

Part 42: What's Going On? Part 1

Tyler Velin | Matthew 24:1-35

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Fyodor Dostoyevsky was a Russian writer who saw firsthand the oppression of 19th-Century Russia. This blatant disregard of human life led him to provide this encouraging statement: "The mystery of human existence lies not just in staying alive, but in finding something to live for."

For him, the hard part was not surviving in hostility, oppression and famine, the hard part was trying to find something to make sense of our lives which are filled with hostility, oppression and famine. In such a world it might be hard to find personal purpose, let alone a purpose or goal for the whole of human history. If you had to provide an answer as to not only what your purpose was, but the purpose of humanity as a whole, what would that be?

In our passage today, Jesus is going to show his disciples the end of this world, and in light of that end we are going to find purpose and understanding not only for us, but for all of human history. If we recall what is going on in the book of Matthew, Jesus has entered into Jerusalem and he has found it to be a city which bears no fruit. The Jewish people, the Temple structure and the religious elite are all void of true worship, seen ultimately in their rejection of Jesus.

And it is here that we read the context for our passage today: **Matthew 24:1-3**. We are about to begin the final great monologue of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. This is a large teaching that is directed to his disciples and it is prompted and shaped by two things: 1. Jesus just predicted that the temple in Jerusalem will soon be totally destroyed. The center of Jewish worship is now going to be thrown down. This is a huge cultural event. And 2. Jesus knows he is soon to leave his disciples.

The Jews, and Jesus' disciples understood that one day God's messiah would come back and establish the whole of his kingdom by conquering his enemies. So when the disciples hear of the destruction of the temple, they assume that all of that is synonymous with this great day of judgment. Soon, in their mind this will all happen. And what they want to know is when this is going to happen and what this is going to look like.

The question they are asking, and the question you may have been asking as you heard the text read earlier, is "What is going on?" What part of history are we in, and how do we make sense of what is to come. Well in this text today Jesus is going to shed a little light on the disciples question and the answer is going to look a little different than what they expected in their minds.

Jesus is going to share with them a glimpse into what is to come, but the goal is not to simply inform them, his goal is to prepare them to live in light of this end goal of all humanity. You see often times when we talk about the end times we see it as a time of information gathering, we get names and dates, and we end up only knowing, and maybe fearing, what is going to come. But Jesus' goal in sharing what he is about to share isn't simply to inform his disciples, but to transform them by providing for them expectations and hope.

We too need these in our own world, because as we are going to see in the passage today, we live in the same times these disciples will live in. What we are going to see today is this: **Jesus wants to shape our expectations of this world, so that Jesus can be the expectation of this world.**

In order to do this Jesus is going to share with us a glimpse of what is to come as we await the second coming of Jesus. And he is going to do this in three ways. I'm going to actually give us a brief outline of this text before we look at it in more detail. In verses 4-14 Jesus is going to give us a glimpse of what is to come in general (characteristics of this age). In verses 15-20 Jesus is going to give us a glimpse of what is to come in specific (the overthrowing of the temple). And in verses 21-31 he is going to give us a glimpse of what is to come in full (the final return of Christ).

When you consider the center of time, what do you consider? What is it that your life is building to? Is it your degree, your marriage? Your promotion? Maybe even your death? Well for the people of Israel this time they waited for was "the day of the Lord." It stood as center piece of time which they longed for. And as I mentioned earlier, this was the day that was final and ultimate. Look with me at **Obadiah 15-17**.

This passage was written over five hundred years before Jesus was here speaking to his disciples, and it was written after Babylon destroyed the first temple. If it was soon then, certainly the disciples thought it must be soon now, especially when Jesus is again speaking of the destruction of the temple.

And one thing they knew about the day of the Lord was this: God's anointed would come, the Almighty would come down and on that day the nations would be judged, and God's people would be delivered. So in this sense, it all happened at one time: the Messiah would come, he would judge the Gentiles, deliver the Jews, and establish his kingdom.

But Jesus has increasingly been throwing a wrench in this line of thought. Instead of judging the Gentiles, Jesus has been preaching the gospel to them. And while he is telling his disciples he is this Messiah, the "Son of Man" prophesied in the Old Testament, he has spoken repeatedly about leaving them. And just last week he mentioned some sort of return: **Matthew 23:39**. So they begin to think, "If Jesus is going to return again, then doesn't that mean he is going to leave?"

Imagine if you were invited to a friend's house for a meal. You knew this friend to be phenomenal cook, so you ate light that day, and you arrive at their house already salivating over what is to come. You walk in, make your way to the dining room table and sit down. The host comes out and tells you amazing things about the meal that is to be prepared. Maybe he uses some stories to describe what that meal will taste like, maybe he uses some sort of repeated phrase like, "The meal of the house is like..." And all the while your hunger and anticipation grows. Then the table is set. But all of a sudden the host says, "Great, now that you're here I'm going to pop out and grab dinner, when I come back, we will eat." And then he leaves.

Wouldn't you wonder where he would be going? How far is he going? To the kitchen? Did he forget something in the car? How long is he going to be gone?

This is what the disciples are now beginning to wrestle with when it comes to understanding their location in the proclamation of God's kingdom. Where are we? And where is Jesus? And when do we get to eat? Perhaps that is your own frustration with Christianity. You heard the wonderful news of Jesus' salvation, but then you woke up and still wrestled with sin, your mother still got sick, you still feel the cold of winter storms, and you say "What's going on?"

Maybe you've had questions like that as you survey our world and see the massive amounts of brokenness. Perhaps you think, certainly there can't be a God because he would do something about this? Or maybe you wonder if the God you hoped in is actually able to prepare the world he said he could? Or maybe again, the meal you see the neighbors eating looks less satisfying than the one your host described, but at least it's ready, maybe I should just go over there?

Here we are two thousand years later, and the table is still set, and we are still hungry. When is Jesus going to bring us the perfect meal he told us about? When is he going to end our suffering, satisfy us ultimately, heal our brokenness, restore us finally? Is he coming back?

This tension is the tension Jesus is now going to address for the disciples and for us as he looks at this age between his comings **In General**. In this section Jesus is going to provide a large scale overview of the characteristics of this age: **Matthew 24:4-14**

In general Jesus typifies the age between his coming as an age of tribulation, opposition and tension. The disciples thought that Jesus would bring with him an immediate rule of peace. But Jesus says the opposite.

"Do not let anyone tell you otherwise," Jesus says. There will be political unrest and natural disasters in various places. Kingdom will rage against kingdoms. But this is not the end. These are just the birth pangs.

You know why Jesus had to put in here comments like, "do not be alarmed, the end is not yet," and "these are but the beginnings of the birth pangs"? Because just about every generation of Christians from the disciple's age to ours has looked at their time and said, "This is it."

But what Jesus is saying here is "this is it" in general. This is what life is like between my comings. Ultimate flourishing will not happen here on this earth. Daily this world will be reminded of its brokenness, its limitations, its weakness, its problem.

You see if we return again to the question of: Why are we here? We have to wrestle with the track record of human history. Whatever is wrong, whatever our hope is to fix it, it's not working. When I was in journalism school they train you on how to put together newscasts. And a helpful tool producers use is what are often called "puff pieces." They want to end a show with a dog balancing a plate on its nose not because they want you to be entertained, but because they want to end their shows on something other than another emergency operation on an infant with cancer. Signing off with new statistics about suicide bombers in Europe doesn't have the same "good-night" ring as a panda giving birth does.

Our secular world goes to great lengths to inform us while also trying to insulate us from this reality. But isn't it clear to see, especially after a century of two world wars, that whatever our hope is, it's not strong enough? If the point of history is to make the world a better place, then it's not working. If world peace is our true end, we are further from that than even these disciples were under Roman rule. It's hard to imagine leaving a better world for our kids begins by slaughtering third trimester children in the womb.

But that's what Jesus said would happen right: **Matthew 24:12**. We live in a world where morality is becoming more and more subjective and as a result we are not seeing love win, we are seeing it mutate.

Love is now equated not with the sacrificial labors given to the beloved, it is synonymous with the experience of the lover. Sin drives our hearts in on themselves. The result is discord towards others.

How do we make sense of this? From almost any other worldview it is almost impossible to find any sort of purpose in the suffering of our world. But the tension of this intermediate age, is that the Christian gospel shapes our expectation and provides for us a purpose: **Matthew 24:13-14**.

The tension of this broken age is political, religious and natural suffering, but also enduring gospel hope and increasing gospel witness. You see it is the gospel of the kingdom of God which stands in harsh contrast to the kingdom of this world. And we get to bear witness to that kingdom which is to come in the midst of a kingdom which is crumbling.

Why are we here? What is going on? We are participating in the spreading of the only hope which disrupts this endless disappointment. Look at what **James 1:2-4** says, or **1 Peter 1:6-9**. Jesus is coming back, and for the true believer it is precisely the trials of this time of tribulation which prepare us for eternity by calling us to endure in our faith.

Dear brothers and sisters, you may encounter dark times in this age. Times of loss, heartache, sorrow and gut-wrenching agony. But if you are a believer, if you have been bought by the blood of Christ, you will endure by faith. By God's grace you will hold till the end.

Also this age will be characterized by the proclamation of the gospel to the whole world. What does that look like? I'm not sure, but what I do know is that in a world where it may seem God is silent his church is called to speak loudly. To go, even amidst opposition, and preach the gospel to those who have never heard. The end of this age will culminate in the gospel of Jesus Christ being made known to many, many people. Where are you being called to endure in this time? How are you participating in the expansion of this gospel?

If Jesus' is the end of our faith, the center of our labors, and the goal of our proclamation we will feel the weight of this world, but we won't be crushed by it because we see the faithful labor that God has called us to. In seeing this age in general, I hope that we might see our lives as Paul sees them in **2 Corinthians 4:7-11**.

Secondly, and in a much shorter span, Jesus now shows the disciples what is to come in this age, **In Specific**. And here Jesus is going to outline the destruction of the temple which he just prophesied verses ago: **Matthew 24:15-20**.

So it is only after Jesus tells the disciples what the whole age will look like that he now turns to one specific even: "So when you see the abomination of desolation." He is alluding to a prophecy in Daniel which would be well known at the time (which is why he says, "let the reader understand") where Jerusalem, and specifically the temple would be destroyed by one who is called, "the desolator."

And here Jesus is speaking about the events which happened in 70AD when the Roman army came and captured Jerusalem laying it to total ruin. We know this not only because it perfectly matches up with history, but also in Luke's gospel Jesus says, "when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near" (Luke 21:20). Also it is well recorded by historians at this time that many Jews listened to Jesus' words here. When the armies of Rome first became visible, many of them did exactly what Jesus said, they fled immediately to an area called Pella, and they were saved.

But those Jews who didn't listen to Jesus' warning here, were mercilessly killed, down to the last one. Now there is a much debate as to what parts of this passage we are looking at today deal specifically with 70AD or deal with the second coming of Jesus.

But we can see a glimpse of Jesus' structure a bit when we focus on the Greek word translated in this text as "tribulation." In verse 9, Jesus uses the word and describes a broad tribulation which doesn't match up with 70AD, in verse 29 Jesus uses the word "tribulation" but then goes to describe an event which follows which we have never seen before in human history. Meaning the tribulation that Jesus is speaking about is a broad category of which this event in 70AD is a specific and painful trial for the Jews. But right after he finishes talking about this in verse 20, Jesus again returns to using his broad word for tribulation again.

But despite that debate, here are two specific points which we ought to bear in mind in light of the destruction of the temple. First, because this age is typified by the increased proclamation of the gospel, there is no longer one geographic center to Christianity. We don't need a temple. Instead of people coming to God, God is going to people through the message of the gospel. Second, and perhaps most importantly, here we have proof in scripture, and recorded in history Jesus ability to predict judgment, but also to offer sure and certain refuge.

Dear friends, as we will see, this age though presently long, will one day come to an end. And because we see so clearly in history people being saved by fleeing to the hills at Jesus' caution, know that you too will be saved if you flee to Christ. We can trust this savior. Have you obeyed his call to believe in him? Will you be safe when this day comes not as a specific example, but as a final and ultimate judgment?

And with that ringing in our heads let us turn to the final picture of this age where Jesus describes our end **In Full**. Look with me at **Matthew 24:21-31**.

In speaking to his disciples about the full experience of his second coming he provides confidence to us in two ways. In verses 20-28 he gives us confidence in his coming, and in verses 29-31 he gives us confidence at his coming.

In verses 20-28 he says that there will be people who deceive you by saying, "Look, here is Jesus, he is in the wilderness, or he is in the inner room." And Jesus says don't believe them. Don't go where they are telling you to go.

In other words during this time, people are going to try to deceive you. They are going to want you to think that Jesus is somewhere or someone that he right now is telling you he is not. But his elect, those whom God has saved will not be deceived. They will endure just like Jesus said earlier.

Jesus here is saying very clearly, don't be duped. Don't think that anyone or anything else can offer you what only I will offer you when I come again. But wouldn't it be nice if it were that easy? J.C. Ryle says the problem with sin is that it never identifies itself as such. It's always veiled, always crafty, and always seductive to our ears.

And in our world today we hear often the promise of a better life. We see the signs and wonders on our TV's: beachfront vacations, passionate relationships, universal acclaim, and we wonder, maybe I should

go over there. Maybe that's what I've been missing? Maybe if I had that kind of power these tribulations would be less tumultuous? But Jesus is saying here, "See I've told you, that's not it."

Then he goes to say, "When I come, in all my glory, you'll know." Just as lightning strikes in one place yet lights up the whole sky, everyone will know when I'm coming back. Just as you're able to identify a corpse in the desert by seeing the vultures circling overhead, you'll be able to clearly perceive when I have come back.

Meaning: don't think the neighbor's dinner is my dinner. If you endure patiently as my chosen people, then one day you will get everything I promised you in full. And it will be beautiful and unmistakable. Have confidence that I will come again.

And this is where Jesus goes when he describe the confidence we will have at his coming **in vs. 29-31**.

Here is the unmistakable hope for anyone in this world. Here Jesus so clearly gives us the very substance which shapes our expectations. Why would we endure such hard tribulation, why would we risk so much for the gospel to be proclaimed, why would we turn down the offers of false saviors? Because the power and great glory of Jesus Christ is worth it.

He will come with such a peculiar glory and majesty that we will immediately say: "Yes, that's it." Everything was worth this. To see an object of beauty like that and to know that he has come back for me. To gather me, to bring me to himself, to grant me not in part, but in full all the promises of his kingdom, that's the reasons for life.

Paul describes this beautiful moment this way: **Colossians 3:1-4**.

You see it's only when Jesus shapes our expectations in such a way that he is our expectation can we ever have a response like this. If the expectation of our life is to make much of ourselves, or of our family, or to see some specific agenda or ideology embraced, then this day will be a massive let down.

In contrast to God's elect you will be the tribes of earth who mourn. You will mourn not because you do not see his beauty, but precisely because you see his beauty and it is not for you to enjoy. For you this great and terrible day will be greatly terrible, because you will face judgement for your rejection of a king of this power.

But this is why we as the church live life in light of these expectations. We know this world will be hard, it will present challenges, it will war against the gospel of this kingdom, but here we are proclaiming it to you. Come and hope in this Jesus.

Make sense of your life by seeing the whole of your life in him. We live in an age where Jesus is our king, but at this point he has not brought his full kingdom. When you consider the trials and tribulation of this life, in their extreme forms and in their daily reminders, do they lead you to endure as you rely on Jesus more and more? Do you baptize your efforts in school, career, and service in the lens of testifying to the Kingdom that will one day be ours!

Do the hazards of evangelism lead you to hole up and wait, or are you lead to see this age as one which culminates not in your own comfort but in the increasing footprint of the gospel. Will you say with Paul: "Yes, I will rejoice, for I know that through the help of the Spirit of Jesus this too will turn out for my

deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body whether by life or by death."

Jesus has given us a clear picture of the trials of this age so that we might participate in the glory of the age to come.