

JUDGMENT AND SUFFERING (SUNDAY, APRIL 11, 2011)

Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 11:14-25; Matthew 24:1-14

God in His perfect wisdom and sovereignty can bring judgment in many different ways. When God brought the 10 plagues on Egypt and her false gods, we read that some of the plagues only came on the Egyptians and that God's people were spared the judgment of the flies and the disease which killed the livestock. The great darkness of the 9th plague, which enshrouded the land of Egypt, did not come upon the land where the children of Israel lived. And the greatest of the plagues, the death of the firstborn, only came upon those of Egypt. Exodus 11:7 reads, "But against none of the children of Israel shall a dog move its tongue, against man or beast, that you may know that the LORD does make a difference between the Egyptians and Israel."

In the NT, in Acts 15 we read of the spectacular judgment that came upon Herod Agrippa I after he gave a speech to the citizens of Tyre and Sidon and was praised as being a god and not a man. We read in Acts 15 that the angel of the Lord struck Herod because he did not give glory to God. He was eaten by worms and died.

We might say that in certain cases, God brings judgment with laser-like focus. The wicked experience the wrath of God while His people experience His blessing and mercy.

But Scripture shows quite often that God's righteous people endure great hardships when God brings judgment. For example, when God judged His people, it certainly wasn't the case that only the wicked and rebellious among God's people suffered.

And in a similar way, when God brought the terrible judgment which befell Jerusalem around the year A.D. 70, it wasn't the case that only the wicked suffered.

The Apostle Peter writing to Christians scattered throughout the area we know today as the country of Turkey reminded them in 1 Peter 4 -

1 Pet. 4:12 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; **13** but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy... **17** For the time *has come* for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if *it begins* with us first, what will *be* the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?

Today as we continue our study of Matthew, we come to one of the most interesting and challenging chapters of Matthew's gospel. I think too often we think of Matthew 24 as simply the chapter which speaks of the terrible judgment which befell Jerusalem and the unbelieving Jews who did not obey the words of Jesus Christ. But Matthew 24 speaks not simply of the awesome judgment that came upon Jerusalem but also the suffering of God's true people who were called to endure this very difficult time.

I think a good summary statement of verses 1-14 would be this. **Times of judgment demand watchfulness and perseverance.** And so as we continue to live through the judgment being brought against our own nation Matthew 24 continues to be a very relevant text for us.

We will look at the first 14 verses in three parts. First, verses 1-2 give important background for this chapter. Second, we will look at the important question the disciples asked in verse 3. Third, we will look at verses 4-14, where Jesus began to answer the first question asked by the disciples.

1. IMPORTANT BACKGROUND FOR MATTHEW 24, vv. 1-2

Matt. 24:1 Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. **2** And Jesus said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not *one* stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.”

At the end of Matthew 23 in verse 38, Jesus stated, “See! Your house is left to you desolate.” I stated two weeks ago that this verse speaks of what was the greatest judgment that came upon Jerusalem – the glory of God’s presence departed. The beautiful temple was just an empty shell. The temple would stand for another 40 years but it would essentially be an empty house even though the ceremonies and rituals of the temple continued.

It is quite significant to see that Jesus went out from the temple complex after speaking these words. We should understand a connection between the actions of Jesus and what we read in Ezekiel 10:18-19 and 11:22-23.¹ Let me read again Ezekiel 11:22-23.

Ezek. 11:22 So the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel *was* high above them. **23** And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain, which *is* on the east side of the city.

Do you see the connection of Ezekiel 11 with this passage? Matthew doesn’t mention the presence of any cherubim, but he does record that Jesus left the temple and then Jesus went across the valley east of Jerusalem and came to the Mount of Olives as did the glory of the LORD in Ezekiel 11:23.

Verse 1 states that the disciples came to Jesus to show Him the buildings of the temple. It is not that Jesus was like an unformed tourist and the disciples were helping him understand the beautiful scene of Jerusalem as they made their way east to the Mount of Olives.² We are not told exactly what the disciples were intending to point out to Jesus. Perhaps the best understanding is that they did not want to fully accept that the temple

¹ France, 887.

² France, 887.

was desolate, abandoned. It was too beautiful and glorious a building to think of it as being desolate.

Josephus wrote of the temple:

“Now the outward face of the temple in its front lacked nothing that was likely to surprise either men’s minds or their eyes; for it was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun’s own rays. But this temple appeared to strangers, when they were coming to it at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow.”³

Jewish rabbis said of the temple, “he who has not seen the temple in its full splendor has never seen a beautiful building.”⁴

I have noted before that the temple was much more than a single building. It was a massive and beautiful complex of buildings larger than our entire piece of property.

I think it is significant in verse 2 that Jesus responded to the disciples asking them, “Do **you** not see all these things?” Of course, Jesus was aware of the beauty and splendor of the temple. But Jesus was not impressed by outward splendor or glory. Jesus then declared the fearsome judgment that would come upon the entire temple complex. The stones that were used to construct the temple complex were massive. Today the only thing that remains of the temple complex is the Western Wall, the so-called Wailing Wall. This wall is not part of the temple but part of the temple complex’s substructure. Some of the stones used in this wall are over 15 in length. One of the stones in a section of the wall called Wilson’s arch is estimated to weigh 570 tons.⁵ How were such massive stones even put in place?

Nothing today remains of the temple or the buildings of the temple. The words of Jesus literally were fulfilled in that not one stone was left upon another, that was not thrown down.

Verses 1-2 give us an important background for Matthew 24. The proper interpretation of this chapter must consider the judgment that fell upon Jerusalem and the temple in the Jewish wars from A.D. 67-70.

2. THE DISCIPLE’S QUESTION, v. 3.

Matt. 24:3 Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be? And what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”

³ J.W. 5:5:6 [222-225]. Cited by Gentry, 40-41.

⁴ Quoted by Gentry, 40.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wailing_Wall?vm=r

Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives where He delivered the instruction of chapters 24 and 25, what is often called the Olivet Discourse. It is the fifth and final discourse found in Matthew.

According to Mark, it was specifically Peter, James, John, and Andrew who came to Jesus privately and asked their questions. Here Matthew doesn't specify which of the disciples asked Jesus about the words of judgment that he spoke in verse 2.

The disciples in Matthew's record asked two questions.

1. When will these things be? That is, when will the judgment of verse 2 be fulfilled?
2. What is the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?

The first question is easier to understand. The disciples wanted to know the time frame. When will this judgment come about?

The second question, which has two parts, is more difficult. The disciples wanted to know what sign would signal the coming of Christ and the end of the age. The word **coming** is the important Greek word *parousia*. It is likely the case that the disciples, when they asked the question, thought that the parousia, the coming of Christ and the end of the age were to be directly associated with the first part of the question, the predicted destruction of Jerusalem mentioned in verse 2.⁶

There are some writers who believe the since the disciples most likely linked together the destruction of Jerusalem with the coming of Christ and the end of the age, we as readers and interpreters should also link these things together. But that is not necessarily a good assumption. Another writer, Jeffrey Gibbs, I think has correctly argued that the disciples do not have a very good track record for understanding the ministry of Jesus and the things that He taught One only needs to turn back to Matthew 17:9-13 or 20:20-23 to see examples of this.

In Matthew 17, the disciples did not understand what it meant that Elijah had to come first. In Matthew 20, the mother of James and John requested Jesus that her two sons be given places of great prominence in Jesus' kingdom, a request which angered the other disciples, because they too wanted a place of honor.

The disciples may well have thought that the destruction of the temple would bring about the end of the world as many other Jews believed. But we don't have to take this same position.

The disciples' question in verse 3, though perhaps uniformed, gives though a good outline for Matthew 24 and 25. I believe a very good argument can be made that Jesus in these chapters gives us a two-part answer to the questions of the disciples.

The first part of Jesus' answer deals with when the judgment of Jerusalem would take place. If you look at Matthew 24:34 we have a summary answer of this.

⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28 (Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 33B)*, Electronic Edition by Oak Tree Software (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 688. John Bray also agrees with this. Bray, 16.

Matt. 24:34 Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.

Starting with verse 36, I believe we are to see a transition in Jesus' answer. We are not given any time reference to when Jesus will return at the end of the age. In fact verse 36 states, **But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but my Father only.**

So a good part of Matthew 24 deals with the judgment that came upon Jerusalem culminating in A.D. 70. The second part of the chapter and the following chapter gives instruction about the final return of our Lord and Savior. And it is very good to see a connection between the judgment of A.D. 70 and the final return of Christ. The fearsome judgment of A.D. 70 is a picture of the even greater judgment that our Lord will bring at the end of time. The judgment in A.D. 70 showed that Christ had ascended to the right hand of the Father. The judgment at the end of time will show the culmination of His rule at the Father's right hand.

3. THE FIRST PART OF THE ANSWER, vv. 4-14

Matt. 24:4 And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. **5** For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. **6** And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all *these things* must come to pass, but the end is not yet. **7** For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. **8** All these *are* the beginning of sorrows.

Matt. 24:9 "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. **10** And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. **11** Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. **12** And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. **13** But he who endures to the end shall be saved. **14** And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

This first part of Jesus' answer can be divided into two parts, verses 4-8 and then verses 9-14. Verses 4-8 announce that the end is not yet. Verses 9-14 issue a call to stand firm through difficulty.⁷

The time after Christ's ascension and before the final fall of Jerusalem was an important time of transition between the Old Covenant administration and the New Covenant administration.

⁷ France, 901 and 904.

Importantly the first word of instruction that Jesus gave was, take heed that no one deceives you or leads you astray. You find many very similar warnings in the NT. It is one of the constant duties of a Christian. Watch out that you are not deceived by false doctrine and by false teachers.

Eph. 5:15 See then [Watch out]⁸ that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise...

Col. 2:8 Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

In verse 5 Jesus specifically highlighted one of the dangers. There would be **many** coming in the name of Christ saying, “I am the Messiah or Christ.” And Jesus said that they would deceive many.

Ken Gentry in his book on Matthew 24 provides a listing of 16 individuals who fit the warning of Jesus.⁹ The book of Acts mentions two false Messiahs. Acts 5:36 speaks of one named Thuedas who had 400 followers, and Acts 21:38 mentions an Egyptian who led 4000 assassins out into the wilderness. Many others claimed to be the Messiah who would accomplish salvation for the nation of Israel and independence from foreign domination.

The second specific warning is verse 6. There would be wars and rumors of wars, but one must not be troubled by these things, because the end is not yet.

This is an interesting warning. How many wars are going on in the world today? There are at least 10 wars today in which there are over 1000 deaths per year. There are over 20 other conflicts that might not be called full-scale wars but which could erupt into such.¹⁰ And such has been the sad record of history for thousands of years. When hasn't there been a time when there have been wars and rumors of wars?

But consider this. The time of the Roman Empire during the NT period was known as the *pax Romana*, the peace of Rome. The period from the A.D. 30's to the 60's was a relatively peaceful time. But this period of peace started to break down. In Judea after A.D. 60 there were growing tensions which then led to the Jewish-Roman War beginning in about A.D. 66. There were great tensions and civil war in Rome itself after Nero's death.

So Jesus was giving an actual word of warning as well as giving a real sign of the times and yet warning that merely the presence of wars and rumors of wars was not yet the end.

Additionally in verse 7 Jesus spoke of famines, pestilences, and earthquakes. We find records of these things both in Scripture and in other ancient sources.

⁸ Same except verb of warning as in Matthew 24:4. Βλέπετε.

⁹ Gentry, 67-68.

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ongoing_conflicts

Acts 11:28 Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar.

Josephus also spoke of famines. Acts 16:26 speaks of an earthquake that at least affected the prison in Philippi where Paul and Silas spent the night. Other earthquakes can be recorded in the A.D. 60's in Asia Minor, Italy, and Jerusalem.¹¹

Jesus said these things were not the end but merely the beginning of sorrows.

Then starting in verse 9 there is a change in focus. Yes, a terrible judgment would eventually come upon Jerusalem, but God's people would not just be sitting in the bleachers watching this happen. No, this would be a time of testing, suffering, failure for some, and gospel triumph.

Verse 9 speaks of being delivered up to tribulation. The word tribulation literally means a pressing or pressure, a squeezing of sorts. In the NT the word is used metaphorically. The word tribulation used here is speaking of oppression or affliction of varying sorts.

John 16:33 These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

Acts 14:22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting *them* to continue in the faith, and *saying*, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.”

Rom. 5:3 And not only *that*, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance;

Not only would there be various forms of suffering but more specifically some would be killed. And then note the end of verse. You will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. The suffering of God's people in this first century period was not just restricted to Israel. Throughout the Roman world God's people were hated.

Sadly this would be a time where many would turn away from the faith and the message of the gospel. Many will be offended, that is they will fall away or turn from the faith. This was a time of apostasy. Paul warned Timothy that he was living in such a time of apostasy in 2 Timothy 3.

Specifically Jesus in verse 10 stated not simply that many would turn away but that they would strike out against those that they once professed to love. There would be betrayal and hatred.

Further in verse 11 Jesus warned against false prophets who would deceive many.

¹¹ France, 904.

Acts 20:29 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. **30** Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

Verse 12 speaks of a time of lawlessness or antinomianism. People will cast off God's Law and the love of many will grow cold. Isn't this similar to the warning that was given to the church in Ephesus? It was rebuked for losing its first love.

This is a rather grim section of instruction and warning. And yet verses 13 and 14 end this section with two words of promise and hope.

First, verse 13. He who endures to the end shall be saved. On the surface this might seem to be a troubling verse. Some might even try to use it to justify a works-based salvation. This is not what this verse is saying.

Jesus spoke a very similar word in Matthew 10:22.

Matt. 10:22 And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.

Both Matthew 10:22 and 24:13 are promises made in the context of suffering. The point of these verses is to both give challenge and encouragement. There is no assurance given to those who turn away from Christ in the midst of testing, but those who by God's grace seek to remain faithful are given assurance that they will not suffer for nothing, it will not be in vain.

I quoted before the words of John Calvin on Matthew 10:22. Let me quote them again here.

This single promise ought sufficiently to support the minds of the godly, though the whole world should rise against them: for they are assured that the result will be prosperous and happy. If those who fight under earthly commanders, and are uncertain as to the issue of the battle, are carried forward even to death by steadiness of purpose, shall those who are certain of victory hesitate to abide by the cause of Christ to the very last?¹²

What is the end that this verse is speaking about? It is possible that it is speaking of the end of the period of judgment that came upon Jerusalem and the temple. But it is probably better to see the end as not referring here to any specific time. R. T. France suggests the translation, "for as long as it takes."¹³

We have not reached a place in our nation of intense suffering for the name of Christ and yet we see sadly how many turn away from the truth of God's Word. It can be very discouraging to see this. It can easily make people question and doubt, especially when someone very close turns away. What is the point of seeking to be faithful to Christ? I

¹² John Calvin, s.v. Matthew 10:22.

¹³ France, 907.

think many young people especially are confronted with this challenge. What is the point of living a restricted life according to the Bible when there are so many pleasures and joys that the world offers? Why give up your Sundays to go to a boring church service when you could do so many other things? Why follow the narrow and exclusive teachings of the Bible instead of thinking for yourself and coming up with your own ideas of life, death, and eternity. Maybe eastern religions do really have insights into truths that we have ignored?

The answer to all of these questions is given in verse 13. Those who endure to the end will be saved. Following after Jesus Christ with focus and perseverance leads to great reward. Here is a place of safety and refuge for those who battered by the storms and uncertainties of life.

And then in verse 14 we have a truly astounding promise. In the midst of a section which speaks of suffering and failure there is a beacon of hope given. The gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

Many would see that this verse is talking about the final return of Christ and that the gospel must go into every nation of the world before Jesus comes again. But that is not the meaning of this passage.

First, the end of verse 14 is best understood as the end of the temple. The word end in verse 14 is not the same Greek word as used in verse 3, the end of the age.

Second, the word **world** in verse 14 doesn't have to mean the entire world of 220 plus nations. In fact this specific word can refer to the world as ruled by the Roman Empire. Luke 2 speaks of the entire world being taxed right before the birth of Christ. That is the same word used here.

Third, the NT in the writings of Paul does refer to the amazing spread of the gospel in the first century before the fall of Jerusalem.

Col. 1:6 which has come to you, as *it has* also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as *it is* also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth;

Other verses to note from the writings of Paul include Rom. 10:18; 15:18-24; 16:26.

It is often the case that the gospel has spread the most when under the most difficult of circumstances. I certainly don't wish for persecution and suffering. But if God does bring greater suffering to the west, I think there is the hope of gospel expansion in our own day.

CONCLUSION:

Times of judgment demand watchfulness and perseverance.

BENEDICTION – ROMANS 16:25-27

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith — to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.