

FACING THE FUTURE

SERIES: THE LORD OF HISTORY

by Steve Zeisler

We're going to devote four messages to the study of a challenging, wonderful, and fascinating passage of Scripture, Matthew 24-25. Commentators disagree on its interpretation. Predictive prophecy is often avoided by preachers-and I well understand their reluctance.

This is one of the discourses, or extended teachings, of Jesus. It's often referred to as the Olivet Discourse because Jesus spoke these words from the Mount of Olives in the last days of his life. There he sat down with his disciples and looked across the Kidron Valley to the temple, from which he had just departed, and he addressed questions regarding the future.

It's timely to study a passage like this because of current concern about the future as we approach the end of the millennium. As you're aware, for only the second time in western history in the calendar that we're familiar with, a year is going to end with three zeros a few months from now. This is a man-made milestone, of course. We don't even know exactly what year Jesus was born; there's some debate about it. The calendar we have was created for more or less arbitrary reasons. Even so, there's a sense of the future pressing upon us. We can anticipate that computers will be confused, and there are other reasons why prognostications are rising to a crescendo in what has been called millennium fever. As this year progresses, historians will analyze, pundits will theorize, politicians will bluster, marketers will bargain, advocates will propagandize, technologists will promise, seers will prophesy. Some will throw the biggest party of their lives on the last day of 1999, and others will head for the hills.

But amidst all these voices and all this concern, we do well to hear the words of Jesus. He spoke clearly and thoughtfully and penetratingly when his disciples faced similar circumstances, when they were at the hinge of history, at a crisis moment when everything was about to change. The dark clouds of the future were hanging over them, and Jesus' own words to them were filled with foreboding. They were scared, so they asked for help: "What will happen, Lord?" And Jesus' answer will be helpful to us even though, as I said, the reason for our own foreboding is somewhat arbitrary. We live in a world that's going to be asking questions, and we have tremendous opportunity as Christians to speak of the One who is the Lord of history, the One who holds the future in his hands. It will do us good to make ourselves ready.

This message is an overview of Matthew 24 and 25. In the next three messages we'll go through these chapters in more detail. Let me begin by summarizing the thrust of Jesus' teaching. When his disciples asked him what was going to happen, his answer was essentially to refuse to give them much helpful special knowledge. He didn't let them in on secrets. He didn't give them the decoder ring for the future, if you will, that would put them in a different category than they were in before he spoke. Nor did he call for extraordinary efforts on their part: "Since the future is bearing down on us, everyone's life ought to change. A heightened sense of responsibility should pervade everything...." Rather, his basic message was this: "You have been called to faithfulness as a disciple of Jesus Christ. The marching orders you've been given remain in effect. The hope you have remains your hope. The love of God will not change. The need of the world for the love of God will not change. So stay with your assignments." We should renew our commitment to the ordinary life of faith. We have good news for the lost, hope for the languishing, a call to live by the power of God in holiness, serving Christ and others. That remains our calling.

But as I've already noted, the world will be asking us questions that afford us opportunities to speak, so let's arm ourselves, not because we should be so different, but because the milieu in which we live may change and become more open. We are to be "as shrewd as serpents," Jesus said (Matthew 10:16). The additional Christian responsibility, though, is to be loving: "Lord, what can I do to serve?" And further, our responsibility is to honor Christ, not just protect ourselves, as the new millennium approaches.

Destruction to come

Let's look at some verses from these chapters. I want to start with the end of chapter 23. Jesus had entered triumphally into Jerusalem and had gone to the temple and cleansed it of spiritualized greed. "It is written," he said to them, "My house will be called a house of prayer," but you are making it a "den of robbers." (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46.) He stopped those who were passing through, and presumably those who were offering sacrifices. He left the temple, never to return again. He pronounced woes on the religious hypocrites of the day, and then at the end of that, we read these words verses 37-39:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Jesus in effect had cut off the temple sacrifices of Israel. From this day forward sacrifices in the temple would not be sanctioned by God. Jesus was now going to become the sacrifice, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The responsibility of the temple to bear witness to that was now over.

The disciples then sat with him on the Mount of Olives across from the temple mount, and in their concern raised issues and asked questions. Verse 1 of chapter 24:

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings.

Mark records this same conversation. He even adds a detail in 13:1: "As [Jesus] was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!'" They were admiring the temple: "Isn't this a beautiful building, Lord? Desolation is one thing, but you didn't really mean what you said, did you? These are massive stones. No one can move them. They're immense and strong, and they've been here for hundreds of years. Look carefully at this now. This is an important place-this is God's house." Matthew 24:2-4:

"Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you."

Since this message is an overview of these chapters, it will help us to try to understand what was in the disciples' minds when they raised these issues. What was Jesus speaking to in their experience? There are two ideas that grow out of the disciples' observation and questions. After we look at them, I want to take us to some parables, at the end of chapter 24 and in chapter 25, that are to guide us as believers in our concerns as we anticipate the future. We'll look at two ideas that grow out of these parables as well.

Before all of that, however, we can make the simple observation that the disciples asked Jesus for help. This is always a good idea. There are a lot of people you can talk to when you're confused, unsettled, in some degree of dread, uncertain, under pressure, or fearful. You can talk to your friends. You can chat with your accountant. You can see a lawyer. You can call your dad. You can complain to your neighbor. But the best person to talk to is Jesus, and we should commend the disciples because they pleaded with him and questioned him. Sometimes Jesus will direct us to other people to speak for him, but in the long run the one who will answer us is the Lord Jesus himself. He's the one who will make sense of our questions and give us direction and hope.

No safe place

Now let me suggest what I think is behind the disciples' calling attention to the massive stones, the beautiful scrollwork, the beloved temple. Jesus had said, "I will never return to the temple in Jerusalem until I come back as the reigning

Messiah. This temple is left desolate." In response to those hard observations, the disciples wanted to say, "Yes, but didn't you really mean that there is a safe place somewhere? You meant that everything else is going to hell in a hand basket, but not really the house of God, this particular place, right?"

I believe that what was behind their question was a longing that is similar to our own. When it gets hard, when the sky grows dark, when there are more and more reasons to feel disconcerted about the world we live in-either the macro world of all of history or the micro world of our own circumstances-we want to retreat to someplace where nothing bad will happen. "I'm a follower of yours, I love you. I want to be safe. I want a home, a circle of friends who will make me feel better. I want to avoid the hard things that are coming." Or, "Not my investments, Lord. Everybody else's computer can crash, but not my computer. I know it's hard in the third world, but here in Silicon Valley we're going to be safe, aren't we, Lord?" Or, "Those people in Washington are terrible, but as long as the economy is strong...."

Jesus' answer is that not one stone will be left upon another. There is no safe place.

One of the tragic things that happened in the repeated destructions of the temple was that the Jewish people who trusted God fled into the temple because they thought, "Surely this is a safe place. This is God's house. The enemies will be stopped by angels surrounding the house of God." But it was the worst thing they could have done, because each time the trampling armies made their way in and destroyed the people conveniently collected in the temple. In fact, Jesus' advice, as we'll see in a bit, was, "When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies...flee to the mountains...." (Luke 21:20). The day will come when evil will do its worst work, when God will have to judge what can only be judged and can no longer be fixed.

Remember, the Lord also called himself a temple: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19). And Peter wanted to say, "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you! [You're the Anointed of God! You won't die!]" (Matthew 16:22.) But Jesus said in effect, "Yes, I will. The temple will be destroyed."

In Jesus' statements there is a theology of judgment, of unsafeness, as evil does its worst over and over again. There's no escape from it. It brings destruction, but afterward there is vindication, cleansing, and renewal.

The temple in Jerusalem had twice before undergone terrible violation, once under Nebuchadnezzar and once under the Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes. Jesus predicted the Roman destruction of the temple that would take place about 40 years later. He was also saying that there was to be still one more time after that, which is still future to us, when the temple would be erected again, and all of history would focus on the condition of Israel, and once again it would be destroyed. Jesus' predictions are subtle and fascinating, but he was telling a deeper truth about all the longing to get out of the problems that make up ordinary Christian life. We want to avoid hardship rather than trust God with it. The fact of the matter is that the world is broken at its core, and it is therefore chaotic. There are earthquakes, famines, plagues, evil, wars, tyrants, and persecution. And believers don't get to opt out of those things.

Now, what word of hope might be found as we contemplate the prospect of destruction? Is it all just bad news? Remember what David said in Psalm 23:4:

**"Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me...."**

We don't get to circumvent the valley of death's darkness. We don't get to avoid the hardship that comes with being human. The fact is that this world is not our home; we were made for some place else, and we will never be ultimately happy or secure here, or have everything we want here. But we do get the companionship of Christ. Jesus said, when he talked about house-building, "You can build your house on the sand, or you can build your house on the rock." And he defined those who build on the rock this way: "everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice" (Matthew 7:24). That describes a life with a solid foundation. We don't have the option of a life with no storms. When the storms come, they will do what they will do. The question is whether we have made choices that integrate the reality of Christ into our lives, whether he is our companion and has made us people who don't quail under hardship, whether he has strengthened us and made us hopeful and even joyful, despite what happens. That's the perspective Jesus is trying to give the disciples in Matthew 24.

No inside information about the future

I believe a second idea was in the disciples' questioning. "Okay, let's assume terrible things are going to happen, and you aren't going to take us out of them. If that's true, give us a map of where all the land mines are going to be so we can avoid them." I believe that is behind their question in verse 3: "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

Jesus made an interesting statement after that question: "See to it that no one deceives you." He was saying, "Your very longing to get specific prophetic descriptions of future things before they happen, that very desire to know how to avoid the difficulty and steer your way through the troubles, who to trust and who not to trust, has endangered you."

The Lord went on to make predictions, but they were not the kind of predictions that the disciples desired. Most of us seek in the Scriptures a way of staying off the Titanic: "Lord, tell me which ship is going to hit the iceberg, and I'll get on a different ship." What Jesus did was give us information about when to head for the lifeboats. He said, "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel...then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains." (Matthew 24:15-16.) In Luke 21:20-21 he said, "When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains...." He gave information that will be useful at the very end of things, but he deliberately didn't give us clear indications of where to go so that the Y2K problem won't apply to us, how to find our way through the difficulties that other people are going to face.

It certainly is true that no date that's as obvious to everyone as January 1, 2000 is going to be fraught with Biblical significance. The repeated word in these chapters, which we'll come to in subsequent messages, is "unexpectedly." Matthew 24:37 says, "As it was in the day of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man." Matthew 24:42: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." Matthew 24:50: "The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of." Matthew 25:13: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

What then should be the focus of believers? If Jesus is not going to protect us from the problems, but will only accompany us through them, if he is not going to give us secrets that will enable us to ward off difficulties and find the secret tunnel to the end, then what does he commend for his people? I would suggest two things from this long discourse. The first is expectancy.

An attitude of expectancy

In the parables at the end of chapter 24 and in chapter 25, one of the recurring themes is this: Since you don't know what's going to happen, stay alert. Precisely because the hour, the day, the moment is unclear to you, it could be this afternoon, or tomorrow. So pay attention to what's important. Is there someone in your life from whom you're estranged? Don't wait-make it right. Have you been shallow and lifeless in your prayers? "I'm going to get serious about the worship and prayer thing, but I have a deadline at work, and my taxes are due. There's so much going on, and the kids are driving me crazy. I need a new job, and my car's in the shop....I'll get to it later." But the pressing implication of the Lord in this is that we must put first things first. Listen to the things that matter to God. Listen to them early and regularly. Today is the day. Don't wait. Every day ought to have that quality of expectancy about it.

I know some people who live with a kind of expectancy that this may be the last opportunity they have to share Christ with an unbeliever, the last opportunity they have to write the wonderful poem of praise that they've had in their heart but never committed to paper, the last chance they have to laugh out loud because of the beauty of God, the last chance they have to spread joy, to tell the truth, to memorize the passage of Scripture they've always wanted to commit to memory. Therefore they are attentive, alert, involved, passionate. People who live like that find the Lord everywhere. They're expecting this might be the last day, so they enter Christian community expectantly and they meet Christ in their brothers and sisters. They see him light up your face, and they see him guide them through troubles, and they see him encourage their hearts. He is there, and he buoys them up and changes them. They become people of deeper hunger for the Lord. The more they have of him, the more thirsty and hungry they are for him. Living a life expectantly brings you more in touch with the Holy Spirit himself who testifies of Christ, who changes our character, who makes us more excited to know him, whether the Lord tarries or not. Regardless of whether the Lord returns today, it is a clear and vital command to live as if today is the last day. And it may well be, because there is no way of knowing when God is going to overturn everything.

An attitude of persistence

The second thing that the Lord commends in these parables at the end of the discourse is persistence. He also wants to press on us the responsibility to stay with it over and over and over again. A man leaves his steward in charge and goes on a journey, and the steward finally gives up his responsibility because his master doesn't come back for a long time. His sense of obligation peters out, and he becomes wicked and self-serving. (See Matthew 24:45-51.) Bridesmaids wait for the groom, but he doesn't come. They get sleepy and doze off. (See 25:1-13)

Have you determined by the grace of God to be the kind of person who stays alert, faithful, responsive, loving, and grateful for the long haul? If not, wake up! Perhaps you look at your life and say, "There once was a time when I cared, when I wouldn't miss worshiping with others, when I knew what my gifts were and I was engaged using them. There once was a time when my heart was in it. But that time has passed, and I am no longer that person." Jesus' parables speak to that issue. Our response to God can't be something that is in our distant past but no longer true. Everything the Lord will say to those of us who see the year 2000 coming, and to the disciples who heard of the destruction of that temple and the destruction of the temple to come, ought to explode in a response in the present. Now is the time. Today is the day. "Yes, Lord. I will be renewed by your grace! I will listen, act, care." And responsive, faithful, grateful, joyful, honest, humble people are going to have something to say in a world that is going to get crazier over the next few months. Because of the questions being asked by everyone else around us, we have the opportunity to be part of seeing scales fall from eyes so that love for God replaces fearfulness.

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