

Say What?

Hard Sayings of Christ:
This generation will not pass away- Matt. 24:34

Background for Matthew 24

Jesus predicts what may have seemed inconceivable at the time- the greatest architectural wonder in the Middle East will one day be a pile of rubble. Jesus delivers his teaching in Matthew 24 from the Mount of Olives, a site already resonant with apocalyptic overtones as the place of the Messiah's coming to judge his enemies (Zech. 14:4). Resting on the hillside, and probably looking down on the temple below, the disciples naturally question when such a catastrophe could occur. They ask a second question as well, about the sign that would herald the end of the age and Christ's return, a question likely triggered by Matt. 23:39. Jesus will make clear that the destruction of the temple and the end of the age are two separate events, but probably the disciples do not yet recognize this (see Mark 13:4), scarcely imagining that one could occur without the other. In their eyes, the two questions are one and the same (Craig Blomberg, *New American Commentary: Matthew*, Holman, 353).

It seems that Jesus begins by addressing the disciples' second question. Before describing the destruction of the temple itself, he warns against false signs- events that some would claim prove that the end is near even when it is not. Jesus' followers must take care not to be misled by occurrences that will simply be commonplace events of life in the Christian era. These events, which are not decisive signs include: (1) People other than Jesus will claim to be the Messiah. Many false teachers have made this type of claim throughout history. (2) "Wars and rumors of wars" will abound. These rumors are set apart from the great war that will lead to the return of Jesus pictured in Revelation. (3) International hostilities will be commonplace. (4) Famines and earthquakes will make people wonder if the end is near, but nothing may be deduced from them.

Like a woman's contractions before her labor and delivery, these preliminary events remind one of the nearness and inevitability of Christ's return. But just as a woman may experience false labor and just as genuine contractions still leave her



Digging
Deeper

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*"I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened."
Matthew 24:34*

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uncertain about the exact time of delivery, so too the events of Matt. 24:4-8 do not enable us to predict the time of Christ's coming. Birth pangs were in fact a common Jewish metaphor to refer to an indeterminate period of distress leading up to the end of this age. Yet in spite of all these disasters and difficulties, Christians must not be alarmed; the end is still to come.

Other preliminary signs before the return of Christ include: (5) Persecution and martyrdom of Jesus' followers (6) Apostasy, betrayal, and hatred will run rampant in the church. This envisions people within the church causing problems. When persecution increases, some will abandon their faith to save their necks. To the extent that the "gospel" in which they have trusted is only of the "health-wealth" or "prosperity variety," it will be exceedingly hard to maintain belief under these trying circumstances. (7) False prophets will arise. (8) Spiritual life will deteriorate, possibly even among true believers as they tire of fighting the battle against apostasy and persecution. But here we also are reminded of the marvelous inheritance for those who persevere. (9) Jesus tells us too of one positive sign: the extensive preaching of the gospel to representative areas and people groups across the globe (Blomberg, 355-356).

All of the preliminary events that Jesus talks about in Matthew 24 occurred to some degree before A.D. 70, though most if not all have recurred many times since then as well. Various messianic pretenders arose. The war of Israel against Rome began in A.D. 66-67 and was preceded by the growing hostility incited by the Zealots. Famine ravaged Judea, as predicted in Acts 11:27-30, dated to about A.D. 45-47. Earthquakes shook Laodicea in A.D. 60-61 and Pompeii in A.D. 62. Persecution dogged believers' footsteps throughout Acts; internal dissension so tore apart the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1-4) that God even caused some to die (1 Cor. 11:30). Numerous New Testament epistles were written primarily to warn against false teachers and perversions of Christianity, most notably Galatians, Colossians, 1 Timothy, 2 Peter, and Jude. Paul, finally, could claim that "all over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing" (Colossians 1:6).

The initial fulfillments of these verses will explain how 24:34 can be true. It demonstrates that everything necessary for Christ's return was accomplished within the first generation of Christianity so that every subsequent generation has been able to believe that Jesus could come back in their times. It should lead us to reject all views that claim to know for sure that Christ is returning in a given year, decade, or century on the basis of some unique event that has never previously occurred in Christian history. Moreover, by including the extensive preaching of the gospel with the eight negative signs, Jesus offers something of a balance in his presentation of events that must occur before the end. The period of time prior to Christ's return will be characterized by a growing polarization between good and evil. God's people will increase in power, witness, and impact in the world, even as persecution and hostility intensify and global conditions deteriorate (Blomberg, 356-357).

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus felt that Daniel 9:27 (see Matt. 24:15) was fulfilled when Zealots slaughtered the priests in the temple in A.D. 66, committing a sacrilege for which God brought about the desolation of the temple (human bloodshed in the temple desecrated it). This sacrilege would have been the signal for Christians to flee Jerusalem (Matt. 24:16). Early Christian historians tell us that Christian prophets warned the Jewish Christians to flee Jerusalem at this time.

The temple was left "desolate" in 70, when the Romans destroyed it with fire and then erected their own standards on the site. As Jewish people knew, these standards bore the insignia of the Roman emperor, who was worshiped as divine in the Eastern Mediterranean;

they would thus have sealed the site's desecration. Jerusalem's citizens had felt that even bringing these standards into Jerusalem temporarily (as Pilate had done roughly three and one-half years before Jesus uttered this warning) defiled the holy city. On several occasions the citizens of Jerusalem had shown that they preferred death to their temple's defilement (Craig Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, IVP, 113).

“The abomination that causes desolation” in Matt. 24:15 clearly alludes to the horror prophesied in Dan. 9:27, and repeated in Dan. 11:31 and Dan 12:11, with Jesus explicitly mentioning the prophet's name. First Maccabees 1:54 understood this prophecy to have been fulfilled in the destruction of the temple sanctuary by Antiochus Epiphanes, the Seleucid ruler who sacrificed swine on the Jewish altar and ransacked the capital city, leading to the Maccabean revolt of 167-164 BC. Jesus is envisioning a similarly horrifying event accompanying the destruction of the temple in the first century; indeed Roman troops did again desecrate the building as they virtually razed it to the ground in AD 70. The disciples would have naturally associated the destruction of the temple with “the end of the age” (Matt. 24:3), even if Jesus goes on to separate the two in his sermon. Jesus' foretelling of the destruction of the temple places him in a long line of Old Testament prophets who predicted the temple's demise (Blomberg, “Matthew” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, Baker, 86).

Waiting for Jesus' Return

So how does Jesus answer his disciples perennial desire for signs to specify when Christ's return is near? Like tender fig tree branches and new leaves that announce the arrival of summer, all the events of Matt 24 point to the nearness of Christ's return (24:32-33). But nearness implies that nothing more in God's plan of redemption must occur before the end can come. It doesn't mean that it must necessarily occur within a few months or years, but in the sense that it may occur at any moment. Since *the decisive* event of history has already taken place in the ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, all subsequent history is a kind of epilogue, even though it may last a very long time (Blomberg, 363).

In the Bible Christians are told to eagerly long for Jesus' return (see Rev. 22:20; Titus 2:12-13; and Phil. 3:20). But, do Christians in fact eagerly long for Christ's return? The more Christians are caught up in enjoying the good things of this life, and the more they neglect genuine Christian fellowship and their personal relationship with Christ, the less they will long for his return. On the other hand, many Christians who are experiencing suffering and persecution, or who are more elderly or infirm, and those whose daily walk with Christ is vital and deep, may have a more intense longing for his return. To some extent, the degree to which we actually long for Christ's return may reveal how deeply attached we are to this world. Instead of anchoring our hope in this world, we should anchor our hope in the future that God has for us.

But does this mean that we should never undertake long-term projects? A desire for Jesus to return quickly does not mean that we should never invest ourselves in long-term projects or neglect to plan for the future. It is precisely for this reason that Jesus does not allow us to know the actual time of his return. He wants us to be engaged in obedience to him, no matter what our walk of life, up until the very moment of his return. To “be ready” for Christ's return is to be faithfully obeying him in the present, actively engaged in whatever work he has called us to. And if Jesus returns before we “complete” our work, he will not hold that against us (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1093).

In Matthew 24, Jesus is portrayed as the exalted, even divine Son of Man and Messiah, who will one day return from heaven just as he would soon ascend into heaven. When that happens, the chain of events culminating in Jesus officiating at the final judgment of all the peoples of the earth will have been set inexorably into motion. Then all will weep- his people with joy, and his enemies with sorrow because they will now recognize that their fate is sealed. Despite numerous false prophets throughout the history of the church, whom Jesus himself predicted (Matt. 24:23-24), no one can ever know when that time will be, so all must be prepared. It could come at any time (Blomberg, "Matthew", 90)!

Can We Know When Jesus Will Return?

Jesus tells us that no one knows the time when he will return to the earth (Matt. 24:36, 42). However, this has not stopped many people from claiming to know when Jesus will return. Throughout church history people have made predictions, sometimes claiming new insight into biblical prophecies, and sometimes claiming to have received personal revelations from Jesus himself indicating the time of his return. Unfortunately, many people have been led astray by these predictions and had their lives disrupted. Anyone who claims to know when Jesus will return is simply disobeying Scripture, since the Bible makes it clear no one can know when Jesus will come back (Grudem, 1094).

Home Group Questions

1. Read Matthew 24:44. What does it mean to "be ready" for Jesus' return?
2. If you knew Jesus would return within 24 hours, what situations or relationships would you want to straighten out before he returned?
3. Why might Christians not look forward to Jesus' return?
4. What clues in Matthew 24 point to the fact that Jesus' return will be very evident to everyone?
5. Why is it dangerous to predict when Jesus will come back?
6. How does not knowing when Jesus will return serve as a motivation for us?

Questions for Personal Application

7. Are you ready for Christ to return today? What do you need to change in order to be ready?