

**SERIES:** The Good News, as Reported by Matthew  
**SERMON:** *Stage Four: Delivery*  
**SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 24:1-25  
**SPEAKER:** Michael P. Andrus  
**DATE:** December 7, 2008

**Introduction:** If you were not here last Sunday you could be excused for wondering, “What in the world is this sermon all about?” Well, it’s a continuation of last Sunday’s sermon on Matthew 24, one of the key prophetic passages in the whole Bible. Stage Four: Delivery is what I call the final stage of the Tribulation period, culminating in the Second Coming of Christ. But before we jump back into this fascinating chapter, I want to make sure we all understand why we’re taking precious time on a Sunday morning to talk about this topic. I could answer that on several levels.

First, we’re generally committed here at First Free to expository preaching through books of the Bible. This is not just a tradition for us; it is purposeful. We believe that if pastors are left to themselves to choose preaching topics, the congregation hears mainly the topics that interest him or that he feels comfortable addressing. If, of the other hand, we preach through the Bible book by book, the people are going to hear the whole counsel of God. While I enjoy studying prophecy on my own, I wouldn’t naturally choose to preach on it because I think it is very difficult and it has the tendency to create division in the church. But when I decided to preach through the Gospel of Matthew, I had no choice but to deal with chapter 24. That’s one answer to why we’re taking precious time with this subject this month.

But there’s a better answer to the question, and it goes back a step further. Why does God address the future so often and in such detail? And I think the answer is that He knows how easy it is for us to become “so earthly minded that we are of no heavenly good,” to borrow a phrase from my friend Josh. We have such a tendency to get enmeshed in everyday life—work, family, friends, entertainment, travel, politics, sports, you-name-it—that we begin to think this is all there is. There’s nothing wrong with any of those things I just mentioned, but God knows how important it is for us to realize this is not all that there is or even the most important thing there is!

There is a spiritual world we can’t see and there is life after death, and so God goes to some lengths to tell us about it. He tells us there are angels, demons, Satan, heaven, hell, and, of course, Himself. No doubt you’ve been following the news story out of Olympia, Washington, where a group of atheists put up a sign at the state Capitol right next to the nativity scene:

*“There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens our hearts and enslaves our minds.”*

The individuals who wrote that have chosen to believe that the only reality that exists is what they can see. But even an atheist must wonder when, let’s say, his child tragically dies from cancer or from an auto accident, “What was *that* all about? What was the point? Is that it?” But who does he ask?

God speaks to the atheist, saying, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no god’”, but He also

offers great insight, if we will accept it, into the spiritual world and the future. He doesn't tell us everything we'd like to know, for sure, and maybe that's because we simply don't have the capacity to understand more. But He tells us enough to know it's far better to spend eternity with Him than the alternative, and how to make sure that happens. That is, He has made the Gospel crystal clear. Still He knows how time-bound and earth-bound we are even as believers, so He gives us frequent warnings to be ready when He calls our name, or when He calls this whole world's number. We need to be watchful. An eternal perspective is healthy and even essential for every believer.

With that let's return to Matthew 24. The time is barely 48 hours before Jesus goes to the Cross. The location is the Mount of Olives (thus this is called The Olivet Discourse), where Jesus and His disciples are looking over the Kidron Valley at the Second Temple, rebuilt and enlarged by Herod the Great. Jesus tells His disciples that this amazing building is destined for ruin—that not one stone will be left upon another.

The disciples ask Jesus two questions everyone has asked at some time: (24:1-3)

1. When is the Second Coming going to take place?
2. What are the signs or evidences that will precede it?

Today we continue with Jesus' answer to the second of these two questions. But first let's review.

### **What are the signs or evidences that will precede the Second Coming? (24:4-35)**

The period of time Jesus describes is known to us as the Tribulation period or the Seventieth Week of Daniel, a seven-year period of trial and persecution that can be divided into several stages. Last Sunday we considered the first three stages which I called: early labor, transition, and heavy labor, after the labor metaphor that Jesus Himself uses in verse 8. The signs of Early Labor Jesus mentions are:

#### **Stage one: Early labor (4-8)**

- 1. Deception by false Messiahs**
- 2. Wars and rumors of wars**
- 3. International unrest**
- 4. Widespread famines and earthquakes**

We noted that these signs can actually be observed in every period of history, so their presence alone is not sufficient to cause alarm. In fact, Jesus says in verse 6, "Such things must happen, but the end is till to come."

The second stage, which I called the Transition Stage, includes five signs, more intense and more frequent than stage one:

#### **Stage two: Transition (9-14)**

- 1. Persecution and martyrdom of true believers**

- 2. Apostasy and betrayal on a large scale**
- 3. Proliferation of false prophets and deceived people**
- 4. Exponential increase of wickedness**
- 5. The preaching of the Gospel in the whole world**

I suggested that an argument could be made that all the signs in Stage 1 & 2 have already been sufficiently fulfilled that we could be ready to enter Stage Three (or at least they could all be fulfilled within a matter of months). In other words, I believe there is very little that needs yet to happen before Heavy Labor begins. (On the other hand, I want to make it clear that I'm not predicting that; while it's hard for me to understand how, I suppose it's possible that the Coming of Christ could be another 500 years off. I say that because no doubt there were sincere believers during the Middle Ages who felt these signs were upon them. Even the Apostles seemed to believe these signs were visible in their days).

We identified Stage Three: Heavy Labor as beginning at the half-way point of the Tribulation, when the abomination that causes desolation, predicted by the Prophet Daniel, takes place in Jerusalem. The signs mentioned here have not been seen yet, but I believe they could easily all occur in my lifetime. They include the following:

**Stage three: Heavy labor (15-25)**

- 1. The abomination that causes desolation in the holy place**
- 2. Great distress unequalled in human history**
- 3. Impossibility of survival if the days were not shortened**
- 4. Satanic signs and miracles by false Messiahs and false prophets**

Several of you asked me after last Sunday's message how the final fulfillment of the abomination that causes desolation could occur when there is no temple in Jerusalem today but only a Muslim mosque on the Temple mount? I would simply respond that it is possible that a Third Temple is going to be built. You will remember there have been two Jewish temples so far. The first was Solomon's, destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., and the second was erected in 516 B.C. under Zerubbabel's leadership but rebuilt and greatly enlarged by Herod the Great. A third temple is very definitely possible.

There are, as a matter of fact, extensive preparations going on today among certain orthodox Jewish sects to rebuild the temple. Materials are being stored and temple utensils have already been fashioned. Just Google "Third Temple" and you will find literally millions of articles about the Third Temple. The Jews, of course, want that temple to sit on Mount Moriah where the Mosque of Omar sits today, but I can't imagine that happening without full scale war between Israel and the Muslim world.

I personally don't think the Third Temple is something we evangelicals should be promoting or helping to finance, for the NT tells us that Jesus Christ superseded the sacrifices of the OT and the Church is the temple of the Holy Spirit. However, if the Third Temple is built by the Jewish

people, it may well be the place where this prophecy is fulfilled. But I'm not certain a Third Temple is necessary for the fulfillment of this prophecy, for it is possible that "the Holy Place" mentioned in verse 15 is a reference to Jerusalem itself, and that the abomination is some kind of reprehensible act the Anti-Christ perpetrates on the Jewish people.

As we concluded the sermon last week, we had come to Stage Four: Delivery. So let's turn in our Bibles once again to Matthew 24, beginning our reading in verse 26 and reading to verse 35:

*"So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.*

*"Immediately after the distress of those days " 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'*

*"At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. 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.*

*"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away."*

#### **Stage four: Delivery (26-35)**

**The Second Coming of Jesus Christ will be public and visible (26-28).** Jesus predicts that there will be those at the end of the Tribulation period who will claim they know where Messiah is—out in the desert or hiding in an inner room somewhere. He says, "Don't believe it, for when Messiah comes He will not be hiding; He will be as visible as lightning." In fact, the Second Coming will be quick, sudden, public, visible, universal, and unimaginably glorious.

Verse 28 contains a strange proverb, and scholars are all over the map trying to explain what Jesus means. "Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather." The proverb reminds me of a story I recently heard about a vulture who tried to board a plane carrying two carcasses with him. The stewardess stopped him, saying, "I'm sorry, only one carrion per passenger." (I apologize! That is not the meaning of this proverb, for sure). But what *does* the proverb mean and why is it found here? The best I can suggest is that Jesus is saying that the spiritually dead inevitably attract judgment. The Second Coming, friends, is going to be a time of great judgment on the world.

In verse 29 Jesus seems to be referring back to the signs we talked about in Stage 3 when He says, "Immediately after the distress of those days." Without any delay or any relief from the heavy labor, there will be major astronomical phenomena.

**His coming will be accompanied by major astronomical phenomena. (29-30).** The sun will be darkened, the moon as well, stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. I don't know whether this is the language of appearance or the language of reality, but either way, the darkness that will be palpable. Have you ever felt total darkness? Perhaps you've been in a cave when the guide turned out the light. I was once in an isolation cell at Alcatraz (as a tourist, of course). It was essentially a solid steel cage with no light at all, no fixtures, no furniture, nothing. But it was the darkness that was the most memorable and absolutely frightful.

I wonder if this isn't similar to what happens just prior to the Second Coming. There will be no light from the sun or moon or perhaps even stars. The darkness will cause such disorientation that Luke indicates people will literally die of fright.<sup>1</sup>

Why does God do this? Well, Matthew doesn't give us any more detail, but other prophetic passages indicate, I believe, that this is the time of the Battle of Armageddon, and perhaps the darkness is one of the afflictions God will visit upon the armies of the north, south and east as they converge on Israel, the apple of His eye.

**His sign will appear in the sky. (30)** No one knows for sure what this sign is, but the grammar may actually mean "the sign which *is* the Son of Man." This is most likely the correct interpretation, because neither Mark nor Luke mention the sign; they simply say the "they will see the Son of Man." Whatever the sign is, it will appear in the sky and will be clear enough to be recognizable by all people, for in verse 30 we read that . . .

**His coming will be mourned by the nations. (30)** While the Second Coming is a time of joy and deliverance for believers, as we'll see in the next verse, it will also be a time of mourning for the nations because they will realize, too late, that Jesus Christ is exactly who He claimed to be and is prepared to do what He said He would do. The nations mentioned here are likely the nations who have gathered their armies against the Jewish people.

We come to the climax in verse 30.

**He will appear in the clouds with power and great glory. (30)** You will remember that Jesus ascended into Heaven following His resurrection and post-resurrection ministry. Acts 1:9 tells us that after He gave His disciples their Great Commission, "he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight." Then two angels came and spoke to the disciples: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back *in the same way* you have seen him go into heaven." He left them in His resurrection body; He will come again in that same body. He left them in power and great glory; He will come again in power and great glory. He left them in a cloud; He will come again in a cloud. Clouds are a frequent sign connected with the coming of Christ.

Friends, this will be the single most amazing event since the creation of the world. Hymn writers

have done their best to capture the moment. I think of *We Shall Behold Him*. Imagine, if you will, Steve Green or Sandi Patti singing this instead of me reading it.

*The sky shall unfold, preparing His entrance;  
the stars shall applaud Him with thunders of praise.  
The sweet light in his eyes shall enhance those awaiting;  
And we shall behold Him then face to face.*

*The angel shall sound the shout of His coming;  
The sleeping shall rise from their slumbering place.  
And those who remain shall be changed in a moment;  
And we shall behold Him then face to face.*

**He will gather His elect from the whole earth. (31)** The Second Coming will mean judgment for unbelievers but deliverance for the people of God. We read 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.” Not one believer will be missed. As I mentioned last week, I personally believe this is a reference to the Rapture of the Church, the gathering of all believers from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation to be with Christ “and so shall we always be with the Lord.”<sup>ii</sup>

If you compare this verse with 1 Thessalonians 4, an indisputable Rapture passage, you see that both passages speak of a great “gathering” of believers, both speak of clouds, both speak of angels, both speak of a trumpet sound, and in both Christ is the focus. Of course, as I mentioned last week, if indeed it *is* a reference to the Rapture, it is a public event at the end of the Tribulation at the time of the Second Coming, not a secret Rapture seven years before the Tribulation starts or in the middle of the Tribulation.

### **The analogy of the fig tree: What does it mean? (32-33)**

Jesus commands His disciples to learn a simple lesson from agriculture: when twigs get tender and leaves come out, summer is near. Now that’s easy enough for all of us to understand. After a Wichita winter we are all looking for the first buds on the trees, the first jonquils poking their heads out. The buds don’t bring the summer, but the appearance of them is a sure and certain indication that summer is at hand.

The followers of Jesus are to be no less discerning than the gardener: “Even so, when you see all these things (I assume He means the first three stages of signs He has enumerated), you know that it is near, right at the door.” Now the disciples to whom He is talking hadn’t yet seen all these things, and in fact, they died before they saw them all. But when Jesus was teaching His disciples, He was also teaching future generations of believers; He was teaching the Church. The disciples represent believers of every age. I think by “you” He means whatever believers are alive when the signs come to pass.<sup>iii</sup>

We who are living here at the end of 2008 have certainly seen more of these signs and to a

greater degree than the Apostles ever did, and perhaps more than any other generation in church history. It seems to me that we have seen enough to convince us the Second Coming could be near. Allow me this morning to stretch your imagination a little. It is not at all inconceivable to me that a world leader with great charisma could arrange a peace accord between the Arab world and Israel in behalf of the major nations of the world. It is also not at all inconceivable that the same world leader could later break that covenant and turn on the Jewish people, as Daniel 9 predicts.

What might cause that to that happen? Suppose the Israelis decided to act unilaterally and bomb the nuclear reactors in Iran. What if Iran then persuaded all the Arab countries, along with their friends in Venezuela and Russia, to suspend all oil shipments to the European Union and the West? If some scenario like that played out, it is not at all inconceivable that the Europeans would join Israel's enemies in condemning Israel's first strike and line up against her, leaving the United States friendless and without the oil it needs to power its fragile economy. (Please understand, I'm not trying to predict this is going to happen, only painting a potential scenario that could conceivably unfold in a matter of months or years).

I don't believe we are right at the door *yet*, because at least six events remain unfulfilled:

1. The abomination that causes desolation has not yet occurred.
2. Distress unequaled in the history of the world has not yet come upon us.
3. Great signs and miracles are not happening.
4. Astronomical phenomena of the kind described in verse 29 have not been seen.
5. The Great Apostasy spoken of in 2 Thess 2 has probably not occurred (though that might be disputed).
6. The Man of Lawlessness, the Anti-Christ has not yet been revealed, which Paul also says must happen first. But I do believe the time could be near.

Now I can't leave the fig tree without mentioning an interpretation that some Bible teachers have given, namely that it is a reference to the regathering of the nation of Israel, which happened in 1948. Immediately after that event, interest in Bible prophecy skyrocketed. Many were certain that Christ's coming would happen within a few years, and certainly no more than 40, the traditional length of a generation. But this year Israel celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>iv</sup> I don't think Jesus was talking about the founding of Israel when He spoke of the budding of the fig tree. He was simply offering a common analogy, that just as buds indicate the nearness of summer, so the signs of the times indicate the nearness of the Second Coming. In verse 34 we come to one of the most difficult of all prophetic promises in the NT:

**The promise that “this generation” will not pass away until all these things have happened: What generation? (34)**

Jesus says to His disciples, “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” Here's the problem: This seems to promise that He would return in glory during the lifetime of those to whom He was speaking. That didn't happen. How do we explain this? One option some have chosen is that Jesus was mistaken; after all, they point out,

just a few verse later (verse 36) He admits He doesn't know the time of the Second Coming. He guessed but missed it by a couple of millennia. But "not knowing" and "being mistaken" are two different things, and my theology does not allow me to accept that Jesus was wrong, so I am forced to look for some other interpretation of this prophecy.

Some scholars, as I mentioned last week, believe this whole chapter is about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A. D. 70, which occurred less than 40 years after Jesus spoke these words. They are called "historicists" rather than "futurists" because they believe this chapter is all history. (Some even believe that Jesus literally came in A.D. 70 and we have been living in the millennium ever since, though it's a bit awkward to explain why a millennium should last almost 2,000 years or why we aren't experiencing the millennial blessings the Scripture promises, like lions lying down with lambs.

But I don't see any way one can find fulfilment of all these signs of the times in Matthew 24 in the months and years preceding A.D. 70. For example, the suffering of the Jewish people just before the fall of Jerusalem was significant, but Jesus says in verse 21, "For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again." Well, the Holocaust was certainly worse than the suffering in A.D. 70 by almost any standard of measurement. Something worse even than that is coming.

But if you're a futurist, as almost all evangelical are, and believe these prophecies are yet to be fulfilled, how do you explain Jesus' promise regarding "this generation?" There are several possibilities. First, the term "generation" can mean "nation" or "race." Jesus may have meant that "this Jewish nation" will certainly not pass away until all these things are fulfilled. Despite dispersion and incredible persecution and multiple efforts at extermination, Israel is a viable nation today. It will never be exterminated.

Another interpretation is that Jesus is using "generation" in the same way He spoke of the scribes and Pharisees as guilty of the murder of the prophets. They didn't kill the prophets themselves, but they were spiritually aligned with those who did. In other words, right up to the time when all these things happen, there will be people of the same stripe or generation as those who rejected Jesus while He lived on earth.

Still another possible explanation is that by "generation" Jesus is referring to the generation that is alive when these signs begin to unfold. In other words, the signs He has spoken of will all be experienced by one generation, the one living when Christ returns. Those who witness the birth pains will witness the birth.<sup>v</sup>

Whatever Jesus meant I am confident of one thing—He is trustworthy. In fact, that is His final point in verse 35:

**The promise that Jesus' Word is permanent though heaven and earth pass away: Will this actually happen? (35)**

Verse 35: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” Can we count on this? I absolutely believe it. Consider the first part first, namely that heaven and earth will pass away. What does this mean? That they will go out of existence? In 2 Peter 3:10-11 we read,

*“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earthy and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”*

I used to think this passage was speaking of the total destruction of heaven and earth as we know them. I no longer believe that. The term translated “destroy” does not necessarily mean “exterminate.” It can refer to a radical restructuring, a cleansing such as can only be achieved by fire. Yet the new heaven and the new earth will come out of the present one. It will be the present one resurrected and renewed. I think a parallel can be seen in what will happen to our bodies as believers. They will be resurrected and renewed. They will be these bodies, recognizable and identifiable, but they will have a new life principal. They will not be subject to the normal limitations of space and time, but they will be our bodies.

The new heaven and new earth will likewise be this heaven and this earth purified, restructured, renewed. I expect it to be recognizable. I expect there to be mountains and rivers and great plains and oceans and islands. I expect there to be animals. But everything will be purified and have new life principles that make it a perfect environment for resurrected saints.

But there is a second part to His promise: “My words will never pass away.” In another place Jesus said, “It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law” (Luke 16:17). Friends, the foundation of our faith, the foundation of our church, the foundation of our confidence is that God’s Word is truth. The past happened as it records it; the present functions according to the divine laws it reveals; and the future will unfold as God predicts it.

I want to close this morning with the very next words in 2 Peter 3:

*So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this (the new heavens and the new earth), make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation. . . .*

*Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.*

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i. Luke 21:26: “Men will faint from terror.” MacArthur comments, “The Greek term behind

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“faint” means to expire or stop breathing, indicating that people will literally die of fright.” John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28*, 51.

ii. Some who hold the pre-tribulation view of the Rapture have tried to find differences between the gathering here in Matthew 24:31 and the Rapture described in 1 Thessalonians 4. For example in 1 Thessalonians it says “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout,” whereas here in Matthew He just sends His angels. But it doesn’t seem to me that the involvement of angels precludes the Lord’s personal involvement, too. The Scriptures often say the Lord did something when in fact He does it through other agents. Besides angels are also mentioned in 1 Thess. 4, for Paul mentions there “the voice of the archangel.”

Furthermore, Matthew mentions a loud trumpet call, whereas at the Rapture Paul says it is the last trumpet (1 Cor. 15:52). Personally I think someone got these mixed up, because the last trumpet would be a more appropriate description for the gathering at the Second Coming than the one at the Rapture, which supposedly comes seven years earlier, but frankly, I don’t think there’s any difference between these trumpets.

iii. At the same time, I think it is inappropriate for Jesus to speak these words to the disciples as representatives of His Church *if* no one from the Church will be present when these events take place. In other words, if the Church is raptured before the Tribulation, why does Jesus speak of “you;” why doesn’t He speak of “them,” the Tribulation saints? Dispensationalists generally answer that Jesus is not here speaking to His disciples as representatives of the Church but as representatives of Israel, and since the Tribulation period is a uniquely Jewish period, the Church will be absent and it is still appropriate for Jesus to address His disciples in the second person. The basic problem I have with such an interpretation is this: when are we supposed to know that Jesus is speaking to His disciples as representatives of Israel as opposed to representatives of the Church? For the vast majority of the book of Matthew we have taken His instructions as applying to us! What is the signal here in chapter 24 that He is no longer talking to us?

4. I was in seminary when the Six Day War took place in early June of 1967. I was taking a class from J. Dwight Pentecost, one of the preeminent prophetic voices of that day, and I distinctly remember him saying in class, “Men, I do not expect us to meet again this Fall. I believe Israel’s taking of the city of Jerusalem from the Palestinians is an indication that the Rapture is imminent.” I admire his anticipation, but he was wrong.

v. MacArthur, 65.