

“Advance through Storm”
Matthew 24:1-14
October 6, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

Historian Kenneth Scott Latourette has written a multi-volume history of the Church titled *Advance through Storm*. The same title could aptly be at the head of Matthew 24, a chapter in which Jesus speaks of the future. The future he describes is one full of the storms of trials and significant suffering, yet one in which he promises that the mission of the Church will advance.

This long discourse comes in response to two questions his disciples asked Jesus about the future. **“When will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?”** (v. 3). The disciples ask a “when” question, and Jesus answers with a “what” statement. They want to know when he will return, and Jesus focuses instead on what the current age will be like prior to his return. In a word, it will be filled with really bad things. But he doesn’t let that dominate the discussion, because this passage is filled with words of hope. In other words, Jesus is realistic about the challenges of life in this fallen world, but at the same time optimistic about where things are going. He is more concerned with what kind of people we ought to be as we live in this dark world, than in the details of when he might return. He is interested in the “what,” not the “when.” He wants to make us good people, not good predictors.

Most people have a natural curiosity about the future, and we want to know some details. Many people are willing to take advantage of this natural curiosity and try to make some money off it. In a sermon he preached on this passage, David Platt tells about an experience he had while in seminary in New Orleans. He and some of his seminary friends visited Jackson Square in the French Quarter, and noticed an abundance of fortune-tellers and tarot card readers, and plenty of tourists eager to pay money to find out their futures from these street vendors. So he and his friends set up a booth themselves and offered to tell people their futures free of charge. They would say, “Your future doesn’t look very good, but it can change because of Jesus for any who will put their faith in him.” It didn’t take them long to realize that what they were offering wasn’t what people were looking for. They wanted to know such things as who they would marry, would they be financially successful, would they remain healthy, and how many children they would have. Sadly, there are Bible teachers who do something similar when they “find” in the Bible details that Jesus here refused to answer. There was a widespread teaching in the Church several decades ago that claimed to find evidence in the Bible that Jesus would return in 1988.

What the Bible does teach, and we can see it clearly in this passage, is that this age will be marked by trouble, but God's purposes will prevail. As Christians, we have every reason for both realism and optimism. We can be realistic in acknowledging the bad things that are inevitable in this fallen world, at the same time that we remain optimistic because of Jesus' promises to us. Let's look more carefully at that now.

I. **Bad Things Are Going to Happen, But... - v. 1-2**

The opening sentence of the chapter is more than a statement describing Jesus' movements. **"Jesus left the temple and was going away."** At the end of the previous chapter, Jesus had pronounced a word of judgment against Israel as a result of their rejection of him. **"See, your house is left to you desolate"** (23:38). Their "house" is the temple. Jesus is now departing the temple. Jesus is God, and what is a temple without its God? It is "Ichabod," for the glory has departed. Do you remember that story from the Old Testament? The Philistines captured the ark of the covenant, where God's presence dwelt in the midst of Israel. Ichabod was the name the wife of Phinehas gave to her son after the ark was captured and both her husband and father-in-law, Eli, had died. Now, with Jesus' departure from the temple, the glory of Israel has departed (1 Samuel 4:21).

As they were leaving the temple, Jesus' disciples were busy admiring its splendor. The temple was easily the most splendid structure in the entire nation, judged to be one of the wonders of the ancient world. It was built with large stones, some of which measured 40 feet long, 12 feet wide, and 12 feet deep. These stones could weigh more than 200,000 pounds each, and they were stacked on top of one another. What's more, gold was placed at various parts on the outside of the temple, designed to reflect the sun and cast a bright glow around the building. So it was no surprise that these country boys from Galilee, the disciples, were filled with awe as they considered this impressive structure. Perhaps, too, they were trying to cheer Jesus up, for he had just concluded his lament over Jerusalem.

Jesus teaches them something about what they should glory in when he tells them what is about to happen to this temple. **"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"** (v. 2). Jesus is our true glory. If he is not in the midst of the things we might build, then the same outcome happens to all things in this life. If you build a career without Jesus, it will crumble. If you build a marriage or a family and don't include Jesus, it will eventually come to naught. If you build a body, we must remember the words of Matthew Henry, "The most beautiful body will be shortly worms' meat."

But the opposite is also true. Where Jesus is present, there is glory. Even in the most mundane circumstances, or in the most difficult situation, the presence of Jesus fills it with glory. Even the most diseased body, when the Spirit of Jesus fills that body, is full of light and joy, and will one day be raised again to immortality. Bad things do and will happen, but where Jesus is present, glory is present.

II. Bad Things Are Going to Happen, But Don't Be Afraid – v. 3-8

The rest of the chapter is Jesus' answer to a question posed to him by the disciples. **“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?”** (v. 3). The disciples assumed that the destruction of the temple would happen at the same time as Jesus' return and the close of the age. We know, though, that this was not the case. The temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. when the Romans finally tired of the incessant rebellion of the Jews and attacked the city and destroyed its temple. This chapter is notoriously difficult to interpret, largely because it's not made clear which question Jesus is answering at any given time. Sometimes he is answering the question about the destruction of the temple, and at other times about the end of the age. My understanding is that in this first section, through verse 14, Jesus speaks primarily about the end of the age. Then beginning in verse 15, he will talk more specifically about the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, after which he returns to talk about the end of the age.

Jesus says that this age, prior to his return, will be marked by many bad things happening. It is important to understand that the qualities he mentions of this age are not just things that will happen in the last little while before Jesus returns. Rather, they are qualities that exist during this entire time between his comings. And they are all unwanted and dreadful events. First, many will be led astray by those falsely claiming to be God's Messiah. There has never been a shortage of people ready to capitalize on tragedy. Sometimes it's as simple as contractors jacking up their prices after a hurricane or tornado strikes. But in this case, it's people promising to have answers to the terrible things happening. That's how Hitler came into power. Germany was in a terrible way after World War I, and Hitler promised, in a Messianic manner, to be able to lead them back to German greatness, into a millennium of Aryan supremacy. Jesus tells us to expect such things to happen before he returns.

He goes on to speak of wars, famines and earthquakes. All three of these are major tragedies that threaten to bring down entire communities and even nations. Wars, famines and earthquakes bring disruptions unparalleled by normal tragedies because their scope is so widespread.

Jesus is a realist when it comes to his warnings of these significant disruptions to our lives. But he is no pessimist. Twice in verses 3-8 he gives us

reason for hope, no matter how bad things may become. He says in verse 6, **“See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place.”** This is Jesus telling us not to be alarmed. The word has the idea of being paralyzed with fear or panicked. Because Jesus says it, it has power. Jesus is the one who knows the future, who is even now predicting the future for his disciples. Further, he is the one with the plan, a plan indicated by the little word “must” in verse 6: **“for this must take place.”** This is the word of divine necessity. Such tragedies as wars, famines and earthquakes *must* happen because they are part of God’s plans. They are not part of his plan in the sense that he delights in them or approves of them as good, because all of these things are in fact bad things resulting from life in a sinful, broken world. Yet Jesus is sovereign over such things, able to use them for his good purposes. This is the Jesus who tells us “See to it that you don’t let yourselves be paralyzed with fear when these things happen.”

When I was in seminary, I had to drive my old car several times the one-thousand miles from Philadelphia to my home in Memphis. On one occasion, I barely made it home because of a mechanical problem with the car. So I took it to a mechanic who did the necessary repairs. I said to both my mother and my mechanic, “I hope my car makes it back to Philadelphia without any problems.” Both replied with similar words, saying, “It will be fine.” Guess whose words were more reassuring, those of my mother, who knew nothing about car mechanics, or those of the mechanic who diagnosed and repaired the problem? Similarly, it makes a big difference that Jesus is telling us not to be afraid.

Verse 8 also brings great hope to us. Speaking of these major tragedies, Jesus says, **“All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.”** This age is like a woman’s labor pains. I understand that those are some intense pains. I was with Wendy all three times she went into labor in delivering our children. My wife has a very high tolerance for pain, so we had committed to natural child birth, without any medication of any kind. With the birth of Matthew, our first child, she was in labor for 36 hours, and it was miserable. Wendy was begging for medicine, for a C-section, anything that would take away this awful pain. Her doctor kept refusing, telling Wendy she was doing great. And then it happened. Our son was born, and it was as if a switch was flipped and we went from agony to joy in a matter of minutes. All the pain was forgotten in the joy of welcoming this new life into our world. Jesus says that’s the way the kingdom of God will come. All the pain of labor will be forgotten in the joy of the everlasting peace and joy of life with our loving Savior.

III. Bad Things Are Going to Happen, But It Will End Well – v. 9-14

This last paragraph follows a similar path to the previous one, except that it focuses on the troubles that will come specifically to God’s people during this period between the two comings of Jesus. There will be persecution, **“and you**

will be hated by all nations for my name's sake" (v. 9). The result of this is that **"many will fall away."** There are many who are like the shallow soil in Jesus' parable of the soils. The seed is sown in the heart and begins to grow. But when trouble arises, the plants, not being deeply rooted enough, wither and die. False prophets will aid in this falling away. Also abetting it will be a spirit of lawlessness that will cause the love of many to grow cold. **"And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold."** Notice here that law and love go together. Let me take this opportunity for an important application to parenting. Love grows best in the hearts of children in an environment where there are boundaries, where there are laws informed by biblical values. Our modern view of parenting tells parents that their main job is to be supportive and let their children engage in a process of self-discovery. Children need boundaries and they need to be taught to love.

There is a second result of this persecution upon God's people. **"But the one who endures to the end will be saved"** (v. 13). And then we read the most unexpected verse. **"And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world."** After hearing Jesus speak of the severe persecution God's people can expect, we would expect a shrinking, struggling church. But it's the exact opposite. The good news of Jesus will be declared everywhere. It's like a football team that is losing badly through three quarters but ends up winning the game.

Let's apply this to our own day. The wave of secularization that is washing across our American culture today will have two effects. First, many will fall away. Second, the Church will be strengthened for a new wave of fruitful ministry, matured as they endure through trials of suffering. Sean Bock of Harvard University co-authored a study published in the academic journal *Sociological Science*, showing that strong religious faith grows stronger even as secularization erodes the moderate religious faith of others. "Rather than religion fading into irrelevance as the secularization thesis would suggest, intense religion...is persistent and in fact, only moderate religion is on the decline in the United States."

CONCLUSION:

Let me offer an application in closing. Jesus is driving this bus. Trust him. He is no sixteen-year-old driver, long on confidence and short on experience and skill. He is the Ancient of Days, the Prince of Peace, and the lover of our souls, living and dying for us out of his passionate love for his children. Trust him and don't give way to fear. Let your hearts be at rest. Jesus has this. Just stay close to him.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 24:1-14

1. This passage describes events of significant disruption and suffering, such things as war, famine and earthquake. Jesus says that such things will mark this age between his first and second coming. Describe a time of such significant disruption and suffering in your life or in the life of someone in your family.
2. Describe what it feels like when you are undergoing such a time of significant disruption and suffering. What are the temptations you battle? What have you found comforting in such times? What do you find comforting in this passage?
3. Put yourself in the place of the disciples here. They have just heard Jesus predict that the temple would be completely destroyed. The temple was the glory of Israel, and its demise would only happen at the hands of an invading force. What effect would it have on you if you were told by Jesus that America would soon cease to exist in its present form, being conquered by a foreign power?
4. The disciples ask Jesus a “when” question, and he answers with a “what,” describing what’s going to happen and the kind of people we need to be in light of that. Why do you think Jesus, and the Bible as a whole does this?
5. What does the metaphor of labor and delivery (verse 8) teach us?
6. Jesus said that “many will fall away” as a result of times of persecution in the Church. What kind of faith does it take to endure in a time of persecution? How can you grow in that kind of faith?
7. If we were to summarize this passage, we might do so like this. “Bad things are going to happen, but Jesus has this. Just trust him.” What are some of the practical benefits of believing that?
8. The final verse of our text includes a wonderful promise. “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.” Do any applications come to mind as you meditate on that verse?