

Kingdom: A Journey Through Matthew

Return of the King – Part 1

Dr. David Platt

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RETURN OF THE KING – PART 1 Matthew 24:1-35

If you have Bible and I hope you do, turn with me to Matthew 24.

After graduating from college at the University of Georgia, getting married, and moving to New Orleans, I remember the first time I went downtown into that city. Jackson Square, located in the heart of the French Quarter, was littered with tables where fortunetellers and tarot card readers sat and spoke with tourists. Men and women would pay these street vendors to find out what their future looked like. It didn't take long for some friends of mine and me to decide that we wanted in on the action.

So one Saturday, we took a table, some chairs, and some candles, and we set up shop right next to the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans. We put out our table and set a sign in front of it that said, "We'll Tell You're Future For Free." And then we waited for our first customer. People began coming up to us and asking, "You can tell me my future for free?" We said, "Yes, guaranteed."

So they'd sit down, and we'd ask them a few questions to establish the fact that they had sin in their lives. And we'd look at them and say, "Man, your future doesn't look very good." But then we'd tell them how their future could change based on who Christ is and what Christ has done for them.

It didn't take us long to realize that's not what people were looking for when they sat down at one of those tables. Most people were looking for details about their lives: Were they going to be married? Were they going to stay married? Would they have children? Would they get rich? Would they get sick? Would they experience some sort of tragedy? How successful would they be? Strangely, when they wanted to talk about the future, they wanted to talk about various details, but they had no interest in talking about their eternal destinies.

Now the reason I share that is because we are about to read one of the most controversial chapters in all the New Testament—a chapter where Jesus foretells the future and talks about the end of the world. All kinds of people have taken this text and tried to figure out little details about what or when or where this or that is going to happen.

The words we're about to read have led some people to predict exact dates when Jesus is going to come back or the world is going to end. I remember when I was younger hearing about a book called, *88 Reasons Why Christ is Returning in 1988*. What do you do if you're celebrating New Year's Day with that guy in 1989? What do you say to him? "Happy New Year" just doesn't seem appropriate.

Last year, Harold Camping predicted that the world would end on Saturday, May 21, 2011. When that didn't happen, he changed his prediction to October 21, 2011. He had made a slight miscalculation. On October 22, I think he decided to hang it up.

But it's not just lunatics out there. Solid, Bible-believing Christians and scholars debate what this or that means in a text like Matthew 24. Is this premillennialism or postmillennialism or amillennialism or pre-trib or mid-trib or post-trib or rapture or no rapture? And there's a place for that—because these things are important and the Bible talks about them.

But if we're not careful, we will miss what is most important. Because amidst all the little questions that arise in Matthew 24, there are large questions that must be answered in every one of our lives. So regardless of details about when or how or where this or that is going to happen in the future, I want to ask every single person in this room: Are you ready for whatever may happen in your life or in this world this week or this year or over the next ten years? And most importantly, are you absolutely certain of where your life will be in eternity?

There are no more important questions than these. And my goal this morning is not to tell you your future or to answer every single question you may have about every single detail of the end times. Instead, my goal in the next few minutes is to show you the big picture of what Jesus said about the future of your life and the future of this world that we live in. And I want to show you what you can bank your life on and what you cannot bank your life on. I want to show you what matters and I want to show you what doesn't matter. And as bold as it may sound, today I want to prepare you for whatever your future may hold this week and this month and this year and the next ten years. And as weird as it may sound, I want to show you how Jesus' words today prepare you for your life ten billion years from now.

So let's read this text—the first 35 verses of Matthew 24—and then, based on this controversial, oftentimes confusing text, I want to give you three clear words of encouragement for your life and your future in this world. Matthew 24:

Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the 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."

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 end of the age?" And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. 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. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

"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. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 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.

"So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those

who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. 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. 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. Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. 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. 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. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

"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. 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. 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.

"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, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Matthew 24:1-35)

Ha! Wars and earthquakes, lightning and vultures, trumpets and fig trees, tribulations, abominations, desolations, and generations. What does all this mean? Amidst all the controversy and confusion, there are three clear exhortations for your life and my life in these words.

Trust in the authority of Christ.

Number one, trust in the authority of Christ. Now this is where I want to take a big picture look at what we just read and help you understand how this text is arranged. There are two main prophecies that Jesus is addressing here, two main events that He is talking about. And it's important to distinguish when He's talking about what.

Understanding the text ...

So, understanding the text. And admittedly, not every single Bible scholar would agree here, but the majority see a clear distinction here between the prophecies of two primary events, the first of which is a prophecy concerning the destruction of Jerusalem.

And that is what Jesus is talking about, specifically starting in verse 15. So get the scene. In verse 2, Jesus foretold that the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed. As He and His disciples walk across the valley and come upon the Mount of Olives, from which you can look back and see the city of Jerusalem with the temple in it, His disciples come to Him and ask, "When is this going to happen?"

And Jesus begins to talk about when this is going to happen. He starts talking about things that are signs or not signs, and then you get to verse 15, and He says, "*So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea—i.e., in Jerusalem—flee to the mountains*" (Matthew 24:15-16).

And then you get down to verse 21, and He says, "*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). And this is clearly a reference to the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, and the temple in the middle of it.

When he talks about "*the abomination of desolation spoken by the prophet Daniel,*" that is an intentional reference to Daniel 8:13, Daniel 9:27, Daniel 11:31, and Daniel 12:11, where the prophet Daniel, centuries before, foretold a time when a foreign ruler would come into the temple and profane it. Most Jewish people linked that prophecy with something that happened around 168 B.C., when a ruler named Antiochus Epiphanes came into the temple, erected a pagan altar in it, and sacrificed a pig over it, thus defiling the house of God.

But it's as if Jesus is saying here, "That's only a foretaste of what will happen when Jerusalem is destroyed. And sure enough, approximately 40 years after Jesus spoke these words, around 70 A.D. Roman armies began surrounding the city of Jerusalem to overtake it. And when they would overtake it, the Roman army would destroy the temple and instead make sacrifices to false gods, declaring Titus, the Roman emperor, to be supreme.

And Daniel 12:1 uses this same phrase—"There shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been seen until that time"—the same phrase that's used here in verse 21. And it was a horrifying, ghastly time. 70 A.D., the destruction of Jerusalem was a virtual blood bath of Jewish men and women who were pummeled by the Roman army.

The Jewish historian Josephus described the savagery, slaughter, disease, and famine that marked the Jewish people during those years. Parents reduced to cannibalism with their own children. Many were taken into slavery. Millions died.

All of this would take place 40 or so years after Jesus said these words, so here He tells His disciples, looking back on the city of Jerusalem, "When this happens...flee!" When the Roman army comes to attack the city and destroy the temple, don't even go home and get your clothes. If you're in the field, leave immediately.

How difficult it will be for pregnant women or men and women who strictly observe the Sabbath and think, "We can't go anywhere or do anything." Or in the winter, when frequent rains will have caused waters to rise, making them hard to cross and get away. So this is the first prophecy here in this chapter, and it is key. Jerusalem will be destroyed. The temple will be obliterated. Not one stone will be left upon another.

So this is one prophecy in this passage, but there's also another. This other prophecy is clearly described down in verses 29-31, when Jesus talks about a day when "*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. 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. 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*" (Matthew 24:29-31).

That's a prophecy concerning the return of Jesus. Verse 29 talks about all light in the world becoming dark and the heavens shaking. We know this is more than just the destruction of Jerusalem that's being talked about here. This is the day when Jesus is coming back in splendor and glory with a trumpet call from heaven. He will come to fully and finally assert His reign and His rule over the world as the sovereign Son of Man who deserves the praise of all peoples. So that's verses 29-31.

Now the real difficulty comes with understanding all of the other verses in this passage. How do they relate to one another? How do they relate to these two prophecies?

And there are two main schools of thought that, to be perfectly honest, I go back and forth between because I see how either of them makes sense. The predominant school of thought is that these two events (the destruction of Jerusalem and the return of Jesus) are intended to be seen here like two progressive mountain peaks, one of which sets the stage for the other, one of which points to the other.

Last week, I was in Kenya in a place called Ngong Hills, and I mentioned that Kenyan marathon runners train there. It's a very high altitude, so it's good for their lungs. And there's this beautiful mountain outside the city of Nairobi that you can run up, and as you run, there's a series of hills that progressively get higher and higher and higher.

So one day, we were going to go up on the mountain to look over the city of Nairobi—you can see the whole Great Rift Valley and it's beautiful—and so we were going to go up there and pray. The team was going to ride in a van, which would have been the wise option. But one of our Kenyan brothers was going to run, and so I decided, "I'd like to run."

I didn't have running shoes on (I was wearing some boot-type shoes), but I thought, "It'll be alright. Besides, we are just going up one of those hills." And so we started jogging, and within minutes, that altitude and that steady incline slowly began to take its toll on me.

I would look up, and this one hill looked like it would never end. My shoes felt like they weighed 20 pounds each. It's deceptive when you look up a hill and you think, "Well, that's not that far." It's not far if you're in a van, but it's a little different when you're in running with a Kenyan brother.

So finally, we got to the top of our hill—me, dripping sweat and totally out of breath; my Kenyan brother, barely breaking a sweat, not breathing hard at all. And that was just one hill. We got to where it plateaued, and I looked up, and there was another hill leading to another plateau. Needless to say, the team caught up to us in the van at that point, and so we had to stop running. No more Kenyan hills for me.

And so that's how many people picture this text. When Jesus talks about the destruction of Jerusalem, He's talking about one hill to come in the future. But there's another one after that, a greater hill, like the first, but even more significant—the return of Jesus. So this one prophecy basically prepares you for the next. This one prophecy basically helps you understand the next. It's a foretaste or foreshadowing of what is to come.

So that's one option. The other option is that verses 4-28 here are all just one description of trouble and distress and tribulation that will happen in the world before Jesus comes back in verse 29, and the destruction of Jerusalem is just an example of that trouble and distress and tribulation, albeit a very potent example and pertinent for these disciples.

So I could go either way on that because the point is the same. One, Jerusalem is going to be destroyed. And two, Jesus is going to come back. That's what this text is all about.

Applying the text...

Now, why is all of this important for you and me sitting here in the twenty-first century? Applying the text. Mark this down, this is a mammoth reality for you and I to realize in this room. The things of this world are passing. This is huge!

Think about these disciples. Put yourself in their shoes. Country boys from Galilee who come to the big city of Jerusalem, and they are stunned by its splendor, particularly the splendor of the temple. And they had reason to be.

It was a massive, awe-inspiring, breath-taking edifice. Built with stones, some of which measured 40 feet long, 12 feet wide, and 12 feet deep. Some of these stones weighed over 200,000 pounds each. Just imagine trying to move one of those stones without the advanced construction equipment we have today. No Caterpillars in the first century! No dump trucks and semi-trailers and cranes. Yet they stacked massive stone after massive stone on top of one another, all leading to a roof bathed in a sea of golden glory. The white marble on the top of the temple would virtually blind you when you looked at it in the reflection of the sun.

So the disciples of Jesus see this in the beginning of this chapter, and they point it out to Jesus, as if to say, "What an amazing building." And Jesus shocks them when he says, "You see all these stones? Not one of them is going to be left standing soon." The things of this world—even the best, most incredible things of this world—are passing. Things that you and I marvel at, things that you and I treasure, things that you and I build our lives on are passing.

The key verse in this whole passage is Matthew 24:35: "*Heaven and earth will pass away.*" Do you hear that? This world—with all of its splendor, all of its majesty with trees and mountains and seas and oceans and rivers, with all of its riches—it's all fading.

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but..."—listen to this mammoth statement—"*but my words will not pass away*" (Matthew 24:35). The things of this world are passing, but the truth of the Word of Christ is permanent. Regardless of how someone might interpret this detail or that detail in this text, this is clear: Jesus accurately foretold the destruction of Jerusalem 40 years before it happened. Those stones would pass away, that city would pass away, the people who filled that city would pass away, but His words would remain.

Jesus is not some fortuneteller in the French Quarter or some tarot card reader in downtown New Orleans. He is the Lord of history, and He speaks with authority about the future. He knows the future. He ordains the future. He brings it to pass.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but His word will not pass away. So build your life not on the things of this world, not on the riches of this world, not on the pleasures of this world, not on the plans and plaudits of this world. Don't build your life on those things. Don't waste your life on those things. They're all going to burn up in the end. Build your life on what matters: the words of Christ.

So that's why I say to every single person in this room this morning, "Trust in the authority of Christ." He spoke about the destruction of Jerusalem, and it happened. And He spoke about His return one day, and it will happen. Mark it down, it will happen.

So are you going to be ready? And on that day (which we'll talk about in just a minute could be any day), are you going to be ready? Will you have built your life, banked your life, on that which is passing or that which is permanent on that day? Oh, I urge you, trust in the authority of Christ, and build your life, spend your life, on what will last forever.

Persevere in the power of Christ.

So how do you get ready for that day when Jesus comes back? I'm glad you asked. The second clear exhortation from Jesus' words here in this passage: Persevere in the power of Christ. I hope you can see the significance of everything else Jesus is saying in this passage. He's preparing His disciples in that time for Jerusalem's destruction, and in the same words, He's preparing disciples in all times for His return.

These words of warning about signs and preparing knowing what to expect apply to all people of all time. These disciples in their day needed to be ready in these ways, for they would persevere through certain difficulties. And though other followers of Christ in other times in history (like you and me in the twenty-first century) would face different historical challenges, much would still be the same, and so the encouragement from Jesus all over this passage is to persevere.

Now as I've mentioned, a lot of people take this text and try to piece it all together in order to conclude, "Okay, once these certain things happen in the world, at that moment, Jesus is going to come back." But I don't think that's the point. The point is not for us to read this passage and then try to set a date for when something's going to happen.

Jesus Himself said in verse 36, which we'll look at next week, "*Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only*" (Matthew 24:36). So Jesus says, "I don't even know the day and hour," which is a pretty remarkable statement that we'll talk about more next week.

But the point is not for this text to lead to date setting. The point is for you and I to walk away from this text knowing what is going to happen before Jesus comes back. And what's going to happen was clear to these disciples in the first century and should be clear to all of us in the twenty-first century.

Followers of Jesus will face deception.

Followers of Jesus (then and now and until Jesus comes back) will face deception. Now we're overviewing all that we see in this passage surrounding these two prophecies. Verse 4, Jesus says, "*Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray*" (Matthew 24:4). Don't be led astray.

He says the same thing in verses 22-25. People will say, "Look, here is the Christ," but don't believe them. "*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). Don't believe them! Don't be led astray – don't be deceived.

And it's not just Jim Jones and David Koresh and other clearly false teachers. It's people all over the place who promote a picture or a version of Jesus that is not found in the Bible, and they're deceiving many.

Followers of Jesus will face tribulation.

So followers of Jesus will face deception, and followers of Jesus will face tribulation. That's a clear theme in this passage. Whether in first century Jerusalem or in the twenty-first century world, life will not be easy.

Wars and rumors of wars, nations rising against nations, famines and earthquakes. These things were familiar to them, and they are certainly familiar to us, aren't they? Wars and rumors of wars across the Middle East and with Israel and Iran and North Korea, nations rising against nations. Famine in parts of Africa over the last year where hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children have starved and are starving. Erik Hansen, a member of our faith family who I mentioned last week that we visited in Kenya, goes once every couple of months to a refugee camp on the border of Somalia filled with hundreds of thousands of people who in starvation have fled their country, looking for food. Famines, earthquakes. Have we not seen in just the past few years a cyclone in Myanmar, an earthquake in China, flooding in Pakistan, and a tsunami in Southeast Asia killing hundreds of thousands of people, each in a matter of minutes?

We are not immune to tribulation in this world; no one is. Expect these things, Jesus says. Not in such a way that you say, "Okay, well, since this happened in Myanmar and this happened in China and this is happening right now in Iran and in North Korea, clearly Jesus is coming back now." Maybe He is, but the point here is not to lead us to date setting.

The point here is to remind us how to live and what to expect in this fallen world in the time before Jesus comes back. And so He says, "*See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet*" (Matthew 24:6b). What an astounding statement! Famine everywhere, natural disasters rampant, rumors of nuclear war, but don't be alarmed.

Oh, don't let your life go up and down based on political trends or potential disasters. These things are not to alarm you. They're all a part of what Romans 8 called the groaning of creation for redemption from the Creator. Mark it down: Christians are not saved from trials. Christians are saved through trials.

In other words, Jesus is saying, "Trust in Me. Don't be alarmed. Even when it seems that everything is out of control, I am in control." These things are to be expected. Pain and hurt and suffering and tribulation will happen in this world. It will not be easy for you. Wars will happen, famines will happen, earthquakes will come, cancer will come, tumors will come, tragedy will come, but don't be alarmed. Persevere through deception, through tribulation.

Followers of Jesus will face temptation.

Followers of Jesus will face temptation. Jesus talks in verses 10-12 about how "*many will fall away and betray one another ... many will be led astray ... the love of many will grow cold.*" You will be tempted not to trust in God. You will be tempted to turn from your faith and to trust in yourself. People that you thought were believers, who were in the church, will turn away from God, and they'll turn away from you. And you will face temptation to do the same.

Followers of Jesus will face persecution.

Followers of Jesus will face temptation, and followers of Jesus will face persecution. Verse 9, "*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*" (Matthew 24:9). Because you are a Christian, because you bear the name of Christ, you will experience suffering. You will experience opposition in this world. So expect that, don't be surprised by that. Persevere in that. That's the whole point of what Jesus is saying here.

Verse 13, "*The one who endures to the end will be saved*" (Matthew 24:13). Don't give up. "By the power I give you," Jesus says, "don't give up." That's what I mean by, "Persevere in the power of Christ." It's not easy to follow Jesus faithfully in this world, which is why Jesus' promise to us that we quote at the end of every worship gathering from the end of the Book of Matthew is so huge: "*I am with you always, to the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20b). He is saying, "I will be with you. I will enable you with my presence by my power to endure to the end of the age. Through deception, tribulation, temptation, and persecution. Trust in Me."

And as you do, proclaim this gospel of the kingdom throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations! So see this, oh, I love this. We've talked about verse 14 before. George Ladd called it "the most important single verse in the Word of God for the people of today."

Verse 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*" (Matthew 24:14). So Jesus has just gone through this long list of things that will happen that are not necessarily signs of the end—they're just birth pains, they're leading to the end, but they're not the end. But this is when the end will come. When this gospel of the kingdom has been proclaimed as a testimony to all nations! Yes! Make this gospel known to every people group in the world.

This just sets the stage for Jesus' command, which we'll close out with in a couple of weeks here, when He tells His disciples to "*make disciples of all nations*" (Matthew 28:19). This is why we go! This is why we go into Birmingham. And it's why we go work in Clarkston (metro Atlanta) among unreached people groups there. And it's why Erik and Amanda Hansen and JD and JJ and Chris and Leah and Ryan and Bethany and multitudes of mid-termers and even short-term trips go all over the place from this body. We're going, why? Because we want the gospel of the kingdom to be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations!

This is what matters! Do you see it? This matters more than what team wins what championship in football or basketball or baseball. This matters more than what kind of house you live in or car you drive or money you make or clothes you wear or awards you earn. Put those things aside. Sacrifice these things in your life for the spread of the gospel of the kingdom throughout the world. This is what matters.

Now again, it's not easy. Follow this. Persecution inevitably follows kingdom proclamation. When you give your life to proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in your workplace, when you give your life proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom throughout the world, it will get harder for you, not easier. You want to live a nice, comfortable, carefree, safe Christian life? Don't ever talk about the gospel. Because when you do, there will be challenges that come your way.

But it's worth it. It's worth it, why? Because gospel proclamation ultimately results in kingdom consummation. Jesus will return and consummate His kingdom when this mission is accomplished. And it will be accomplished when every nation, when every *ethne*, when every group of people has been reached with this gospel. Oh, let's give our lives to this, church. Let's give our resources to this.

People say, "Well, how do you know when this has happened? How do you know when all the nations have been reached with the gospel of the kingdom?" And this is where I'll share with you again George Ladd's words simply because they cannot be improved upon:

"God alone knows the definition of terms [here]. I cannot precisely define who all the nations are, but I do not need to know. I know only one thing: Christ has not yet returned; therefore, the task is not yet done. When it is done, Christ will come. Our responsibility is not to insist on defining the terms; our responsibility is to complete the task. So long as Christ does not return, our work is undone. Let us get busy and complete our mission."

God, help us to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom throughout the world as we persevere in this world in the power of the King.

Long for the coming of Christ.

Trust in the authority of Christ, persevere in the power of Christ, and then, third long for the coming of Christ. Long for the coming of Christ. Oh, don't you see it? Don't you see how the reality of tribulation and deception, temptation and persecution just create anticipation? The more we live in this world, the more we will long for Christ to come back to this world. And if this text makes anything clear, it makes it clear that it will be no secret when one day the angels of heaven let out a trumpet blast, and every eye will behold the Son of Man in the sky.

He came the first time lying in a manger.

Oh, this will be different from His first coming. He first came to a remote, obscure town just outside Jerusalem where hardly anyone noticed or knew, save a few shepherds and some farm animals. He came the first time lying in a manger. But ladies and gentlemen, He will come the second time riding on the clouds.

Just like Daniel prophesied centuries before:

"Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man...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"
(Daniel 7:13-14).

He came the first time in humility to provide salvation.

He came the first time in humility to provide salvation. Through His death on a cross for the sins of men and women throughout history. But He will come the second time in glory to execute judgment.

So "the clouds" here in Matthew 24 are not just an allusion to Daniel 7. All throughout the Old Testament, God reveals His glory in the image of a cloud. It's a pillar of cloud that led God's people in the exodus from Egypt. At the end of the book of Exodus, God's *Shekinah* glory is revealed in a cloud that covers the tabernacle. Psalm 104:3 says that God makes the clouds His chariot, and Isaiah 19:1 depicts the Lord riding on a swift cloud. The picture here is the glory of God revealed in the glorious Son of God, coming in power to execute judgment.

So Matthew 24:30 says that the tribes will mourn. Why will they mourn when they see the second coming of Christ? Because this is the day of judgment, and all who are not ready for that day, all who have refused to turn from their sin and themselves and to trust in Christ

as Savior and King will come face-to-face with the Holy One whom they have rejected. And that day will be a horrible day for all such men and women.

Oh, let me pause at this moment and ask the simple question: What if this happened today? What if today, these rain clouds outside opened up, and the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, came back today to this world? Would you be ready? Friend, have you come to the point in your life where you have, by the grace of God, decisively turned from your sin and yourself to trust in Jesus as the Savior and the Lord of your life? Do you know that your eternity is sealed with Christ in such a way that the thought of Jesus' return brings nothing but joy to your soul at this moment?

If so, then long for that. If not, though, then I invite you today, right now, at this moment, in your heart, throw aside everything else and say, "Yes, I see, Jesus, that You are the King. You have authority over the future, and You have authority over my life. And You, through Your death on the cross, have taken the payment for my sin. And You, through Your resurrection from grave, have triumphed over sin and death. And so I trust in You today to be my Savior and my Ruler, my Lord and my King." Oh, I urge you to do this in your heart today. Do this before it is too late.

And even for the Christian, who would say, "Yes, I've trusted in Jesus as my Lord and King," would you be ready if He returned today? Or are there things in your life that are not right with Him? Are there things in your life that you are holding onto, toying with, flirting with that you would cause you to be ashamed before Jesus at this moment? Oh, be free of these things. Let go of these things. Confess your sin and find mercy in Your Savior so that you are ready for His coming at any moment.

He came the first time in humility to provide salvation; He will come the second time in glory to execute judgment. So what do we do until He comes back?

Christians confidently watch...

Christians confidently watch. That's the lesson of the fig tree in verses 32-33. Jesus says, "Just like when you see leaves on a fig tree, you know that summer is near, so when you see these things, know that my return is near."

With every passing day, we know we are getting closer, so we watch. In a very real sense, we keep our eyes on the sky knowing that it could be today, it could be tomorrow, it could be ten years from now, or it could be a thousand years from now.

We don't know, but we do know that His timing will confound our wisdom. And when the Son returns, we will see that the Father's timing makes perfect sense. So we watch with confidence in the control of God.

Christians patiently wait...

Christians confidently watch and Christians patiently wait. In verse 34, Jesus says, "*Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.*" That's a verse that's been particularly confusing because for some it seems that Jesus is saying that the generation He was speaking to would see His second coming.

And there's a lot of discussion about the different words in this verse. What is meant by "generation" and "pass away" and "all these things"? But it's clear; obviously Jesus did not mean that He would return before the disciples He was speaking to would die. Instead, the picture seems to be that all of these things that He's talked about—tribulation, deception, temptation, and persecution—would come upon these disciples, and some of those in that

generation would even see the destruction of Jerusalem as a foretaste of the return of Jesus. But in the midst of it all, from generation to generation, we patiently wait.

We know two things. One, that Jesus is coming back. And two, that we are closer today than we were yesterday. And so we wait, knowing that when He comes, His return will exceed our expectations.

Do you ever get your hopes up for something, and then when it actually comes, it wasn't all you thought it would be? Not so with the second coming of Christ. Even the words we have here are mere human efforts at describing the glory of what that scene will be like and what will unfold in the days to come after that.

It's what I love about the way *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis ends. The last paragraph of the last book in that series says:

"As Aslan spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Oh, mark it down, the end of the world as we know it will be the beginning of a new heaven and a new earth where *"death will be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore"* (Revelation 21:4), where *"night will be no more [and we] will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be [our] light, and [we] will reign [with him] forever and ever"* (Revelation 22:5).

Christians urgently work.

So Christians confidently watch and patiently wait, and while we do, we urgently work. Christians urgently work. We fight deception, and we persevere through tribulation. We fight temptation, and we endure persecution as we proclaim the gospel (the good news!) of the kingdom throughout the whole world. We pray, "Your Kingdom come!" We give all our resources. And we spend our lives—we lose them, if necessary—knowing that His church (our lives!) will accomplish His mission.

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