

The King Who Is Coming in Power and Glory

Matthew 24:1-35

For as far back as you go in history, people have always held an intense fascination with how the world will end. As early as 2800 B.C. the Assyrians were certain it was near. An ancient Assyrian tablet reads, “There are signs that the world is speedily coming to an end, bribery and corruption are common, children no longer obey their parents, every man wants to write a book and the end of the world is evidently approaching.”¹ The ancient Mayans predicted it would all be over on December 21, 2012. Modern scientists warn us that someday the sun will turn into a red giant and encapsulate the planet. And of course all of this has found a happy home in the imaginations of pop culture. As one author writes, “Pop culture has shown us a million ways the world could end. There are slow-moving viral outbreaks, zombie takeovers, nuclear wars and alien invasions and robot mutinies and environmental cataclysms.”² There’s even a video game at Chuck E. Cheese where only *you* can ward off an alien attack and stop the world from total annihilation (if you have enough tokens, otherwise were all sunk).

How’s it all going to end? We can’t get enough of the question. Our passage this morning in Matthew begins, interestingly enough, with the disciples asking Jesus a similar question. Find your way to Matthew 24.

If you were with us last week, you’ll remember that Jesus has been teaching and debating with the religious leaders in the temple area in Jerusalem. At this point in Matthew’s story, we’re watching the final days of Jesus unfold. That debate came to a climax in ch. 23, with Jesus’ harsh condemnation of the Pharisees—those who saw themselves as the teachers and guides of Israel, but who were in reality giving them contaminated medicine. Their teaching was laced with hypocrisy, such that all who followed it would ultimately find themselves dead. Jesus was not shy about condemning them for that, or exposing their hypocrisy for what it is. Yet not without great pain in his voice for what it means for them, and for Jerusalem, the city of David, the home of God’s temple, which will soon be left desolate. As judgment for Israel’s unrelenting rebellion against their covenant God, and as fulfillment of God’s promises to dwell with his people, not through a building, but by his Spirit through his Son, the temple in Jerusalem will soon be destroyed.

And so when Matthew 24 opens with Jesus’ disciples marveling at the buildings in the temple, we should prepare ourselves for what’s surely going to be an interesting response. Verse 1: “Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the

¹ As cited in Neal Conan, “Our Fascination with the End of the World,” *Talk of the Nation*, NPR. Dec. 1, 2009. Available at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120988099>.

² Tyler Wells Lynch, “The End of the World: A Cultural Obsession,” *HuffPost*, Nov. 13, 2012. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tyler-wells-lynch/end-of-the-world-movies_b_2117647.html.

buildings of the temple. But he answered them, ‘You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down’” (24:1-2).

Those comments spark an unsettling curiosity in the disciples—one that causes them to privately ask Jesus the question that in one form or another has been asked from earliest history, and is still being asked today. Verse 3: “As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?’”

How’s it going to end?

When this question is raised today, the responses we find are usually one of two extremes: either apathy or obsession. *Apathy*—a kind of “who cares?” attitude, whether out of disbelief in God, distraction by the world, or even disillusionment due to Jesus’ delay—the kind of scoffing we see in 2 Peter 3:4: “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” Whatever the case, the promise of Jesus’ coming makes no functional impact on life from day to day. That’s apathy. (And I dare suggest that that’s probably where many of us are.)

The other extreme is *obsession*, which can take all sorts of shapes. From doomsday predictions in the secular world, to attempts by religious people to chart in scrupulous detail how the events of the future will play out. Treating the Bible like a secret code book, combing through it with a newspaper in the other hand, trying to make connections between obscure prophecies in the Old Testament and modern day events in Russia or the Middle East. The stuff that led people like Harold Camping to predict the end of the world three times, first on Sept. 6, 1994 and then May 21, 2011, and then Oct. 21, 2011. Obsession. You get the picture.

When the disciples ask this question, however, they do so not out of fear or obsession, but with wonder and hope. *Wonder* at the implications for Jerusalem and the temple, which have for so long been a symbol of God’s beauty and presence but will no longer be the center of his kingdom (cf. Jn. 4:21), but *hope* knowing that the royal unveiling of Jesus and his kingdom will mark the close of this age, which means the fullness of the age to come.

Now when they ask about Jesus’ “coming,” they’re not really asking about his return—not yet. They don’t even understand the fact that he’s about to die and rise again, let alone return at a later date. They’ll get that eventually, but that’s not a category they’re working with yet. What they’re asking him is when his “royal appearing” will take place. The word translated “coming” here is the Greek word, *parousia*, which certainly can and does often refer to Jesus’ return in the New Testament, but is a word that more generally means “royal appearance.” When the Roman Emperor would plan a state visit to a colony outside of Rome, the word they would use to describe that royal appearing was *parousia*—a declaration of the authority and glory of that king upon his arrival.³

That’s what the disciples are asking about—when will Jesus’ royal appearing come, that moment when *he shows up and everyone acknowledges his authority and kingship*? The time when, according to the hope of the Old Testament, this evil age will come to a close and give way to

³ See N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two* (Louisville: WJK, 2002, 2004), 114.

the world to come. The world ruled in full by King Jesus. The promised new creation, the new heavens and new earth of Isaiah 65, where Death will be swallowed up forever, tears wiped away, David's Son will rule forever with justice and peace, and all nations will behold God's glory forevermore (cf. Isa. 11:1-9; 25:6-9; 60:1ff; 65:17ff). The end of the world, for the disciples, for ancient Israel, for Christians today, isn't really an end, but a new beginning. The final beginning. The world as it was meant to be. And Jesus' royal appearing will usher that in. *How will we know when that's here?* That's what they want to know.

Now, if you look again at their question in v.3, you'll notice that there are really two parts to it: (1) "when will these things be"—that is, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem that you just told us about, how not one stone will be left on another; and (2) "what will be the sign of your coming and the close of the age?"—the question we just talked about—his royal appearing. Their *assumption* is that the answer to both parts of their question is the same. That when Jerusalem falls, Jesus' royal appearing will take place, the present age will come to a close, and the new creation will be upon us in full. That's their assumption.

But that's an assumption that Jesus wants to correct. And that's what launches us into the rest of the discussion in this passage. Jesus is saying in effect: 'Yes, Jerusalem will fall; and yes, I will come in victory, *but not at the same time*. In fact, there will be a season of suffering and at times intense persecution, including the destruction of Jerusalem, that will begin during this very generation and last up until my appearing, but only after that season will I come in power and glory.'⁴ Jesus is the true king and our only hope for salvation, but his royal victory will not be complete until he returns in the end. And he wants them to know this—that there's going to be a gap between Jerusalem's destruction and his royal appearing, marked by great tribulation—so that when suffering and turmoil comes, and false teachers rise up, they won't be caught off guard or led astray.

Look with me at vv. 4-8:

And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray.⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray.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.

There's going to be trouble. False kings will try to lead people astray. There's going to be international turmoil, natural disasters. But Jesus says, "See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, *but the end is not yet*" (v. 6). It's funny how these verses are so often cited as evidence that the end of the world is near ("wars and rumors of wars"), when Jesus is actually saying the *exact opposite*. None of this is evidence of the end. These are but the beginning of the birth pains. This fallen world is pregnant with God's new creation, but it is a long and painful labor, marked by the unsettling of the kingdoms of this world and the agitation of creation itself, as the world gets ready for the day of Jesus' royal visitation when he will set everything right (cf. Rom. 8:20-22).

⁴ For a similar understanding of the basic flow of this passage, including a discussion of other common interpretations, see D.A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC 8; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 488-495.

And that unsettling and agitation also means tribulation and persecution for Christ's followers in the meantime. Continuing in v. 9:

Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.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.¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved.¹⁴ 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. (24:9-14)

It's not uncommon for people to read this chapter as though Jesus is talking *only* about stuff that will happen way off in the future (what we sometimes call the "end times"). That's one way to read it, but I don't think it pays careful enough attention to the context. Jesus is answering the disciples' question, telling them what's going to happen *soon*, so that when Jesus' arrival doesn't happen right away, they'll be able to endure the tribulation they find themselves in—something Jesus says in v. 34 will happen in their own generation. In other words, Jesus is telling them that the end times, and the tribulation that comes with it, are already upon them, and will continue until his return. Now there are different understandings of this, but if you look at how the New Testament uses the phrases "last days" or "last times," it consistently refers to the time period *between* Jesus' first and second coming (cf. 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; Jms. 5:3; 1 Pet. 1:20; 2 Pet. 3:3). According to the Bible, the end times are not exclusively future; they are *already* and *not yet*.

Which is to say that we are living in the end times. Right now. They're not here in full, but they have begun. And if we don't understand that, and assume that now that we have Jesus, everything is awesome from here on; if the disciples don't understand that here, and assume that when Jerusalem falls, the full glory of the kingdom spring forth; if we don't get that there is this period of suffering for God's people,, *then the trials of this world threaten to overshadow the promise of our Savior*. We risk being caught off guard, deceived by false messiahs, disoriented by the turmoil in the world, derailed by persecution, all the while forgetting that the reason Jesus is delayed is because we have a mission to carry out.

Think about what happens when the trouble of this world overshadows our hope of salvation in Christ—the hope of heaven to come. Any kind of trouble—money troubles, when the mortgage becomes bigger than Jesus. Relational troubles, when a divorce becomes bigger than Jesus. Physical troubles, sickness, death. Persecution for our faith. All of the ways this broken world reminds us that Jesus has not yet come in power and glory. When those tribulations become bigger than Jesus, such that we're caught off guard by suffering and lose sight of the promise of his victory in the end, what happens to our hearts?

First, we become insecure and self-protective. When life no longer goes my way, or I can no longer predict what will come, we invariably turn inward. We circle the wagons, bolster our defenses, protect whatever we can still call our own. We become blind to the needs of others, focused only on keeping our heads above water. You might say that our love grows cold (v. 12).

Then we try to take control. Take matters into our own hands, become captains of our own destiny. In other words, we become our own savior. *Or else* we look to those who seem like they're in control, and we make them our savior. Someone who comes along, making promises

of a better world. A new hope. Justice and peace. *If* you will follow them. It's a false messiah, an alternative savior (v. 11). Someone who makes promises that only Jesus has the authority and power to keep.

It would be tempting to laugh at that idea if it wasn't such a common problem in our world. But our sinful hearts are drawn to these kinds of people—someone who offers all the blessings of heaven with none of the pain of the cross. From political revolutionaries to religious gurus, they lead people astray, away from Jesus. If you find yourself talking more about your favorite leader or teacher than Jesus, or if that person talks more about themselves than Jesus—if they're the hero of their own sermons—then there's a problem. You might be dealing with a false messiah, an alternative savior. And when we throw our hat in with people like that, then in our insecurity, we tend to demonize anyone who opposes them or refuses to fall in line. We found a new savior, so we betray one another and hate one another—those who stick with the old one (v. 10).

But if we cannot take control or find someone who seems to be in control, then we usually look for an escape. Something that we feel like we can control, that gives us relief or satisfaction, even if it's just for a moment. We fall away from Jesus and into unhealthy practices or addictive patterns. We escape by turning to food, either eating it or avoiding it. We turn to entertainment, fantasizing, cutting, pornography, abuse, drugs and alcohol—anything that relieves the pain that is our life, and makes us feel, if only for a minute, like we're in charge. Like a king, an alternate savior. Lawlessness increases as we become a law to ourselves, maintaining our fragile kingdom. And once again, all the focus goes on us. Love grows cold (v. 12).

But eventually, when all of that fails, when our own efforts and our false messiahs let us down, we give up. We resign ourselves to insecurity, depression, hopeless dissatisfaction. We stop looking for Christ's coming, or living as if it would make a difference if it ever did happen. *There is no savior*—not for me.

We cannot afford to be taken off guard by the tribulation of this season. There are hundreds of paths off the road of faithfulness to God. Thousands of alternative saviors we can turn to. What is needed is to trust the true Savior, to keep our eye on him and his promises, so that we can endure to the end. To persevere against the trials, fueled by the hope we have in Jesus—that he will come again—and therefore focused on the work he has given us to do in the meantime—to proclaim the gospel of his kingdom to the whole world. What is needed is a steadfast, patient hope in Christ's coming victory, that frees us and fuels us to persevere amid the tumult of these last days.

But if you're going to persevere, then you need to understand that there will be a season of intense trial until Jesus comes. And if you're the disciples in this story, you need to understand that that season *includes* the destruction of Jerusalem, but that Jesus' royal appearing will not happen at the same time. So when you see Jerusalem falling, it's not time to party; it's time to *run*.

That's what Jesus clarifies in vv. 15-21:

So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand),¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.¹⁷ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house,¹⁸ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.¹⁹ And alas for women who

are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! ²⁰ Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. ²¹ 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.

Now when Jesus mentions the “abomination of desolation,” again some think that he is talking about an event in the future. And from his vantage, he is. But from our vantage, what he’s describing is very much past. He is talking about the destruction of the temple (the “holy place”), the same thing he mentioned back in v. 2, which happened back in 70 A.D. But he’s using language drawn from the Old Testament book of Daniel to describe that destruction. The “abomination of desolation” in Daniel referred to an atrocious act of defilement to God’s temple. God’s temple was holy, sacred, set apart for God. When pagan nations conquered Jerusalem, they attempted to defile it by bringing in things that were unholy, unclean, like what Antiochus IV did in 167 B.C. when he slaughtered a pig on the altar of the temple. Pigs were unclean.

That same kind of atrocious defilement will happen again when the Roman armies surround the temple and destroy it in 70 A.D. The parallel passage in Mark also uses Daniel’s language, but Luke gives us his interpretation: “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart . . .” (Lk. 21:20-21).

So what Jesus is saying here is this: Jerusalem will fall, and I will return, but not at the same time. So when Rome shows up, don’t stick around for the fireworks. The end is not yet here. Get out of town. Because you still have work to do.

And there will be other severe trials while we wait for Christ’s appearing, but not without limit. Verse 22: “And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.” Jesus will return and bring the season of tribulation to an end. But among those severe trials, he warns them again of false messiahs—not just people who claim to be alternative saviors, but people who claim to be *the* Savior, the Messiah, Jesus himself in his royal appearing. Verses 23-28:

Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. 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. ²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

That last line is interesting. “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.” Growing up in Nebraska, while you’re driving down the road you would sometimes see Turkey Vultures swirling up above, zeroing in on some dead carcass they’ve discovered. So it is with false messiahs in a fallen world. They see Jesus’ delayed return not as an opportunity to get busy in declaring the gospel, but as a chance to make their own move for his throne. To take advantage of the weak and weary, those beat down by the suffering of this season, and to try to convince them that they are Jesus having returned.

That sounds like a big pill to swallow, but that’s the lie that Jehovah’s Witnesses bought into. They believe that Jesus already returned in 1914, not bodily, but through his invisible presence,

and now directs his kingdom through their organization.⁵ That's the lie that the Korean-based World Mission Society Church of God⁶ is trying to pull off, right here in Boston. They were founded in 1964 when a man named Ahn Sahng-hong claimed to be the Second-Coming Christ, and whose wife calls herself 'God the Mother.' Sounds goofy, but they claim to have 820,000 followers worldwide. I've been stopped on the T, they've come to my door, my wife has been stopped in the grocery store, asking if we have ever heard of "God the Mother." Maybe you have been too. That's the cult they represent.

But Jesus says don't be led astray. 'When I appear in victory and power and glory, nobody's going to miss it.' Verse 27: "For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." It's not going to be invisible, or spiritual; it won't be known only to a select few. It will be bodily, visible, obvious, and glorious. He elaborates in vv. 29-31:

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.³⁰ Then 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.³¹ And 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.

Jesus is using imagery from Isaiah to describe from a heavenly perspective the significance of his coming—the sun and moon darkened, the heavens shaken (cf. Isa. 13:10). It's imagery that describes the cosmic justice of this king. Then he uses language from Daniel again to describe the victory and authority of his coming: "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:13-14). And it's at that point, at his royal appearing, that all doubts about who's really in charge will finally be put to rest. The nations will see King Jesus, and those who rejected him will mourn for their rebellion against the true King (cf. Rev. 1:7). And Jesus will gather his people from every corner of the earth, and his heavenly new creation will be complete.

Jesus is the true king and our only hope for salvation, but his royal victory will not be complete until he returns in the end. We need to understand that if we are to endure and not be deceived or disillusioned or derailed in our faith. Jesus summarizes in vv. 32-35: "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things [these signs of turmoil and tribulation], you know that he is near, at the very gates" (vv. 32-33). He could come at any time. "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." These signs—this turmoil and tribulation—will all begin to take place during the disciples' lifetime. It doesn't mean they will be completed by then. Sometimes people read this verse as though everything Jesus is talking about here, including his return, was supposed to happen during the generation of the apostles. But he's talking about the signs which point to the nearness of his coming, signs that

⁵ See Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), 79-83.

⁶ For information and a biblical analysis of WMSCOG, see <http://carm.org/world-mission-society-church-of-god>.

did take place during their lifetime, and are *still* taking place today. Which means for us that he is still near—at the very gate. His royal appearing could be any day. He has promised it. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (v. 35).

So what do we do in the meantime? We endure through suffering, clinging to Jesus as our savior, and not some cheap alternative. And we remember that as long as he delays, we have work to do. A gospel message to make known.

It’s tempting to quietly scoff at the idea of Jesus’ return as he continues to delay—again, like those in 2 Peter 3:4: “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” But Jesus’ delay is not a failure to keep his promises. It’s his mercy and patience in desiring more people to come to know him as Savior. 2 Peter 3:8-15 reads:

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.¹¹ Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness,¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which 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.¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.¹⁵ And count the patience of our Lord as salvation . . .

So as long as Jesus delays and we continue to face trials, may each difficulty we experience in life be for us a quiet reminder that there’s still work to do. People to be saved. Nations to be reached. All with the gospel of Jesus. And then the end will come.