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**Sermon Title:** What Does It Mean?

**Sermon Text:** Matthew 24:1-24:35

**Matt. 24:1** ¶ Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple.

**Matt. 24:2** But he 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.”

**Matt. 24:3** ¶ As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

**Matt. 24:4** And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray.

**Matt. 24:5** For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.

**Matt. 24:6** And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.

**Matt. 24:7** For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.

**Matt. 24:8** All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

**Matt. 24:9** ¶ “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake.

**Matt. 24:10** And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.

**Matt. 24:11** And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.

**Matt. 24:12** And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.

**Matt. 24:13** But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

**Matt. 24:14** And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

**Matt. 24:15** ¶ “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand),

**Matt. 24:16** then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

**Matt. 24:17** Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house,

**Matt. 24:18** and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.

**Matt. 24:19** And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days!

**Matt. 24:20** Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath.

**Matt. 24:21** For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.

**Matt. 24:22** And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.

**Matt. 24:23** Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it.

**Matt. 24:24** For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

**Matt. 24:25** See, I have told you beforehand.

**Matt. 24:26** So, if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it.

**Matt. 24:27** For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

**Matt. 24:28** Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

**Matt. 24:29** ¶ “Immediately after the tribulation of those days 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.

**Matt. 24:30** Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

**Matt. 24:31** And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

**Matt. 24:32** ¶ “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near.

**Matt. 24:33** So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

**Matt. 24:34** Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

**Matt. 24:35** Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

**Main Point:** The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple were done as a judgment by God, drawing to an end the Jewish age.

### **Outline:**

1. His Coming in Judgment (24:3, 27, 30-31)
2. The End of the Age (24:3)

### **Introduction**

I don't know how much you love studying history. For me, I truly love it. I consider myself an amateur, but I still do love it. But if you read enough history, after a while you realize that a good historian can tell you what happened, but they should be able to also tell you *why* it happened and what can be learned from what happened.

But historians also have limitations. They can give you *one* sense in which things happened, and why they happened and what can be learned. But they cannot give you the God's-eye view. They cannot give you ultimate answers as to why a thing happened. They can tell you the factors that led to something happening, but they can't tell you God's purpose in it.

They can tell you, for example, that Rome came against Jerusalem in 70 AD, and they can tell you that this happened because terrorists took over and tried to make a holy war against Rome. But they couldn't explain the **big** "why" of it all.

Psalm 111:2 says, "Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them." So we should care what God has done, and even why He has done it, if he gives us those answers.

Well two weeks ago, I introduced the same passage that we just read. And at that time, I tried to convince you that between the time when Jesus predicted these events and today, what Jesus predicted in this passage has actually happened in real time and space around the year 70 AD. And yet it's one thing to say, "These things happened." It's another thing to ask, "what does it mean?"

And so unlike the last time we looked at this passage, which was largely historical, I want to ask a bigger question from the text: what does Jesus say that it *means* that the temple was destroyed and that Jerusalem was flattened?

And the two ideas I'd like us to focus on that Jesus says best explain these predictions are first, he sees the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple as Jesus' own coming in judgment. And second, he sees the fall of Jerusalem as the end of the age. So, the end of the age, and the coming in judgment. This is Jesus' interpretation of what this passage is really about. Let's look more closely.

## 1. His Coming in Judgment (24:3, 27, 30-31)

First, Jesus sees the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple as his own coming in judgment.

There are two ideas that go together here which we'll need to dwell on: there is this idea that what happens here is judgment. And there's also this idea tied up with it that in the destruction of Jerusalem it is Jesus who is coming to bring this temporal judgment against them. You may have noticed that before. It might even be part of why you might not have been convinced by me two weeks ago. Because you think, "This passage says Jesus is coming." And that seems like a problem on the face of it. But it isn't if you see what Jesus means by it.

Let's focus on the judgment aspect first.

Notice how Jesus speaks of the events in the language of astronomic upheaval. How do we think about this language like we see in verse 29?

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days 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."

Now I think there are certainly some who say, "See, in 70 AD the sun wasn't darkened, the moon kept shining, and the stars were (and are) still in the sky. Therefore we can be sure that this hasn't taken place and is still future for us."

Yet look at this language again. This is language that the Bible uses in the Old Testament, and those passages that originally used this language were not about the end of the world or the final judgment. Instead, they are about temporal judgments against worldly kingdoms.

I'm going to give you examples, but I'd like to point to the Puritan writer John Owen. John Owen, in commenting on this passage makes the point that what Jesus predicts here is plainly and evidently metaphorical language.

Owen says that in Scripture when God makes judgment, the heaven, sun, moon, stars and heavenly bodies represent governments, governors, dominions, and political states.

And then he gives a list of 14 Scriptural examples from Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Psalms, Joel, and other passages where this language is used, and

it's always about worldly governments. (Is. 14:12-15; Jer. 15:9; 51:25; Is. 13:13; Psa. 68:6; Joel 2:10; Rev. 8:12; Matt. 24:29; Luke 21:25; Is. 60:20; Obad. 1:4; Rev. 8:13; 11:12; 20:11).

I'm going to give you one example of this language. I think it's very potent. When God is speaking against the nation of Babylon which was eventually destroyed by God, look at the language from Isaiah 13:9-10. Remember: this is not a passage about the end of the world. It's about the end of Babylon.

“Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.”

The governors and rulers of Babylon are those stars in the heavens that stop shining. The sun is the glory of this earthly kingdom which can no longer be seen. This is not a passage where God is predicting that heavenly constellations will literally cease to exist.

And God did do this. This prophecy was fulfilled. And the stars didn't literally stop shining, and the sun didn't literally darken, and the moon didn't stop reflecting light. And yet these things took place when Babylon was destroyed. Because this language of stars and heavenly bodies is a reference to these high and exalted entities that are thrown down. This is the biblical language of judgment of nations. It is not a literal description of physical astronomical events.

How does Jesus speak of this judgment here? Well he speaks of it in terms of his own coming. I'm going to read verses 30-31:

“Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” (Matthew 24:30-31)

So this comes after the astronomic language of upheaval here. And this language of Jesus coming might be the hardest part for some to accept.

One thing that I think we all must affirm is that *the* second coming of Christ has yet to take place. As our church creeds affirm, “He is returning to judge the living and the dead.” His return in judgment of the whole earth still has not taken place, but as we’ll see next week, his return will be sudden and unexpected.

But he also still talks about the *destruction* here as a type of coming, as well. As a temporal judgment.

Jesus is not saying here that this is *the* second coming. We’ll read about that next week, actually. Rather, this is a coming in temporal judgment against a nation.

How is he coming? Well he’s “coming on the clouds of heaven.” This isn’t language that God uses in Scripture to describe the last judgment. Instead it’s language of temporal judgment against nations. We see this language of coming on the clouds in the Old Testament. Daniel 7:13, especially speaks of “one like the Son of man” coming in the clouds of heaven.” Daniel 7 in particular is a passage of judgment, and it’s also certainly not a passage about the second coming of Christ and the final judgment. It’s the language of *a* judgment against a particular people, but not a passage about *the* final judgment.

But this is the language Jesus chooses in order to describe what’s going to happen to Jerusalem. Not final judgment language but temporal judgment language.

Jesus wants the disciples to see the theological reasons for it all. It isn’t just an *army* coming against Jerusalem, it’s *Jesus* coming against Jerusalem.

The Roman army is simply his agent. They are pawns in the hands of Jesus. They are the instrument in Jesus’ hands just like the Babylonians were used by the hand of God to judge the Assyrians.

Here is the point: *The fall of Jerusalem is a theological event*, not just something happenstance. And Jesus - by making this claim *before* he brings Rome against Jerusalem – is interpreting the event so there is no misunderstanding.

Just like Babylon was judged by God and destroyed, so is Jerusalem being destroyed.

Just like Ninevah was destroyed by God, so is Jerusalem being destroyed.

And it breaks Jesus' heart. He does not rejoice to do this. We saw his tears already... his yearning for this city. And yet because of their sin and rebellion Jesus says he is treating Jerusalem like its own worst enemies. He's dropping Israel down to the same level as the great villains of their own history: Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and the people of Nineveh.

They will not receive preferential treatment. They thought their nation was invincible, and yet like so many nations who were raised up by God and later thrown down, the same is now going to happen to Jerusalem. And Jesus is adamant that this is no accident. God is at work. In fact, he takes personal credit: It is Jesus who is doing this. Why? Obviously we know it's judgment. But judgment for what?

I think John 1:11 explains it well: "He came to his own and His own people did not receive him."

Remember Matthew 23, where Jesus pronounced a guilty verdict over Jerusalem, and pronounced woes over the leaders and people of Jerusalem who rejected the prophets. "How often I would have gathered your children together...and you were not willing!" (23:29).

This people that have rejected Jesus will face his judgment in this life, not merely in the next. Jesus in this passage is predicting that he will come in judgment against Jerusalem.

## **2. The End of the Age (24:3)**

Second, Jesus interprets the destruction of Jerusalem as the end of the age.

If the last point was the "why?" question, this is the "so what?" question. So Jesus comes in judgment against Jerusalem. To what end? What does it matter? Well the answer Jesus and the disciples give us here is that these events conclude (to use the language of the text) "the end of the age."

Remember: all of this was kicked off at the end of Matthew 23 when Jesus mourned the downfall of Jerusalem, and he mourned the unwillingness of his people to come to him. Then in verse 1 they are looking around at the temple,



admiring it, and Jesus says very specifically, “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.”

And then they go to the Mount of Olives where the disciples ask Jesus this question: “when will these things be, and *what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*”

Notice that the question he was being asked was in two parts: “when will these things be, **and** what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

Now, we already looked at the first part of this question they asked (when will these things be?). We briefly saw last time that Jesus answered by giving *lots* of signs so they could know that the temple and Jerusalem would be destroyed. And he even told them when they would know it is time to literally run for the hills.

But there’s a second part to their question, isn’t there? The disciples also understand that the destruction of the temple will mark “the end of the age.”

Notice specifically that the disciples, of course, don’t ask Jesus about the end of the world. The word for “world” in scripture is *kosmos*. They ask him about the end of the “age,” which is the Greek word *aeon*. That’s the word for what is sometimes temporary, and it’s the word for a period of time. The disciples *assume* they are living in a temporary age and want to know when it will end, and how it will end.

In Scripture, “age” is a word that gets used in numerous ways. Generally, when the authors of the New Testament speak of “this age” they’re speaking of the old fallen creation that is filled with sin and struggle.

When it speaks of the “age to come,” it’s talking about the age of the new heavens and the new earth where sin and death are no more.

And the Bible tells us is that we live in a time when both of those ages overlap.

So we live in a fallen world. But we also live in a world that is being redeemed. An age in which redemption is now, and where we can even now be rescued from sin and its corruption.

But both of those ages are overlapping right now. We're in "this age" still. We still suffer. We still hurt. Death still has its way and sin still exists.

But with the death and resurrection of Jesus we're also in the "age to come." When Jesus finally returns (something we'll talk about next week), all people, both good and evil, will be bodily raised up and Jesus will judge both the living and the dead, "this age" will end, the overlap of ages will end, and from then on we will *only* live in what the New Testament writers call the "age to come."

But in this passage, the disciples don't say "this age" or the "age to come." They want to know about the end of what they simply call "*the* age." What age are they asking about? Well they appear to be asking about what you might call the "Jewish age":

The age of the temple.

The age of the centrality of Jerusalem.

The age of Israel.

And Jesus' answer, in answer to the disciples' question, was that the end of *that* age would be in 70 A.D.

Now, maybe you followed those arguments two weeks ago and on the podcast, maybe you did not. But here notice how Jesus answers their question about the end of the age. He doesn't answer by telling them about the end of the world. He answers by telling them about the fall of Jerusalem and the temple.

You might think that the fall of Jerusalem doesn't seem very cataclysmic. After all, most people barely think about it today.

But I just want you to think about the Jewish mindset in Jesus' own day. Because for them, this really *was* the end of their world, the end of their age, the end of all they knew. The world as they had known it (with some interruptions) for a thousand years, even since they settled in the land of Caanan.

Judaism has been completely and permanently altered forever because of this event. Besides the rescue of God's people from Egypt there has probably not been a more impactful event than the fall of Jerusalem in all of Judaism.

Jesus himself sent his servants the Romans, who took their city, burned it to the ground, and drove them out of it. God took their temple. No more sacrifices. No more ceremonies. No more washing or ceremonial cleansing. No more Levitical priesthood. All of it gone.

But all of it fulfilled in Jesus if they had ears to hear.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus is saying many things here, but let me at least suggest this: God is saying to us here today that He is faithful to keep his word: when he pronounces judgment he really does it.

I think we naturally do not like to think about it, but the wrath of God is a real thing – not because God is cruel, vindictive, unfair, or brutal... but because God really is righteous, and he really does respond to evil and sin. Exodus 23:7 says that God “will not acquit the guilty.” Why won't he do that? Because that's what a bad judge does. Bad judges look at the guilty and say “innocent.”

God's wrath is real because he really is holy. This passage reminds us that while God is patient and longsuffering, he eventually does respond, even if his judgment is delayed.

What kind of hope is there for a sinner, then? Well look at this *passage* today. Think of the escape Jesus offers here. Even as judgment is predicted for the city, he gives is a way out and a way of escape. Some people listened to his words and fled. Others remained and were destroyed. The warnings of God's wrath aren't given to people so they may be ignored. They are given because even in his judgment he is merciful.

What is the way of escape? Maybe you're listening to this and feel like you can relate to Jerusalem here. “I deserve judgment. I've resisted the gospel. I've resisted God.” So how can someone like that escape from that wrath?

The answer is the good news of the gospel.

**What is that Gospel?** The Gospel (the good news) is that God sent his Son, born of a woman, born in a specific time and place. That son was named Jesus, and Jesus lived as a man, kept the law, lived out the righteousness of God for all to see. He never sinned once. And he taught the truth and pointed people to himself. Now, you would think that a good man would be treated well.

But instead of being treated like a law-keeper, he was treated like the worst lawbreaker. Like the dirtiest offender. Like the worst of the worst. He was crucified and buried. He looked like all the other people who had died. But by His Spirit, God raised Jesus up on the third day.

And he tells all of us that if we believe on his name and trust in him, if we repent of our sins and make Jesus our hope, he will be our escape from God's wrath. And one day he will raise us up as well and give life to our mortal bodies. Jesus is our escape from God's wrath, if we will have him. In Christ, we never have to fear the wrath of God, nor do we have to fear the day of our death because we belong to the one who has conquered death, and we will live again.

The intention of God in giving this warnings is that we will *respond* to the warnings, not because his wrath isn't real but on the contrary because his wrath *is* real. The gospel doesn't tell us that the wrath of God is gone, but that it is quite real, but that the Son of God faced and endured the wrath of God which his people deserved.

Here's the problem: if you're here right now then you've been a recipient of God's kindness. And the problem is that mankind has a way of misreading that kindness.

At one point near the beginning of Romans Paul asks this question to his readers:

"Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience?"

Just pause before we read further. Paul asks his readers to reflect on this, essentially saying, "You sin. You know you sin. You know these things about

yourself. And yet you also know that God hasn't destroyed you. He hasn't done to you what he did to Jerusalem. Instead, he's been merciful." Paul asks his readers to think: is it possible that you might think that just because God has been kind to you that therefore he must not care about sin? That's Paul's question.

I suspect Jerusalem had become like this person Paul talks about. Jerusalem became a place where the people thought, "It's been 400 years since this city fell and was rebuilt. The Selucids and Hasmoneans made our lives miserable but look, we're still standing! Perhaps God favors us more than everyone else." They presumed upon the riches of God's kindness.

But Paul goes on. He says, "Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing the *God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*"

Now, there is more we could say about this passage today. It's so rich. But let me make an application. Next week we're going to talk about the very real truth of the final judgment that is one day coming.

But right now, let me ask you: what do you make of God's kindness in your life so far? He hasn't destroyed you yet. You have breath in your lungs, water to drink, food to eat. Maybe you have even nicer things than that. What do you make of those things? He lets you continue to draw breath. Why do you think that is? The people of Jerusalem say, "It's because we're so good, and because God doesn't punish sin." But they're wrong.

He hasn't destroyed you or me or this city the way he flattened Jerusalem. What does that mean?

Paul's answer is this: you are witnessing before your very eyes "the kindness of God meant to lead you to repentance." He's been kind. But you're meant to repent. Will you accept his escape and turn to the Son of God? Will you repent?

*Let's pray.*