

*Alfred Nobel was a Swedish chemist who made a fortune by inventing dynamite and other powerful explosives used for weapons. Years later, when Nobel's brother died, a newspaper accidentally printed an obituary for Alfred instead. He was described as a man who became rich by enabling people to kill one another in masses. Shaken by this assessment, Nobel resolved to use his fortune to honor the accomplishments that benefited humanity. Thus, he created the Nobel Peace Prize, among others.*

*Alfred Nobel, in essence, was given a sneak peek into how he would be remembered if he were to die that day, and one might even say he got a glimpse of his future. As a result of his seeing his own obituary, Alfred Nobel was able to make some key changes in his current life.*

Just as Alfred Nobel got a glimpse of the future so to speak, Jesus is going to give us a glimpse of the future as well. This morning, we are continuing to look at the last week of Christ – the last week of His earthly ministry. From the Gospel of **Matthew**, we began with the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Sunday. Then we looked at the cleansing of the temple by Jesus on Monday where He did some remodeling in the Court of the Gentiles. It's now Tuesday, where Jesus has returned to Jerusalem with His disciples after spending the night in the village of Bethany. Jesus enters the temple once again, and for much of the day, it appears His time is spent in a series of confrontations with the Jewish religious leaders.

So, with that as the background, if you have your Bible, turn to **Matthew 24** beginning with **verse 1**. Matthew tells us,

**<sup>1</sup>Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. <sup>2</sup>And He said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down." <sup>3</sup>As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"**

It's Tuesday, probably later in the day, and Jesus leaves the temple with His disciples for the very last time. They make their way to the top of the Mount of Olives, and from the top, overlooking the temple made of white marble and decorated with gold and precious stones – admiring its splendor and beauty, Jesus tells His disciples that one day the temple buildings will be completely **torn down** – in fact, not one stone will be left upon another.

As you might expect, that little bit of news prompted a big question from the disciples – **“when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”** Now, when we look at that question, from our perspective, we might see two – maybe even three separate questions in there – it’s a compound question, but from a Jewish perspective, and remember these disciples are Jews and so is Matthew’s audience – to them, it’s all rolled into one for in their minds, the destruction of the temple, which is key in Jewish life, and the **end of the age** were connected and all of it would surely happen at the same time. For the disciples – for the Jews, their relationship with God was totally centered around the temple – but here Jesus speaks of its destruction, because as they will discover, a relationship with God can only be centered on Jesus.

Well, let me tell you what happened with the temple. Less than forty years after Jesus spoke these words, in August of 70 A.D., under the command of Titus, the Romans stormed Jerusalem, built large wooden scaffolds around the temple buildings, piled them high with wood, and set them on fire. The fire became so hot that the gold inside the temple melted and seeped into the cracks and crevices between the stones. When it cooled, the Roman soldiers began to pull down the stones of the temple buildings in order to get to the gold, and they didn’t quit until they had managed to pull down every single stone.

**So, what do we take from this?** History tells us that everything happened exactly as Jesus said it would happen, and therefore, we can have confidence that the rest of what Jesus says about the future will also come to pass, and He continues to tell us what happens in the end. Beginning with **verse 4**, we are told,

**<sup>4</sup> And Jesus answered and said to them, “See to it that no one misleads you. <sup>5</sup> For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will mislead many. <sup>6</sup> You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. <sup>7</sup> For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. <sup>8</sup> But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. <sup>9</sup> “Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. <sup>10</sup> At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. <sup>11</sup> Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. <sup>12</sup> Because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold. <sup>13</sup> But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. <sup>14</sup> This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.**

If you remember from our study in **Revelation**, what we see described here by Jesus coincides with portions of **Revelation 6** which refers to the first half of the seven-year Tribulation period. In this passage of **Matthew**, Jesus speaks in general terms, telling us about the religious deception by false Christs and false prophets who will mislead many, to include the ultimate deceiver of the end times – the Antichrist. Jesus speaks of wars, conflicts, disputes, famine, and natural disasters – those things we already see to some degree in this fallen world. He says those who are identified as Christians will be hated and martyred. Jesus speaks of injustice and unrighteousness, where right becomes wrong and wrong becomes right, and He describes the hardening and the coldness of people’s hearts towards one another and towards God – but in spite of all of this, even during the Tribulation period, the **gospel** will still be preached. Jesus says these things must happen, describing them as **birth pangs**. **Now, what did Jesus mean by that?**

Well as you know, contractions and birth pains mark the beginning of labor. They start sometime before the actual delivery, and as the time for the delivery draws closer and closer, so does the frequency and the intensity of the contractions and pains. Likewise, these events described by Jesus tell us that labor has started and delivery is coming, they will be painful for humanity, and these pains will gradually become more frequent and more intense as the time draws closer to the Lord’s return. So, Jesus has been very general in His description of the end times, but now He becomes very deliberate, and beginning with **verse 15**, He says,

**<sup>15</sup> “Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), <sup>16</sup> then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. <sup>17</sup> Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. <sup>18</sup> Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. <sup>19</sup> But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! <sup>20</sup> But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath.**

In this passage, Jesus brings us to the midpoint of the seven-year Tribulation period with His reference to a dual prophecy by **Daniel** – a prophecy that specifically concerns the Jews, and as I have said on several occasions in the past – the Tribulation period is primarily intended for the Jews. In this dual prophecy, Jesus mentions the **abomination of desolation**. The word *abomination* suggests something that is offensive to God, while *desolation* implies that the temple will be left deserted – and when these words are put together, we learn that those who come to worship in the temple will no longer do so because of this abomination.

The near fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy is attributed to a Syrian ruler way back in 168 B.C., who desecrated the Jewish temple by sacrificing a pig to Zeus and pouring the pig's blood on the altar. No Jewish worshiper would enter the temple because pigs were considered vile and unclean. But in our passage in **Matthew**, it seems that Jesus had something different in mind, something in the future instead of the past, referring to the activity of the coming Antichrist. If you recall from our study in **Revelation**, the Antichrist initially comes as a man of peace and he will make a seven-year treaty with Israel – who is still in their unbelief, but at the mid-point in the Tribulation period, the Antichrist sets himself up as God in the rebuilt Jewish temple in Jerusalem and he will force the world to worship him. At this turning point, he becomes the ultimate **abomination of desolation**.

As you can imagine, when this happens, the Jews will realize they made a horrible mistake by thinking the Antichrist was their guy, and there will be a dire sense of urgency among the Jews to head for the hills, and rightly so for the last half of the Tribulation period – referred to as the “*Great Tribulation*” will be unimaginable in scope and suffering. Beginning with the next verse – **verse 21**, Jesus tells us so.

**<sup>21</sup> For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. <sup>22</sup> Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. <sup>23</sup> Then if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here is the Christ,’ or ‘There He is,’ do not believe him. <sup>24</sup> For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. <sup>25</sup> Behold, I have told you in advance. <sup>26</sup> So if they say to you, ‘Behold, He is in the wilderness,’ do not go out, or, ‘Behold, He is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe them. <sup>27</sup> For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be. <sup>28</sup> Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.**

During the last three and a half years, the world's conditions will be so terrible – the worst destruction and distress and despair in all of history – people will wonder if any relief is in sight, and fortunately for the sake of those who repent and turn to Christ – namely the Jews who had once rejected Him, the time will be short, and then like a bolt of **lightning**, Jesus returns and no one can ignore it.

Jesus says, “*So, don't believe those who will try to deceive you with their apparent supernatural powers and false claims, who suggest that the Christ secretly appeared over here or over there. When I come again, make no mistake, it will be very public – for all the world to see.*”

Unlike His quiet birth in a lowly manger, this time all the earth will see Him, and beginning with **verse 29**, Jesus continues to describe what happens. He says,

**<sup>29</sup> “But 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 the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>30</sup> And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. <sup>31</sup> And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.**

Now we are not told here, but at this time, Israel will be surrounded by its enemies – it’s Armageddon – their outlook is hopeless, for they are about to be wiped off the face of the earth, and then to mark the end of the Great Tribulation period, Jesus immediately shows up with the heavenly hosts as the conquering King in power and glory to rescue and gather His people – and as we just read, His entrance will be a grand entrance – not with palm branches on a road beneath Him but with celestial phenomena above Him.

Now, in the middle of all of this end times teaching by Jesus, we are given a parable which He uses to illustrate a truth He really wants them to learn, and beginning with **verse 32**, Jesus says this:

**<sup>32</sup> “Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; <sup>33</sup> so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. <sup>34</sup> Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. <sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.**

Here, Jesus used this parable of the **fig tree** as a sign to answer the question that’s probably still on the minds of the disciples – **When? When does all of this begin?**

Let me say there are numerous views regarding this parable largely stemming from questions as to what does the **fig tree** represent – if anything other than a literal fig tree, and what does Jesus mean by the phrase **“when you see all these things” – what things? And what is a generation?** So, to narrow all of this down, there are two common views that I feel have merit, and I will give them both to you to chew on this morning.

The first view, which I would describe as being simpler and more straightforward, is that the budding fig tree represents the coming harvest – in other words, the Lord’s harvest and judgment is near, and people will know it’s near because of the increased frequency and intensity of the birth pains, and even more definitively, because of the future abomination of desolation in the Jewish temple. That will be a clear distinct sign, and the generation – apparently referring to the wicked people who live at that time – they will see it all before they **pass away** at the end.

Now, another common view, which is very popular these days, is that the fig tree is symbolic of Israel, and there are a couple of Old Testament passages that seem to make that reference. Now at the moment when Jesus said this, Israel was occupied by the Romans, and we know from history that Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D. Following the destruction of the capitol city and the temple, Israel ceased to exist as a nation, and the Jews were scattered throughout the world, until all of that changed on May 14, 1948, when Israel became a recognized sovereign nation once again. That had never happened before – a nation had never been reborn so to speak, and many believe this was a fulfillment of the Lord’s prophetic fig tree parable.

Israel – whose presence is absolutely necessary in the end times – who is budding with life as a reborn nation in 1948, and the generation who saw that happen – and a generation could be 100 years according to **Genesis 15**, *they – we* had better start looking up, for Jesus has to be **right at the door**.

So, with all that said, Jesus tells us to be discerning of the times, and beginning with **verse 36**. He says,

**<sup>36</sup> “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. <sup>37</sup> For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. <sup>38</sup> For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, <sup>39</sup> and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. <sup>40</sup> Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>42</sup> “Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup> But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. <sup>44</sup> For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.**

Here Jesus explains that no one knows when He is to return for His coming will be like the **days of Noah**. Now, let's think about that for a moment. For some 100 years, while the weather was calm, Noah built an ark. He was a righteous man, and I think it is safe to assume that during this very long time, Noah surely warned people about the flood that was coming – but no one would listen. In the days of Noah, the people were wicked, apathetic, and oblivious to their situation, and when the rains came, they were caught off guard and the flood swept them away.

In the same way, the world has been warned by preachers and teachers time and time again that Jesus is coming and He's bringing judgment with Him. Even during the Tribulation period, the gospel will still be preached, the end times will be explained – they will be in it, and yet, this deceived and indifferent world will still be surprised when Jesus comes.

Now if you noticed, two times Jesus speaks of those who are **taken** while others are **left**. Some have suggested this is a reference to the rapture of the church, but I don't think that's the case and let me give you two reasons why – *context* and *sequence*.

The *context* given to us is the **days of Noah**, and if you remember in Noah's day, the flood took away the wicked and left the righteous to dwell on the earth – which is the opposite of the rapture of the church. In regards to *sequence*, I believe the rapture of the church occurs before the Tribulation period for the church is not destined for God's wrath. Remember, the Tribulation period is primarily intended for the Jews to bring them to repentance and to acknowledge their true Messiah Jesus Christ. In the sequence of events presented to us by Jesus in His teaching, He's describing something that happens at His Second Coming to the earth.

So, then these people who are either **taken** or **left** are those who survive the Tribulation period without being killed. Those who are righteous will remain and enter into the Millennial Kingdom in their physical bodies, while the wicked – just like in the days of Noah, will be taken away to judgment. To these believers who have turned to Christ during the Tribulation period, Jesus says to them be **alert** and get **ready**, for I'm coming quickly and suddenly.

Okay, let's finish up with some direction by Jesus. Beginning with **verse 45**, He says,

<sup>45</sup> **“Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time?”** <sup>46</sup> **Blessed is that**

slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. <sup>47</sup> Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. <sup>48</sup> But if that evil slave says in his heart, ‘My master is not coming for a long time,’ <sup>49</sup> and begins to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; <sup>50</sup> the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, <sup>51</sup> and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Alfred Nobel got a glimpse of the future and it changed his life. Jesus has given us a glimpse of the future as well, not so we spend our time trying to figure out *when* He will return, but rather to encourage us to be faithful *until* He returns, for when Jesus returns to the earth – He’s bringing judgment with Him.

Regardless of whether we die today and are standing before the Lord, or the rapture of the church occurs next month and we are caught up to meet Him in the air, or Christ does not come for a thousand years – the point is, we are to be faithful for we *will be* and we *could be* in His presence at any time.

*Many years ago, while traveling out-of-town, a businessman attended a Sunday morning worship service at a large church in Texas. As is customary during most church services, a portion of the time was devoted to important announcements, which the pastor stood up to deliver. One of the announcements was with regard to the sermon topic of that evening’s worship service. The sermon title was “Jesus Is Coming!” Its focus would be on Lord’s return and the need for Christians to be ready for this event.*

*As the pastor wound up his invitation to attend the evening service, he quickly concluded by adding, “Remember, ‘Jesus Is Coming!’ at seven o’clock this evening.” Immediately chuckles could be heard across the large sanctuary. The pastor, after realizing how his statement must have sounded to some of his listeners, simply smiled and moved on.*

*Although humorous, his statement was somewhat of a heart stopper for the businessman – for he found himself visualizing the possibility of seeing Jesus that very evening. The pastor’s unintended statement hit its mark with the visitor, and it’s a thought you and I should consider as well. **What if you were called to stand in His presence today? Would you be ready?***

*In the end, our task is to be faithful, always watchful and ready for the Lord. **Are you ready?***



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