

June 7, 2009
Week 36

Bring Back the King Matthew 24

We're nearing the end of Christ's trek on earth's soil. He's teaching with the abandon of one who's counting the days and hours until his death. Every word is weighted by that expectancy. Jesus wants them to know what to expect and how to prepare for ultimate things in climactic days.

The disciples are curious and tense. Jesus is predicting the destruction of the monumental temple in Jerusalem and speaking in tones of alarm. But they also show signs of awareness that Jesus is the King of all ages. "When will this happen? What will mark your arrival at the end of the age?"

"Watch out," says Jesus. "People will come in my name deceiving many. False christs." And Jesus is accurate. False messianic figures did come and have come and still come—people with grandiose claims and distorted messages, leading others into weird misunderstandings of the truth. Beware of them, says Jesus. And when it happens more than ever, be ready.

"You'll hear of wars and rumors of wars." When haven't there been wars? But imagine a time of such unrest that it portends the coming of Christ.

"Nation will rise against nation; kingdom against kingdom." Imagine all the great conflicts of the ages, and how often people must have wondered, "Is this what Jesus was talking about?"

Now add famines and earthquakes. Are those increasing in our day, or do we simply have more information? Either way, our generation can't help but wonder, "Are we the ones to see the return of the King?"

Our imaginings are mixed with joy and dread. Though we love the King and anticipate the fullness of his kingdom revealed, this is too much for us and too soon for some people we love. What if they aren't ready? What if I'm not ready?

Jesus reassures us that these cataclysms are birth pains. Yes it hurts, but try to remember that these sufferings are like a birthing process—tortuous but necessary for the joy that follows.

But his warnings continue. Persecution. Betrayal. Deceit. "Love will grow cold," says Jesus. Why? Because of the increase of wickedness. That's part of our moral decline and decay that we forget. Our growing indifference to the effects of worldliness also dulls our sensitivity to human need. Our addictions and affections for less than worthy matters distract us from better affections and habits, and our love grows cold.

"Some will stand firm to the end," Jesus says. "They will be saved." All of scripture is loaded with encouragements to be among those robust souls who never give up on their faith. "...he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (*Matthew* 10:22). "... dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (*1 Corinthians* 15:58). "Stand firm, then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist ..." (*Ephesians* 6:14). "Resist [the devil], standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (*1 Peter* 5:9). So stand firm. Keep going. Never

stop believing and living like someone who believes.

Now, the crux of the whole text. “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations [*ethnos*, or people groups], and then the end will come.”

While the birth pains of false christs and wars and rumors of wars and famines and earthquakes and persecution and betrayal and deceit have been screaming out warnings for centuries, this one phrase should get our attention. “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached to the whole world—every people group—and then the end will come.” Why should this awareness alter our way of thinking and living? Obviously, the world is getting smaller. Mobility, technology and all things modern are making it possible—and soon—for the gospel to land on every *ethnos* in every nation. This is the first time since Jesus walked the planet that such a notion could be plausible. Wars? Always. Famines? Sadly, yes. Earthquakes? Here and there. Devastating! Persecution? Betrayal? Deceit? Of course. Nothing new. But the gospel landing on every ethnic group? That’s new. That’s now. That should give us pause.

Once again, we’re faced with a huge question. Do we believe Jesus? Or is Jesus a crazy man? Or are his followers and reporters over-zealous in their amplification of his teachings? Do we selectively sift through the sayings of Christ like a forty-niner panning for flakes of gold, or do we believe in his warnings and predictions of ultimate things? After all, his ethical prescriptions make our lives and the whole world a better place but his ultimate claims seem to threaten my world. Do I really want to hear it? Is it convenient to believe it?

So what if I do believe it? How does it affect me or influence my way of life? In other words, so what?

Jesus continues, “Keep your eye on the holy place,” which we know is Jerusalem. Something about the events surrounding that sacred ground will be central to the final unfolding of human history.

What else? Prepare for hardship. Be careful of false gospels. In other words, keep your faith strong and your theology simple and clear. Why? Because Jesus is going to make a huge entrance. No one knows the day. So be watchful. Be a good servant of the king. Be a good steward of the trust and resources given to your care. Be ready.

It’s always a good question to ask, “If I knew Jesus were coming tomorrow, how would I prepare?” Of course, that exercise is always balanced by the obvious question, “What if he delays?” But something about the threat of imminence should inform even our long term approach to life.

If I believe all of this, there are things I will do and won’t do ... things I will commit to and won’t commit to ... things I will buy and won’t buy ... things I will invest in and won’t invest in ... things I will say and won’t say.

If I don’t believe this, my approach to life will prove my disbelief. And I’m left with other questions. Why do I only believe Jesus selectively? What if Jesus is absolutely right? What if these scriptures are true? What if I allow myself to be distracted and detoured by a world of falsehood?

Of course, that’s our daily struggle—straddling two realities. *John 15:19* reminds me that I do not belong to this world; Jesus has chosen me out of this world. *1 Corinthians 3:19* calls the wisdom of the world foolishness in God’s sight. Paul goes on to remind us that while all things are ours—the world, life, death, the future—we are “of Christ and Christ is of God.” *1*

Timothy 6:7 is a familiar reminder: “We brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it.” The soul has no pockets. *1 John 2:15* reminds us of the dangers of loving this world and its desires too much and *James 4:4* calls friendship with the world hatred toward God. Strong words. Again, warnings not to be overly invested, emotionally or otherwise, in something that isn’t going to last.

This is not easy. Things of the world are both enticing and enjoyable, though tainted. They are also accessible, rather than ethereal. And how much is too much? Jesus feasted and fested and valued friendship and beauty and the upside of this life.

Well, we find help again in our theme verse, *Matthew 6:33*. “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.” Other things will find value and order in proper proportion if God and his kingdom and his ethic are the focus and priority of our lives. Yes, we’ll still be tested by hard questions and serious dilemmas, but our affections and loyalties and investments will be shaped by our first and most and best devotion—to God, revealed by Jesus Christ.

Even our view of the last days of human history will be reshaped. Yes, I’m awed and frightened by the thought of Jesus exploding onto the human scene riding the clouds like a chariot with thunder like trumpets. Yes, I feel timid about my lackluster faith and I hope for more days to bring my affairs into order according to kingdom values. And of course I tremble at the uprooting of this reality that has become familiar—a home to me and to mine.

But this is Jesus! We know him and how he feels about us. We know the work of his blood and how it pardons us. We know his grace and how he’s prepared a place for us. We know his justice and mercy and how he’ll do what’s right and best for others around us. We can trust him with this cataclysmic and cosmic reorientation of all reality, since we know his heart.

And so I say it cautiously, but with a growing conviction. Bring back the king. Preach the gospel to the whole world and bring back the king. Go ahead and give testimony to every people group and bring back the king. I’m ready. Oh, I want to be ready. Bring back the king. Maranatha. Our Lord, come!