



"WHEN WILL THIS HAPPEN?"

Now I know what you're thinking. "Steve, what kind of an Advent series is *this*? Surely, we're meant to be building up to Christmas? Thinking about the birth of Jesus? Etc."

Now don't worry, we will. But Advent is also a looking forward (and not just to that extra-special present you're hoping to find under the tree this year). It's a reminder that Jesus is going to return, to finish the job He started.

So, for the first half of Advent, we're going to look at a chapter that talks about that event – and has featured a fair bit on YouTube and Facebook posts this year:

Matthew 24:1-35

Well, 2020 has been a strange, frightening, even heart-breaking year - and not just because of C-19. We've seen growing east-west tensions, huge swarms of locusts, devastating famines, and magnitude 7+ earthquakes. Oh, and a whole bunch of conspiracy theories, too.

Now one of those theories is the idea that all of this was predicted in the Bible – as some kind of a sign that the end is on its way. And to prove it, some people have cited this passage – Matthew 24 – along with Luke 21. However, there's a problem with that approach. Because the tendency is to think Jesus is answering this question:

"What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the world?"

What people fail to realise is: Jesus is actually answering 2 questions here. And yes, the second question is about the end of the world. But the first one is this:

“When will *this* happen?”

When will ‘what’ happen? The event Jesus talks about in the beginning of this chapter: the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. And Jesus answers *that* question in vs4-35. The second question He tackles in vs36 onwards.

So, 2 questions, 2 answers. And today we’re going to look at Jesus’ answer to the first question. Why? Because in the midst of it all, He gives 5 words of advice which would have been relevant to His disciples then – and are to us, now.

1) Be Fearless (vs4-8). Jesus kicks off with 7 signs: false prophets, revolutions, wars, famines, earthquakes, and, if you rope in Luke 21 as well, plagues and strange occurrences in the heavens. Now these verses get quoted a lot by people who want to prove that Jesus is about to return. And they make 2 mistakes: 1) these signs are referred to as ‘birth pains’ or contractions, so it’s the frequency and intensity we’re supposed to look out for; and 2) as Jesus says here, “The end is still to come.”

But the main point is: don’t be afraid. Just like the 1st century, we live in a time when a lot of people are scared. But the world has always been a scary place, on-and-off. So, keep some perspective! And don’t give in to the fear.

2) Be Fervent (vs9-14). Next Jesus warns them that trouble is coming – in the form of persecution for their faith in Him. A reality for His disciples then, and a reality for millions of His disciples around the world now. And in a way it’s not surprising, because Jesus came into the world to save us, yes, but also to start a revolution – to plant a kingdom that will eventually overturn the evils of this world. And that means we are at war – because Satan doesn’t like it. And like all wars, things can get nasty sometimes.

The good news is: Jesus has already won! That’s why the Gospel is called good news or *euangelion* – a victory message. Even so, it takes guts to stand up for your faith. We just need to remember: at the end of it all, we win!

3) Be Footloose (vs15-22). In AD66, almost 40 years after Jesus spoke these words, Roman troops bearing the imperial standard entered the temple to seize some cash for the Emperor Nero (what Daniel 11:31 calls ‘an abomination that brings desolation’). The Jews rebelled, and Roman legions responded by taking Israel apart, bit by bit, ‘til they got to Jerusalem. But the church in Judea saw what was coming, remembered Jesus’ warning, and relocated to Pella in Jordan. And God saved them.

What’s the point? This world is not our home - so travel light! Sometimes, it takes a crisis to remind us of what really matters. And all the other stuff? You can’t take it with you, guys (even that extra-special present).

4) Be Faithful (vs23-28). Historical fact: after Jesus spoke these words, Israel experienced one false messiah after another – all claiming to be the Jewish King of Kings. In fact, according to Josephus, when the Romans

finally breached the main wall of Jerusalem in AD70, one of the Zealots in the city shouted, "God will deliver us with a miracle! Follow me!" Suffice to say, it did not go well. And for 2000 years there have been false prophets making all kinds of claims – and 2020 has been no exception.

When things are getting hairy, people have a tendency to believe all kinds of stupid. We become more spiritually aware, yes, but that can work positively *and* negatively. So, remember who Jesus says He is. And stick with it!

5) Be Focused (vs29-31). OK, a lot of people look at these words and think, "This is the end of the world." And yes, it does sound like it – but it's not quite. Because the same language is used in Isaiah (ch2, 13, 34) to describe God's judgement of nations back in the 6th century BC. I.e. this is a description of the chaos of the past 2000 years, from the fall of Jerusalem to the second coming. But the main point is vs31: it's also the time for God's messengers to get out there and do what they're supposed to do.

And that's the take-home for us, too. Because we have a job to do: to gather those who are willing to say yes to Jesus. Our priority should not be, 'what's going to happen?' Our priority should be the mission of the Gospel. That's it.

Remember Who's Boss

In case you've still got doubts about how I've interpreted this so far, the clincher, I think, is vs34: "This generation will not pass away, until all these things have happened," as in the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. And just as Jesus promised, within 40 years everything written in these verses had come to pass.

Even the stones being reduced to 1 layer!

Now this would have seemed a horrifying prospect to His disciples. But that temple was going to have to make way for something even greater: a spiritual temple, with the potential to incorporate every man, woman and child on the planet.

But perhaps the greatest lesson here is that Jesus had a better grasp of what's going on in our world than we do. And He still does! So, as you head out into a world that can sometimes feel like it's going bananas, be fearless. Be fervent. Be footloose. Be faithful. Be focused.