



BULLEEN BAPTIST CHURCH

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SERIES : "THE LAST THINGS"

Study 10 : "Jesus & the End : Matthew 23-25" Oct 15, 2006

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INTRODUCTION : to the series

The "Last Things" is a Series on God's ultimate purposes for his people & his creation. It picks up on the main themes through the Scriptures; themes which find their ultimate fulfilment when Jesus returns to the world - the whole of creation is renewed, his people are "clothed with immortality," and God reigns supreme.

INTRODUCTION : to Study 10

The setting? Jesus had left the Temple. With his disciples, on the Mount of Olives, he responds to a question about the beauty of the Temple by predicting its total destruction. Brief accounts are in Mark 13 and Luke 21 but Matthew preserves the more complete account in Mt. 24 & 25. This teaching of Jesus is central to our understanding of his coming in Judgement and in final glory, but the history of its exegesis is a sorry and tangled mess - particularly in more recent years.

How best to illustrate this? By asking the question, "Are there any signs that precede Jesus' return?"

In the first half of Mt24, Jesus stresses that there ARE "signs." For example :

"You will hear of wars ... there will be famines and earthquakes ... you will be persecuted ... many false prophets will appear ... the gospel will be preached in the whole world and then the end will come ... there will be great distress ... " Mt24: 4-33

These signs had a clear purpose - **IDENTIFYING an event**; giving **WARNING** & requiring **ACTION**.

when you see all these things, you know that it's near, right at the door. Mt24:33

when you see the abomination of desolation ... *let those in Judea flee to the mountains* Mt24:15-16

But in the second half of Mt24, Jesus stresses that there are NO signs!

... no one knows about that day or hour ... you do not know on what day your Lord will come ... the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. Mt24:36, 44, 50.

Which is it? See the signs & take action, or, nobody knows and Jesus comes when least expected.

Either we DO know or we DON'T know - it can't be both! Confusion abounds : Eg.

"The Bible is also clear that we are to be watching for the signs of His return - so that we may be ready for the moment when "in the twinkling of an eye, we shall behold Him." Likewise, the Bible is also very clear that the exact time of Christ's return cannot be foreknown by man and we are not to be setting dates for these things. However, Jesus did say we are to be aware of the signs of His return from <http://www.ckalive.org/ckalive/Word/signsoftimes.htm> (as at 08/10/06)

This convoluted idea is common, but it won't wash - the force of the conflict of ideas is not faced, just "resolved" by verbal gymnastics: "*watching for the signs*" but not "*setting dates*" - when taking action at a certain time is the whole point of the signs! The above quote leads to such nonsense as "we may not know the hour or the day, but that doesn't stop us from figuring out the week & the month!"

Is there a solution? Yes. Responding to the disciples' question in Mt24:3, Jesus taught about TWO different events separated by a lengthy time period. (a fact of history from our viewpoint and even stated in the text - see Mt24:48, 25:5, 19) The events? :

Jesus' coming in judgement at the DESTRUCTION of Jerusalem ... in AD 70 (SIGNS)
and his RETURN at the "end of the age" ... which is yet to come! (NO SIGNS)

WHY THE CONFUSION?

- A. CONTEXT is usually ignored - and therefore the main theme of Matthew 24 is not recognised.
- B. The complex nature of the Disciple's QUESTION is not given its full weight
- C. Jesus' AUDIENCE is not correctly identified
- D. TIMING indicator (Mt24:36) emptied of its meaning.
- E. "SIGNS" misinterpreted and misapplied.

A. CONTEXT of Matthew 24

Matthew 23 is a "must read" for context - national JUDGEMENT on Israel for rejecting their Messiah. The whole chapter is a denunciation by Jesus of the Religious rulers of his day, culminating with :

Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation ... Look, your house is left to you desolate. Mt23:32-38 (see Ac3:13-15 and Mt21:33-46, 22:1-7)

The bridge between 23 & 24 is the underlined statement regarding the Temple. Note the expression "your house." Jesus rejected and disowned it. The disciples remark on its beauty. Jesus responds by declaring it would be totally destroyed. The disciples want to know when it will happen

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples ... (called) his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." ... the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Mt24:1-3

The focus sharpens to SPECIFICS; the destruction of the temple and, by implication, Jerusalem - the main theme of what follows.

B. THE DISCIPLE'S QUESTION (... or questions?)

How many questions? 1, 2 or 3? (see the underlined phrases, above)

1. "When will this happen?" SIMPLE - "When will the Temple be destroyed?"
2. "What will be the sign of your coming?" Is this OT or NT CONTENT? The Disciples would not accept that Jesus was going to die at this point (Mk8:31; Lk18:34; Jn12:16 cf Jn12:34) so its a bit much to expect they comprehended his Resurrection and Return. They were still on the other side of Easter, so they were thinking in OT categories and using OT language - of Jesus as Messiah coming to Jerusalem in judgement as per

Look! The LORD is coming from his dwelling place; he comes down and treads the high places of the earth. The mountains melt beneath him and the valleys split apart, like wax before the fire, like water rushing down a slope. All this is because of Jacob's transgression, because of the sins of the house of Israel. Mic1:3-5 (See also Is19:1 ... and Rev2:16 & 3:3 for NT uses of Jesus coming in judgement)

3. "(Signs) of the end of the age" ("age" not "world" as in some translations) Again, from the disciples perspective, they were hoping Jesus would make an OPEN claim to reign over his Kingdom in power. His death was not on their agenda. Did they understand him to mean that the end of the temple would mean the end of the present age (in which Jesus was being rejected) and the beginning of the new glorious one of the Messiah's rightful rule? I think they did.

Now for the interesting part. How did Jesus CHOOSE to answer the question?

In light of the disciples' understanding at that point (one question in three differing phrases) OR in anticipation of their future understanding - that his coming "in judgement to Jerusalem" did not exhaust the concept of his coming? That is, would Jesus answer in his categories or theirs?

Jesus' mind did work along those lines. After he washed the disciples' feet he said :

"You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Jn13:7

The Disciples' understanding also followed this pattern :

Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him Jn12:16

I believe that Jesus took the opportunity to teach about another, final return in Mt24:37 - 25:46 - on record for his disciples' eventual understanding.

Any Biblical evidence for this? Check out Mk13:4 and Lk21:7 In these accounts, the disciple's question is limited to 1., above. No mention of "signs of your coming" or "end of the age" and also no mention of the material found in Mt24:37 - 25:46.

C. JESUS' AUDIENCE

Who was Jesus talking to? Those listening to him at the TIME ... or us, 2000 years LATER?

Which was the "generation" referred to? US or THEM.

These questions are vital to a correct understanding of these Chapters :

IN CHAPTER 23 : When Jesus used the word "you" it was directed at the Pharisees who were present with him at the time and listening to him. Eg.

You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth ... I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation. v34-36

Obviously, Jesus was not speaking to some future generation of Pharisees!

IN CHAPTER 24:4-35 When Jesus used the word "you" it was directed at his disciples who were present with him at the time and listening to him. Eg,

Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ, and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ... Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' ... then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. "

Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender & its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

Jesus was speaking to those who were there at the time listening to him -not to some future generation of disciples. (2000 years in the future?)

D. TIMING INDICATOR

I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Mt24:34-35

This is the PIVOTAL verse of Chapter 24. All verses after it refer to his 2nd Coming. All verses before it were fulfilled in 70AD when Roman armies laid siege to Jerusalem, and destroyed the city & temple. Between 800,000 & 1,200,000 Jews were killed. The survivors were sold into slavery - so many that slave traders complained the market was flooded and slaves were worth next to nothing. This is one of the best documented battles of the ancient world. A victory arch was built in Rome; it still stands, complete with carvings of captives & treasure looted from the temple.

Jesus said that no stone of the temple would be left upon another (Mt24:2). Fire consumed the temple and the gold sheet that adorned the white marble building blocks melted between the joins. Roman soldiers prised the stones of the ruins apart to reclaim the gold.

The destruction of Jerusalem happened EXACTLY as Jesus said it would and WHEN he said it would ... within a generation, as promised.

"This generation" is not "This (Jewish) race" nor is it "(a future) generation (that sees these signs)

Supporting evidence?

I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom Mt16:28

Jesus speaks of an event, in language that we normally associate with his Second Coming, far enough into the future that most will have died, but not so far away that all will have died.

E. SIGNS MISINTERPRETED

All the errors in understanding these Chapters culminate in this. All of the signs that Jesus predicted, the signs that many people today believe are still to happen / are happening around us as the lead-up to Jesus' return are either NOT signs at all or have already been FULFILLED. Eg.:

EARTHQUAKES, FAMINE, WARS in abundance prior to 70AD, but they were not signs of anything. They just are! Jesus' comment : "See to it that you are not alarmed, such things must happen, but the end is still to come." (Mt24:6) The common perception is that Jesus said the opposite - "Be alarmed; they are getting worse, this is the end! (By the way, Earthquakes have not increased through the 20th Century - see the paper "Earthquakes and the End-times; A geological Perspective" available from the foyer.)

FALLING STARS, GREAT TRIBULATION, SIGN OF THE SON OF MAN Surely all these things have not happened. They must refer to Jesus' Return? Not necessarily. All are capable of being understood on the Bible's own terms. (Eg. "The gospel will be preached in the whole world and then the end will come." See Lk2:1; Col1:6, 23, Ac11:28, 17:6 ("World" means the Roman Empire")