

Matthew 24 Signs of the Times

Introduction

This major discourse of Jesus is largely concerned with the coming judgement and the conduct of His followers in the period prior to this event. The big challenge in understanding this chapter is that **two future events** are described in these verses; the destruction of Jerusalem in the 66-70AD War and the second coming of Jesus. The **former** event of judgement will take place because the Jewish leadership and many of the people in the nation did not recognise Jesus for who He is, and even when they understood His claims they rejected them. Mathew 23:37-39 roots this message in a context of profound sadness in the heart of Jesus at what would happen to His people and nation in the not-to-distant future. The beautiful building before them looks so good, but within their lifetime it will be in ruins. *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. ³⁸ Look, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see Me again until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.’”* This was the last time Jesus taught in the temple –He knew it, though His disciples were oblivious to this fact. Matthew 24:1 explains clearly the prompting Jesus got from His followers which led to this powerful message. *Jesus left the temple and was walking away when His disciples came up to him to call His attention to its buildings.* The symbolism of Jesus turning His back on the temple is not accidental. What Jesus will accomplish on the cross in a very short space of time will relegate what happens in that beautiful building to a secondary place, in terms of God’s people’s relationship with Him. Prior to Calvary atonement was made through the priests offering the blood of sacrificial birds and animals on the altars in the temple; after Jesus’ atoning sacrifice the relationship of God and His people –Jew and Gentile alike –had changed for ever. Hebrews 10 makes this point very clearly: *The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. ⁴ **It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins** (Hebrews 10:1-4). *Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered **for all time one sacrifice** for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ and since that time He waits for His enemies to be made His footstool. ¹⁴ For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy* (Hebrews 10:11-14). The **later** event of judgement, at the second coming of Jesus, was explained as a result of their question in Matthew 24:3: *As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?”* Various signs will be explained but the most significant is given in Matthew 24:14: *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.* Some Christian scholars want to interpret the whole passage as applying only to the first century AD and they would claim that all the signs listed here have already taken place; others, by contrast, have sometimes claimed the whole passage exclusively applies only to the end times. I think that neither of these two views can be correct. However, how do we divide up the signs here? Some scholars (for example, R.T. France, *The**

Gospel according to Matthew, p.333), for example, argues that Matthew 24:1-35 relates to the fall of Jerusalem; and 24:36-51 to the second coming of Jesus. If correct, this kind of division would make interpreting the passage much easier, but it is more likely that the truth of what Jesus was saying was not as neatly packaged as this position would suggest. After all, Matthew 24 verses 6, 8 and 23-28 do appear to indicate that Jesus is hinting that His return may not be quite as soon as His first followers were hoping. After all, at this stage they had not even grasped that He was soon to be crucified, raised from the dead and ascending to heaven, so it is most improbable that they would have had any expectation of a second coming. It is best to accept the possibility of references to both the judgement on Jerusalem within one generation of this prophecy, combined with other indicators of signs preceding Jesus' second coming in judgement and in glory.

1. The Beginning of the Troubles (Matthew 24:1-14) *Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. ² "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."*(24:1-2) An initial conversation about the amazing temple Herod had built, (The project, by the time of Jesus' public ministry, had been underway forty-six years (John 2:20) and was only completed a few years before its destruction some time after 60AD), led to discussions about both the near and ultimate future of God's plans and purposes for Jerusalem and His people.

(a) **The Context of the Teaching** (Matthew 24:3-4) *As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" ⁴ Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. Teaching on the end times was given privately by Jesus not in public. It was an important subject, but so capable of misunderstanding that our Lord declined to say more than absolutely necessary when people outside the faith were present. This is possibly because their need is to trust Jesus as Lord and Saviour; anything else is of secondary importance to salvation. However, to His followers Jesus was prepared to give some general information about the end times. The disciples (then and now!) wanted to know roughly a date of His coming and a checklist of the events preceding it. Why did Jesus consent to give the limited information He offered? Verse four indicates very clearly that there will be people who will make convincing efforts to deceive believers concerning the end times. Therefore, Jesus said, be very careful to stick closely to the information I have given you. This is all you need to know. It is sufficient to help you remain faithful to Me, until I call you home or come again to take you home, forever. I suspect many of us have heard some fantastic and amazing pronouncements about the end times –so amazing that you would never have thought of them, nor can you find these insights in the Bible! Be very careful –never confuse the fertile imagination of even a sincere believer with the reliable truth of God's Word. If Jesus has only inspired a limited amount of information then we need to accept that it is sufficient for what we need this side of heaven. He may also have limited the information in order that ordinary believers can grasp it, rather than giving a huge mass of details that only great experts can interpret for the church. We have a priesthood of all believers who have a God-given responsibility to ready and study the Bible for ourselves, on this subject as any other.*

(b) **The Predicament to be faced** (Matthew 24:5-8)⁵ *For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many. ⁶ You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁷ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are the beginning of birth pains. What does Jesus predict will happen? (i) Many false messiahs (24:5) all kinds of religious leaders will claim to be Jesus –look for the nail-*

pierced hands! A false messiah will have no evidence of the cost of our redemption. (ii) Many successful false messiahs (24:5) *and will deceive many*. This is not a possibility. Jesus is stating plainly that human leaders claiming to come from God, even brandishing Bibles, will lead people astray from the faith. This is a most serious predicament. There have been enough cults that have emerged over the last couple of centuries alone to confirm the accuracy of Jesus' teaching. They may even have knocked at your door this year already! (iii) more wars and cultural breakdown (24:6) Samuel Huntington, a perceptive American political scholar wrote a powerful book called *The Clash of Civilisations* in 1996. He argued that the 21st century would be marked by major conflicts between western secularised nations and Islamic-controlled nations. Jesus mentioned that the later days would be marked with the overturning of the old order in nations; violence between nations, together with an increasing range of natural disasters across the globe. We might want to suggest that such observations are not inconsistent with events taking place in the world at the present time. Yet Jesus makes a clear pointed statement in v8 that: *All these are the beginning of birth pains*. What does He mean by this? When the world around us is falling apart, socially, economically, militarily and in any other possible way- don't be afraid because God still has the bigger picture under His control. Remember in what or whom do you place your security? If it is in material goods or money or health or ...? All these things can be swept away in a moment –our only place of security is in God. Verses like Isaiah 43:1-3a are our comfort and assurance at this time: *But now, this is what the Lord says— He who created you, Jacob, He who formed you, Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.*

When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. ³For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour; God never abandons His children.

(c) **The Persecution to be experienced** (Matthew 24:9-13 ¹¹*and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. ¹²Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, ¹³ but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.* (i) Institutional Persecution (24:9) *“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.* Jesus has now moved from general signs in the world (especially with reference to the Jews) to more specific guidance to His followers. Prior to the judgement in Jerusalem (for Jewish followers of Jesus) and in the end times for both Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus things will get worse and persecution and oppression, simply for following Jesus, will take place. This is not sporadic mob violence by a few, but state instigated acts of evil against the people who confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour. The day will come when evil politicians, not just dictators will exclude followers of Jesus from the public square altogether and such leaders will make unceasing prejudicial statements about Christians that a growing proportion of the populace will be influenced by and adopt their hatred. Does any of this sound familiar? Do we see any signs that this is beginning to happen in Britain and Western Europe as a whole? I believe that we do –though only in the early stages, but it is very possible that we are in the latter days –but take heart and do not be discouraged God has not been taken by surprise. He knows what is going on and will ultimately be victorious over it. We know the outcome in the ‘final chapter of the book’! (ii) Intentional Apostasy (24:10-12) *At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other... (24:10) hatred and opposition from outside is expected at times, but betrayal from apostates from within is deeply painful and discouraging. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the war with Rome 66-70AD, gives horrific examples of Jews attacking Jews and treating each other in the most abominable ways. In fact had the Jews been united they might even have held out against the Romans, but when they were divided, then their slaughter was a forgone conclusion. Whether to avoid suffering for the faith or bought off with money or some other secular reward, some people will behave in this appalling manner in the days prior to Jesus' second coming as well*

as in earlier generations. Do not be surprised, Jesus said, I am giving you notice so that you keep your eyes on Me and do not lose heart when other people let you down. After World War Two, in 1946, Youth for Christ International hired two men as evangelists one a country preacher and the other a successful city minister, destined, many thought to be the greatest evangelist of his generation. The two men were Charles Templeton and Billy Graham. How many of us have even heard of Charles Templeton? He died in 2001, far from the faith he had professed. His colleague in ministry, Billy Graham, who may not live too many more years, will be viewed in the opposite light, as one of the most significant men of God of His generation. Paul's warning to Christians in I Corinthians 10:12-13 is so important here: *So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* Biblical warnings are in place so that we heed them and avoid making shipwreck of our lives. ¹¹*and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. ¹²Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold...* these words are not in the Scriptures to discourage us, in fact they are intended to encourage true believers to kept faithful to God when surrounded by such sinful and ungodly behaviour. This reality will be true in some places that have been blessed with a great Christian heritage, prior to Jesus' return. However, at the very same time great blessings will be happening elsewhere.

(d) **The Proclamation to be announced** (Matthew 24:14) *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.* Newspaper proprietors want to create an impression of 'doom and gloom' to sell more copies of their papers. Jesus takes a very different view. Here, although things may be exceedingly difficult in some countries to live as a Christian, remember the missionary mandate given to the whole church to reach the whole world with His good news, prior to Jesus' return. These words were not spoken to the hundreds of millions of Bible-believing Christians alive around the world today, but to a congregation of frightened Jewish believers in one place on the planet. Even after Jesus' resurrection the Church began on the Day of Pentecost with no more adults than would be typically present in this church on a Sunday morning. Does that put our forthcoming building project into perspective? These people set out in faith (and with all their weaknesses and problems) and within a generation had planted congregations in every major city of the Roman Empire. Do we worship the same God? If so, we too can accomplish the tasks He has entrusted to us in this, our generation. God is not in the business of asking us to do the impossible –rather, in the power of His Spirit we will be equipped to do more than we ever thought possible for our good and His glory! When we see the growth of the Church in China and India –is it not exciting? In proportion to population size South Korea is probably sending more overseas missionaries to witness than any other branch of the Christian Church at the present time; can you imagine what it will be like when China sends a similar proportion of missionaries to reach other nations for Christ! Be encouraged – God has some incredible blessings yet to pour out on His Church in the world, although, they may be accompanied by great suffering and persecution.

2. The Climax of the Troubles (Matthew 24:15-28)

(a) **The dreadful events** (24:15) *So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation, 'spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand —* This next section of the discourse (especially 24:15-22) most probably concerns the troubles which would precede the disastrous fall of Jerusalem and the war with Rome in 66-70AD. However, Jesus has made no prediction of the date for this event, but the phrasing here would alert any Jewish believer to think of the book of Daniel and the incidents there (*the abomination that*

causes desolation, 'spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand Matt.24:15) in a time of great calamity for the nation. It refers to the desecration of the Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes, who built an altar to Zeus there, offering swine and other animals as sacrifices (see I Maccabees 1:41-61). It points forward to a time when forbidden objects would be on display in the holy city of Jerusalem. Roman standards linked to the victorious legions in the 66-70AD war would be carried into the city and displayed to the remaining populace. Yet unbelievable cruelty, Jew against Jew, had already polluted the city long before the Romans gained access, following the successful siege. The trauma experienced by the Jewish people then was only exceeded by the holocaust in the last century. It was that bad. No wonder Jesus was distressed for the city about what lay ahead. Luke 19:41-44 explains that most clearly: *As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it⁴² and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes."⁴³ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side.⁴⁴ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."*

(b) **The desperate actions** (24:16-22)¹⁶ *then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.¹⁷ Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house.¹⁸ Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak.¹⁹ How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers!²⁰ Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath.²¹ For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equalled again.²² "If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.* Jesus was clearly hinting in that time of calamity ahead there would be some narrow window of opportunity when some people would be able to save their lives, but pregnant women and those with young children, amongst others would have no chance. The slaughter in the city was appalling and its impact harrowing on observers, like the experiences of the liberators of Nazi concentration camps after World War Two. Failing to live God's way ultimately is too heavy a price to pay, not only in eternity, but also for some people in this life also.

(c) **The discernment required** (24:23-28) *At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it.²⁴ For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.²⁵ See, I have told you ahead of time.²⁶ "So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the wilderness,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it.²⁷ For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.²⁸ Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.* Here in more general terms Jesus warns His followers not to be deceived by false claimants who profess to have brought a message from God, but who have not been sent by Him. In every generation there have been such people. Josephus gave one example of an Egyptian false prophet who gathered several thousand followers on the Mount of Olives, prior to an attack upon Jerusalem. Roman governor Felix's troops routed them, killing or imprisoning most of them (F. Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Vol.2, pp.261-263- see also Acts 21:38). Then and now we need to trust only God's Word and not the false claimants who offered alleged extra information from God. This warning from Jesus is applicable in every generation, not just to His first hearers and the people alive at the very end of human history.

3. **The Second Coming of Jesus** (Matthew 24:29-51)

(a) **The Warning concerning His coming** (Matthew 24:29-41) *"Immediately after the distress of those days "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken."³⁰ "Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.³¹ And He will send His angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.³² "Now*

learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ³³ Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. ³⁴ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. ³⁶ “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. It is probable that the majority of the text in this last section of this chapter refers to Jesus’ second coming. The reference to extraordinary phenomena in the heavens is familiar to readers of the Old Testament prophets, for example, Isaiah 13:10, 34:4; In Joel 2:28-32, words quoted by Peter (Acts 2:16-21) on the Day of Pentecost, the first part of his citation was clearly fulfilled with the coming of the Holy Spirit, the latter part concerning these phenomena in the heavens refers to the second coming of Jesus in line with the words of Jesus here in Matthew 24. The reference to *His angels with a loud trumpet call* (24:31) is explained more fully by Paul in I Thessalonians 4:16, a passage we looked at a few weeks ago. Jesus is very clear that life in the world in the years immediately preceding His return would be marked by much apathy towards spiritual things, but also the sense of ‘normality’ of the rhythm of secular daily life. In order to stop His followers trying to chart a timetable for His coming, Jesus (24:36) stressed that no-one except God the Father knows the date of His return, so don’t try to guess or you will be wrong! Numerous explanations have been offered to explain Matthew 24:34; but although it is true that the generation of Jews hearing Jesus utter these words had not passed away by the time of the 66-70AD War, it is less clear if there is a secondary fulfilment prior to His second coming. I suspect that there is one, but we will only know for certain in heaven who got it right!

(b) **The Witness prior to His coming** (Matthew 24:42-51) ⁴² “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. ⁴⁵ “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. ⁴⁷ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’ ⁴⁹ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. ⁵⁰ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. ⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Much more important for us are the challenging final words of Jesus on this topic. The repeated warnings in Scripture on this theme imply that Christians will be prone to complacency Whether Jesus’ return is tonight or many years in the future we must live in a way that retains that sense of imminent expectancy. The solid fact is this: Jesus is coming back. The warning is this: Be ready! May each of us put our faith and trust in Him and live in a way we would be comfortable with explaining to Him on that great and glorious day of His return in glory, Amen.