

It's a Christmas Miracle

Sunday AM

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Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, as we hear the tune of that classic song about the angels declaring the truth of the Christ child to the shepherds on the hillside, Lord, it is my prayer that we would be with a shepherd's heart today, that we would hear your word willingly, but more importantly, we would respond immediately. Lord, may you speak, may we hear, and at the end of this hour, may we obey your word. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of your New Testament, chapter 24. Now for those of you that are guests or visitors with us, over the course of this month, we as a family of faith have not only been walking through a Bible reading plan, we have also been reading specifically the Gospel of Matthew leading up to what you and I know as the Christmas season and this week we've had the opportunity, we've had the privilege of reading that last section of the Gospel of Matthew, those last days of the physical ministry of Jesus Christ, and ultimately when we got to chapter 28, what we know as the bodily resurrection which changed not only the world for eternity but each of our individual lives as well. Today, I want to invite you to take a journey with me through three of these very strategic passages. We're going to be in Matthew 24, Matthew 27, and Matthew 28, and I want to address the subject matter of a Christmas miracle. Now oftentimes when we give a title to a message, that is somewhat of the theme that will guide us throughout the text but today is going to be somewhat reversed, in fact, I'm giving you the cart before the proverbial horse because I want to build a case for a Christmas miracle, not support that title along the way.

Let me encourage you to turn to Matthew 24, three areas that we're going to address. We're going to deal with a past prophecy, we're going to deal with a present picture, and we're going to deal with a future promise. Matthew 24. For those of you that may not be aware, is one of the most controversial, most discussed and debated chapters in all of the Bible for we discover that Jesus Christ has taken his disciples just days before his crucifixion and ultimate resurrection and there as he looks over the city of Jerusalem, he begins to expound, he begins to share with them about what we know as the last days, the end of times. Those of you who love theological words, this is eschatology. This is the

speaking of what we know as the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and as we'll address in just a moment, anytime you get two Baptists together, you get three opinions, and no more so than on this chapter and this subject matter. But today we're not going to read the dialogue of Jesus, we're not going to deal with the sermon of Jesus, I want you to see the specific questions that are asked. In fact, it's much like the game show Jeopardy. You know in Jeopardy there are a lot of answers that can be given but it's based on the question that is asked that determines whether the answer was correct.

Beginning in verse 1 it says,

1 And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. 2 And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. 3 And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?

Now as you read throughout Matthew 24 and also chapter 25, there's a lot of subject matter, there are a lot of statements that are made, and there's been a lot of discussion about the when, the how, the where, and particularly the chronology of things, but I want you to notice that everything that Jesus addresses is based on these two questions that are asked. The first one is when shall these things be, that's in reference to Jesus saying the temple is going to be torn down; and the second one is they said what is the sign of your coming and when is it going to take place.

Now we would all agree that on this subject matter when we deal with the prophecies of Jesus' Second Coming there are a lot of constructs, there are a lot of concepts, and there's a lot of controversy, to say the least. So if you would allow me this morning, I want to kind of gather us all under one big Matthew 24 umbrella and just deal with some basics of what we know this prophesy and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

The first thing I want you to know about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is this: it is going to happen. It's going to happen. In fact, the Bible says in 2 Peter 3 that in the last days, there will be scoffers, there will be those who mock saying, "Well, he hasn't returned yet, I don't think it's going to happen." For those who scoff and for those who mock, I don't think they understand the probability. Allow me to illustrate. If you're in a sporting even, whatever that may be, and they have a coin toss at the beginning to determine who's going to get the ball or who's going to begin on offense versus defense. When they flip that coin and you can use the sports illustration or just a casual one as well, if I take a coin and I flip it nine times in a row and it lands on heads all nine times, the statistical probability of it landing on tails the tenth time is not 10%, it's 50/50, and I think one of the struggles that humanity has as we look back on almost 2,000 years and say, "Well, Jesus said he was coming back, why hasn't he arrived?" You do understand that every day we are removed from the empty tomb does not lessen the probability that

he will return, for every day that we live, there's a 50/50, there's a 50% chance he will return this day, and there's a 50% chance that he will not.

So the first thing we need to grasp is this, this is an event, this is something as addressed in Matthew 24, it is going to happen. The second major principle I want to share with you is this, that in God's great calendar of events, it is next. Now I know this is where the great controversy comes in because everybody wants to discuss dates and everybody wants to talk about how long and when will it be and what month and what date and what year. Notice I said it will be next. You see, God's calendar is centered on the person of Jesus Christ and we talk about his birth, particularly at this season, we talk about his life and his ministry, we talk about his death on the cross, his resurrection three days later, his ascension into heaven, and his return.

You see, that is the next event on God's great calendar of events and yet there is so much controversy and there's so much discussion and there are so many people who even part ways among each other over the chronology of such, and so today I want to share a very important statement with you. This was shared with me years ago. We're going to put it on the screen. I think this helps us all when it comes to the chronology of the Second Coming, that nothing has to happen before Jesus comes back for us. There are a lot of things that have to happen before Jesus comes back with us. Some of the things that have to happen before Jesus comes back with us may, in fact, happen before he comes back for us.

Now what I have very specifically yet vaguely told you is that it's next and we get so caught up with this Scripture and that Scripture and this event and that event and this scenario and that experience, understand that it is next in the sense that 1 Corinthians 15 says, "In the moment, in the twinkling of an eye, those who are dead in Christ, those are alive in Christ, shall be caught up to meet together the Lord in the air." And when we talk about all of the things regarding Jesus' Second Coming, you do understand that does not encompass just three or four minutes of time. It includes his coming for us, it includes his wrath being poured out as we see in the book of Revelation, and it also includes the one day where he will come out of the sky and he will physically descend to the earth.

It is going to happen and in God's great calendar of events, it is next, but it is the third aspect of this past prophecy that may be the most important, that you can't predict it and I can't predict it. In fact, in Matthew 24, Jesus made this incredible statement, he said not even the angels but his Father alone in heaven knows. Can I give you some wisdom and some advice? If you're a reader of, a listener or, or an observer of somebody who has falsely, erroneously at some point said, "This is the date," and it has come and passed, would you close their books, turn off the channel and stop the podcast? You know, in the book of Deuteronomy 18 it says that if a prophet claims to be of God and he misses one prophesy, put him to death. So I figure turning off the tv is just an act of mercy. In other words, when we discuss this subject matter that even the disciples were so curious about, "Jesus, when are you coming back? What's going to be your sign?" There's a whole lot happening in that chapter of Scripture but just know this, Jesus is coming back. It's next and there's nothing you can do to predict exactly when it will take place.

As we continue through the book of Matthew towards Matthew 27, we move from what I call a past prophecy to a present picture. In fact, in Matthew 27 beginning in verse 50, we have the final verbiage, the final utterances of Jesus Christ on the cross. It says in verse 50 of Matthew 27,

50 Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.

Allow me to push pause for just a moment. There are seven what we know as famous statements that Jesus made when he was hanging on Golgotha's cross. He began by saying, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they're doing." He turned and he said, "Woman, behold your son. John, behold your mother." He turned to the thief beside him who was repentant and said, "Please remember me when you come into your kingdom." He said, "Today you will be with me in paradise." After three hours of darkness, Jesus declares with a loud voice a quotation from Psalm 22:1, he says, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Then he simply declares, "I thirst. It is finished. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

You see, verse 50 is critical because Jesus has given up the ghost, he has offered his life, he has given himself for humanity. It's these next three verses that I want you to see as a present picture or a reality for our lives. It says,

51 And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; 52 And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, 53 And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.

Now I am curious for those of you who are participating in our Bible reading plan, how many of you this week read that section of Scripture and responded with a holy, "Huh?" Because I will confess to you, I have read this section of Scripture dozens of times before I noticed that it said that when Jesus Christ rose from the dead, many saints of old, that's the Old Testament guys, that their graves were opened up and they walked in the holy city, that is what we know as Jerusalem. In fact, this is one of those what I just call head-spinning passages in the Bible.

Before we deal with the details of particularly the raising of the dead, I want us to look at this present picture because even though the prophecies that we addressed earlier, even though some of them may occur before we are taken with the Lord, many of them have not yet occurred and yet what we see in Matthew 27:51-53 is a present picture of you and my reality when we are believers in Jesus Christ because the tomb that he was raised from is still empty this day.

So what took place? It says that the veil was torn from the top to the bottom. Now if you read the Old Testament Scriptures about this famous veil in the Holy of Holies, it was about 30 feet in height. It was the width of a man's hand. And about every three to four

feet it had a horizontal seam in it. In other words, to use somewhat of our vernacular, imagine back in the days, you know what BG is, right? Before Google. Remember BG when we actually had a Metro Atlanta phone book? Imagine something of that thickness made of woven fabric, 30 feet in length, with seams every three to four feet being torn from the top to the bottom. It was an incredible event, in fact, I think sometimes we read through this passage so quickly we get it reversed. We seem to think that somehow the earth quaked and then the veil tore. No, no, no, the veil tore and because the veil tore, the earth quaked.

So not only do we see this incredible event with the veil, we also see the earth around, the ground around, everybody who was gathered completely altered, and then all of a sudden if that wasn't enough, when the tomb was discovered empty, when the angel said, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" we do not have an exact roll call of what is happening here but can you imagine, "Hey, Solomon. Hey, Noah. What's up, David?" It just says many of the saints, does it not? It doesn't give us a list of their names. You say, "Why didn't it give us all the names?" Because the Bible wouldn't have enough pages to fill them in. It says many of the saints rose.

That's an incredible passage, but more than anything, it is a picture – listen – it is a picture of our present reality when we celebrate the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Let's begin with the veil. Do you know what its purpose was? It was to separate the holy from the unholy. It was to separate the clean from the dirty. You see, the veil separated humanity from the Holy of Holies where the ark of the covenant, the mercy seat was, where the blood of the Lamb was applied, and when Jesus rose and this passage took place, and it says there that the veil was torn from the top to the bottom, that meant that you and I had complete access to the throne room of God. Because of Jesus' shed blood, there was no longer a partition, there was no longer a divide. We can do what Hebrews 4 says, we can enter boldly into the throne room of God. No longer would the priest and the blood of bulls and goats suffice because the blood of Jesus Christ had been shed and it was so powerful that that veil tore and there was no longer a divide between the holy God and unholy creation.

Then it says that the earth quaked. It's an incredible picture that even the creation responded. You know, one of the things that I'm consistently amazed and I know there are all kinds of opinions and perspectives and such, but I think that the creation outside of humanity may get God better than we do. You say, "Well, how do you know that?" Because when we get a warning that there is a horrible storm or a tornado coming, we, the humans, get in a big diesel truck and chase it and the dogs actually hide from it. You tell me who's more intelligent. The earth quaked. It's amazing that the creation of the Lord responds oftentimes better to his movement than us.

Then they rose from the dead. You see, what an incredible picture, that as a believer in Jesus Christ, we have been raised from the dead. We have been given a new life. We have been what the Bible calls born again. What a picture that is still relevant today. This is not something we're waiting on like the prophecies of Matthew 24. These are the things we're discussing and saying, "Well, was it this? Or could it be that?" No. The veil has

been torn, the earth has quaked, the body of the saints have risen. It's a picture of what our present reality can and should be when we believe on Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior.

This leads to the final thought today, Matthew 28, beginning in verse 18. We know it as the Great Commission but I want to talk about an incredible future promise. Verse 18, Jesus has risen from the grave. The women were there first to observe. They shared with the disciples. They have run into the tomb. The word is getting out and he has gathered them together as he promised. Verse 18,

18 And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

Now I want you to hold onto that statement for just a minute, all power.

19 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: 20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo [listen to this], I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

You know all those prophecies that people get all frustrated and bent out of shape about? He says, "Don't worry. I'm with you until the end of the world." Now I know this is one of those great passages where it talks about going and sharing our faith with others and likely we should, but Jesus ends this Gospel by stating that, "I am with you unto the end of the world." What an incredible promise and that's not just a promise for all those things that are mentioned in Matthew 24, that's not just a promise of things next decade or the next calendar year that we're about to roll into, or the next season of life. Last time I checked, that means the events of the next hour are on his radar until the end of the world. That means that whatever we experience, whatever we go through, whatever challenges are before us, he said, "Don't worry, I'm with you even in that."

Now I want to take this promise and I want to walk what we've addressed in Scripture backwards, if you allow me to. The raising of the bodies from the dead. You know, the Bible speaks that one day that you and I as believers in Jesus Christ, we will receive a new body, one that will be without pain, it will be without death, without misery, and yet Jesus said, "I will be with you to the end of the world," that means he's with us even when our physical bodies begin the failure process. In sickness and in death he says, "I'm with you until the end of the world."

The earth that quaked. Now that can be literal or proverbial. Any of y'all experienced some earthquakes in your life? News you didn't expect to hear? Events that came that you weren't expecting? Things that completely rattled the foundation of your world? But what does Jesus say? "I'm with you until the end of the world."

What about the veil being torn in two? Because of that, because of Jesus' shed blood, because of our relationship with him, there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, there is no

situation that cannot be addressed. How oftentimes do we say, "I believe Jesus is big but I don't know if he's that big"? He said, "I'm with you until the end of the world."

We go back to Matthew 24, there are a lot of things spoken of in that chapter of Scripture, a lot of events that oftentimes we speculate of and oftentimes read about in the tabloid headlines of the local market, what does he say? "If the world is still here and things are still wrong, I'm with you to the end of the world."

I want you to think about this section of Scripture, these incredible prophecies, this unbelievable picture of the resurrection and then the promise that no matter what happens, where we find ourselves or what the situation is, he's with us no matter what, and thus the Christmas miracle. You say, "The Christmas miracle? I don't understand." Some of you may be thinking, "I don't even understand how? What does this have anything to do with Christmas?" You do realize that his death, his resurrection, you realize his ascension and his coming and his ability to say, "I'm with you to the end of the world," you do understand that all that began with what we know as the Christmas story; that he was willing to be veiled in flesh, he was willing to humble himself to the dirt of life to walk among us, and what we know as the Christmas story, it began in that manger scene, it began as the wise men came and presented their gifts to him, it even began when they made their way to Egypt and they came back out, it began when at age 12 he was gathered among the religious and the academics and he was confounding them with his knowledge and ability, it began when he changed the water into wine, it began when he overturned the tables, it began when he told a woman who was caught in adultery, "Where are your accusers? Go and sin no more."

You see, I could walk through all the stories and all the aspects of Jesus' life and ministry but I want to end in Luke 19, a man by the name of Zaccheus. You see, this is the Christmas miracle. Here was a man who found his way to the top of a sycamore tree just to get a glimpse of Jesus, a man who was a thief, a liar, and a scoundrel. That night Jesus went to his house, communicated the truth of God's word to him and he repented of his sins and Jesus made a profound statement in Luke 19 that's also repeated in Matthew 18:11. This is the Christmas miracle, "I came to seek and to save that which was lost." Do you not see the miracle in that? That all that we've talked about, all the Christmas story, all the ministry, all the things about the Second Coming, the resurrection, and the whole reason because he wanted to save you. He wanted to forgive you. You see, you were on the other side of that veil and he wanted it to be torn. You were going to be in that grave for all of eternity never to be let out and he wanted you to be raised. He knew you'd walk through the difficulties of life, the struggles of life, the relationships of life, and he said, "I want to be with you to the end of the world." You see, the Christmas miracle isn't the fact just that he came and that he's coming again, it's why he came, to seek and to save us.

With all the details of the Christmas story and even the entire story of Jesus Christ, the miracle of it is that he would even be willing to do it for people like you and people like me. He came to seek and save that which was lost and that, my friends, is a Christmas miracle.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Maybe you're here today, you're familiar with all the carols, you know all the traditions, but maybe the person and the story of Jesus Christ has never been personal with you. I've got some great news. There is nothing that you have done or haven't done that can somehow exclude or void you from Jesus saying, "I came to seek and to save you." You may be thinking to yourself, "Then if I'm eligible, if he desires to forgive me, what do I do?" The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Can I just encourage you, whether you're here for the first time or you've been here 10,000 times, if that's the position you find yourself in today, let me just encourage you to have a conversation with the Lord. Technically the Bible calls it prayer. You don't have to have this conversation out loud, in fact you don't even have to say the same words that I might say, but maybe your conversation would go a little something like this. "God, today I finally realized my need for Jesus. Lord, I understand today that I'm the problem. I'm the one who has messed up. I'm the one who has sinned. I'm the one who has walked down the wrong path of life, but I believe today that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem and I believe, God, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to take the cross of Calvary for my sins. God, I believe that he did raise three days later so that I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to all the world's problems but I do know that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem. I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me not based on what I have or haven't done but based on what Jesus Christ alone has done on my behalf. In the best way I know how, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed, our eyes still closed, maybe today you're that person for the first time you cried out to God to forgive you and save you. We'd like to celebrate with you. In fact, in just a moment, I'm going to pray over us and we're going to stand and sing and we'd love the opportunity to see you step out and step forward and we can celebrate with your decision in life. Or maybe today you've already made that decision but you're like the half-dozen folks who tomorrow night at our Christmas Eve service are going to stand in our baptistery and declare to the world they're believers in Jesus, maybe you need to follow in baptism. Or maybe today is the day that the Lord has spoken, this is the body of faith you're supposed to be a part of and maybe today we can celebrate with you becoming a part of our family of faith. Or maybe you just need to pray with somebody or maybe it's another decision, we just want to celebrate with you.

Heavenly Father, as we are in this season of celebration in our culture, what a wonderful opportunity to celebrate that you're still in the saving business, you're still in the forgiving business, you're still in the healing business, you're still in the restoring business. God, today as we allow your Holy Spirit to take your words and perform spiritual surgery on our hearts, may we just simply respond to you in an appropriate fashion. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me as John leads us. Whatever decision, I'll be right here at the front.