

“The Big One”
Matthew 24:15-31
October 20, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

Much of California lies along a fault line in the crust of the earth called the San Andreas Fault. It is an area especially prone to earthquakes, which have occurred frequently in this region. California is ready for these smaller earthquakes. What they really fear, though, is the Big One that seismologists say is likely to happen at some point, an earthquake of magnitude 8 or greater on the Richter scaled. That is powerful enough to result in major disruption of life. The aftermath of such an earthquake is sobering, described as follows:

Even those who survive the immediate earthquake will find themselves in danger. The first thing they will need is water, but most water mains will probably have been broken. Utilities such as electricity, natural gas, gasoline, telephones, etc. will be interrupted for days, weeks or longer. Medical facilities will be jammed and unable to handle the casualties. Most people will not be able to get to the hospital because roads will be damaged. Banks will be closed, as will any organization that relies on the internet. Little if any food or medicine will reach the area, and radio/TV communications will be spotty at best.

What happens inside of you when you think of such cataclysmic events? One that many of you will remember was the 9-11 attacks. Do you recall what that day felt like? Most of us were glued to our televisions. If you had loved ones who were traveling out of town, you felt especially vulnerable. We all wondered if something more widespread was going on than the attacks on the buildings we could see. There was a palpable sense of fear and anxiety. On the positive side, church attendance swelled for several weeks after the attacks.

These widespread catastrophes reach deep inside of us and touch something that is hard-wired into all of us. We know deep down that there is a “Big One” coming, a day of such momentous consequence that life as we know it will never be the same. In times of prosperity, we manage to bury this sense deep down. But all it takes to bring it to the surface is one cataclysmic event that touches us. Today’s passage speaks about this as it moves easily from Jesus’ prediction about the fall of Jerusalem to talk about the great cataclysm of Jesus’ return. This is the Big One of all Big Ones.

I. A Big One – v. 15-22

The disciples had earlier asked Jesus when his predicted destruction of the temple would occur (24:3). They had actually asked him two questions, though

they considered it only one. **“When will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?”** They had assumed that the destruction of the temple would mark the return of Jesus and the close of the age, when in fact those are two different events. So in the verses we considered last week, Jesus gives an overview of the current age, the age between the two comings of Christ. He describes it as a time of tribulation, but one in which those who persevere in their faithfulness to Jesus will see the gospel spread throughout the whole world (v. 14).

Beginning in verse 15, Jesus begins answering the specific question about the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem. He tells his disciples that they will know it’s imminent when they **“see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place”** (v. 15). Daniel was referring to an event that happened in 168 BC when the Syrian ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes, came into the temple and erected a pagan altar. He went so far as to sacrifice pigs on the altar in open defiance of Jewish ceremonial laws. Jesus says that there will be another desecration of the temple by the Gentiles. Luke, in his Gospel, sees in this a reference to Jerusalem being surrounded by the Roman army (Luke 21:23).

We know from historians of the era what happened next. Josephus reports that this war resulted in 1,100,000 Jews being killed, large scale cannibalism, and multitudes of Jews carried away as prisoners of war, to become slaves throughout the Roman Empire. Additionally, this marked the end of Israel’s religious life as a nation. Many Jewish Christians were spared these trials, thanks to their heeding of Jesus’ warning. The Christian historian Eusebius wrote that they fled Jerusalem when they saw the Roman army approaching, going to a town called Pella.

One of the difficult features of this passage is that Jesus moves seamlessly from talking about the destruction of Jerusalem to talking about his return at the end of the age. You can see that right here. Verses 16-20 are clearly talking about Jerusalem’s destruction in 70 AD. But then there is a shift in verses 21-22, where Jesus speaks of unprecedented tribulation that, if not cut short, will result in the death of every living human being. This could not possibly be about the 70 AD event. There is a lesson for us in this. The lesson is that all cataclysmic events in this life should serve to warn us of the great cataclysm of Jesus’ return.

There are also lessons we can learn from the counsel Jesus gives to his disciples about that 70 AD catastrophe. For one thing, we learn that there are times when it is appropriate to flee, as Jesus urged his followers here. Second, we learn about the power of prayer during times of major catastrophes. Jesus said, **“Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath”** (v. 20). The amazing thing about this verse is that Jesus sees no conflict whatsoever between the sovereignty of God and the truth that prayer changes things. In a

way that I do not come close to understanding, prayer can even change the sovereign plan of God. God had planned the fall of Jerusalem, as Jesus predicted here. But then Jesus says that the prayers of his people can change the timing of this. Jesus was a strong believer in prayer, and we should be too.

II. False Answers to Big Ones – v. 23-26

False teachers have been a constant problem in the Church. This problem is even greater in times of distress, because people are asking questions and open to those who provide answers. But if the answers are not biblical, they may serve to provide some comfort to people, but it will be false comfort. So the next four verses contain Jesus' warnings about such teachers.

What stands out to me in these warnings of false teachers is the sensational nature of what they offer. They claim a specific appearance of Jesus in a particular place. **“Look, here is the Christ!”** or **“There he is!”** (v. 23). Some will even perform great miracles in association with their proclamations. The temptation to follow them is so great that only the protection Jesus gives to his elect will be adequate to avoid being led astray.

The truth is that Jesus has told us already where we can find him. As far as I can see from the Bible, there are five places we can find Jesus today. First, we find him in his word, the Scriptures. We meet Jesus in his word as we read it, meditate upon it, hear it preached and believe it. We meet him in prayer as well. Third, we meet him in the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism. Fourth, we meet him in the needy that we come alongside of, whether it is those materially or relationally poor. Finally, we meet him in the gathering together of God's people, for where two or three are gathered in his name, there he is in their midst (Matt. 18:20).

It is true, though, that Jesus will one day appear in a more significant way. But as we are going to see in our next point, there will be no mistaking that appearance. It won't be done secretly or subtly. Let's look at that now.

III. The Big One to End All Big Ones – v. 27-31

Jesus makes it clear that his second coming won't be like the first, which was as quiet as the snow which falls at night. Jesus uses two metaphors to speak of the clarity of his second coming. It will be as clear as the lightning which lights up the sky. It will be as unlikely to be missed as vultures miss the sight of carrion. His return won't be quiet and secret.

Then beginning in verse 29, Jesus describes five things that will happen when he returns. The first is a cosmic shaking. **“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” (v. 29). God had made a promise to Noah in which he said, **“While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease”** (Gen. 8:22). So this cosmic shaking, in which the sun is darkened and the stars fall from heaven, is the Bible’s way of saying that the earth as we know it will end. It is creation descending back into chaos, which is the way it began, according to Genesis 1:2. But just as God created the first earth out of this chaos, so he will do again, creating a new heaven and earth, one free from the curse put on it as a result of the sinful rebellion of the human race.

The second action of the return of Jesus is the appearance in heaven of **“the sign of the Son of Man”** (v. 30). This is likely not a separate sign, but a description of Jesus as the sign. In other words, the sense of this is that a sign will appear in heaven, and the sign is the Son of Man himself. A sign points to something else. There is a sign in front of our church that says, “Altadena Valley Presbyterian Church.” The sign is not the church, but points to the fact that the church meets here. What does the sign of Jesus’ appearing point to? It points to the fact that God is coming to put things right in his world. It is the owner returning to reward his servants and punish his enemies.

That leads to the next action we read of. **“And then all the tribes of the earth will mourn”** (v. 30). What is this mourning? It is the grief of regret, the realization that an opportunity has been lost forever, the opportunity to follow Jesus and trust him. It is the regret that those in Noah’s day must have felt after the door to the ark had been closed and the rains and floods began. Their only hope of escape was now closed to them, and they have only themselves to blame. These mourners Jesus speaks of had convinced themselves all along that Jesus was their greatest problem, and now they see that he was actually their only solution. It is the mourning of those who realize that they are about to be given what they have always wanted—life without God, free to do whatever they want without any requirement from God. But they now realize that such a life is the greatest punishment possible, and there will be great mourning. It is the grief of those who realize that all hope is lost.

The fourth action is the coming of Jesus on the clouds, with all power and glory. He will be accompanied by an army of angels, and his coming will be announced audibly with the sounding of a trumpet. This imagery of the trumpet comes from ancient practices of warfare. If a city was under siege by an invading army, their only hope was the arrival of an ally, another army to chase away the invading army. The arrival of this new army would be announced with the blast of the trumpet. Our world has been under siege by sin and by God’s enemies, but Jesus is coming to liberate us all.

Finally, we read that Jesus will send his angels to **“gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other”** (v. 31). I love that

word “gather.” It makes me think of the gathering of families at holidays, when people come, sometimes from great distances, to be together again. It is the bringing together of that which has been scattered. We will be gathered to Jesus and to one another. Both will bring great joy to our hearts, and it will be an unending joy. As a result of this gathering, we will be with the Lord forever and we will be with the Lord’s people forever. It will be a great reunion with loved ones who have died before you and who were believers in Christ. This gathering is the reversal of death, which is a separation. Never again will there be the sad goodbyes of separation and death. This is indeed the “Big One” to end all Big Ones. That is, Jesus’ return will put an end to all other cataclysms once and for all.

CONCLUSION:

Let me wrap this up by summarizing what we’ve seen in this passage about the return of Jesus. First, we can expect cataclysmic events to take place throughout this era between the two comings of Jesus, an era that has lasted two thousand years so far. These events are like the fall of Jerusalem. They should serve as a warning to us, being viewed as something of a preview of the really big cataclysmic event of the return of Christ and the end of this world. These small cataclysms will increase in intensity and frequency as things get close to the end of this age. For those in the Church, our greatest threat is not from the tragic events themselves, but from within, from false teachers who will claim to have explanations for these tribulations. But at just the right time, when the tension has reached its high point, Jesus will return. It will be a return evident to all, with two results. Those who have renounced Christ will mourn his arrival, seeing in it their own doom, while those who have trusted him will rejoice, being gathered to him and to his people forever.

The application is simple. Can your faith weather the Big One? Can it weather little “Big Ones,” things like earthquakes and great tragedies like the fall of Jerusalem? Can it weather the really “Big One” of Jesus’ return? There is only one kind of faith that can do so, and it’s faith in Jesus. Faith in faith will not stand on that day. Faith in some emotional experience will not stand in that day. Faith in some prayer you’ve prayed or some experience of walking an aisle will not stand. But faith in Jesus will stand, not because of the strength of the faith, but because of the strength and faithfulness of Jesus, the object of the faith. Are you one of the elect who will be gathered up to Jesus? Here’s how you can tell: when in crisis, do you trust yourself or do you trust Jesus? There are people in our world called doomsday preppers. They build bunkers in places like South Dakota, stocking them with food and weapons. Perhaps that can protect someone from smaller catastrophes, but not from the Day of the Lord. Better to trust the word of Jesus, who promises safety to all who seek refuge under his wings.