

SIGNS OF THE END OF THE AGE

Matthew 24:1-51

Key Verse: 24:14

"And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

Human history seems to be nothing but a vicious cycle of fallen man. Many people agree that the last part of the 20th century is the end of the age. The phrase, "the end of the age," alludes to the most tragic destruction of the earth, partly because of the exhaustion of natural resources, and mainly because of man's immorality and violence. But this is not the case. Matthew 24 teaches us that the future of the world is not dark, but glorious. All the bad things happening at the end of the age are actually signs of the beginning of birth pains for the glorious new age to come. In this chapter we learn several things we must be careful about, and we learn what kind of attitude we must have while living in this chaotic post-Christian era.

First, the startled disciples (1-3). Look at verse 1. "Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings." As we know well, the disciples were mostly rural Galileans and fishermen who knew the fish market. But they did not know much about the people in the higher classes or about elegant buildings. After looking at the temple, some of them were fascinated by what they had seen. The Jerusalem temple had been built at the summit of Mount Zion. It was built of white marble stones, plated with gold, and it shone in the sun. No wonder the Galileans were overwhelmed to see it. Immediately they turned to call Jesus' attention and expressed their amazement. In Mark 13:1b they said, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" They really spoke up to express their feeling. But what they said only revealed their hidden love of the world. Since they were Jesus' disciples, they should have had a spiritual value system. But they did not.

What did Jesus answer? Jesus did not respond to their curiosity at all. Instead he taught them the future things to come. Look at verse 2. "'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.'" Jesus' prophecy was fulfilled in A.D. 70, when the Jerusalem temple was completely destroyed by the Roman army until not one stone was left on another. Jesus' prophecy is also a warning that the people and nations who do not practice God's laws are destined for complete destruction.

What was the disciples' response? As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, from which the temple could be seen in full view, the disciples came to him privately and said, "Tell us, when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (3) To the Jews, "your coming" or "the end of the age" was understood as "the day of the Lord" the day of great joy and victory, the day God himself would intervene in history.

Second, the characteristics of the end of the age (4-8). Jesus did not answer their question concerning the end of the age directly; rather,

he told them several things to be careful about. Look at verse 4. "Jesus answered: 'Watch out that no one deceives you.'" Jesus warns his disciples to watch out, because the end of the age will be a season for false messiahs and a time of great deception. As history proves, at the end of one civilization after another, people become extremely violent and immoral. Most of all, people become ungodly. People who live among violent, immoral and ungodly people become very fearful.

Then many sorcerers and magic artists like 'Koresh' arise, claiming, "I am the Christ" (5). They deceive weak-minded people and empty their pockets. Especially, they empty sorrowful widows' pockets. These days, to most people, secular humanists are false messiahs. They see the things of the world without the absolutes of God. They see everything according to situation ethics. One father once looked at his daughter and said, "She is my precious daughter." After he was drunken, the father said, "Wow! She is a beautiful woman." His relativistic idea caused him to commit incest.

Jesus also said that people will hear of all kinds of tragic events happening, such as nation rising against nation, famines, and earthquakes in various places. We should not be alarmed. It is because these things are the beginning of birth pains for the glorious new age. The world is not easy to live in because of the increase of wickedness. Wicked people are selfish people. Because of selfish people the love of most grows cold.

But Jesus' way of thinking is different. In verse 6b Jesus says, "...but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come." Jesus says here that Jesus' people should not be fearful on account of the world situation and evils in the world, because God rules the world. The world is not heading for destruction, but for the day of the Lord, the day of eternal victory. All kinds of troubles, trials and tribulations are nothing but birth pains for the day of the Lord. Verse 8 says, "All these are the beginning of birth pains." So we should not be alarmed by the world situation, but rejoice, waiting for the day of the Lord.

Third, "Stand firm to the end" (9-13). In the last days many God-haters arise. These people persecute Jesus' people in proportion to their demon-possession. They hate Jesus' people because they hate Jesus, for he is holy (9). In the last days, many people turn away from the faith and betray and hate each other, poisoned by the devil's doubt (10). Look at verse 11. "...and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people." Here, "false prophets" refers to the Pharisees or secular humanists.

In this situation, what can Jesus' people do? Look at verse 13. "...but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." How can we "stand firm to the end"? First of all, Jesus' people must be faithful to Jesus. Revelation 2:10b says, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." Jesus' people must love one another fervently, until the devil flees away from them with raving speed. Jesus' people must live a life of victory. St. Paul is our champion in this. He said in 2 Timothy 4:7, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Fourth, the good news of the kingdom of God must be preached (14). Look at verse 14. "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." Jesus' people are chosen people. They are chosen to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God. God made a plan of world salvation. God started to fulfill his plan first with Abraham; next with King David. Finally, God fulfilled his plan through his one and only Son Jesus Christ. Now this gospel must be preached to the whole world before the end comes (14). When we preach the gospel to the whole world, God is most pleased, because the salvation of the whole world is God's utmost desire. When we obey God's world salvation purpose, we are going to be persecuted. But there is a final victory. For example, under the Roman Empire the early Christians were persecuted simply because they lived pure lives, while the Romans lived very corrupt lives. Later, the Romans faced severe marriage problems for their sons and daughters, for from among the Romans they could not find anyone who had not contracted the Roman version of AIDS. Because of this, Jesus' people who had lived pure lives were accepted and honored. Finally, Rome became a Christian country. Praise God who uses our struggle in evangelizing the whole world!

Fifth, abominable people (15-18). Look at verses 15,16. "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." The abomination that causes desolation refers to Daniel's prophecy in Daniel 9:27. A king of Syria who was disgusted by Judaism determined to stamp out Judaism and introduce the Greek religion in Judea. He captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple and placed the head of a swine on the altar. The temple in Jerusalem was the place where God was present, as well as where the ark of the covenant, the word of God, was. But when the temple was desecrated, the head of a swine was placed on the altar. What a great inversion! Where God should be present, the head of a swine was placed! Figuratively speaking, this is the inversion of the order of the universe. This was a disaster to the Judeans. Jesus warned his disciples that the same thing would happen again (15,16). The abomination that causes desolation is an allegory of the chaotic world. Those who have no personal commitment to Jesus are all abominable people. Most men worship money instead of God; most women prefer stinky macho men rather than noble men. They are indeed abominable.

Jesus told his people to flee to the mountains when they see "the abomination that causes desolation." Here, "mountains" stands for a place where God's people can worship God quietly. But most people cannot flee to the mountains because they do not want to give up a handbag or a pair of gym shoes. Instead of fleeing to the mountains, they come back home; next, they go to the place where they can get something or enjoy sinful pleasure (17,18). Finally they are caught by the inverted world. People who live in an inverted world are always full of fear and anxiety. They have no peace in their hearts.

Sixth, "when the Son of Man comes" (19-31). In the last days there will be great distress unequalled from the beginning of the world until now (21). What shall we do in such days? Verse 20 says that we must pray

for God's help. It is amazing to know that God will shorten the days of distress for the sake of the elect (22). Here we learn that a handful of Jesus' people who struggle to keep the life of faith are most beneficial to all mankind. On the other hand, false messiahs, saying, "Take it easy," can be most deceptive. We must not listen to them (23-26). If we listen to them, we become like vultures that eat a carcass (28).

This distress is nothing but a prelude of the coming of the Son of Man. When the Son of Man comes again, the sun and moon and the stars that have given light and energy won't be necessary, because the coming of the Son of Man himself will be sufficient light for his people and the new world.

When the Son of Man comes, there will be two kinds of people. One kind will mourn, and the other kind will rejoice. Look at verse 30. "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." All peoples of all nations despised and rejected Jesus because they hated God, who is holy. They ignorantly nailed Jesus to the cross, thinking that they would never see him again. But they shall see the Son of Man with their own eyes, whether they want to or not. It is a great punishment for them to see Jesus, whom they crucified. More than this, they have to stand before him to be judged according to what they have done to him and his people (Ro 2:6-11). On the other hand, the Son of Man will gather his people who have been faithful unto death and say, "Well done, good and faithful servants" (31). May God help us to be worthy of his praise.

Seventh, God's people must have spiritual insight to interpret the times (32-35). Look at verses 32,33. "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door." Each generation has its own characteristics. So it is not easy to interpret the times. But Jesus' people can do so because they have the word of God--the universal canon of everything. Let's read verse 35. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." During the first century, Jesus' people had to live under fiery persecutions. They had to overcome all kinds of trials in order to defend the gospel of Jesus. Jesus' people in the last part of the 20th century have to live in times like those of Sodom and Gomorrah--very immoral and violent. Jesus' people should be sacrificial in order to advance the gospel of Jesus. It is possible for us to do so when we have spiritual insight to interpret the signs of the times. These days many people say in their bewilderment, "What's going on?" or, "What's up?" They have no insight to see the world. But Jesus' people must have keen spiritual insight to interpret the signs of the times and lead his people to God.

Eighth, "keep watch" (36-44). There are many people who say, "I want to be a Christian, but not now." Such people are deceived by the devil, who says, "You can do it tomorrow." Jesus' people must awaken from complacency because no one knows the day or hour of Jesus' coming, not even the angels (36). The people of Noah's times only engaged in eating and drinking and giving in marriage. They never imagined that God will

judge those who are only eating and drinking and mating. The flood came suddenly, but their swimming ability was too poor. So they all drowned (38,39). Therefore, Jesus' people must keep watch through prayers and Bible study (42-44).

Ninth, "be a faithful servant" (45-51). Who is the faithful servant to Jesus? He is the one who faithfully distributes spiritual daily bread to the Son's children. In the last days, corrupt people eat too much food and become sick spiritually. They need spiritual food. Who can give spiritual food to his sick children? Jesus' people can do that. Teaching the Bible seems to be a losing business. But we must do so, because our Lord Jesus wants us to do so (45-47). There is a danger that we calculate too much and come to the conclusion that he will not come soon (48,49). A habit of calculation only makes men wicked and unfaithful. What happens to them? "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. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (50,51).

In this passage we learn that we should not be afraid of the world situation. We must believe that all the troubles of the world are the birth pains for the day of the Lord. In this troubled world, in order to be faithful to our Lord Jesus we must struggle hard to teach the Bible to God's sheep. Let's not despair. Let's be faithful to God, standing on his promises.