

Basics

¹ *Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you —unless you believed in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:1–2 ESV)*

¹⁶ *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)*

Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. (Jude 1:5 ESV)

How Does This Story End?

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Matthew 13:24-30

Matthew 24:6-31

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Introduction:

Good morning! This morning we come to the conclusion of our Basics series. For the last 9 weeks we have been asking and answering some of the most foundational questions associated with the Christian faith. Today, appropriately, we are concluding this series by asking the question: “How Does This Story End?” Now, notice please that we are not asking the question: “When Does This Story End?” The Bible is pretty clear that nobody knows when this story will end – if you think that you do; if you already have T-shirts printed up in the trunk of your car then you need to repent and return those shirts, get your money back and give your head a shake. Jesus said that nobody knows the day or the hour. We don’t KNOW when this story will end. But we do know HOW it will end. The Bible says a lot about that and so this morning we will look at some of what is said.

We’ll address this topic in two stages. The Bible compares the coming of the end to a woman in the throes of labour. There are birth pangs and then there is delivery. Birth pangs can be long or short. You can have that baby in the cab on the way to the hospital or you can have that baby 72 hours and three epidurals later. You never know. Birth pangs lead to babies but you cannot predict how long they will last. So it is with respect to the end.

These Are But The Beginning Of Birth Pains:

Open your Bibles to Matthew 24:6-8. Jesus says:

⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. (Matthew 24:6–8 ESV)

1. There will be wars and rumors of wars...

The time between the ascension of Jesus into heaven and his ultimate return to the earth to fully consummate his eternal kingdom will be characterized by all manner of conflict in the cosmos. Jesus said that he did not come to bring peace but a sword. The Gospel is a recreative virus that is assaulting and transforming the entire cosmos – socially, politically, spiritually and physically – and as it works its way through the whole lump it creates all manner of conflict and upheaval. There will be wars and there will be earthquakes. The conflict is not just seen between people it will be seen even in nature. The Apostle Paul mentions this as well, he says:

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (Romans 8:22 ESV)

This process and upheaval envelopes us all – it touches all things so we expect to see an intensification in all manner of conflict as we get nearer the return of Christ. And we have seen that haven't we? The 20th century was the bloodiest century in human history. We had the Great War – The War To End All Wars it was called. And then a few years later, we did it again. We had Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and Chairman Mao. We had Auschwitz, the Great Purge and the Killing Fields. We live in BRUTAL TIMES and that will only increase, Jesus says. We will see conflict between people and we will see conflict in creation – all the more, ever increasing until the Lord returns. But this is not the end. These are but the beginning of the birth pangs.

The second thing we notice about this time comes to us from another teaching of Jesus; this one in Matthew 13 beginning at verse 24. There Jesus says:

²⁴ “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, ²⁵ but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore

grain, then the weeds appeared also.²⁷ And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’²⁸ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’²⁹ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them.³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’” (Matthew 13:24–30 ESV)

Thankfully for us, the disciples were confused by this parable and asked Jesus to explain it to them. He does so in verses 36 and following. He says:

³⁷“The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one,³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers,⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 13:37–43 ESV)

The first thing we need to notice is that Jesus explicitly says that the field in this parable represents “the world” – we see that in verse 38. As D.A. Carson says in his commentary on this passage, this parable is **ESCHATOLOGICAL** not **ECCLESIOLOGICAL**. Meaning, this is a story about how things end, not about how to do church. This parable is telling us that good and evil will grow side by side in the world until the end – until Jesus sends out his angels to separate all the **WEED** people from the **WHEAT** people so that the righteous might shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

Therefore, the second thing we should say about this time period – the time of the birth pangs before the end – is that:

2. Good and evil will grow side by side in the world...

Different people need to hear that different ways. Some Christians are unrelentingly pessimistic about the world. They see it as **ONLY** getting worse and **ONLY** getting more evil – but that isn’t true. There are really exciting things happening in the world. I just got back from the Dominican Republic – there is revival happening there! People talk about it – the Spirit of God is moving! We went to a Bible teaching conference in Santo Domingo and we met charismatics, non-denominational folks, Pentecostals, and Baptists all gathering together to hear robust, reformation rooted, Gospel focused Bible teaching. It was remarkable. They are starting to refer to the

Dominican Republic as the Geneva of Latin America. We met students who had come from SPAIN to be part of what God was doing in the DR. That culture is changing under the power of the Gospel and the growth of the Christian church.

And yet. The world is also getting worse. The news does a much better job of telling us about that. The Middle East is collapsing. Russia seems reinvigorated. Europe has stopped having babies. There are massive demonstrations in Germany now protesting the waves of immigrants fleeing Syria. Here in Canada many people are feeling concerned and anxious about the new government. And so people wonder: is this the beginning of the end?

And the answer is that its hard to say because the Bible says that things will get BETTER and WORSE before the end. Evil and GOOD will grow together in this world until the end. What seems to be disappearing is the middle ground. Therefore we expect to see more polarization and – to go back to point 1 – more conflict and upheaval as the end approaches.

Thirdly Jesus tells us that before the end:

3. There will be a great apostasy and many people will fall away...

Go back to Matthew 24 verses 10-12:

¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. (Matthew 24:10–12 ESV)

You will sometimes hear this referred to as The Great Apostasy. Some professing Christians will fall away because of difficulties and others will fall away because of deception. The effect of this will be the purification of the true church – Jesus goes on to say:

But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 24:13 ESV)

Fourthly Jesus says that:

4. The Gospel of the kingdom will be preached to all nations...

The very next verse in Matthew 24 says:

And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:14 ESV)

The hinge between the time of the birth pangs and the time of delivery – the time of the end – is the completion of the task of world mission. Jesus doesn't say that every one on the earth will become a Christian, only that the Gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world – and then the end will come.

For a very long time the Gospel was known in a very limited portion of the earth. The Gospel was known in Europe and in North America and in parts of North Africa and the Middle East but in the last 50 years that has radically changed. Historian Mark Noll reports:

“The Christian church has experienced a larger geographical redistribution in the last fifty years than in any comparable period in its history, with the exception of the very earliest years of church history.”¹

Christianity has EXPLODED in China. Many observers estimate that there are more Evangelical Christians in China now than in the United States of America.

Are you hearing this church? Are you putting these pieces together? In our lifetime we have witnessed TWO of the events associated by Jesus with the turning of the seasons. We have seen the greatest Apostasy in Christian history in Europe and North America and simultaneously we have witnessed the greatest expansion in Christian witness since the days of the Great Commission. We are watching the love of many grow cold and we are watching the Gospel of the kingdom being preached to all nations. We are definitely closer than we've ever been – but we are not there yet. According to David Platt in the book *Finish The Mission*, there are still:

“over six thousand people groups comprising more than 2.5 billion people who have little to no access to the gospel”.²

So here is what we know so far. In the season of birth pangs there will be increasing and all embracing conflict between peoples and within nature. The Gospel is going through the world

¹ Mark Noll, *The New Shape Of World Christianity*, (Downers Grove, IL:IVP Academic, 2009), 10.

² David Platt in *Finish The Mission*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 62.

like a sword pushing some deeper into darkness and calling others into marvelous light. Therefore the world is becoming more polarized. Conflict increases. Evil and good grow side by side. Because the world is becoming so difficult, many so called believers fall away. They become haters and enemies of the truth. But thanks be to God, many other people are being called in! The church goes forward and the gates of hell do not prevail against it. The Gospel is going out to all the nations of the earth – there are 6000 people groups – many of them in Northern India and in what geographers refer to as the 10/40 window – who have still not heard the Gospel but ITS COMING! Books are being translated right now, young pastors and evangelists are being trained up – you are paying for that out of your tithes and offerings – plans are being made, people are going forth and in our day or in our children’s day, by the grace of God we will FINISH THE MISSION! And then the end will come. Jesus says that.

And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:14 ESV)

And Then The End Will Come:

So let’s talk about that – let’s talk about the end that is coming. As some of you will know there are a few disputed details concerning the order and the nature of the end. MOST Christians agree on MOST things concerning the nature of the end but there are 1 or 2 disputed details and I’m not even going to mention them. This is BASICS and therefore we are going to stick to the things we know for sure. Here is what the vast majority of Christians agree on with respect to the major events associated with THE END.

1. There will be a Great Tribulation

Jesus says that the entire period between his ascension into heaven and his return to the earth will be characterized by tribulation. In John 16 he says:

In the world you will have tribulation. (John 16:33 ESV)

And yet – the Bible also talks about a particularly intense period of tribulation right before the end. Jesus says:

For then there will be **great tribulation**, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. (Matthew 24:21 ESV)

Jesus seems to be saying that whatever is characteristic of the world during the church age in general will become PARTICULARLY ACUTE in the last generation. We see that too with respect to the character sometimes called “the anti-christ”. The Apostle John says:

as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. (1 John 2:18 ESV)

John says that throughout the “end times” – the entire period between the two comings of Christ – we expect to see antichrists. We expect to see people and forces rallying in opposition to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But then we are also right to expect THE ANTICHRIST. A particularly acute manifestation of this general phenomenon at the end. As with the antichrist in particular so with tribulation in general - we expect a fierce season of intense opposition immediately before the return of Christ.

Secondly and as part of that, the Bible also tells us to expect that:

2. There will be a great deception

Just as the entire church age was characterized by false teachers and false prophets deceiving many, this general trend too will be amplified in the time of the end. In Matthew 24:11 when Jesus was describing the time of the birth pangs he talked about false prophets deceiving many. But then later while talking about the great tribulation he says with heightened urgency in verse 24:

For false christs and false prophets will arise **and perform great signs and wonders**, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. (Matthew 24:24 ESV)

Now these false prophets are empowered by the devil to do great and deceiving signs. They will look for all the world like the apostles of Jesus Christ raised from the dead! By means of these powerful “proofs” they will seek to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

But thirdly, as we have already read, after this great tribulation, after this time of intense

deception – IMMEDIATELY AFTER IT – Jesus will return to the earth.

3. Jesus will return to the earth

Matthew 24:29-31 says:

²⁹“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matthew 24:29–31 ESV)

The Apostle Paul says that SIMULTANEOUS to this event is the fourth event associated with the end – the resurrection and transformation of all believers.

4. We shall all be changed!

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:51:

⁵¹Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:51–53 ESV)

When Christ returns we will be resurrected – our spirits will be reunited to our resurrected and transformed bodies – and so we will be with the Lord forever!

That happens simultaneous to the return of the Lord – so #1 and #2 go together and #3 and #4 go together.

Now go back to the passage describing the return of the Lord in Matthew 24:29-31; let’s see that on the screen again. Now notice the many similarities between this teaching and the parable of the weeds. Remember how that parable ended:

²⁸he servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’” (Matthew 13:28–30 ESV)

In both teachings SERVANTS are sent out by THE MASTER to gather and to separate. The WHEAT is gathered into the barn and the WEEDS are gathered to the fire.

That leads us to the fifth event associated with the end:

5. There will be a Final Judgment

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11–15 ESV)

Notice how all these teachings fit together. Everyone is gathered and everyone is separated. In the end – according to the Bible - when Jesus comes back, we will be raised and changed and JUDGED. And if our deeds show forth our faith – if it can be PROVED that we were SAVED by grace through faith in Jesus Christ – if there is enough evidence to convict us of being Christians – then we are gathered into his presence where we will enjoy his goodness forever – or we will be gathered unto fire. There to perish and to mourn forever.

Sixthly, in the end, after the judgment and the separation of all people:

6. There will be a new heaven and new earth

Revelation 21 says:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away (Revelation 21:1 ESV)

The Apostle Peter puts it this way:

⁷ But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.... the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! ¹³ But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Peter 3:7–13 ESV)

The cosmos will be renewed by judgment and fire. Everything sinful and evil will be pulled up by the roots and removed forever so that the righteous will shine like the sun before the face of their Father forever.

And lastly we are told that in that place:

7. God's people will enjoy God's glory forever

The Bible ends at the everlasting end. Revelation 22 says:

⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:4–5 ESV)

That's how this story ends. With God's people seeing God's face and enjoying him forever.

How Then Shall We Live?

How then shall we live? KNOWING THAT – being told ahead of time that this is how it ends – HOW SHALL WE LIVE as faithful people in the meantime? Let me suggest 3 ways.

1. With patience and endurance

Jesus said:

But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 24:13 ESV)

Don't quit just because things are getting hard – Jesus said that in this world you will have tribulation. Don't despair, don't believe the lie of the devil that these difficulties somehow disprove the claims and the coming of the Lord. He will come. He will not leave you or forsake you. He is with you in tribulation so be patient and endure.

And secondly, we need to live:

2. With urgency and prayer

Some of the most glorious verses in the Bible lie side by side with some of the most horrific.

Isaiah 66:22-23 says:

²²“For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain. ²³From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD. (Isaiah 66:22–23 ESV)

That is glorious! That is marvelous! That fills my heart with joy and expectation – and then these words:

²⁴“And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.” (Isaiah 66:22–24 ESV)

Our greatest hope and our most horrific fear lie side by side in those verses. Enjoying God’s face FOREVER! And being reminded of all those with whom we were too busy or too frightened to share. The neighbor, the co-worker, the father, the sister, the son. Outside the presence of the Lord, forever dying and never dead.

If reading those verses doesn’t drive you to your knees in prayer then YOU ARE NOT ALIVE! O God – AWAKEN OUR HEARTS! Cause us to pray and to speak with urgency and with great compassion to wrestle for the souls of men.

Lastly, we need to live:

3. With hope and eager longing

I saw a lot of depressed posts from Christians this past week in the wake of our recent election. I’m not making a political statement right now, I’m just saying that my hope has never rested in any particular political party. My hope is in Christ! I am convinced that this world will never know peace and never know justice until JESUS SITS ON THE THRONE and EVERY KNEE IS BOWED BEFORE HIM. I don’t care who else governs until that day – I care about who will rule over all things to the glory of the Father ON THAT DAY. Make sure your heart and your hope is in heaven.

The Apostle Paul looked forward to that day. He said:

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to **all who have loved his appearing**. (2 Timothy 4:8 ESV)

My heart is not moved greatly by the rise or fall of any particular earthly power or party. My heart LONGS FOR HIS APPEARING. COME LORD JESUS! THY KINGDOM COME – THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN – that is the believer’s prayer on this day, and every day UNTIL THE END.

This is our glorious hope, this is our ultimate future and this is the Word of the Lord – THANKS BE TO GOD. Let’s pray together.