

The End of the Age

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[0:00] O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

! We sung those words at the beginning of our service, and they remind us, indeed they remind us, kind of every year as we sing them, that God's people are people who live looking forward, who live in anticipation, looking forward to the appearing of the Son of God, that God's people are a people who live with a longing and perhaps even an aching for the coming of Emmanuel God with us.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, Advent meaning coming, and Advent is a season of anticipation, of looking forward and waiting, and celebrating the coming of the Lord Jesus into this world.

Well, this morning, as we restart our series in Matthew, we have before us an Advent passage. But not one anticipating the first coming of the Lord Jesus into the world, the coming of Jesus to a manger in a stable in Bethlehem with shepherds and donkeys and wise men and all the rest.

No, we have an Advent passage here anticipating what? Jesus' second coming. His return, the period of Advent that awaits the very end of the age.

[1:37] So, in verse 3, what is it here that causes the Lord Jesus to sit with his disciples and discuss the very ends of the age?

To get out, if we can put it this way, the eschatological diary, the end times diary, and sit down and show what's in the calendar, to show what's in the diary. But what causes that?

Well, as we said before we read, Jesus is in the last week of his life. He's days away from the crucifixion. So, what prompts this discussion? Well, in a word, judgment.

Judgment is coming. Chapter 24, verse 1. Jesus is leaving the temple and walking away from it, and the disciples point out the buildings to him.

Now, why are they doing that? Why are they saying to Jesus as he leaves, look at these buildings? Well, because they understand that Jesus isn't just kind of leaving for the day, like you leave kind of work or school or home or whatever, only to come back there tomorrow.

[2:44] No. They understand that how Matthew records it there, for us, Jesus left the temple and was going away, is something much more significant than that.

Something much greater than just the kind of average leaving for the day is happening here. Just put your, cast your eyes up to the few verses at the end of chapter 23, just before this.

Verse 37, verse 38. Jesus has lamented over Jerusalem and has said that this house is now left desolate. That is that the temple is no longer the center of religious life where people are going to come to meet God.

No, no, this is Jesus as he leaves at the start of chapter 24. He is shutting up shop. He is spiritually locking the doors and saying that the temple is now spiritually empty.

The building is gutted of all its spiritual furniture. Judgment is coming on the temple. And so the disciples are kind of pointing to the outward beauty of it, saying, but look how glorious it is on the outside.

[3:52] But Jesus knows on the inside, the worship of God is rotten and dead and it's over. And so Jesus tells his disciples there, chapter 24, verse 2, the temple is going to be destroyed.

Judgment is coming. And so now, verse 3, privately, do you notice that? No crowds, no Pharisees, no Sadducees. It is just the Lord Jesus and his disciples.

Privately, he sits with them on the Mount of Olives. And in response to the news of judgment on the temple and on Jerusalem, the disciples ask two questions. And do you notice? No pushback.

They just have two questions. Verse 3, as he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him saying, tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?

And it is these two questions that the Lord Jesus takes the rest of chapter 24 and 25 to answer. When will the temple be destroyed?

[4:55] And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? And so the disciples are evidently kind of right to see these things as linked.

Judgment on the temple and the coming of the Lord Jesus in glory, ushering in the end of the age. They see there's some kind of link. They know that they're kind of in the diary.

They're in the Google calendar if they had such a thing, right? Those things are there. But what Jesus now needs to proceed to tell them is exactly how they're related, where exactly they are, and how all those things work.

And so in the rest of these two chapters, you'll see this morning and the next few weeks, Jesus answers those questions. But he also tells them a third thing. The when, the what are the signs, but he also tells them a third thing.

And actually, I think what we'll see these next few Sunday mornings, the most important thing. How then shall we live? How then shall we live? And knowing these things are in the diary.

[5:57] How then shall we live as we wait? And so what we're going to do is just walk through the disciples' two questions here. And if you can be patient with me, we'll start by getting the calendar out, looking at how those things fit into the cosmic diary of creation.

And then we're going to kind of backload it with application. So we will get there. But we need to spend these first few moments just setting the scene. So let's look at the two of the disciples' questions and the Lord Jesus' answer.

So firstly, when will it arrive? When will it arrive? Now, what we need to see is that when the disciples ask these things, they are speaking about two events.

And in their minds, they belong together. The destruction of the temple and the coming of Jesus at the end of the age. Kind of one is going to happen in the morning and one will happen in the afternoon. But all within the kind of same day.

But what Jesus does now is show them that those two things, these two days or events, are actually on different days. They think they belong on one day in the diary.

[7:05] When Jerusalem falls, Jesus will return. But he stretches the horizon and says, no, it's two days. So when is the end of the age? Not when the temple is judged, but in a worldwide judgment on the last day.

When is the end of the age? Not when the temple is judged, but in a worldwide judgment on the last day. Just before I give you the verses for that, let me try and give you an illustration to help you with some of this.

Matthew 24 is some of the most challenging verses in Matthew's gospel. As we work out time frames and horizons, all that's going on here. There are libraries full of PhDs just on these few verses.

But try and think about what's going on this way. Some of you will have driven this. We drive this every day now. You're driving out of Aberdeen past Dice and you pass the airport and up over the hill, driving down towards Blackburn.

And what do you see? If it's a clear day in front of you, you see Benahee. You see Benahee. One hill. Okay, as you come on day 96 there, we see one hill in front of us as we drive out home.

[8:09] But with a few different peaks. But with a few different peaks. The highest, well actually I don't know if it's the highest. One of them is the Middertat. One is Oxencraig. Maybe that's the highest. But you see there's a few different peaks there.

One ridge. But on a few different peaks. Well, what Jesus is saying to his disciples here is he's saying that the summit peak, the very end of the age, the return of Christ, that's the highest one.

The coming of the Son of Man, verse 30. But on this kind of one ridge, these last days, these days of tribulation, there is another smaller peak in front of it.

And that is the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem. From where the disciples are standing, they think those things are just one peak together. And he says, no, actually it's two with this big kind of ridge between them both.

So where do we see these two days? When is the end of the age? Not when the temple is judged. But where do we see that? Verse 15. Jesus speaks about the coming of the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel coming to the holy place.

[9:17] Now these words would have put chills down the spines of Matthew's readers. Kind of like the mention of the name Voldemort in Harry Potter, right? It was kind of, ah, don't even say it kind of stuff, right?

Such evil. Such wickedness were those days. And again, it's a difficult passage. But God, through Daniel, as we heard earlier, as was read earlier, Daniel prophesied that one would come to desecrate the temple.

If it wasn't so serious, we could say, imagine someone setting up a tribute to Dundee United in Potodri, right? Almost unthinkable. But it is so serious. Imagine coming to church today with a statue of Buddha at the front of the church.

Or someone taking your Bible and burning it. Daniel is prophesying one who will come into the sanctuary, the holiest place of the temple, and set up worship to another god. And one fulfillment of that prophecy was seen in Antiochus IV Epiphanes, which is around 170 years before these events here as Jesus sits with his disciples.

About 170 years before that, Antiochus IV Epiphanes came to Jerusalem, brought war and destruction, and set up false worship, an abomination of desolation.

[10:38] Desecrated it. Set up idols there. But Jesus is saying in verse 15 that an event like that is coming again. There is another fulfillment of that prophecy.

That the temple will be desecrated. And these events have a very immediate setting. And we see it from the little brackets there in verse 15. What does Matthew say?

He says, let the reader understand. He's saying to the first readers of Matthew, this is really close. These events are in the future for you. And these will be dark days.

And we see some of the immediate application. Verse 16, the Jews are to flee to the mountains. They're not to turn back, verse 17. They're to pray that it wouldn't happen in the Sabbath or on winter. Verse 21, for there will be great tribulation as has not been seen from the beginning of the world till now and never will be.

Well, Matthew's first readers are getting this in kind of the mid-60s AD. And in AD 70, we have the fall of Jerusalem. The Romans come.

[11:42] And under Titus, they set up worship. Worship to Caesar and all other types of Roman gods in the temple. And the abomination of desolation arrives.

And Jews are killed and persecution arrives and God's people have to flee. And so that day, that is an event, a major day in the history of God's people and in the timeline of all that's going on here.

But it is not the last day. It is not the last day. And why is it important to understand that? Because verse 5 and verse 23, people will come in those days and say the Christ has come.

And people could be led astray. And so Jesus needs to say to them, no, the very end of the age isn't the fall of Jerusalem. And so when people come and say, oh, come to the wilderness, he's there.

Or come to the inner room, he's there. Jesus says, I won't be there. I won't be there. Why? Because it is not the very end of the age. No, the coming of the Son of Man won't be a small thing, a localized thing.

[12:48] It will be in a worldwide judgment on the last day. When is Jesus coming? Not in AD 70, the fall of Jerusalem. No, a worldwide judgment on the last day. It will be as visible as lightning from east to west, verse 28.

27, 28. Or as visible as vultures eating a carcass on a plane. Now, we don't have very many vultures here in Aberdeen, verse 28.

I haven't really seen them. But perhaps you have a type of vulture or seagulls here. If you're new to Aberdeen, you'll meet them very, very soon. But what is Jesus saying there in verse 28?

What's he saying? He's saying the equivalent of this. If you go down to the beach and you see lots of seagulls swarming, what do you see? You say, ah, someone's dropped their chips.

It's visible to everyone, right? You go to the beach. There's the seagulls. Someone's dropped their food. And the Lord Jesus is saying, so visible it will be when I return.

[13:48] When I return. Yes, from miles off, you can see the vultures swarming. You can see the seagulls. You can see lightning strikes here. But you can see it miles away. You will see it.

You will see it. In other words, Jesus is saying that is the end of the age. When all see it and all will know.

So to Jesus' answer, when is the end of the age? He does not give dates, does he? There are no dates here. And we'll see Joe's going to pick this up again next week.

He does not date it. But he says, here's what to look for. It is in the diary. It is in the diary. The end of the age. And you will know. You will see it.

No one can miss it. The first coming of the Lord Jesus. Tiny manger. Tiny town. Tiny group of people. But no, the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus' second coming.

[14:42] Not a manger, but verse 30. On the clouds. Not a small town, but verse 27. Seen from east to west. Not a small group of people. Verse 30. No, all the tribes of the earth.

Verse 31. There will be angels with trumpets. And he will come with power and glory. When Jesus comes, we will know. Now, why is this important?

Because it's not unheard of then. And it's not unheard of now. For people to stand up and say, I know exactly when Jesus is coming. I know the secret. I have a secret date.

Come into this desert over here. Or join this cult over there. That has happened. That still could happen. But Jesus drives home to them. No, this is not a private thing.

The return, the coming of the Lord Jesus, will be public. So that every tribe in all the world, no matter where you are, will see it. So when is the end of the age?

[15 : 43] Not the fall of Jerusalem. But when worldwide judgment when Jesus returns. Okay, bear with me. We're going to look at the signs. And then we will get to the application.

So that's when Jesus takes those diary dates. He says, not one day. But he splits it over two kind of eschatological days to two events. Right. Secondly, well, what are the signs the disciples ask?

What are the signs of the end of the age? Jesus says, well, not the labor pains of suffering in gospel advance. But the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds. What are the signs of the end of the age?

Not the labor pains of suffering in gospel advance. But the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds. Given there are two days in view, Jesus wants to be clear.

What signs are labor pains showing that the end of the world will come one day? That he is coming. But what is the sign that the very end of the age is here?

[16 : 39] What are the, if we can put it this way, what are the signs of Advent? And what is the sign that it is Christmas Day? We're in the season of Advent right now, aren't we? Looking forward to Christmas.

And the cultural signs of Advent are all around us. But they are different to what happens on Christmas Day. Think about it. Signs of Advent. Chocolate calendars are opened. Or maybe it's not chocolate in your house.

Maybe it's something just much better. I don't know. But calendars are opened. Trees go up. Christmas carols start to be sung on Classic FM. It's the only time of the year I'm allowed to listen to it in the car.

The carols start to be sung. Amazon, just a little bit busier at the front door as they drop off presents. Christmas trees with presents underneath. All the rest. But the signs of Christmas Day.

Well, the calendars stop. It's Christmas carols back to back, wall to wall on Classic FM. Christmas dinner is served. Christmas presents are open. The king's speech to the nation, right?

[17 : 39] The days, the time of waiting, and the day, the signs, the events are close, but they are different. And Jesus needs his disciples to know that they are in Advent and what the end will look like.

So first, what are the signs of Advent? What are the signs of Advent that we are in the last days awaiting Jesus' return? Answer? Suffering and gospel advance.

Just scan down the beginning of the passage there. What does the Lord Jesus say as they ask these questions? Verse 6. Signs of Advent. Verse 6. Wars and rumors of wars. Verse 7.

Nation coming to war against nation. Kingdom coming against kingdom. Famine. Earthquakes. Verse 9. Persecution of God's people because they're God's people.

They will deliver you up to tribulation, put you to death. You'll be hated. Verse 10. There'll be betrayal. People will fall away. Verse 11.

[18 : 39] False prophets. Verse 12. Lawlessness. Know the signs of Advent, of the second coming of the Lord Jesus. It's not an easy picture, is it?

These words here, as I said earlier, are known as the Olivet Discourse. Because Jesus and his disciples are sitting on the Mount of Olives. And they are difficult words to interpret and work with.

As I said, whole libraries, PhDs have been written on these words. And everyone says, oh, these are all such difficult words. But when they say it, they really mean about the timing and who's being spoken to, which kind of camera angle, which day is in view.

But actually, I think often the commentators miss the real difficulty of these words. And the real difficulty of these words is when Jesus speaks of the kind of signs of the second coming. He's speaking of suffering.

These are difficult words because the lived experience of God's people as they await the end of the age is going to be so hard. Suffering in the world. Famine. Earthquakes.

[19:42] Wars. Suffering in the church. Persecution. Death. Hated by the nations. All for his name's sake. It's hard. And so how does Jesus kind of sum up these days of second advent as we await the end of the age?

How does he sum it up? Verse 8. Birth pains. Birth pains. Labour pains. Contractions. That's what Jesus says it is.

All contractions. Labour pains. As we wait on his coming back. Suffering. Yes. But suffering in anticipation of something glorious to come.

But these days of advent waiting on the second coming of the Lord Jesus. With AD 70 behind us. But as we stay on this ridge. This travail. This trail waiting on him coming back.

It's not all pain is it? Do you see alongside these labour pains the gospel is advancing. Verse 14. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations.

[21:07] To all nations. Yes, labour pains. Suffering trials. But gloriously, the good news of the gospel will go forth.

So in the immediate context here. In the immediate context. To the disciples. The first readers of Matthew. How are they to understand the fall of the temple and the destruction of Jerusalem?

They're not to understand it as the end of the age. The second coming of Christ. No. But as a labour pain. AD 70 and the terrible suffering that happened there. Was a huge contraction.

Perhaps worse than any other. But it was an indication that Jesus, although not yet come, would one day come. A sign of advent. But not arrival.

And so friends, we still live in those days. Days of advent. Jesus has not returned. But he is one day coming. And so how then do we live?

[22:10] How then do we live? How shall we live as we await the sign of the coming of the end of the age? You see, there are labour pains. But verse 30. There is a sign that the Lord Jesus is here.

Verse 30. He then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man. That is the Son of Man himself. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn. And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds.

That is the final sign. Do you want to know the end of the world has come? You will see the sign in heaven as Jesus arrives. You will see him coming from the sky.

They say 650 million people watched the Apollo moon landing. That was something like 93% of Americans saw the Apollo moon landing. Well, the sign of the return of the Lord Jesus is a 100% viewing event.

And not just Americans. All nations. That is the sign that he has come. He will come on the clouds. So how then shall we live, friends? As we await for the Lord Jesus to return.

[23:12] How then shall we live? And I think that is what Jesus is most concerned about. We see it here and we're going to see it again. That the season of Advent will change how we live. Knowing Christmas Day is coming is going to change how we live.

We have to buy presents. Order a turkey. Whatever it is. Jesus coming again should change how we live. So how do we live? Answer. Not alarmed or led astray.

But composed and sure of victory. Not alarmed and led astray. But composed and sure of victory. Jesus tells us in verse 6. Do not be alarmed when false Christs come.

When wars are started. And persecution and hatred comes. Now it's no wonder that you would be alarmed. Alarmed for these first readers when Jerusalem starts to be under siege.

Alarmed for all of God's people all through the ages. All through church history. As again and again persecution comes. From Nero to Marcus Aurelius. To Diocletian. To the Viking invasions.

[24:14] All the way through to the French Revolution. To the Soviet Union. To Korea. North Korea today. To parts of the Middle East. And Africa. When trials and tribulations and persecution comes.

We want to be alarmed. It's hard. But Jesus says don't be alarmed. These things must happen. In other words, God's people as we await on Christ's return.

Are not to be alarmists. We're not climate alarmists. We're not war alarmists. Famine alarmists. Now we hear about these things with tears and sorrow and heartbreak.

But we are not alarmed. How then shall we live? Verse 13. We are to endure. To keep following Jesus. I heard one commentator put it this way.

All these things kind of add up to what? To composure. Composure. To sober mindedness. Think about Jesus' description of the days that we're in as birth pains.

[25:14] When labor starts and a baby starts to come into the world, what is needed? Calm heads. Sober mindedness.

Making sure mum and baby get safely to the hospital or whatever it is that needs to happen. Even when things start to look like they're going wrong, no matter what's going on.

And you see all the pain and discomfort there. What's needed? Calmness. Calmness. Composure. It's going to be okay in the end.

We need to get to wherever we need to go. We need to get to the hospital. We keep going. And now we need to press home these things, don't we?

We need to press home these days and how hard it is to endure them, to not be alarmed, to be composed. You see, in these days of tribulation, these days of Advent, you see verse 24, Jesus says, false Christs are going to come.

[26:09] Anti-Christ, doing signs and wonders. Now, those sorts of things happened around the days of AD 70, but we too are in a season of birth pains and contractions, and those things will continue to happen until Christ's return.

So, dear friends, in our day too, false teachers, anti-Christ, can rise up. And what's so deceiving is what? They look like Christ. They sound like Christ. They're doing signs and wonders.

And they want to lead people astray. And Jesus says, no, endure. Don't listen to them. Keep going. But when the pressure cooker is up on the outside, persecution, hatred, and you're hearing people say anti-Christ words, words that are like Jesus but not.

Again, think of a puzzle in the last battle, the skin of a lion pretending to be Aslan but not Aslan. And it's so important but oh so hard to keep going.

So, dear friends, if you're here today feeling tempted to pack it all in, remember the day of the diary is set. Jesus is coming. He's coming. Back in judgment. These are days of Advent.

[27:14] You will meet him. So, do not turn away from him and do not turn away from his words. Heaven and earth will pass away, but his words will not pass away.

Don't turn to the left. Don't turn to the right. In days of false teaching, false prophets, false messiahs, keep your hope in the Son of Man who is coming on the clouds.

Endure. Keep going. Do not turn from Christ's words. But what else can help us to keep going in these days? Well, surely it's this.

It's knowing that we are on the side of victory. Verse 31. The elect will be gathered. God's people will be saved. As we sung, this is the God, the Son of Man, the King of Sam 2, who will defeat all who oppose him and his people.

And God will graciously take all his people to them. So, dear friends, let me close then with this question. We've thought about when the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the ages.

[28:19] What are the signs of the end of the age? How then do we live during? But let me close with this question. Dear friends, do you know what season it is this morning? Do you know what season it is?

Jesus says in verse 32, he gives us the lesson of the fig tree. It is a lesson of seasons, isn't it? When the leaves arrive, says Jesus, summer is near.

So do you know what season it is? Dear friends, it is the season of Advent. These are days of second Advent. Second Advent, which started when Christ ascended into heaven 2,000 years ago and will last until he returns.

We are in days of labor pains, awaiting Jesus' return. He is coming. And so are you ready for that? In spring, you get ready for summer.

In Advent, you get ready for Christmas. In labor pains, you get ready for delivery. In these last days, we need to be ready for Jesus' coming. So are you ready? Dear friend, if you're here today and you're not a Christian, you're not ready.

[29:26] You are not ready for Jesus' return. So come to Jesus today. Turn to him. Trust in him. And you will be ready.

The date is fixed. You will meet Jesus. It's in your diary. It's in mine. So come to him. Kiss the sun. And know that you will be safe with him forever.

If you do know Jesus, then in these days of Advent, dear friends, keep going. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Love his word. It endures.

And know that one day the longing of God's people will be over. And we will sing the words, rejoice, rejoice. Emmanuel has come to Israel. We will sing that, that God has come to his people with him face to face forever.

Let's pray. Amen. Lord Jesus, we thank you so much that you came into this world.

[30:28] You came as a baby in a manger. You came to live and to die, to bear the cost of our sin. We thank you that you rose again from the dead.

That you ascended into heaven. That you are seated at the right hand of the Father. And there you are, ruling and reigning over all. One day to return.

Lord Jesus, by your grace and the help of your spirit, help us to wait patiently.

To endure. To endure. To never turn from your word. To have no years that are swayed by false messiahs. But to fix our eyes on Jesus.

Knowing you are coming. That you, the Son of Man, will come on the clouds. And in that day, we'll make all things new. So ready us for that day.

[31 : 28] Keep us faithful. But thank you that you are faithful to us. You will take your people to be with you forever. So Lord Jesus, we worship you this morning. And we ask that you would be near to us.

In your name we say. Amen. Amen.