

THE TRIUMPH OF GOD COMES THROUGH AND AFTER LONG SUFFERING

Matthew 24: 1-28

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Describe a time when you have had to wait for a very significant good event in your life. What made the wait hard? What helped you to keep waiting?

The entire premise of Matthew 24 is that this world, as we know it, is going to come to an end when Jesus Christ appears for the second time. As Paul says in Titus 2, as Christians, we are waiting for this “Blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” Jesus, in this chapter, seeks to describe for us what sorts of things will be happening to us and around us as we wait. Notice in v. 13 he says, “he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” Then in v. 25 he says, “See, I have told you ahead of time.” Jesus tells us what we can expect as we wait for his return so that we will endure and be saved. We are going to discover four reasons why Jesus tells his people what to expect while they wait for him to come save them.

STUDY

1. Note that this chapter is an answer to a question that the 12 disciples ask Jesus in private (v.3). Before we think about what they ask and why they ask it we need to review what the disciples thought about Jesus and his mission. According to these verses, who did the disciples think Jesus was and what did they think about his mission?

- Matthew 14: 32-33 & 16: 13-16
- Matthew 16: 21-23
- Matthew 20: 17-28
- Acts 1: 6 (note: this is during the 40 days after the resurrection)

These twelve men are fully convinced that Jesus is the promised Jewish Messiah, the Son of God. They were absolutely convinced that Jesus, because he is the Messiah, was going to set up his kingdom on the earth in the very near future, with Jerusalem as the capital. He was going to destroy the Roman armies, throw out the corrupt religious leaders and take over the world. This would mean that they, the disciples would be his closest advisors

and receive the highest positions of honor and power. We see their expectation so clearly in a couple of passages in Matthew. In Matthew 16 right after Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus tells them that he is going to Jerusalem and that he will be betrayed and handed over to the religious leaders and they along with the Gentiles will torture him and kill him. Peter immediately takes Jesus aside and declares “Never, Lord, this will never happen to you.” Jesus said to him, “Get behind me Satan, you are not setting your mind on the things of God but on the things of men.” Then just a few days prior to Jesus’ speech in chapter 24 the two sons of Zebedee, John and James talk their mother into asking Jesus for the right to sit on the thrones closest to him. Again, these men are like a dog salivating over the smell of a steak bone that he knows is going to be given to him. They expect Jesus to take over and put them in positions of power at any minute. They cannot conceive of a Messiah who will suffer and die.

2. In light of their views of what Jesus is going to do, how do you think Jesus’ declaration that Jerusalem, the temple and thus the Jewish nation was going to be destroyed would affect them? Why did they point out the temple buildings as they were leaving?

What Jesus said in chapter 23 has caused them trouble. Jesus’ declaration that the house of Israel, as typified by the city of Jerusalem and the temple, is going to become desolate, does not compute with their view of how things are going to happen. How can the nations stream to Mt. Zion if it is destroyed? How can it be that they are going to destroy all the nations who oppose God’s people if they are destroyed as a nation? Therefore, with these amazing words of Jesus ringing in their ears, they point out this marvelous structure that is the place where God said he would dwell in the midst of his people, the place where he would put his name forever. They are inquiring of Jesus, how this can be? Does he really mean to say that the temple is going to be destroyed? That is exactly what Jesus means to say. He says, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is going to be so complete that not one stone will remain upon another.

3. Several hours pass between vv. 2 & 3. It is late afternoon and they are watching the sun set on the glistening city from the Mt. of Olives. The disciples come to Jesus in this private setting and ask him when these things (the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple and the nation Israel) are going to happen and the sign of Jesus’ coming to power and of the end of the world. They view the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world through Christ’s taking over as one event. When you put their question in the context

of what they believe about the coming of Jesus, what might their motives be? Why do they want to know when these things will happen?

They want to know how long they are going to have to wait. They are showing their impatience and their longing for the power to enforce their will upon the wicked world. They don't want to wait for heaven to come, they want to create heaven on earth, with themselves as Jesus' closest advisors. They know Jesus is going to take over and the world as it currently exists will end and they simply want to know how soon until they take over. Their question is motivated not simply by confusion about putting together seemingly contradictory pieces of evidence. Rather their question reflects an all too human demand that God rule the world on our timetable and as we desire.

4. Do you ever grow impatient with the delay in Jesus' coming again? What are the things that make you wish the world would end today and Jesus would take over?

Jesus tells his people what to expect while they wait for him to come save them because we do not like to wait.

5. What would you say is Jesus' basic answer to their question, "when will the world end" in vv. 4-12? Why do you think this?

The basic point Jesus makes is that there is going to be a significant period of time elapsing before he appears as the King of the Universe and sets up his kingdom on the earth. We see this in several ways. First, there will be enough time for people to impersonate Jesus and teach false things in order to mislead people. This could never happen if Jesus were reigning on the earth in power. Therefore, a significant amount of time must pass before he "appears". Second, rather than one nation ruled over by Jesus which is a stable kingdom of peace, Jesus says there is going to be wars and conflicts among all sorts of nations. Thus, there must be a significant period of time until his "appearing". Third, rather than a natural world in which the effects of the curse are eliminated, the natural world will be full of disaster. Fourth, in v. 8 Jesus says, "all these are the beginning of birth pains." This metaphor shows that his appearance to end the world is going to happen after a long process of unknown length that will be characterized by pain but will result in joy, just like labor and the birth of a baby. All of these events, false Christs, wars, national conflicts, famines, earthquakes, many falling away from the faith, etc. are all only the beginning of birth pains. In other

words these events tell us only that the process has begun, they do not tell us how close the birth actually is.

6. What is significant about Jesus' saying "these things must happen" (Literally, "it is necessary for these things to become")? Who says they are necessary?

God does. These things are all a part of God's grand design and purpose for the world. ?" Jesus says that just like labor pains are necessary for birth to take place so these troubles are part of God's necessary preparation for his appearing to end the world.

7. How should we respond to those who point to wars, disease, persecution, apostasy in the church, false teaching, etc. as proof that Jesus is about to return?

When people point to earthquakes and famines and wars and persecutions as "signs" that the coming of Jesus is upon us we should ignore them. That's the point Jesus is making. These are not the signs that Jesus is about to come back. They are merely the beginning of the birth pains. We should say that all these show us is that we are in the birthing process and that the return of Christ is nearer today that it was yesterday, however, none of these "signs" tell us how close we are to his appearing.

8. In v. 13, Jesus says, "he who stands firm to the end will be saved." Why does he say this? What are some ways that the "birth pains" of vv. 4-12 could put pressure on people to stop waiting?

The reason we need to know about these birth pains is because any of these things could cause us to lose heart and to quit waiting for the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. How many people say that the reason they have abandoned Christ and the church is because of wars, famines and earthquakes? The logic is simple. If there is an all powerful and all good being ruling the world he wouldn't permit such atrocities to occur. They occur, therefore he does not exist. Again, when you are persecuted for being a Christian it is not hard to understand how you might stop waiting for Jesus if by stopping you can avoid persecution. When a Christian friend abandons Christ and is not unhappy but actually seems to be getting on better in the world, it's not hard to see how that would put pressure on you to consider if it is worth it to keep waiting for Jesus. When Christian leaders are found out to be cheats and liars and adulterers and sexual perverts it isn't hard to see why many members of their churches

would stop hoping in the return of Jesus. When a charismatic speaker tells you that you can have heaven on earth right now, with no painful waiting, it's not hard to see why you might stop waiting for the true Christ and embrace a false Messiah. When you see the wickedness in the world and when you see wickedness in the church and nobody seems to be suffering for wickedness and you think about the claim of the Bible that a powerful and holy God is ruling over this world it is not hard to see how the love of most would grow cold. The reality of suffering, sin and hostility to the gospel all put pressure on professing Christians to stop waiting for Jesus and to either abandon the church or follow one of the multitude of false prophets who offer a more attractive salvation.

9. When you contrast v. 13 with v. 12 and then note that v. 14 immediately follows, what are some things we can conclude about those who endure?

During the labor pains that are necessary to bring forth the joy of his return, while the love of most grows cold, there are many who will endure, who will keep on waiting to the very end. These, and only these will be saved. Like a woman longing for the birth of her child, the true children of God long for the return of Jesus. Their love for Jesus and other Christians remains "hot". Then, those who are enduring will be preaching the good news about the kingdom of God to all the nations of the world, thus hastening the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ.

10. According to v. 14 what is the only sign that actually points to how close the return of Jesus might be?

Verse 14 is the only sign of Jesus' impending return mentioned in these verses. The gospel will be preached by those whose love is hot for Jesus as a testimony to the nations of the world and when all the nations have had this witness of Christ's lordship preached to them, then he will return. If you want to see a sign that Jesus' coming is closer now than it has ever been, then simply notice that the number of unreached people groups continues to shrink year after year. Let the missionary advance of the gospel fill you with hope.

11. Which of the "pains" mentioned in vv. 4-12 put the most pressure on you to stop waiting?

Jesus tells his people what to expect while they wait for him to come save them because there are many pressures to stop waiting.

12. In vv. 15-21 Jesus describes the destruction of Jerusalem that took place in A.D. 70 (Note: He spoke these words in about A.D. 30 and Matthew published this gospel in about A.D. 45.). What are some things that Jesus wants these disciples and the Christians who will be living in Jerusalem when it is destroyed to know and do?

What Jesus is doing is warning Christians living in Jerusalem and in the region of Judea to be prepared for the destruction of the temple and to flee when they see Roman soldiers once again laying siege to Jerusalem. Don't be misled into thinking that God is going to save his chosen city. Just as he destroyed the temple by the hand of the Babylonians in 530 B.C., by the Romans in 160 B.C., so he is going to destroy the city and temple again by the hand of the Romans. His advice when they see this event forming is to flee to the mountains. Their flight must be in haste. If they are going to survive they must not try to retrieve any of their possessions, they must simply flee as the danger will be so great. He displays his compassion in lamenting how terrible it will be for pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days. He tells them to ask God in the midst of judgment, not to forget mercy. They should ask that God not send the Romans in the winter or on the Sabbath, as both of these occasions would make their flight more difficult.

13. What does Jesus' command in v. 22 to pray that the destruction of Jerusalem take place during good weather and on Sunday through Friday, tell us about how to pray in the midst of catastrophe?

Jesus' command to pray is noteworthy because of what he tells them to ask God and for what he doesn't tell them to ask God. They are not to pray that Jerusalem be spared. They are not to ask that the Romans be defeated. God has determined to destroy Jerusalem and he does not want the disciples to pray that God not destroy Jerusalem. However, he does want them to ask God that he show mercy on his people who are fleeing from Jerusalem by sending the destruction during mild weather and during the week when there will be no restrictions on travel and work as there is on the Sabbath day. When we find ourselves in the midst of severe calamity and suffering we ought always to pray for God's mercy in the midst of it. There are mercies that God wants to give to his people while they live in the midst of the certain and ordained suffering that is necessary to experience during the time of birth pains. In the midst of the necessary calamities of this age we are to ask God to be merciful to his people.

14. What can we conclude when Christians go through catastrophe's like the destruction of Jerusalem?

Prior to Christ's return some of God's people are going to experience excruciating, catastrophic calamities. These are part of the necessary sufferings that will precede the coming of Jesus. We should do all we can to escape these calamities and pray all the while that God would limit the extent of these calamities for his people living in the midst of them. The fact that you are experiencing such calamities does not mean that God has abandoned you. Just like God's just destruction of Jerusalem was an expression of his righteous judgment, so will there be other expressions of his wrath during human history and we should endure them as well, knowing that it is not a sign of his displeasure with us but part of his displeasure with the world of sinful humanity.

Jesus tells his people what to expect while they wait for him to come save them because there are catastrophe's that threaten to destroy all hope.

15. "Those days" of v. 22 refers to the entire period of time between Christ's ascension (Acts 1:11) and his second coming. What does v. 22 tell us about that time period?

First, it is going to appear that the human race is going to be wiped off the face of the earth during the time before Christ's return. There have been many times during the course of human history when men have despaired of the survival of the human race. During the bubonic plague of the 1300's over half of Europe died in a very short period of time and many were sure the end of the world had come. In our day we are constantly bombarded with information about various threats of human extinction from disease to World Wars to environmental disaster to meteors from outer space. Jesus tells us this is to be expected. Second, Jesus says that none of these threats to human existence will be finally successful. Rather, God is going to prevent any of these catastrophe's from happening in their fullness. Let me just say that does not mean that we should not care about disease or environmental disasters. Rather, we should not fear for the human race. We are not going to be wiped from the earth by disease, war, famine, Martians or intelligent robots. Third, God is going to prevent any of these apparent threats from reaching their conclusion for the sake of the elect. It is out of his concern for his people that he prevents the suffering from overwhelming human existence.

16. According to vv. 23-26 what else will be happening during that time period (which we are now in)?

Jesus ends where he began his description of that period between his first and second appearances and in which we are currently living. He describes the intensity of deception that will be in the world. Again, notice that the deception will be so pervasive and so persuasive that it will even appear to threaten the extinction of the Christian church. However, it is not possible for God's chosen people to be deceived because they all recognize the voice of their shepherd and follow him (John 10:25-30). Every true Christian can spot an imposter and will never follow him or her, no matter what kinds of miracles they perform. Don't miss what Jesus says in v. 24. False prophets and false Messiahs perform miracles. You cannot tell whether a person is teaching the truth based upon his ability to perform signs and wonders. The only defense you have against deception is familiarity with the word of Christ, contained in this book.

17. According to vv. 26-28 what will characterize the return of Christ?

Jesus is not going to show up out in the desert, secretly, apart from human observation. He is not going to reveal himself to a small, elitist group of faithful people. He is not going to appear in some private vision. When Jesus Christ comes again it will be as obvious as a flash of lightning. It will be as instantaneous as a flash of lightning. It will be apparent to everyone on the face of planet earth at the same time, from the east to the west. That coming of Jesus will be a coming of judgment. It will be accompanied by wrath that creates human corpses upon which the vultures will feed. The coming of Jesus will be incredibly good news for the elect. It will be their salvation but it will be a day of doom and destruction for all those who have followed false teachers and false prophets and false Messiahs.

Jesus tells his people what to expect while they wait for him to come save them because things are going to get worse before they get better.