

Sunday, September 13, 2020

Bible Study Matthew 24

Listen to Pastor Kelly's sermon for September 13. Then read Matthew 24.

“And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings” (*Luke 21:5*). “One of Jesus’ disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings’” (*Mark 13:1*)!

Modern architecture rarely leaves us awestruck. But if you have ever gazed in wonder at the beauty and design of an ornately decorated, massively erected structure, then you come close to the adoration to which Jesus’ disciples were compelled as they gaped at the temple complex.

The temple built by Solomon had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The destruction included the raising of Jerusalem and many other outlying towns as the Babylonians effectively put an end to the nation of Israel.

In 536 BC Cyrus the Great allowed those, who so wished, to return to Jerusalem. As the Biblical retelling suggests, the response and return were slow, but those who did return began rebuilding the temple almost immediately. For in their minds, without a temple, there really is no Israel. Once the work began, it took a little more than 20 years to complete and was not as grand as Solomon’s Temple. Nevertheless, Israel’s center for worship and symbol of national identity was now complete.

As the centuries passed, this second temple served its purpose. Then, around 20 BC, Herod the Great began work to expand the Temple grounds and enhance the Temple proper. This work which he began would not be complete until around 60 AD. Though the temple’s outlying complexes would not have been completed by the time of Jesus and the apostles, it still would have been a breathtaking sight.

The temple during the time of Jesus was 1600 feet long, 900 feet wide, and 9 stories tall. Its outer walls (though not entirely completed) were 16 feet thick. The buildings, walls, and foundations had been built using massive stones weighing dozens, if not hundreds of tons each. The largest of these stones was around 44.5 feet by 11 feet by 16.5 feet, and is estimated to have weighed between 400-600 tons.

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There were 162 corinthian columns throughout the temple's porticos and cloisters. Each column was 27 feet tall and 6 feet thick, and had ornate capitals adorned with brass lilies. The Holy Place, which also contained the Holy of Holies, stood high above it all. Inside, the ceiling rose to 60 feet. The curtain separating the Court of Israel from the Holy Place, and the curtain separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, were each a full hand-breadth thick.

With its white marble and granite stones and gilded ornaments and decorations, it gleamed in the sunlight for miles. Pilgrims and travelers would see and marvel at the sight of this place long before they even approached the outskirts of the city.

And as his disciples also marvel and comment about its grandeur and its seeming permanence, "Jesus answered them, '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'" (*Matthew 24:2*).

Given the history of their people, and the place the temple occupied in informing their very identity as 'God's people', Jesus' disciples could not conceive of a world which did not contain the temple. "If this is true. If the temple is to one day be destroyed. It must be the end of the world. The end of all things. The coming again of the 'Son of Man' in power and vengeance. The destruction of the temple can only mean the time of the final judgment and the end of the age."

And so in private, while overlooking the temple complex from the Mount of Olives, Jesus' disciples plead, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age" (*Matthew 24:3*)? There are actually two questions here that require two answers.

The first, the destruction of the temple. The second, the time of Jesus' return. In answer to their troubled and inquisitive minds, Jesus first issues a warning. "See that no one leads you astray" (v. 4). For yes, this magnificent structure will be destroyed and it will be a terrible 'day' of unimaginable suffering (vv. 15-22, 32-35), but this is not the end.

In fact, you will continue to experience wars and hear of wars (vv. 6-7). You will experience and hear of natural disasters that bring suffering and destruction (v. 7). And you, yourselves will experience persecution on account of me (vv. 9-10, 12-14). Yet this, still, is not the end.

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So, “see that no one leads you astray” (v. 4). Many false prophets and teachers will arise claiming to know me or even be me. Do not believe them. For when the end comes — when I return — every one will see it (vv. 5, 11, 23-31). Do not worry about missing it. That is impossible to do. No one will miss it. You, however, must be ready, for no one knows when it will happen. So be ready, even now (vv. 36-50).

Can you hear that cautioning refrain taking us to task even today? “See that no one leads you astray (v. 4)...be ready “(v. 44). “See that no one leads you astray, just be ready!” And who are those that are ready? Those who are busy doing the work that Jesus gave us to do (v. 45-50).

There comes a time when every civilization, whether great or small, comes to an end. Yet that end, does not signal THE end. That end has come to many a great kingdom: Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman... It would be the height of arrogance and chronological snobbery to think that America will not also, at some point, come to an end. The “myth of progress” has “led many astray.”

Dear Christian, some day “not one stone will be left upon another that will not be thrown down” will also happen here. Yet, it matters not. It matters not if what we are currently experiencing happens to be an end, or if that end is still many years away. Jesus told us that THE end would be obvious to everyone, and that when lesser ‘ends’ come about, we are “not to be led astray” but are to “be ready” by continuing to do the work He gave us to do.

So, as we continue to live in uncertain times, may you not be led astray by the ramblings and speculations of prognosticators who make promises that even our Lord never made. May you stay ready for His return by continuing to do the work he gave us to do. And may the thought of THE END, bring you joy, for it will mean that our Lord has returned to bring us home!

Questions for Further Reflection

Following the Parable of the Faithful Servant (*Matthew 24:45-51*), is the Parable of the Ten Virgins (*Matthew 25:1-13*) and the Parable of the Talents (*Matthew 25:14-30*). How do these other two parables re-enforce Jesus’ admonition to “be ready” by doing the work he gave us to do? What will you do to “keep oil in your lamps” and use your existing “talents” to make even more talents?