

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew
 SERMON: **Signs of the Second Coming**
 SCRIPTURE: Matthew 24:1-31
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Introduction: In our journey through the Gospel of Matthew, we come today to chapter 24, one of the key prophetic passages in the entire Bible. It was just six months ago in our series on the new Free Church Statement of Faith that I preached a message laying out the entire prophetic program in Scripture. We discussed the Kingdom of God, the Great Tribulation, the Rapture of the Church, The Second Coming, the Millennium, and the Eternal State, but obviously in just one sermon we were only able to scratch the surface. Matthew 24 focuses on just one of these periods—the Tribulation—along with the signs that will precede the Second Coming.

In the opening verses of Matthew 24 Jesus entertains two questions from His disciples; in the rest of the chapter He answers those two questions in reverse order. The second question is answered in verses 4-35, and the first one in verses 36 to the end of the chapter. Let's begin by reading the first three verses of Matthew 24:

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "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."

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?"

The disciples ask Jesus two questions everyone has asked at some time: (1-3)

Two weeks ago we examined the blistering denunciation Jesus gave to the Jewish religious leaders in chapter 23, warning His disciples to reject them because of their blatant hypocrisy, legalism, and self-exaltation. Now as they leave the temple precincts His disciples call His attention to the amazing buildings that constitute the Temple Mount, particularly the Second Temple (the first being Solomon's temple, destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.). This one was first erected by Zerubbabel after the Babylonian Captivity in about 516 B.C., and then rebuilt and greatly enlarged by King Herod the Great. The current issue of *National Geographic* has as its cover story the amazing construction work of Herod, one of the greatest builders in history. Work on the temple had already taken 46 years according to John 2:20, and it wasn't finished yet.

Probably the reason the disciples bring up the temple is Jesus' statement of judgment in 23:38 that "Your house is left to you desolate." I think they are in effect saying to Him, "You can't mean *this* house, God's house, can you?" To which Jesus replies, "Yes, I mean *this house*. Not one stone will be left upon another." Now you have to understand Herod's construction method to fully appreciate how stunning this prophecy must have been to the disciples. The stones Herod used were humongous. Some measured 40' by 12' by 12' and weighed up to a hundred tons! They were so precisely quarried that no mortar was needed, and one could not so much as slip a piece of paper between them.

Yet Jesus' amazing prophecy came to pass less than 40 years later, when the Roman Emperor Titus came and destroyed Jerusalem. Literally not one stone was left standing upon another. The Wailing Wall or Western Wall where Jews go today to worship was the foundation of the Temple Mount itself, not the wall of the actual temple. The temple stones were pushed over that wall, and they lie there today in a heap.

While the disciples are mulling over in their minds how this could possibly happen, they proceed from the Temple eastward to the Mount of Olives, one of Jesus' favorite places. As they sit there, perhaps in the Garden of Gethsemane, looking back at the temple less than a half mile away, they ask Jesus two questions: when and what?

1. When is the Second Coming going to take place?

2. What are the signs or evidences that will precede it?

Now technically they don't ask, "When is the Second Coming going to take place." In fact, at this point I don't think they even understood that there would be a Second Coming. They actually ask, "When will *this* happen?", meaning the destruction of the temple Jesus has just mentioned. But it is obvious from the second question that they equate an event of such magnitude with the end of the age.¹ We know, of course, from the conclusion to the book of Matthew and the book of Acts that Jesus was put to death, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven, promising to come again in like manner. So the "when" question, whether they realize it or not, is really about the Second Coming.

The second question, the "what" question, is about the sign that will precede these great events. In other words, what are the evidences they should be looking for that will tell them when the time is near?

Jesus answers the second question first: *What are the signs or evidences that will precede the Second Coming?* (4-35)

Our plan is to spend two Sundays on this answer. We'll have to wait for the answer to the first question until after Christmas. Let's read Matthew 24:4-31:

Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. 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. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.

"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. 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.

A.D. 70 was merely a foretaste of a much more cataclysmic event that will occur at the end of the age.

The second preliminary issue we need to address is the Rapture of the Church.

2. When will the Rapture of the Church occur relative to the Tribulation? “Rapture” is the term some theologians use to describe the gathering of all true believers to be with Christ, as taught in the familiar passage of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

Every serious Bible student agrees that believers will be caught up together with Christ, as taught here in 1 Thessalonians 4, but there is great debate as to when this event occurs in relationship to the awful period of Tribulation described here in Matthew 24. There are four major views on the time of the Rapture—pre-trib, mid-trib, pre-wrath, and post-trib. In other words, the Church will be (1) raptured before the Tribulation, or (2) in the middle of the Tribulation, or (3) just before the end of the Tribulation, or (4) at the Second Coming itself.

Furthermore, the timing determines what kind of event the rapture will be. The pre-tribs and mid-tribs believe it will be a secret event whereby millions of Christians suddenly vanish from airplanes and cars on the freeway, leaving behind unbelievers and nominal Christians and causing incredible chaos. The post-tribs believe it will be a very public event coinciding with the Second Coming. Please understand that there are good and godly people who hold all four rapture views; in fact, there are good and godly individuals in this church who hold each view. But only one of the views can possibly be correct; they may all be wrong but they cannot all be right.

The most popular view among conservative Christians over the past century has probably been the pre-trib view. In effect, this view sees two future comings of Christ—once *for* His saints (the Rapture) and then seven years later *with* His saints (the Second Coming). This view first appeared in about 1830, but it gained tremendous popularity through the Scofield Reference Bible. Later it was popularized by *The Late Great Planet Earth*, the *Left Behind* series, and more recently by Joel Rosenberg in books like *Epicenter* and *Dead Heat*. Many of evangelicalism’s best-known preachers, from J. Vernon McGee to Charles Swindoll to John MacArthur have been strong advocates of this view. I think they are wrong. I personally believe the post-tribulation view is the most likely (with the pre-Wrath view a close second).

Now I don’t relish disagreeing with men of this stature or upsetting members of my own congregation, but it is necessary for me to state my position this morning *for one primary reason*: we need to know whether Jesus is addressing *us* as members of the Church here in Matthew 24 when He offers signs of the Second Coming and gives multiple warnings about keeping watch and being ready. If there is going to be a secret Rapture of the Church before the

Tribulation, then these warnings do not apply to us but only to those who turn to Christ in faith during the Tribulation. John MacArthur, for example, spends over 100 pages examining the details of Matthew 24 but he states clearly that neither the signs nor the warnings are for us.

*“Since the disciples obviously did not live to the end of the age, the events of chapters 24-25 could not apply to them or to any other believers up to and including the present time. Because all believers living then will be raptured just before the Tribulation (1 Thess. 4:17), the events could not apply to any Christian living before that time. They can apply only to those who come to belief in Christ during the Tribulation. . . .”*ⁱⁱ

But if the Church is going to go through the Tribulation, you and I should be looking for these signs, and the warnings certainly do apply to us.

I don't have time this morning, unfortunately, to do justice to Matthew 24 and teach in detail about the Rapture, too, but I can say with no fear of contradiction that either the Rapture of the Church is missing entirely from this most important prophetic chapter (which would seem very strange to me), or it is referred to in verse 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.” But verse 31 clearly occurs *at the end of* the Tribulation at the time of the Second Coming. That's not a problem for me—it fits perfectly with my post-tribulation view, but it is definitely a problem for those who hold to a pre-trib or mid-trib rapture. They have to interpret verse 31 as some other gathering of saints, and they have to acknowledge that Jesus ignores the Rapture entirely in this most important prophetic chapter.ⁱⁱⁱ

Now let me conclude this discussion by saying that if I'm wrong and there is a secret Rapture, I'll be happy to join you. But if I'm right and the Rapture actually occurs at the Second Coming rather than seven years earlier, then I have this important question for you: *Are you spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically prepared* to endure the tragic times Jesus speaks of here and to persevere through them?

Now let's return to Matthew 24 and examine Jesus' answer to the disciples' second question, “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” I think His answer can be divided into several stages, and I have chosen to employ the labor metaphor that He mentions in verse 8: “All these are the beginning of birth pains.” When a woman delivers a child she generally experiences several stages of labor. Some OB's speak of 3 stages and others four. I'm going to spare you the medical definitions and just go with a layman's approach: early labor, transition, heavy labor, and finally delivery.

Stage one: Early labor. There are four signs connected with early labor.

1. Deception by false Messiahs. Jesus begins in verse 4: “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ, and will deceive many.’” Now frankly there have always been false Messiahs, even in the book of Acts and the pastoral epistles. At every period of church history you find individuals starting new cults and religions and deceiving many. How can something so common to every age serve as a sign of the Second Coming? I think Jesus is simply saying that it will get worse as the Second Coming approaches.

Are we seeing that today? I don't know; it's plenty bad.

2. Wars and rumors of wars are mentioned in verse 6. Again, there has probably never been a period in history when this is not the case. Is it worse today than ever before? Probably not. Could it get worse real quickly? Absolutely. With countries like Iran, North Korea, and Russia rattling their sabers, and with nuclear weapons proliferating, things could deteriorate really fast. Still Jesus tells us in verse 6, "See to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come." We should not be gripped by panic. The mere presence of false Messiahs or of wars and rumors of wars is not sufficient for us to claim that Armageddon is upon us.

3. International unrest is noted in verse 7. "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." This is mentioned separately from wars and rumors of wars, so I assume these disputes are probably not military. It strikes me that this might well refer to disputes caused by international financial collapse or lack of food and medical resources or pollution of the air and oceans. Each of these potential problems has increased exponentially with the global economy, and each could very quickly erupt into an international crisis—today as never before.

4. Widespread famines and earthquakes are addressed in the same verse. Once again, these things are present in our world, and with the threat of global warming it could get much worse very fast. Many scientists are predicting much more extreme weather in the coming years. Luke adds plagues in his account, which reminds me of the AIDS plague of the past 30 years.

But I caution us, as Jesus did, that all these are just "the beginning of birth pains" (verse 8). A woman experiences discomfort in early labor, but the pain is generally superceded by the excitement and anticipation of delivery. I sense a similar excitement among prophetic experts. They love to publish articles and books every time there is a new development in the Mideast, pointing with eager anticipation to the nearness of the end. But a new stage of labor appears in verse 9 that removes the excitement as harsh reality sets in. I call this stage "transition."

Stage two: Transition. Interestingly once again we discover that most of these signs have been present to some degree in all periods of church history since the apostles. The issue is one of degree and intensity. Jesus mentions five signs during this stage.

1. Persecution and martyrdom of true believers. Verse 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." We have seen a definite marginalization of evangelical Christianity in our country in the past 20-30 years, but apparently as the Tribulation progresses that marginalization will turn into vigorous persecution and even martyrdom. By the way, I think our perspective as Americans can get pretty skewed when it comes to evaluating such signs. We think we're being persecuted when we can't put up a creche on the lawn of City Hall. But if you were a Christian in Uganda under Idi Amin or under Kim Jong Mentally Ill in North Korea or in almost any Muslim country today, do you not think you might wonder whether the Great Tribulation had already begun? Only in the West have we had the luxury of thinking about persecution in the abstract.

Do you ever wonder why Christians are hated as they are? Though they do their best to love God and their neighbor and are clearly more generous than non-Christians, they still are the butt of ridicule and the objects of vicious hatred. In fact, the media is much more hateful toward evangelicals than toward radical Islam, which is directly responsible for the deaths of millions. Why? There can be only one explanation, and it's found right here in verse 9– “because of me.” The world system hates Jesus and all He stands for; therefore it will hate His true followers.

2. Apostasy and betrayal on a large scale. Jesus says in verse 10, “At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other.” Apostasy is a term that means abandonment of the faith. It speaks of those who once professed to be Christians (and perhaps even gave outward evidence) but ultimately turn their backs on Christ in order to avoid persecution. Not only that, they betray their brothers and sisters in the faith, probably in order to curry favor with the persecutors. Luke tells us that the betrayal will come even from family members. This is not new, but the degree of it will be new.

3. Proliferation of false prophets and deceived people. The emphasis in verse 11 seems to be on “many.” In fact, not only will the false prophets proliferate, but so also will the number of people deceived by them. We have seen Mormonism grow from a handful of people to about 13 million over the past century and a half. If you add in all the other religious cults and heresies, and then consider popular prophets like Oprah and Dr. Phil and Deepak Chopra, there's probably not much more that needs to happen before this sign is potentially fulfilled.

4. Exponential increase of wickedness, accompanied by the fact that “the love of most will grow cold.” The word for “wickedness” literally means “lawlessness.”^{iv} Rather than trying to hide their sins, people will flaunt them. Frankly, this is the sign that seems most obvious to me today. Things my grandparents would never have dreamed of are now tolerated and even accepted as normal in our day. They could not have imagined that millions of people would be openly living together without benefit of marriage. They could not have imagined that a Hollywood star or even a Congressman could flaunt his homosexuality and remain popular. They could not have imagined the content of PG-13 movies today, to say nothing of R-rated ones.

5. The preaching of the Gospel in the whole world. Verse 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 pre-tribs claim that this Gospel is different from the Gospel of grace we preach today—it's the Good News of *the Kingdom* preached to those saved during the Tribulation. But as far as I can tell there's only one Gospel in the Scriptures—it's the Good News that Jesus paid our penalty so that we can enjoy citizenship in God's Kingdom now and for eternity.

This is a difficult sign to evaluate. Has this happened yet? It all depends upon what the word “whole” means. Every continent has already been reached with the Gospel. Every nation has believers in it. But has every people group and every language group heard the Gospel? No. That's why Wycliffe still has hundreds of Bible translators working among indigenous people

groups. But without a doubt the Gospel is being preached world-wide, even in closed countries, due to ministries like Sat 7. Computers, satellites, and digital technology make the Gospel more accessible than ever before. By the way, there is an interesting reference in Rev. 14 that suggests the possibility that God will supernaturally present the Gospel to every person on earth during the Tribulation. We don't have time to read it this morning, but I encourage you to check it out in Rev. 14:6-7.

The mention of "then the end will come" at the end of verse 14 is the signal that we are approaching Stage 3—heavy labor. I would say that an argument could be made (I am not myself making it) that every one of the signs so far has been sufficiently fulfilled, or could be within months. But I do not believe we have seen the heavy labor yet.

We learn in Daniel and Revelation that the period of Tribulation that Jesus is describing here in Matthew 24 will last approximately seven years. But in the middle of it the suffering and persecution will intensify exponentially. This the last half of the Tribulation is thus often called The *Great Tribulation*. And the signal for the beginning of this stage is the abomination that causes desolation in the holy place.

Stage three: Heavy labor

1. The abomination that causes desolation in the holy place. Jesus specifically states that He is speaking of the same phenomenon Daniel predicted in Daniel 9. So let's turn there to see what this is all about. Daniel is praying and confessing his sin and the sins of the Jewish people when the angel Gabriel comes to him and reveals that God has decreed 70 sevens, or as most Bible scholars agree, 70 weeks of years (or a total of 490 years), for the Jewish people and the city of Jerusalem, in order to accomplish six purposes:

- to finish transgression,
- to put an end to sin,
- to atone for wickedness,
- to bring in everlasting righteousness,
- to seal up vision and prophecy,
- and to anoint the most holy.

So obviously something pretty significant will happen when these 490 years are completed.

However, he goes on to say that the first 69 weeks (or 483 years) are separate from the last week (or seven years). Look at Daniel 9:25-26:

"Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens' (or 69 weeks of years, 483 total). It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary.

Scholars have demonstrated that the length of time between the issuing of a decree by King

Artaxerxes in 445 B.C. (Neh. 2:5-6) until Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, is exactly 483 years, down to the very day!^v After that, Daniel predicts, the Anointed One (or the Messiah) is cut off. I believe that is a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus just five days later. Then Daniel predicts that "the people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary." That happened when the Roman Emperor Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70.

But there is a further fulfillment yet future, for there is one more week unaccounted for—another seven year period yet to come. Daniel goes on to say in 9:26b-27,

"The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. He (i.e. the ruler who is to come, the Anti-Christ) will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven.' In the middle of the 'seven' (or after 3 ½ years) he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple^{vi} he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him."

So when we compare Daniel with Matthew, it is almost certain that Matthew 24:15 is the mid-point in the Tribulation, or the start of The Great Tribulation. Luke adds that Jerusalem will be surrounded by armies (Luke 21:20). Those who live in Judea, that is, those closest to the heart of the crisis, should flee to the mountains. No one should go back into his house to get his valuables or even necessities like a coat. Pregnant women and nursing mothers are singled out for special sympathy. Prayers should be offered that it not take place in winter or on the sabbath.

2. Great distress unequalled in human history. Listen to verse 21: "For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again." The Holocaust will not compare to this, nor Stalin's purge of 20 million people. So terrible will these days be that no one would survive if the days were not shortened.

3. Impossibility of survival if these days were not shortened. I assume this means that the seventieth week of Daniel will not last the full seven years God has allotted for it. It will be shortened for the sake of God's chosen ones.

4. Satanic signs and miracles by false Messiahs and false prophets. Friends, every time a miracle is claimed there are three possible explanations for it: (1) it is phony, (2) it is real and done by the power of God, or (3) it is real and done by the power of Satan. Some of these Satanic miracles will be so real and so convincing that even the elect would be deceived by them, if that were possible (which it is not). We have not seen this yet, but it will happen.

Stage four: Delivery will have to wait for next Lord's Day. But I want you to note how Jesus concludes this section in verse 25: "See, I have told you ahead of time." There is no excuse for being unprepared. But many will be. You know, there is an amazing parallel to the first coming of Christ. Despite hundreds of very specific prophecies of His arrival in the OT Scriptures, almost no one was ready for Him. Just a few lowly shepherds, a few illegal aliens called magi, an old prophet and an old prophetess in Jerusalem. That was about it.

The signs of the times are multiplying, friends. They are increasing in number and intensity. At the very least we should be watchful and ready, persevering in our faith, rejecting the false

teaching all around us, refusing to participate in the wickedness that is everywhere increasing, making sure our love for God and for one another does not grow cold, and pursuing the preaching of the Gospel to the whole world.

i. John MacArthur writes perceptively, “‘Coming’ translates *parousia*, which has the basic meaning of presence and secondarily carries the idea of arrival. The disciples’ question might therefore be paraphrased, ‘What will be the sign of Your manifesting Yourself in Your full, permanent presence as Messiah and King?’ They did not use *parousia* in the specific and more technical sense that Jesus used it later in this chapter (vv. 27, 37, 39) and as it is often used elsewhere in the New Testament in referring to His second coming (see, e.g., 1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Thess. 2:8; 1 John 2:28). They were not thinking of Jesus’ returning, because they had no idea of His leaving, but were thinking rather of His perfected Messianic presence, which they expected Him to manifest presently.” *Matthew 24-28*, 10-11.

ii. MacArthur, 15.

iii. Interestingly there is no mention of the rapture in the book of Revelation either, unless it be Revelation 20:4, which once again is clearly after the Tribulation. In fact, if you read the most detailed Rapture passage of all, 1 Thessalonians 4-5, carefully, there is nothing to indicate that the Rapture will occur seven years before the Second Coming. In fact, the passage reads much more naturally as a description of what will happen *at* the Second Coming itself.

iv. See the description in 2 Tim. 3:1-5.

v. See Sir Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince*, 1954, or Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 1977.

vi. Here is an obvious question, “How can this abomination occur in a wing of the temple when today there is no Jewish temple in Jerusalem, but only a Muslim mosque on the Temple mount?” I would simply respond that it is possible a Third Temple is going to be built. There are, as a matter of fact, extensive preparations going on today among certain orthodox Jewish sects to rebuild the temple. I don’t think this is something we should be promoting or helping to finance, because the NT tells us that Jesus Christ superceded the sacrifices of the OT, and that the Church is the temple of the Holy Spirit. But if the Third Temple is built by the Jewish people, it may well be the place where this prophecy is fulfilled.

It is possible, however, that the Holy Place is simply a reference to Jerusalem itself, and that the abomination is some kind of reprehensible act by which the Anti-Christ turns on the Judeo-Christian faith. Whatever it is, it signals a major turning point in this awful period known as The Great Tribulation.