

Are You Ready 1-22-06

Matthew 24:1-14 (NIV)

¹ 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. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." 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?" ⁴ Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁵ For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. ⁶ You will hear of wars and rumors 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. 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. ¹⁰ At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, ¹¹ and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. ¹² Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, ¹³ but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. 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.

Jesus had just finished pronouncing seven woes upon the religious leaders. In one of those declarations, He said that the blood of all the prophets would be required of that generation. (Matthew 23:35-36) That would mean that some devastating judgment was soon to fall. As they were leaving the Temple, the disciples were awed by the architecture. ¹ Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings.

The architecture was amazing. The Western Wall is about all that remains. It was a retaining wall and not the Temple itself. That wall alone is amazing. The enormous rocks that were cut and stacked supported the Temple area. Inside the rabbi's tunnel I observed one stone that was as big as a moving van. Another one even larger was found within the ruins of the city. We do not even know today how such large stones could be placed. They still inspire awe.

As the disciples pointed out this amazing work of man to Jesus, His mind was still on what was soon to happen. Jesus made a startling prediction. ² "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." We are often amazed by the work of man. Certainly the Temple Herod built was an amazing site. Some television shows tout the wonder of the structures man has made. Jesus pointed to a reality that is true for every structure of man, it will all collapse. We should be in awe of God's eternal work much more than man's tiny efforts regardless of how big they appear at the time. What struck me on my visits to Israel is that no matter how seemingly massive and indestructible our structures are, they will all collapse like sinking Titanics.

Commented [notes1]: 35 And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation. Matthew 23:35-36 (NIV)

The years that led up to the final Jewish revolt were filled with terror. A number of men rose up claiming to be a messiah. They were quickly crushed by Roman cavalry. Towns that joined in the Zealot effort to free themselves from Roman occupation were destroyed, sometimes leaving no survivors. When the revolt became nationwide, Rome first dealt with the North. Seeing the brutality of Roman conquest, most towns surrendered. Those that resisted were slaughtered. The Jews that managed to escape fled to Jerusalem or tried to flee across the Jordan River, but it was at flood stage. As they waited by the riverbanks, they were cut down by the Romans.

Those that made it to Jerusalem found it to be in chaos. There were three factions within the Jewish camp, each claiming their leader was God's leader. They tried to defeat the others by burning their food supplies. The Roman army, led by General Titus, laid siege to the city. Once the outer walls were breached, the Jews fled to the Temple area. It was the high point of the city and the easiest point to defend. They scoffed at a call to surrender and even killed the emissaries. After Rome broke through the Temple courtyard walls, they killed all they could find without mercy. Thousands were crucified on the main streets. The last of the Jewish rebels went into the Temple itself. It was burned and demolished. It has been said that looters overturned all the stones trying to find the gold of the Temple that had melted down between the cracks, fulfilling Jesus' prediction that not one stone would be left upon another. Only the young healthy survivors were allowed to live to be sold as slaves or used for Roman entertainment in arenas.

Jews were eventually outlawed from being in Jerusalem. The end of the Jewish form of worship was complete and final. Jesus' predictions were fulfilled in 70 A.D. It was a scene of unimaginable horror. Remains of that horror are still being uncovered today. A small remnant had fled and taken the mountain top fortress of Masada. It took a few years, but upon finally breaching the walls, all those in the fortress were found dead. They had taken their own lives.

Listen again to the words of Jesus at the close of the last chapter. ³⁷ *"O 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, but you were not willing."* ³⁸ *Look, your house is left to you desolate.* Matthew 23:37-38 (NIV) Desolate was the perfect word. If only they had come to Him as He held out His arms to them. If only they had taken refuge under the shadow of His wings. No wonder He wept over the city. (Luke 19:41)

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?"* Jesus and His disciples had crossed the Kidron Valley and gone up the Mount of Olives. The disciples are so much like us. They had a longing to know when it was going to take place. Don't we all? There is a reason that we do not know. We are supposed to be living every minute as if it were our last. After all, it may be. You do not know when the Lord will call you home. We are one heartbeat, one breath, one illness or accident away from eternity. Many of the great people of God in history thought they would live to see the Lord's return. Some lived a long life, and others had

Commented [notes2]: 41 As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it

Luke 19:41 (NIV)

their lives cut short through sickness or martyrdom. When will your end come? It does not really matter if you live each day as if it was your last. (James 4:14)

Commented [notes3]: 14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. James 4:14 (NIV)

The disciples were really asking two questions, though they saw them as one. The first was the question of when the stones of Jerusalem would be overturned. The second was what would be the sign of His coming and the end of the age. In the disciples' thinking, all that would happen at once. The temple would be leveled and Jesus would reign, ending the age. When they asked about the sign of His coming, they would have meant a revelation of His glory. (Isaiah 40:10) They may have finally accepted Jesus' numerous predictions of His eminent death. (Matthew 20:18-19) Most likely, though, they expected some great manifestation of power to follow during that Passover week. Some interpret all this to be one event in 70 A.D. That viewpoint is called Preterist. Such notable teachers as R.C. Sproul believe that. I do not agree because of some of the passages we will read next week.

Commented [notes4]: 10 See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. Isaiah 40:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: 18 "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" Matthew 20:18-19 (NIV)

⁴ Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁵ For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. This is the first warning. In fact, part of the struggle during the fall of Jerusalem involved competing false messiahs. Since Jesus uttered these words there have been thousands. You know of some in this day, the so-called Rev. Moon, Jim Jones, Gabriel of Sedona, and many others. Mariko met one recently, a woman. One of the founders of the Quaker movement claimed to be the feminine Jesus. The claim, "I am Christ", means, "I am the anointed one." Individuals that claim they have a special anointing have led millions astray.

The lure of those cults is powerful. First, it makes you feel special. As children of God, we should all feel very special that Jesus died for us. (1 John 3:1) A cult makes you feel special as someone with knowledge others do not have. It feeds your pride. You hear it today in the words of New Agers. When you tell them you are a Christian, they respond, "I was too, until I moved to a higher plane." A true Christian has no pride in their standing or knowledge, only a sense of humility that God would redeem them. They boast in the grace and love of God, not attainments of the self. (Galatians 6:14)

Commented [notes6]: 1 How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 1 John 3:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 14 May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Galatians 6:14 (NIV)

The second great seduction of cultic movements is taking the burden of life's daily pressures and responsibilities from you. The leader will just tell you what to do. You just obey, and meals are served and a roof provided. The reason that is so seductive is that it is a counterfeit for trusting faith in God. If you obey Him, He will take your burdens. (Psalm 55:22) You can trust Him for all your needs. (Philippians 4:19) That is quite a bit different from trusting man. It takes faith. You must believe in what you cannot see. (Hebrews 11:1) Trusting a man is so much easier. It is a community of like-minded individuals that do not challenge each other's faith.

Commented [notes8]: 22 Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall. Psalms 55:22 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 19 And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:19 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

⁶ You will hear of wars and rumors 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. A person who trusts in Christ should not be alarmed when Al Qaeda attacks their homeland. The people to whom Jesus was speaking saw their lives uprooted by war after war. Generation after generation would see change upon change. But the end is still to come. War is not a sign of the end. Neither are rumors of war. It is just a part of living in a fallen world.

Then Jesus added, "There will be famines and earthquakes in various places." ⁸ All these are the beginning of birth pains. Wars, famines, earthquakes all over, and that is just the beginning. It was compared to a woman in labor. Jesus said these signs are only the beginning. It has been debated back and forth whether there are more earthquakes now than since the time Jesus uttered these words. Some agree there have been and others disagree. Wars have probably decreased in frequency but increased in carnage and destruction. Famines are certainly killing people in record numbers because of the increase in population. That is just the beginning of birth pains. They are light at first and grow in intensity. If that is the light stuff, I would hate to think of what the intense pains right before delivery will be like! Jesus' point is that as the day approaches it is going to get increasingly intense, more so than the normal cycle of things. That is the sign.

This last year we saw a number of disasters that were very high up on the scale of destruction. The tsunami killed more people than any recent natural disaster. Katrina displaced thousands, destroying not only homes but the infrastructure too. There is the fear of the bird flu becoming an epidemic. Is it the beginning of birth pains, as some are saying today? How will we know? Watch and see if things become more intense as the years go by.

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. One thing is certain, that day will see intense persecution. (Revelation 13:7) That we can indeed say is on the increase. Christians are being murdered at a greater rate today than they were at the peak of Roman persecution. I see a shift taking place in the world press and educational systems that is turning society against Bible believing Christians. Most of the martyrdom is taking place in Islamic countries, but even in secular societies, Christians are being marginalized. In researching end time predictions, I read a comment by the author of one of those web pages in which he stated that Fundamentalists are attempting to make Christianity the state religion of America. It is absurd and unfounded but quite commonly accepted in the secular world. Hate crime legislation may threaten us with imprisonment for speaking the Bible's definition of right and wrong. In parts of Canada today you cannot publicly read Romans chapter one. I am not an alarmist, but I do see a trend away from the principles of the Bible, even to the point of condemning those who believe it to be the word of God. What will the next 20 years bring?

¹⁰ At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, ¹¹ and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. When the world sets itself against those who believe in Jesus, then you can know the end is at hand. How did previous generations miss that? Then there will be the great apostasy or falling away. (Matthew 10:21) If you cannot function legally in your society, it would be a great temptation to give up your faith. If you had to go without food because you were a believer, would you fall away? (Revelation 13:16-17) That is when the world will know who is a true believer. The chaff will betray the wheat. Those who abandon the faith will turn in true believers to save their own skins. The liberal compromising secular church will hate those who cling to belief in the Bible and Jesus as the redemption of

Commented [notes11]: 7 He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. Revelation 13:7 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: 21 "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. Matthew 10:21 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: 16 He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, 17 so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. Revelation 13:16-17 (NIV)

God. Most liberal churches have already made that step of denying the authority of God's word and the basic Christian doctrines passed down to us. (2 Peter 2:1)

If you think there are plenty of false prophets now, wait until that day comes. They will fill in the vacuum created by all those who turned from the truth for convenience. What a time of purging that will be for the church! If it happens in our lifetime, what would happen to you? Are you enough of a believer to take a stand?

¹² *Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold,* Lawlessness will increase. That is literally what the word for wickedness means. For the Jew, that meant not only civil laws but spiritual ones as well. There will come a breakdown in the world of law. Again, there are the seeds of this in our world today. A judge recently sentenced an admitted child rapist to 60 days in jail because he did not believe in punishment but treatment. That sounds so lofty, but at its root it is the denial of penalty for a crime. A judge in Massachusetts gave a teacher probation for raping one of his students. It invites more lawlessness. Societies will follow this trend and indulge in wickedness of increasing intensity. The allurements of sin will cause the agape of most to grow cold. This reminds us of the words of Jesus in the letter to Ephesus, "You have left your first love." The world does not have agape love. It is believers who will turn away from agape. Just as in Jesus' letter to Ephesus, they will forsake their first love. (Revelation 2:4)

If you were free to indulge in anything with society's encouragement, would you maintain your agape, your love for others that expects nothing in return? It will be a time of severe testing. If your desires have not been given to Christ, your agape will grow cold.

¹³ *but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.* Those few that are able to cling to their faith and stand firm will be saved (*sozo*). This verse is used by some to say that you can lose your salvation. I am not addressing whether you can or cannot, but what this verse says. The problem is the word *sozo*, saved. It can mean rescued (Matthew 8:25), delivered (Jude 1:5), or the way in which we use it religiously, saved from judgment. (Acts 2:47) In this passage, Jesus is speaking about the decline of the world's condition and believers who succumb to it to avoid the animosity of the world. Those who do not give in, but stand firm, will be saved. It is future tense, so does the word mean saved from hell or saved from the world's hatred? Theologically, they must have been saved spiritually to have endured all that. So the future tense of the word then would imply saved out of the world.

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.* It is difficult to know exactly to what extent Jesus referring, but we do know that Wycliffe is closing in on the last few languages and plans to have Bibles in those languages by 2025. Has the Gospel been preached there already? Probably! Are you ready? (Also see Revelations 14:6-7)

Let me sum up what we have learned today from Jesus' reply to His disciples. He warned about physical conditions in the earth becoming increasingly intense, wars, famines and earthquakes. Luke adds pestilences though the early and best manuscripts do not have it in Matthew. (Luke 21:11) They increase in intensity as

Commented [notes14]: 1 But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves.
2 Peter 2:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: 4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.
Revelation 2:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 25 The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"
Matthew 8:25 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: 5 Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe.
Jude 1:5 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.
Acts 2:47 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: 6 Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth--to every nation, tribe, language and people.
7 He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water."
Revelation 14:6-7 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: 11 There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.
Luke 21:11 (NIV)

those days approach. Believers are not to be fearful. There will be false prophets and false messiahs in abundance. We are not to be deceived by them. The world will turn against Christians and put us to death. There will be a great abandoning of the faith as the world becomes increasingly lawless and vile. Believers will betray other believers. Those who endure to the end will be rescued from the world's hatred.

We have seen bits and pieces of this in history, but not worldwide all at once. Jesus adds more details later in the chapter that are currently being fulfilled. The challenge for us is not to ask, as the disciples did, about when it will happen, but to live each day prepared to meet the Lord. Will we live today with the intensity and love that we would if we knew today was our last? Since it very well may be our last, what should we change? What should we do differently? Who do we need to share our testimony with? Who do we need to forgive? Who do we need to convey our love to? Once you take care of those urgencies that we knew God wanted us to deal with long ago, then we can simply follow Jesus in complete obedience as if each day was our last. Then, whenever He comes for us, by faith, we will be ready. Are you ready?