

The Coming of the Son of Man

Matthew 24:29-35

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Introduction:

There are certain events in history that we look back on with a sense of solemnity—a sense of utter seriousness. There are events, disasters, or atrocities that you just don't talk about flippantly or make jokes about because of the sheer level of pain, suffering, or death that some people experienced. Events like the Holocaust in Europe, where six million Jews were systematically murdered; or the killing fields of Cambodia, where Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge slaughtered a full quarter of their own population. Or, closer to home, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, or the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. We look back at these events, read about them, or watch a documentary, and we shudder.

The way we feel about these events brings us something close to the mood that should be associated with Matthew 24. But the difference here is that, instead of looking back on an unspeakable event, Jesus looks forward to a time yet to come. He prophesies of such a time—a time of immense suffering, death, and destruction that would come upon the city they were walking in; a devastation that would come upon their own people in the near future.

I wonder how we would react to such a pronouncement—to such a prediction. Would you be able to just shake His words off and not worry about it? If so, what does that say about how seriously you really take Jesus?

Or, would you be shaken to the core because you believe what verse 35 says, that *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away"*? And would you then be seeking to respond rightly to His words? Since Jesus said this, what then must I do; how must I respond?

My prayer is that this is exactly how we would react to the text before us today. It is a famously difficult text. In fact, it is one of the most debated chapters in the entire Bible. And because of the difficulties and debates, we face the danger of coming to this chapter merely to satisfy our curiosity about prophecy, or to win an argument about a particular theological position. The danger of these approaches is that we will miss the main point Jesus is making; we will miss what He wants us to know and what He wants us to do.

So, I don't want us to come to this text with preconceived notions based on a theological system. We want to come to this—as we should come to every text—humbly, letting God speak, paying attention to the original context, the grammar, the language, and the flow.

Main Idea:

And when we do so, though you may go along with every point, I hope everyone here will see Jesus as the Son of Man who is the glorious King. And that the coming of the Son of Man means the King has come in power and glory both to judge and to save.

The Overview (*Matthew 24:29-32*):

Now, for most of us, when hear language like *"the sun being darkened, stars falling, and the heavens being shaken"*, and *"the Son of Man coming on the clouds"* we immediately think of the Second Coming of Jesus to earth. How could this be describing anything other than the return of Christ?

Well, this is one of those texts that we come to assuming we already know what it is about. But have we approached it the way Matthew intended his readers to? Have we put ourselves in the position of those first disciples Jesus was talking to? Have we followed the most natural interpretation of the text as it is? And as I have tried to that this week—having wrestled with the text, discussed it with Pastor Knight, read all I could from different sides—my own view of this passage has changed.

It is certainly all about Christ. Make no mistake, it is about the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. But I don't think this passage is describing His Second Coming. I think Jesus starts describing His Second Coming to earth in the next section. And we will see next week how the language changes. In what we have been studying so far, the language is very much about what His disciples were to expect before this coming of Christ in judgment on Jerusalem. But beginning in verse 36, and continuing through Chapter 25, it is very much about the fact that Jesus' Second Coming will happen at a time no one expects.

In our passage today (*vv.29-35*) Jesus is still answering the disciples' first question: When will the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple happen?

We saw two weeks ago how Jesus told His disciples that the Temple would be utterly destroyed, which spurred them to ask two questions in verse 3:

- When will these things happen?
- What will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?

And we saw last week how Jesus began to answer their first question by talking about the abomination of desolation in Jerusalem and all of the horrors that would come to the city—which did happen in A.D. 70 when the Roman general Titus laid siege to Jerusalem—and the devastation caused by the sword and starvation.

And we saw how He gave instructions to His disciples, to Christians, to notice these things happening, and when they saw it start to happen, they were to flee out of the city—not seek refuge in it. And history tells us that many Christians, indeed, did exactly that. They remembered Jesus' words, they obeyed them, and they fled to the mountains and survived, whereas in Jerusalem, over a million others died.

And we also saw how Jesus gave instructions not to be misled by rumors of false prophets and false Christs who would offer salvation. *"Do not believe them,"* Jesus said, *"when you hear that I may have come. I am not coming to save this city from judgment. When I come, everyone will know it. It will be blatantly obvious."* (vv.27-28).

But He is not done answering their first question. And there are two strong linguistic clues in the text that show us that verses 29-35 are still about that first question.

1. *"Immediately after the tribulation of those days"* (v.29)

I don't think we should try to explain away the word *"immediately"*. The most natural way to read this text is that *"immediately after the tribulation of those days, that is, immediately after the siege of Jerusalem of which I have been speaking, the following things will happen..."*

2. *"Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."* (v.34)

This text, and others like it in the gospels, have caused massive headaches for many commentators, theologians, and pastors. But, again, if we read it in its most natural way—the most natural way Jesus' disciples would have understood it—it doesn't pose a problem because the siege and destruction of Jerusalem did happen within that generation Jesus was speaking to—less than 40 years later.

So, from these two clues, it seems best to take this section up to verse 35 as Jesus answering the disciples' first question: when will these things (i.e., the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple) happen?

And His answer teaches us at least four important things:

- A. We must fear the Son of Man who judges. (vv.29-30a)
- B. We must bow to the Son of Man who rules. (v.30b)
- C. We must believe in the Son of Man who saves. (v.31)
- D. We must trust the Son of Man who speaks. (vv.32-35)

Exposition:

A. We must fear the Son of Man who judges. (vv.29-30b)

- **Matthew 24:29-30b**—"But 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 the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn

1. The precursor to the Son of Man (v.29)

Jesus says that immediately after the horrible distress of the abomination of desolation and the siege of Jerusalem, there will be massive upheaval—the unleashing of judgment and full destruction.

Now you say, "Wait a minute, these cosmic events clearly did not happen in A.D. 70; this has to be a reference to the Second Coming of Christ." However, is that how Jesus' Jewish disciples would have taken His words? I don't think so. Remember, these were Jewish men who had grown up with the imagery and language of the Old Testament. They were saturated in that language. I think they would have immediately recognized the language as being taken from different Old Testament prophecies concerning God's judgment of pagan nations. For example:

- Isaiah's prophecy of God's judgment of Babylon
 - **Isaiah 13:10, 13**—For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises and the moon will not shed its light...¹³ Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken from its place at the fury of the LORD of hosts In the day of His burning anger.

God did judge Babylon severely, but He did not literally shake the earth and cause the stars, moon, or sun to stop shining. This is apocalyptic language used to describe the supernatural and devastating judgment of God against a sinful, idolatrous, wicked nation.

- Ezekiel's prophecy of God's judgment of Egypt
 - **Ezekiel 32:7-8**—"And when I extinguish you, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud and the moon will not give its light. ⁸ "All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you and will set darkness on your land," declares the Lord GOD.

Again, God's judgment of a wicked nation is described in apocalyptic, cosmic upheaval kind of language.

Jesus' disciples would have understood Him to be using exactly that same kind of apocalyptic judgment language to describe what was going to happen to Jerusalem. And it would have been shocking to hear, because Jesus is now lumping Jerusalem in with the wicked, pagan, idolatrous nations. God would judge them severely for they were the wicked nation who had, by and large, rejected God's messengers and God's own Son.

2. The sign of the Son of Man (v.30a)

- **Matthew 24:30a**—And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky

What is this sign? Was it a literal sign in the sky? Well, some point to the historian, Josephus, who records some very strange sightings people had near the time of the Roman siege of Jerusalem. But others point out that a perfectly acceptable translation of this phrase is "the sign will appear of the Son of Man who is in heaven." So that, in fact, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is the sign of the vindication of the Son of Man who is in heaven. The judgment against the prevailing Jewish religious social order that, by and large, rejected Christ was the sign.

3. Mourning over the Son of Man (v.30b)

- **Matthew 24:30b**—and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn

Whenever Matthew speaks of “tribes” (φυλῆ) in his gospel, he is talking about the tribes of Israel. And the word earth can just as easily be translated “land”. Following the immediate context of the judgment of Israel, then, we see that when Christ comes in vindication and judgment, all the tribes of the land will mourn—as their religious capital is burned; as the center of the religious life, the temple, is torn down. They will mourn and weep at the coming of the Son of Man.

Application

Stop—do not pass over this too quickly. This is the judgment of God brought against His own people because they rejected His Son. Though He came and demonstrated His authority with His words and His works; though He proved His divinity through His miracles and power; though He pleaded with men and women over and over again to repent of their sin and trust solely in Him for salvation and life everlasting—yet still, most rejected Him; most shrugged off His claims; most thought they could do better on their own. And because of this response, they suffered God’s just judgment.

But we miss it if we keep this judgment at arm’s length from ourselves. Because, though God is incredibly patient, He will judge all who react the same way. He must judge all who reject Christ; He must judge all who remain in their sin.

If you prefer to keep your sin or try to deal with your sin on your own, you are in no better position than those huddled together in the walls of Jerusalem awaiting certain judgment. If you think you can earn a right standing with God through your own goodness, you are on the brink of destruction, as they were. When the truth of Christ is revealed, will you be one who mourns or one who rejoices?

B. We must bow to the Son of Man who rules (v.30b)

- **Matthew 24:30c**—and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory.

Jesus’ disciples would have immediately recognized the reference Jesus was making. Jesus is identifying Himself as the Son of Man figure in Daniel 7.

- **Daniel 7:13-14**—I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. ¹⁴ And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.

Notice the language of Daniel 7. What is this text about? It is not about the Second Coming of the Son of Man to earth. It is about the Son of Man coming before the Ancient of Days (God the Father) to receive dominion, glory, and an everlasting kingdom. This text in Daniel 7 is about the enthronement of the Son of Man; the enthronement of Christ.

And it seems to me that this is what Jesus is talking about of Himself in Matthew 24. Many of you are probably not convinced, but this is not the only time that Jesus talks like this. Just two days later, Jesus is on trial before Caiaphas, the high priest:

- **Matthew 26:63-64**—But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God." ⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN."

Jesus said "*hereafter*", meaning "from now on" you will see the Son of Man. This does not sound like far future language describing His Second Coming. And few take it that way (*See also Matt.10:23; 16:28*).

Now Jesus is applying Daniel 7 to Himself in Matthew 24. In our context, He is linking the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple with His own exaltation, enthronement, and authority. With the destruction of Jerusalem, and especially of the temple, there is a public, visible, and dramatic replacement of the old with the new.

The temple had been the center of Israel's religious life. It was the locus, not only of Israel's worship, but the very meeting place between God and His people—the physical manifestation of the covenant relationship between God and His elect.

But now, with the coming of Jesus—with His completed work on the cross, with His victory over death, with His ascension and taking His seat at the right hand of the Father:

- Jesus is the new locus of worship. He is the new, better, and permanent meeting place between man and God.
- He is the new, better, and permanent High Priest.
- He is the once and for all sacrifice for sins.
- Though Jesus was rejected by the religious leaders, it will be clear that He has been vindicated and is enthroned at the right hand of God from which He will rule on a worldwide scale. He is the one with power and great glory!
- Therefore, we must bow before Him—our King and our God. He is our Creator, our Redeemer, our Champion, our Master, our Lord, our King. He is worthy of our praise and our obedience, our service and our whole lives.

Which bring us to our next point.

C. We must believe in the Son of Man who saves (v.31)

- **Matthew 24:31**—And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

Whether these are angels or human messengers matters little, because the point is that God is the One doing the gathering (with allusions to Deut.30:4). The gathering of whom? His elect.

Though Paul and others had already begun missionary activity in several parts of the Mediterranean world, missions and evangelism took off after the destruction of Jerusalem—when so many Christians were forced out and scattered to the far-flung parts of the empire.

God's plan was always to bring others into His fold—there are hints and examples of this in the Old Testament. But with the death, resurrection, exaltation, and enthronement of Christ, His promise to Abraham to bless all the families of the earth through His seed truly begins to be fulfilled.

Christ will gather His chosen ones from the four winds—that is, from every part of the globe until the vision in Revelation 5:9 is fulfilled:

- **Revelation 5:9-10**—Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. ¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.

What does that mean for us? It means we preach the Gospel to, and make disciples of, people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. We are privileged to be commanded to participate in this great ingathering mission of Christ. The question is: are we participating? From the enthroned King, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given, we are commanded to participate in this ingathering. We are to speak the Gospel wherever God has us. We are to support the spread of the Gospel here in Phoenix and across the world as God gives us opportunity. We are to pray that the Good News of Jesus Christ would go to all peoples, and that they would respond in repentance and faith—that they would believe in the Son of Man who saves.

We have a big job—an impossible job—but we can rest assured that we also have a Savior who promises to be with us always as we undertake this task, and with Him all things are possible.

D. We must trust the Son of Man who speaks (vv.32-35)

Verses 32-35 are a summary and reinforcement of all that Jesus has been saying. And as Jesus so often did, He uses a parable to illustrate His point.

- **Matthew 24:32**—Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near

The illustration is simple—the fig tree, one of the most common trees in the land. And all the disciples understood that as soon as the fig tree had “*put forth its leaves*”, that is, produced shoots, summer was near. It was a sign in the natural world of what was coming soon.

So, Jesus makes the clear application.

- **Matthew 24:33**—so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.

Jesus is saying that as sure as you know summer is coming when you see the fig tree putting forth its leaves, so you can be sure that Jesus is coming when you see all of these things—i.e., things associated with the Roman siege of Jerusalem—then you know that His coming in judgment, in enthronement, and in salvation is near; it is right at the door.

And to emphasize His point at how near this was to happening He says:

- **Matthew 24:34**—Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

In other words, His disciples were to expect all of this to happen within the current generation. And He seals the truth of these words in the strongest possible terms:

- **Matthew 24:35**—Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.

Application:

And those words should mean as much to us now as they did to the disciples then. They mean that we should rest on nothing above the Word of Christ, the Word of God.

We might make predictions, form hypotheses, posit theories, offer advice, but always remember that the words of man are fallible; the words of Christ are not. The words of man are fleeting and temporary, but not even heaven and earth are more permanent and surer than the words of Christ. You cannot always bank on the words of men, but you can always bank on the Word of God as “*a lamp to [your] feet and a light to [your] path*” (Ps.119:105). It is always true, always sufficient.

And inasmuch as those first disciples could bank on the truth of Jesus’ words about the impending judgment and glorious coming of Christ, so we can bank on His coming again, personally, visibly, powerfully, and victoriously.

And not only that, we can bank on absolutely everything He said and promised:

- We can be certain that Jesus is the resurrection and the life and that he who believe in Him will live even if he dies. (*John 11:25*)
- We can be certain that if we abide in Christ, and He in us, we will bear much fruit. (*John 15:5*)

- We can be certain that, as we make disciples of all nations, Jesus is with us always, even to the end of the age (*Matt.28:20*), because by His death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation to the right hand of the Father, He reigns. He has been vindicated. He has been given all authority in heaven on earth so that we can go out as His messengers to gather in His elect from the very ends of the earth.

Jesus Christ reigns now in heaven—and yes—He is coming again to earth. He is coming to raise the dead; He is coming to judge; He is coming to bring final salvation to His bride, the Church; He is coming to usher in the New Heavens and New Earth where righteousness dwells! Even so, come quickly Lord Jesus.

Amen.

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