

THE LAST DAYS

SERIES: THE LORD OF HISTORY

by Steve Zeisler

Dave Burns was a worship leader and pastor here at PBC some years ago. He's now one of the pastors at Foothills Bible Church in Littleton, Colorado. When we heard about the shootings at Columbine High School last week, many were concerned about Dave and Terri and their family. We finally received this e-mail from Dave:

Yesterday we did two services for the community, one in the afternoon, another last night at 7:00. It was very emotional, as many of our kids attend Columbine High. They and their families were in attendance along with the governor and his family. Needless to say, it was a media circus. We had all the kids and families come forward to share their feelings and to help in the grieving process. It was overwhelming as the stories unfolded. What our kids saw was a battle zone that will impact them for the rest of their lives. At the end of the service, we gathered all the kids and their parents at the center of the church. Twelve hundred people came with hands to shoulders to lay hands on them as our leaders prayed. It was an incredible sight. The photographer from the Rocky Mountain News left his tripod in tears and moved with the rest of the church to pray. Pray for us as a staff. We're tired and it's only just begun.

There is evidence of humility, of servant-heartedness, of trust in God and appeal to him for help in Dave's words. There are some things absent from his words, too. Many of those who comment on the Columbine High shootings profess astonishment that such a thing could happen in a town like Littleton. The witness of Dave Burns as a pastor and leader in this church has nothing of such disbelief. Anybody who is at all familiar with the witness of Scripture knows that human hearts are capable of very terrible things and have been since Cain killed Abel.

What is also absent from Dave's words is any facile explanation, any blaming of Gothic poetry, or the lack of metal detectors at school entrances. The wisest believers in Littleton gave themselves to prayer and service and witness instead of merely human conversation. They know that God is working in ways they cannot measure and that this life is preparation for something better. In crisis moments, the followers of Jesus can minister to neighbors: uncovering things hidden in the darkness, opposing victimizers, caring for victims, and showing mercy to everyone.

Dispelling false hopes

We've been studying Jesus' discussion of the end times in Matthew 24 and 25. Jesus spoke these words from the Mount of Olives during the last week of his life, as he sat with his disciples looking over at the city of Jerusalem. He insisted on dispelling false hopes. No one has spoken more clearly against trusting what is untrustworthy. No one has spoken with firmer conviction about the desperation of the human condition. No one has insisted more forcefully that we should not listen to that which is no answer, that we need to face squarely our guilt and the intractability of human sin, that we have nowhere else to turn but God. These convictions are at the heart of the Olivet Discourse.

We're studying this passage in anticipation of the end of 1999. This is a year in which millennium fever will certainly grow. Apocalyptic cults are spreading fear. We anticipate that there is going to be some computer-based upheaval at the turnover to the year 2000. There are certain to be wars, famine, earthquakes, and cultural disintegration, because every year has them. Just because next year ends with three zeroes doesn't make this time different from any other in that respect.

Jesus warns against giving apocalyptic import to what amounts to no more than ordinary "birth pangs" of history. There will come a day, Jesus predicts in the passage before us, when the final, terrible tribulation will occur, and that will be the final contraction of history. He will return and everything will change. But there's no reason to assume that 1999 is the year for that. So we're studying this material in order to try to think clearly about the future, to be able to speak to people of the good news of the Christian gospel, to urge them to turn to Christ rather than some other voice for answers.

In this message we're going to consider the future of the temple itself. (In the next message we'll look at the end of chapter 24 and most of chapter 25, in which our Lord teaches some parables about what we should focus on in the interim period before the final contraction and his return.) Let's read Matthew 24:15-31:

"So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel-let the reader understand-then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now-and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect-if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time.

"So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.

**"Immediately after the distress of those days
 "'the sun will be darkened,
 and the moon will not give its light;
 the stars will fall from the sky,
 and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'**

"At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

In the following two paragraphs Jesus gives answers about expectations of the time when these things will happen. In verses 32-35 he says to learn a lesson from the fig tree; when its leaves grow green we know that summer is coming. Jesus says, "...This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened." He is speaking of the Jewish nation, not a particular period in history. Jesus is saying that as the end approaches we will see a renewal of Israel. Now they are gathered back into their nation for the first time in nearly two thousand years. That is extremely significant. The day will come when their hearts will be less hardened. I don't think the fig tree is green yet because Israel is as secular a place as it has ever been. But events are turning in that direction.

In verses 36-40 Jesus pronounces the impossibility of knowing the day or the hour. There are two reasons for that. First, no one can know because even the Son doesn't know. The information is not available anywhere. Only the Father knows the day or hour. And second, Jesus says, "As in the days of Noah, so it will be...people were eating and drinking, marrying...." The suggestion he makes is that we will be so preoccupied with our own circle of events that we will read things based on the world that we know the best-the field in which we work, the mill at which we grind, or whatever. Our frame of reference is too small for us to make any evaluation of world-scale events.

The cyclical destruction of the temple

Verses 15-31 are the section that I want us to spend most of our time on. It is a chilling description of Jerusalem's coming to an end. What does Jesus mean? Why should we hear such things? The prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem is followed by a description of the glorious coming of Christ for his own, gathered with him in the clouds with angels in support. But the good end doesn't come until after the awful experience of Jerusalem's destruction.

Let me try to give a bit of a history lesson here, because this is describing not only the final days of the age, which is still before us, but also what was in the near future to Jesus at the time of this teaching.

In 586 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's armies. It was besieged, its people devastated. Solomon's temple was razed to the ground, and the treasures of the nation were stolen. The people were deported, and many of them were executed. In 168 BC, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes marched his armies into Jerusalem, ravaged the people, and desecrated the temple by killing a pig in honor of Zeus on the altar.

Jesus predicts the day in 70 AD, four decades after his execution, when Jerusalem would be surrounded by the armies

of the Roman emperor Titus in a terrible siege. At that time the people were trapped in the city and starved to death. Mothers ate their children to survive the siege. Finally it was broken, the people destroyed, and the rebuilt temple once again razed to the ground by the Roman armies. That's clearly one of the events Jesus is referring to here, because he tells his followers, "Do you see all these things? Not one stone here will be left on another...." (24:2.)

But Jesus is also predicting one final destruction of the temple. There is a time still to come when Jerusalem will be not just the capital of Israel but the central city of the whole world, when every eye will be attentive to it as satellites beam pictures of the final events everywhere in the world. The "man of lawlessness" (2 Thessalonians 2:3), the focus of the great, concentrated rebellion against God, will call to himself all the attention of all the people in the world and will once again march on Jerusalem, set himself up in the temple (which will be built once again), and proclaim himself God. That will signal the end of the age. "They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory."

The pride that brings judgment

Why does this destruction happen the same way over and over again? Why is it that there is no way to solve the problem of human pride and rebellion? Why do we allow what is wicked to grow and flourish to the point when some terrible judgment of God must occur?

Remember why Jesus was executed. He was put on trial. At his trial the Prosecutors made no headway until they finally remembered that Jesus had said, some time before, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19). They convicted him of sedition. That was the one charge they were able to make stick.

But Jesus was not talking about the temple in Jerusalem. He was talking about himself. And as often as the temple building has been subject to judgment, it has illuminated how human wickedness and rebellion and pride would finally ravage Immanuel-the God who is with us. In exactly the same way that the temple building was destroyed repeatedly, we destroyed the Savior. The wicked human heart lashes out at God and exalts itself. Our pride replays the same story in history over and over again. It will do so one more time when the whole world will experience the final contraction and come to judgment.

Renewal after judgment

But judgment is not the last word. Every time there is destruction, it is followed by renewal. When Jesus was killed, it led to resurrection. The place for hope for us is in a God who acts beyond the pain and horror of destruction, who does more than we can see, a God who is invisible, whose victory is still future to us. He meets our needs not just in what we can see but in what we can't see. We can't make things better, but he will make things better.

So Christians have a word to say: not that we can avoid the cross, but that we will find resurrection on the other side of the cross. That's why Paul's words are so important: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20a). The way to real hopefulness, encouragement, and a community of love is not found in avoiding the hardship, seeking to wall ourselves off from the pain, and denying what's terrible about us, hoping that no one will notice, but in acknowledging that we're capable of doing what those boys in Littleton did. We deserve crucifixion, and our hope is in Christ who was crucified for us. We join him on the cross, and we join him in resurrection. Jesus is thorough and harsh in dispelling false hopes, and he is indescribably good in offering us in their place hopes that are real and lasting and eternal.

The only real hope we have

Let's look at a few other details in the verses before us. Jesus warns the man in denial who wants to go back to the house and tidy things up before leaving, the one who would retrieve a cloak. Avoidance of dangerous realities is foolish.

The second thing that Jesus is warning against, as we talked about in the first message in this series ([Discovery Paper 4607](#)), is the idea that there is a God-sanctioned safe place in the world. "Certainly the house of God will not be destroyed. Certainly in the Christian community I will avoid the harshness that's descending on the world." It's exactly the wrong thing to do. There is no safe place that we can run to, and in fact the notion that we want such a safe place is in itself going to lead us astray.

The third thing Jesus says is that we mustn't listen to the voices that claim to have secret messages and sources that no

one else knows of, that perform miracles and lead folks astray, that pretend there are answers where no answers exist.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, "Seek first [your heavenly Father's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." A life that has balance and purpose is one in which we can face whatever needs to be faced in the larger historical setting and in us. We see that history declares that human beings are capable of the worst things. If we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, we get all things. If we seek security in this life, we get nothing. Jesus insists that we look at the terrible things that would be done to him and to Jerusalem, that will be done in the course of this race's history, without either hopelessness or false hopes. I want to close with another wonderful way of saying this from the book of Hebrews. The writer of Hebrews talks about people who are anchored in the future rather than in the present, about living by faith and realizing our passports are not from here but from another country, a heavenly one. This city will be destroyed, but it's not the real city.

"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country-a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them." (Hebrews 11:13-16.)

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Third Message
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