

THE TIME OF THE LORD'S RETURN

MATHEW 24:32–41

Introduction: End of the World or the Judgement Day

The disciples had asked, “When will this happen?” At this point of His discussion, Christ said, “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as...” He was beginning to discuss the end time and His return. It should be noted that the first part of His discussion can apply to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. as well as to the end time (vv. 32-35). However, Christ definitely said this passage had to do with the end time only, with the coming of the Son of Man (vv. 37, 39). When will Christ return?” He revealed four significant points.

- I. The time can be generally discerned (vv. 32-35).
- II. The actual day and hour are known only by God (v. 36).
- III. The day will come suddenly — unexpectedly — shattering to the world of unbelievers (vv. 37-39).
- IV. The day will be a time of separation and judgment (vv. 40-41).

I. Mathew 24:32–35 The Return of Jesus Christ

Christ said that the time of His return can be generally discerned.

1. The events (signs) that point to His return are compared to a fig tree. When the fig tree begins to put forth its leaves, it is clear that summer is near. So when we see “all these things,” the signs He has been sharing, “know that it [His coming] is near, right at the door.” His coming is at the very threshold; He is about to enter into the world again (see Jas. 5:9).

Christ said:

- a. When the leaves are seen on a fig tree, summer is not yet. But we *know* summer is near, at hand.
 - b. “Even so, when *you see* all these things you *know* that it [His coming, His kingdom] is near.” He definitely says we can “know that it is near.”
2. The events (signs) will be witnessed within one generation. The disciples had asked two questions — one about Jerusalem’s destruction and the other about the end of the world. In answering their questions, Christ nowhere drew a definite line between the two questions. The signs and events that precede one shall precede the other. The implication is clear: just as the signs and destruction of Jerusalem took place within a generation, the signs and destruction of the world will also occur within a generation.

Remembering that Jesus is dealing with two questions will also help in understanding what is being said. He is answering the questions: When will the temple be destroyed and what shall be the sign of His return and the end of the world?

Christ is dealing with the end of the temple and the end of the world, the destruction of the temple and the destruction of the world. He is covering the signs, the events that both cause the judgment and occur during the judgment of the temple and the world. In short, the Scripture teaches that the same signs and events cause the judgment of anything.

That is, the events (sins) that cause judgment upon one thing are the same events that will bring judgment upon everything else. Thus, the signs that surround the destruction of Jerusalem are much the same as the signs that shall surround the end of the world. Therefore, what Christ is saying has a double meaning and application.

Several things need to be noted as this passage is studied.

- 1) Christ is answering three very specific questions. When will the temple be destroyed? What shall be the sign of Christ's return and of the end of the world?
- 2) The signs given by Christ are to some extent present in every generation. A quick review of world history reveals this. In light of this fact, a question has to be asked: why, then, is Christ spelling out every day happenings as signs of the last days?
- 3) There is to be an intensification of the signs right before the fall of Jerusalem and right before the end of the world. The intensification of the signs is clearly seen by the following.

- a. The emphasis upon the possibility of being deceived.

Mat 24:4 "Watch out that no one deceives you."

Mat 24:5 "For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many."

Mat 24:11 "And many false prophets will appear and deceive many people."

- b. Christ uses both the word and the idea of "many" time and again, indicating an increase over what had been.
- c. Christ makes three significant statements that definitely point toward an intensification of the signs.

Mat 24:8 "All these are the beginning of birth pains [sorrows]."

Mat 24:13 "But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved."

Mat 24:14 "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony unto all nations; and then the end will come."

- d. Other Scriptures say there is to be an intensification of evil in the last days.

2 Tim 3:1 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days.

2 Pet 3:3 First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.

Jude 1:18 *They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires."*

- 4) The present age is considered by God to be "the age of the last days" or "the last time." According to God's time-table, the history of the church, its presence on earth, takes place in "the last days" or during "the last times."

Acts 2:16-17 *No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams."*

Heb 1:2 *But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.*

1 John 2:18 *Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.*

- 5) Christ gives these signs for a very specific purpose. He is preparing His disciples to endure and to keep their hope for His return alive. He is strengthening their faith in God and in the world to come, the new heavens and earth, the three things that help in understanding the passage.

The Lord's words apply both to the disciples of His day and to all disciples who were to follow in succeeding generations. As long as the earth stands, the disciples of "the last days" (or ages) will face many of the same signs faced by those who experienced the destruction of Jerusalem. But there is to be one difference. At the end of the world the signs will increase and intensify. So terrible a day is coming that it can be called, "the beginning of birth pains [sorrows]" (Mt.24:8) and "the great distress [tribulation]".

3. The events (signs) are certain. Christ was definite about what He had said. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." Note two things.
- Heaven and earth will pass away. Christ was saying they are actually going to be done away with (2 Pet. 3:10-11).
 - All that He had said about the great distress (tribulation) and His return will happen. The great distress (tribulation) and His return are more sure than heaven and earth.

Thought 1. *Expectation* is a key word when dealing with the Lord's return. When we see a fig tree putting forth its leaves, we *expect* summer to be near. "Even so" we should expect two things.

- We should expect the signs, "all these things" that Christ has been mentioning (v. 33a).
- We should expect and "know that it [His coming] is near" (v. 33b).

Thought 2. In the eyes of men, it has been a long time since Christ spoke these words, and an innumerable list of events have happened. Therefore, men assume that the second coming is a fable, the figment of hopeful imagination. God knew this would happen.

2 Pet 3:3-4, 8-13 *First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 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 earth 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.*

Thought 3. Three things are certain to happen in human history: "the beginning of birth pains [sorrows]" (v. 8); "the great distress [tribulation], unequalled from the beginning of the world" (v. 21); and "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (v. 30). Heaven and earth shall pass away, but not the words He spoke, not what He said would happen. What He said would happen will happen. These three events are certain.

MATHEW 24:33–34 RETURN OF JESUS CHRIST

Note the time involved in these two verses — they agree. "When you see all these things...it is near" (v. 33). All will happen in "one generation" (v. 34). □

II. **Mathew 24:36** *The End of the World*

The actual day and hour that Christ will return are known only by God. Note two things.

1. The return of Christ is a real event that is yet to happen. There is "that day or hour." There is *a fixed day and a fixed hour* when Christ will return. It is an actual event.
2. The return of Christ is confidential. "No one knows...but only the Father." Some have thought they knew, but Christ is explicit: "No one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but only the Father."

Rev 5:3 *But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.*

Deu 29:29 *The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.*

Thought 1. Some things are to be left entirely in God's hands. The exact day and hour of the Lord's return is one of these things. *Watchful* believers will be sensitive

to the season (fig tree, vv. 32-33) and know the generation (v. 34), but the exact hour and day are hid from men, even from the wisest and most spiritual men. *Only* God Himself knows when Christ will return. If a man claims to know the hour and day, he is the man from which we should flee. That man's word conflicts with the Lord's Word.

III. *Mathew 24:37–39 Return of Jesus Christ*

The coming of the Lord will be sudden — unexpected — shattering to the world of unbelievers. Christ says three things.

1. When will Christ return? His coming finds its counterpart in Noah's day. He will come when the world is living just as it was living in Noah's day:
 - => Living sensual lives, eating, drinking, marrying, divorcing and remarrying time after time.
 - => Refusing to heed Noah's message of righteousness and coming judgment (2 Pet. 2:5).
 - a. Eating, drinking (water), and marriage are all necessary to maintain life. It is the excessiveness, the lust for more and more, the extravagance that is sinful. It is setting one's mind upon the pleasure of the flesh and of the world and lusting for more and more.
 - b. What is it that Christ says will characterize the age? Not stealing and murder and immorality, but eating and drinking and marrying time after time. When the earth was destroyed the first time, it was because "the earth was corrupt...and... full of violence" (Gen. 6:11). However, the sins that bring the second destruction of the earth seem to be eating and drinking and marrying time after time. These are the sins stressed by Christ.
 - c. Note the words "*up to the day* that Noah entered the ark." While Noah was building the ark, he preached the righteousness of God and the coming judgment. The people had the testimony of Noah's life and his belief in God's Word as a warning, a warning that man was responsible to live righteously and that judgment was coming. They saw Noah building the ark. They saw the ark there, yet they rejected Noah's message and testimony. They went on living in worldliness, in their eating and drinking and in pursuing their own lustful desires, and they did so right up until the very day that "Noah entered into the ark." Then suddenly, unexpectedly, their world was shattered.
2. When will Christ come? He will come just as He came in Noah's day: at a shocking time. Just as they "knew nothing about" the end that was coming, so He will come again when the world does not know.
 - a. They "knew nothing" means this: they did not expect the coming judgment. They *did not believe* the fact, the word, the message. They were *close minded*: they did not bother too much about listening and studying the matter. Therefore, they *were ignorant* about the truth. They did not know the Word of God.
 - b. "They knew nothing" means this: they felt secure in themselves and in their world. As Scripture says in another place:

1 Th 5:3 *While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.*

- c. They "knew nothing" means that: they were living worldly and materialistic lives, eating and drinking when they should have been sensible and clear-minded, listening and turning to God.
- d. They "knew nothing" means this: their concern was "Let us eat and drink: for tomorrow we die" (Isa. 22:13); whereas their concern should have been *righteousness* (2 Cor. 5:21).
3. When will Christ come? He will come when people are living just as they were living in the days of Noah: "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man" (vv. 37. 39). His coming is certain and assured.

Mat 24:38-39 *For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.*

Luke 21:34 *Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.*

Titus 2:12-13 *It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.*

James 4:4 *You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*

1 John 2:15-16 *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world.*

Thought 1. Note the words "knew nothing." They knew nothing because they were steeped in sensual living. A person can eat, drink and be immoral until he is gripped and enslaved.

=> *Conscience* becomes dull, hardened and insensitive to right.

=> *Will* becomes more craving.

=> *Spirit* becomes more selfish.

=> *Life* becomes more worldly.

=> *Hope* becomes more materialistic.

=> *Death* becomes more final.

Thought 2. Christ's return will shatter the world of the person...

- who eats and eats
- who drinks and drinks
- who marries and marries
- who "knows nothing"
- who does not believe
- who is closed-minded
- who is ignorant

Thought 3. There are many genuine believers in the world. The testimony of righteousness should be right before the face of most people just as it was before the face of the people in Noah's day. We are without excuse. We should be prepared for His coming. His *sudden* coming should not catch us unexpectedly; it should not shock or shatter our world.

Thought 4. A man must not allow himself to be so immersed in worldliness that he forgets eternity (1 Jn. 2:15-16; Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 6:17-18).

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It must be remembered that the righteous, that is, the only believers of Noah's day, were Noah himself and his family. They were not caught unaware. It was to the unbelieving world that the day came unexpectedly and with shattering suddenness. This is understandable: the true believer is ever looking "for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ" (Tit. 2:13). When that day begins to approach, believers will see and discern the times through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will be preparing the believer's heart for that day. But the unbelieving world will be mocking what it considers foolish belief. It will be going about its merry way and wantonness, paying no attention whatever to an event that it considers foolish. (Dan. 12:10.) □

IV. *Mathew 24:40–41 The Return of Jesus Christ*

The coming of the Lord will be a time of separation and judgment. Several things are seen in these two verses.

1. On the day when Jesus comes, no one knows He is coming, not even believers. All go about their affairs, their occupations as usual.
2. On the day when Jesus comes, while people are going about their affairs, all of a sudden one shall be taken and the other left.
3. On the day when Jesus comes, there will be separation from those nearest us — from those right by our side. The believer will be caught up to be with the Lord; the unbeliever will be left behind to face judgment (vv. 30-31, 50-51; see 2 Th. 1:7-10).

Mat 13:30 *Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: "First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn."*

Mat 13:49 *"This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous."*

Mat 25:32 *"All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."*

Mat 25:46 *"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*

Thought 1. The basis of separation and judgment is belief. In Noah's day no one believed the message of righteousness. Only the man who believes the message of righteousness and adheres to it will be taken (2 Cor. 5:21 see Jn. 3:16; Mt. 24:13). ■