

WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT THINGS TO COME

(Taken and adapted from 'The Red Bits – A Study Guide' by Michael Button)

INTRODUCTION

The Scriptures have been given to encourage saving faith, to guide us in God's will and to equip us to do good.¹ They are not given to satisfy our curiosity about the future. We should not be surprised, therefore, if we do not find in our Bibles a clear and detailed account of things to come. Having said this, we are told enough to give us warnings and encouragements that help us to live our lives today in the expectation of major events in God's timetable for the ages. Most of this we learn from the Book of Revelation, and some from the prophecies of Daniel. Most of what Jesus told us Himself is to be found in Matthew Chapters 24 and 25 (with some parallels in Mark and Luke).

The disciples had commented on the grandeur of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem, to which Jesus responded with a prophecy that the temple would be completely destroyed. When the disciples asked "*When will this be?*" Jesus did not give a specific time but spoke about things that will happen, of which the destruction of the Temple would be a part.

We must not be too quick to jump to conclusions when studying eschatology (i.e. the doctrine of final things). We cannot expect to have the future mapped out for us in clear detail. Time scales are not uniform, that is to say two events that are mentioned consecutively might actually be separated by a long period, with many other things happening in between. Additionally, events are not always told chronologically, for the narration sometimes returns to a period mentioned previously to give further details about that period.

Despite these difficulties in interpreting eschatological passages, we can be certain of some key factors from what Jesus taught us:

1. **History has a definite conclusion.** Jesus repeatedly spoke of "*The end of the age.*" God is working out of a plan that has a pre-determined end in view for this world.
2. **Prior to the conclusion there will be troubled times.** Jesus gave no indication that things would get better as the *end of the age* approaches. Until the end comes, we can expect ...
 - (i) Deception (*read* Matt 24:4-5 & 11). The fact that Jesus has warned us that false christs and false prophets will arise should keep us on our guard against those who claim to guide us in ways that are contrary to God's ways, or to rely on anyone other than Jesus for our salvation.
 - (ii) International and terrestrial turmoils (*read* Matt 24:6-8). Not only is there disharmony between people, but nature itself is disrupted. The word translated 'sorrows' in the NKJV can also mean the pain of giving birth, a picture that was used by some Old Testament prophets to speak of the period leading up to the age of Messiah's rule. Paul refers to the whole creation being *in the bondage of corruption and groaning and labouring with birth pangs*.²

¹ John 20:31; 2 Tim 3:16.

² Rom 8:21-22.

- (iii) Persecutions (*read* Matt 24:9-10). Jesus will have His enemies until the *end of the age* and those who remain faithful to Him will inevitably face opposition from those same enemies.
- (iv) Lawlessness and cooling love (*read* Matt 24:12-13). The love that grows cool might be that between one another, or the love of a person for Jesus (as with the Church in Ephesus³). No doubt when love for Christ grows cooler, so will love for one-another. The problems, lawlessness and diminishing love can be catalysts for turning away from faith, so Jesus reminds us to endure through all these until our salvation is complete.
- (v) The Gospel will have been preached across the world (*read* Matt 24:14). That is not to say that everyone will respond and be saved but, despite persecutions, the Church will fulfil the Great Commission to make the Gospel known in all the world.

The next few verses of Matthew 24 tell of a period of violent persecution (*read* Matt 24:15-26). By the way Jesus introduces this section ("*Therefore, when you see ...*") it looks as if He is referring back to the same period, or part of the same period, of which He had been speaking, rather than to a period that follows on.

On three occasions Daniel had prophesied of the Temple in Jerusalem being profaned, using the terms *desolate* and *abomination*.⁴ Bible scholars reckon there to have been a fulfilment in 168 BC, when the Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes (pronounced *e-pi-fan-ees*) desecrated the Temple by sacrificing pigs on an altar to Zeus.

Another incident arose under Roman rule in AD 70, when the soldiers of the Roman Emperor Titus brought Roman idols into the Temple and made sacrifices to them. This seems to be the incident that Jesus is prophesying here, especially when one compares Luke's version of this prophecy, in which he records Jesus as saying "*When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near.*"⁵ Titus was about to cause great slaughter and to destroy the temple. Those who heeded Jesus' warning fled the city when they saw the Roman army coming. However, many Jews from the city and its provinces did the opposite and barricaded themselves in the city, only to be starved to death as the city was besieged. Over a million Jews died and another 97,000 were taken captive.

The strong words in verse 21 have caused some to conclude that Jesus is referring to a third incident, yet to take place and called *The Great Tribulation*, mentioned in Revelation 7:14.

3. The *end of the age* will come with the return of Jesus (*read* Matt 24:26-31). This is the great climax of God's plan of redemption. It marks the end of the era of Satan's rule and the start of the new era of the rule of Jesus, sometimes called *The Messianic Age*.

Jesus had previously told of His coming again.⁶ Some key facts about His second coming are:

- (i) It will be sudden. It will not take place over a period of time, during which unbelievers will have time to repent, but it will take place instantaneously, like a flash of lightning.⁷

³ Rev 2:4.

⁴ Dan 8:13, 9:27, and 11:31 with 12:11.

⁵ Luke 21:20.

⁶ Matt 16:27, Luke 12:40.

⁷ Matt 24:27.

- (ii) It will be a surprise (*read* Matt 24:36-44). Since only God the Father knows the time of the Second Coming, it is presumptuous for anyone to claim they know the date of Jesus' return, as some sects have declared on several occasions. People will be going about their everyday business and be caught unawares.
 - (iii) There will be signs that His coming is near (*read* Matt 24:32-33). Though no one will know the precise time of Jesus' return, those who are observant can know the time is getting near. We must be careful of interpreting the preponderance of false christs and wars, mentioned in verses 4 to 6, as being the very last days, since Jesus mentioned them specifically to tell us that these in themselves were only the beginning of a period of sorrows (verse 6). Likewise, *famines, pestilences and earthquakes* may mark the beginning of difficult times but they do not necessarily indicate the time has come (Matt 24:6-8). However, He did say to watch out for signs taking place in the cosmic and spiritual realms (*read* Matt 24:28-29^{*}).
 - (iv) He will come visibly and in great glory (*read* Matt 24:30). His second coming will be in stark contrast to His first coming as a baby in Bethlehem, when few knew of His arrival. This time He will be accompanied by a host of angels and will be seen by many. A verse in Zechariah prophesies that He will stand on the Mount of Olives and cause the mountain to be split in two (*read* Zech 14:4).
4. **There will be a resurrection for all.** That is not to say that everyone will be in heaven, for this resurrection will be the point at which the righteous and the unrighteous will be separated for eternity (*read* John 5:28-29 and Matt 25:31-32).
5. **There will a judgment made from heaven** at which the redeemed will be rewarded according to the life they have lived on earth.⁸
6. **Satan will be defeated** and consigned to hell (*read* Matt 25:41, then Rev 20:10).

Read Luke 21:34-36. Jesus did not teach specifically about His Millennial Rule, the Great Tribulation and the Battle of Armageddon. We learn of these from other Scriptures, notably the visions of John recorded in the Book of Revelation, which are outside the purpose of these studies on the Teachings of Jesus. However, in this passage in Luke's Gospel Jesus may be referring to the worthy being spared the severe time of the Great Tribulation.

Activity 6: Which of the following are true?

- (a) By diligent Bible Study we may know the day when Jesus will return.
- (b) Because God gives us free will, He will let history unfold itself without deciding on a conclusion.
- (c) Believers may suffer before Jesus returns.

^{*} Note on verse 28. Bible scholars are puzzled as to the meaning of this illustration, not least because the bird referred to could be either an eagle or a vulture. Most reckon Jesus was referring to the Roman soldiers, who carried eagles on their banners, coming to bring judgment on the Jews who were spiritually 'dead' through rejecting their Messiah. However others, like the 19C commentator Albert Barnes, suggest it may have a more universal meaning: *'This proverb also teaches a universal truth. Wherever wicked men are, there will be assembled the instruments of their chastisement. The providence of God will direct them there, as the eagles are directed to a dead carcass.'* (Albert Barnes, *Barnes on the New Testament*, vol. 1, page 261^b.)

⁸ We read about this in para. B.2 .

- (d) Jesus said that things will get better before He returns to this world.
- (e) The return of Jesus will be very sudden.
- (f) Angels will come with Jesus when He returns.
- (g) There will be no judgment for believers.
- (h) Satan will be banished forever.

Activity 1: Read the Parable of the Virgins, in Matt 25:1-13. In discussion or meditation, consider in what ways we might either be ready or be unprepared for the return of Jesus.

E. PERSONAL APPLICATION

Jesus told three parables to illustrate everyone's personal responsibility to be watchful and faithful with what one has been given until He comes (*read* Matt 24:44-46 and Matt 25:13-30). Ask yourself, "What will Jesus find me doing when He returns? Will He be pleased, or disappointed?"

Activity 2: Share with others in your group what you would like Jesus to find you doing when He returns. If you are working alone, write down your own thoughts.