

Introduction

One of the classic passages for Christians living daily life in this world is Ephesians 6. There we are told to put on the whole armor of God to be able to STAND against the schemes of the devil. Repeatedly in that text the saints are instructed to STAND. And STAND we must. But the Christian life is also a life of running. The author of Hebrews tells us to run with endurance the race that is set before us. The KEY is to realize that these are metaphors and sometimes we run by standing and sometimes we stand by running. Well this morning in Matthew 24 we see an instance when it is clear that we do just that. Here is a time when Christians were instructed to stand by running.

[Read Text and Pray]

Matthew 24 and 25 contain Jesus's reply to the questions put to him by his disciples about the destruction of the temple, the sign of his coming, and the end of the age. Because he gave the instruction on the Mount of Olives, it is called the Olivet Discourse. As I said last week, this discourse is fraught with a significant amount of controversy and differences of opinion among evangelical scholars and interpreters. Understanding its contents is marked by a significant amount of struggle. I have been struggling quite a bit this week to grasp and be able to explain what is going on here. And it has been rather enjoyable. But I must say what has provided exegetical satisfaction to me will not be as satisfying to others. There remain varying opinions on specific interpretational matters among interpreters that I respect. We must recognize that there are some challenging matters here and we can agree to differ on conclusions to which we come in areas that do not compromise the gospel.

As I said last week, I believe there is an intermingling of prophetic details about what was for the Jews a near end and what is for all humanity the end of the human age. In verses 4-14 at which we looked last time, Jesus provided a general description of the course of life on earth from his death and resurrection forward. Those conditions would commence immediately—wars, famines, earthquakes, and the like, along with world-wide gospel proclamation. And while they are but the birth pains, they do indicate that the end is coming.

Beginning with verse 15, Jesus points to a particular event which graphically foreshadows the end. It will signal the imminence of Christ's dramatic, age-ending return. According to verses 32-35, everything from verse 4 up to Christ's coming would transpire BEFORE the current generation would pass away—within 40 years or so. That's when these things will be—things which are an indicator of Christ's coming.

The whole of Christ's message, embedded with clear warnings, is that the main thing for his disciples is not the WHEN but the FACT of these events. The corresponding responsibility of his disciples is to live in alertness and readiness. It was true of the coming decimation of Jerusalem and it is true of Christ's return to judge the world. So the overall message proclaims the necessity of endurance. We saw it in verses 4-14. Endure by not being deceived, not being alarmed, not being disillusioned, and by not being deterred from preaching the gospel. As we move into verses 15-28, the emphasis is on endurance by running at just the right time. The message is know when to run, and run when it is time.

Jesus is focused on a cataclysmic event of great tribulation. The event is the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple in particular. Remember the fact that Jesus had condemned the Jews in ch. 23:38. After they solidified their rejection of him, Jesus said to the Jews there in the temple, "See your house is left to you desolate." He then informed the disciples who were marveling at the majesty of the temple that it would be completely demolished. The end of the age (of the Jews and of the temple) would come. The indicator of that destruction would be the Abomination of Desolation. And that is where we begin to unpack the text. We will look at the warning sign, the flight, the tribulation, and the coming of Christ.

So first, consider . . .

I. The Warning Sign.

Jesus said that they would see the warning sign of a time to run. The warning sign was the "abomination of desolation" standing in the holy place spoken of by the prophet Daniel. From Matthew's point of view, the reader should be able to understand just what this is. Now bear in mind that Matthew wrote his gospel with a Jewish audience in mind. He had confidence that they would be able to identify the abomination based on their knowledge of the prophecy of Daniel.

From Daniel's prophecy we can grasp that the city and the temple were to be destroyed in the context of abomination, war, and desolation.

Daniel 9:26-27 says, "the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. . . . Desolations are decreed. . . . And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate until the decreed end is poured out . . ."

Daniel 11:31 says, "Forces from [a prince] shall appear and profane the temple and fortress and shall take away the regular burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate."

Now, while the intent might have been more obvious to the Jew who was familiar with Daniel's prophecy, it would certainly be less clear to the Gentile. The gospel writer, Luke, was sensitive to that fact. His intended audience was Theophilus, a Gentile and unfamiliar with Jewish prophecy. He was more definitive in his communication of Jesus here. Where Matthew says, "When you see the abomination of desolation," Luke interprets Jesus as saying: "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near."

The Romans were abominable idolaters. Yet they were used by God to destroy a temple and judge a people that had themselves become an abomination. Those who would heed the warning of Jesus would know that the surrounding of the city of Jerusalem was the indicator of its imminent demolition.

The sign could be recognized by those who knew their Bibles. They could understand the warning indicator if they knew the scripture. Here we have a reminder of the importance of being biblically literate. We need to know our Bibles! Here we are at the beginning of the year. And there is never a bad time to begin reading the scriptures as a whole, but the beginning of the year is a great time to set it as a goal for the year. The abomination of desolation tells us the importance of having a solid grasp of the scriptures and knowing them as a whole. And to know them that way, we have got to read and study them. It takes time and diligence and effort. But this is the word of God. If we know any book, this is the one we should know!

Second, we turn to . . .

II. The Flight.

Jesus urges that when Judeans see the abomination of desolation, when they see the armies gathering at the holy place around Jerusalem, there is only one thing to do. Run! Flee! Run for your life!!

A. The urgency is so apparent. There is no time to go gather one's belongings. If you were in the field, there would be no time to go back home first to get your cloak. When you see the abomination, run! Get out of Dodge. Things are going to be horrific there. You have been given warning and you have been given a sign, but the time is short. Do not delay. The picture is one of greatest urgency. No hesitation. Just remember what Jesus said and do it! There was going to be a window of opportunity, and it had to be seized suddenly because the window was oh so small.

You and I may be living on this side of the abomination of desolation. But there are times even now when we are also told that we should flee, that we should make haste and run for cover and run for safety. Obviously, we should run for cover for protection from the wrath we deserve for our sins. We should run to Jesus that his sacrifice for our sins would cover us. When you sense the reality that your sins call for the judgement of God, you should run. Run to Christ. He died for sinners. His blood was shed so that looming judgment might fall on him instead of them. But sinners must flee to him for safety.

Furthermore, once we come to Christ there are instances for us to flee. There are clear circumstances from which Christ's people are told to run. There are places and there are situations and circumstances from which we should run for our lives!! The one that stands out is temptation. James tells us that "each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death" (James 1:14-15).

So we are taught by the Lord not to seek out temptation but to seek to avoid it altogether. Jesus taught us to pray, "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." And the epistles warn us to make haste in getting away from temptations.

1 Corinthians 6:18 says, "Flee from sexual immorality." 1 Corinthians 10:14 says, "Flee from idolatry." 1 Timothy 6:11 says, "But as for you, O man of God, flee these things;" he was talking about the love of money and material comforts. 2 Timothy 2:22 says, "So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." Listen, temptation calls you to come into the city, come where you feel you will be protected. Come where you feel that your longings will be satisfied. But how do you endure temptation? Not by running to it, but by fleeing from it! It is what we are taught by 1 Corinthians 10:13. "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man. God is faithful who will not allow you to be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

A time to run is whenever you face temptation. If you run to it, you are running to death! No! Run away! Flee! Flee in your mind. Flee with your legs. Get somewhere else. Just go! That is how you escape the death temptation wants to bring you!

B. Jesus tells his followers to flee, and the destination is also spelled out. Flee to the mountains. Generally, when a nation was under attack, the people in the country-side would run to the city. The cities were walled fortresses. It was the safest place to be. So Jesus' counsel is counter-intuitive.

But historians record that the Roman siege of Jerusalem lasted about 5 months. The Roman army allowed pilgrims who were coming to Jerusalem for a feast to enter the city. However, they did not allow them to leave. And the results inside the city were horrific. They ran out of food quicker and became more desperate sooner. It is told that mothers roasted and ate their children inside the walls of Jerusalem in those days. The city was not going to be a safe place. No, the mountains and the caves there would be the refuge that would protect the people in the midst of the heinous attack. And only those who heard and heeded the counsel of Jesus would be safe.

We learn here the lesson to not take the instructions of Jesus lightly! Can you imagine how you would feel if you had heard the warning and heard of Jesus's instructions but trusted your instincts instead of his words and gone into the city only to wind up starving and to witness people eating their own children and only to experience one of the greatest slaughters of people the world has ever known?

Listen, in our own day, people scoff at the gospel. They hear the warnings and laugh at the messengers who warn them to flee to Christ. They experience the guilt of their sin and the misery of it and they flee to psychologists. They flee to the bottle. They flee to their drugs and immerse themselves in earthly pleasures. They flee to lies that make them feel better about their rejection. But feeling better now will not help them then. "Why flee to the mountains? Why flee to Jesus?" they ask. This world fabricates reasons to resist and turn from Christ and reject him and to call him a fake and a false hope. How will they feel when they find that they are confined and surrounded and that the judgment of God is falling directly upon them? They will mourn their decision to reject. They will be appalled at their own foolishness. How they will wish they had heeded the warning and listened to the call!

C. The tenderness of Jesus is apparent as he sympathizes with the plight of women who are pregnant and nursing infants in those days. The trial of making haste on a Sabbath or in winter will be exacerbated by those conditions. Here is a testimony of Jesus's care. He knows our condition. When you feel you are running in obedience to his command and warning, and you feel exhausted and overwhelmed, know that your situation is not unseen by him. And he who sees is he who will help and sustain those who rest in him. He says that you should pray. And by the way when you are running from temptation, pray as you run! He is not going to overlook those who do!

Third, consider . . .

III. The Tribulation

These will be desperate and difficult days. Jesus does not mince words here. In fact, he is explicit that the tribulation of those days is so bad, so great, that it stands apart from all other tribulations either before or after or ever again in the history of the world. And if the days had not been cut short no one would have survived. But God cuts those days of tribulation short because of his elect, because of his chosen people. In other words, it is not time for the world to end. There are still those whom he has chosen who had not even been born yet who would be cut off if the human race was cut off then. But he has chosen them and he has set his love on them, and he will not let humanity kill itself off yet, for their sakes.

Learn from this point how intently God watches over the affairs of the earth for the sake of his elect. He is willing that none of these should perish but all his elect should come to live and to repent and ultimately to join him in communion and fellowship. This is astonishing and amazing love. The daily refrain of every Christian should be, "Amazing love! How can it be that You my God should die for ME!" That you should live for me . . . that you my God should rule the affairs of this world for me!

There are untold ways in which God is regulating every second of every day for the benefit and well-being of his children. How we should be mindful and thankful of his sovereign rule!

False christs and false prophets are mentioned again. There is a satanic effort to lead astray followers of Christ. They will experience a tug to believe a lie, follow a false christ, believe a false gospel, be taken away by false demonstrations of power. So compelling will be the appeal that if it were possible to lead the elect astray, they would be so led. If it was up to them they would be led astray. However, the keeping is up to God. Keeping the elect for himself is a work of the true Christ. He will not lose one. No one will be able to snatch Christ's elect from his hand! Listen! Ultimately the reason any of us stays faithful to the end, the reason any of us endures to the end and is saved is because he will hold us fast. It is not possible for any of the true sheep of the Lord to fall away because of the keeping power and work of Jesus. Now that does not mean that we can be lax and carefree. We cannot throw caution to the wind! No, he keeps us by telling us when to flee. He keeps by urging us not to be led astray. But he does the keeping. And we should be doing the obeying and the praising and the delighting in him.

Fourth, we turn to . . .

IV. The Coming.

Basically verses 25-28 tell us that when Jesus comes, no one will miss it. If someone tries to tell you that you have to be somewhere in particular to see Jesus, you know they are attempting to deceive you. The way that the coming of Jesus will happen is like lightning in the sky. There will be nothing hidden or secret about it. Just think about how your room lights up in the middle of the night when there is a storm. I vividly remember the road trips my family used to take to Oklahoma in the summer when I was a kid. Usually in June, we were headed to the Layne family reunion from the upstate of South Carolina, and it never failed that as we entered Oklahoma a storm would be coming from the western horizon. Lightning flashes would turn darkness into almost daylight for miles. That is the way it is going to be when Jesus comes. You will not be able to miss it. If someone has to tell you about it, it hasn't happened!

The statement about the corpse and the vultures is uncertain but seems to relate to the sudden and unmistakable aspects of Christ's return. As surely as you can't hide a corpse from a vulture, you won't be able to hide from his coming and it will not be hidden from you.

Now how does the coming of Christ fit with the horrific destruction of Jerusalem and these other aspects of the days which have begun within the generation living when Jesus spoke these words? It has now been 2,000 years since then and still Jesus has not returned. Well, we will get to that in more detail when we cover verses 32-35, but for now, suffice it to say the following. The disciples had asked about the sign of the coming of Jesus and the end of the age, which I take to mean the end of the human age. And Jesus is saying that when the patterns of the things he has described begin to take place and when the abomination of desolation appears, and when Jerusalem is destroyed, the fulfillment of those prophecies which Jesus has made are evidence that his coming is imminent. It will be after that.

IT WILL BE after that. And that is the hope and confidence of Christ's people now in the midst of the continuing waves of trouble and tribulation that are not as it was when Jerusalem was sacked, but still the times are tough. Jesus IS coming back. And every eye will see him. And no one will miss it. This is the blessed hope of every true follower of Jesus Christ.

Here is what propels us forward every day in hope. Here is why we should live ready to go. We should live as ready for Jesus to return as a farmer would be ready to leave the field and run for the mountains without going home, as ready as someone on the roof of their house who would not even go in to get their belongings. Nothing on earth is more urgent than meeting him when he comes.

Conclusion

I hope you are ready—ready to run when it is time and ready to meet Jesus. What he warned would happen took place. And what he has yet promised will also happen. Jesus IS coming again. You will either be glad to see him or will start fleeing from him only to be overtaken by him. The way you ready yourself to meet him is by turning from your sins and trusting in his work on the cross on your behalf. Christ became sin on our behalf in order that all who turn away from a heart of sin and a life of sin and who trust in him will be forgiven. These are the elect, his chosen people. These are the ones he is coming to receive and take home.

Prayer

Benediction

The Lord lift up your countenance and fix your hope fully on the promise of his coming that you may be ready to join him when he appears.