

Is the End Near?

“Wars, famines and earthquakes”

Passages: Job 1:6-12
Matthew 24:1-8

We finish off this year with an 8-week sermon series (based in Matthew 24 and 25) which asks the confronting and perplexing question; **“Is the end near?”**

Of course, this question is one that every generation of human beings asks. It’s a question that you’ve, no doubt, asked from time to time...even as I have! With so many issues appearing in the news recently...from the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, to the appearance of ISIS and the escalating wars in the Middle East, to the economic uncertainties in the US and Europe; soothsayers are all around the place, fuelling our deepest fears that the end of the world may be just around the corner!

But let me tell you one thing: **This question about the end of the world is one that human beings have been asking since the beginning of time.** Did you know, in fact, that the oldest recorded prediction of the end of the world was found on Assyrian tablets dating from around 2700 BC. The prediction went like this: *“Our planet is degenerate in these later days; there are signs that the world is speedily coming to an end; bribery and corruption are common; children no longer obey their parents; ...the end of the world is evidently approaching.”*

Isn’t it funny how the same sort of commentary can be heard today? In fact, in every generation there are people who feel strongly that their generation will be the last one? It almost seems as if human beings have an in-built worry about the end of the world!

But, it makes me wonder: Is this question about the end of the world misguided? I mean, instead of worrying about whether the end of the world is near (which, according to scientists, is a very difficult thing to bring about since the physical matter which makes up this world will not simply disappear—even a nuclear war won’t destroy the world!), wouldn’t it be far better for us to ask the more personal and practical question, ***“Is the end of my world near?”***

This will be the question that predominates our discussions as we begin a new series of sermons entitled, ***“Is the end near?”***

Let’s pray.

Matthew 24 and 25 are known as the “Olivet Discourses”—that’s simply because when Jesus spoke these words, He was up on the Mount of Olives, the mountain that directly faces Mount Zion and the city of Jerusalem. It is here that Jesus famously tells His disciples all about **the end of the world**—or, at least, that’s what most commentators think Jesus is talking about. But, I’m not so sure!

But, before I go into any of the specific details about that, let me try and paint a big picture...an overview... of Matthew’s Gospel, reminding you of three specific things (some of which we have seen over the course of our studies in Matthew this past year). This will give us the context in which we can better understand this “Olivet Discourse”.

First, Matthew’s Gospel is about **Jesus, the heavenly King**; the One who comes down into our world via the Virgin Birth to re-establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Secondly, Matthew’s Gospel is about **Satan, the usurper, liar and cheat**; the one who has, thus far, succeeded in derailing God’s Kingdom by distracting God’s people, Israel, from her mission to be salt and light in a darkened world. He will also try to distract Jesus from His attempts to raise up a new Israel to be God’s agents of salt and light.

Thirdly, Matthew’s Gospel is about **three mountains!** On three separate occasions, Jesus climbs up three different ‘mountains’ with His disciples (closer to God?) in order to elaborate the vision of God’s Kingdom. Not only do these three mountains divide the book into three distinct parts, but they set the stage for the battle with Satan that will immediately follow.

- On the first mountain (chapters 5-7), Jesus delivers His Kingdom manifesto known as *the Sermon on the Mount*. In it, He lays out the reality of God’s Heavenly Kingdom as a kingdom of peace, prayer, patience and non-violent power...a Kingdom that will win hearts and minds and ultimately conquer all evil. When He comes down, He is immediately confronted by sickness and demonic forces.

- On the second mountain (chapter 17), on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus is transfigured before His disciples, showing them the fullness of His glory bestowed on Him by His Heavenly Father, in the hope of rallying them to remain true to His call. When He comes down, He immediately has to help His disciples cast out a demon from a young boy.
- Finally, on the third mountain, the Mount of Olives (chapters 24-25), Matthew's Gospel comes to a climax, as Jesus overlooks Jerusalem and pronounces God's judgment on everything that stands in opposition to the non-violent sweep of His Kingdom over the earth. When He comes down from this mountain, Jesus is immediately caught up in a battle with Jerusalem's religious power-brokers as He is betrayed, tried and crucified... and yet, rises triumphantly from the grave.

In today's text, **we are on this third mountain!** In fact, even before Jesus climbs up to the top of this Mount of Olives, He has already begun to pronounce God's judgment on the corrupt religious practices and institutions of Jerusalem! Throughout chapter 23, Jesus levels a series of '7 woes' against the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees because they have become corrupted by the Satanic influences of hypocrisy, pride, selfishness and greed. As such, they are now obstacles to the Kingdom of Heaven! They block, rather than lead, people in the paths of righteousness!

Then, at the very end of chapter 23, Jesus lifts His eyes to the city of Jerusalem with its Temple and religious institutions and declares, ***"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. How often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were unwilling."*** Even the Temple has become an obstacle to the true knowledge of God. This is why Jesus curses it, just like He cursed its religious leaders! ***"Look, your house is being left to you, desolate!"*** It's the curse of barrenness and death!

This, in fact, is clearly what prompts the disciples (starting with verse 1 of today's passage) to point to the Temple and make comments on its majestic beauty! It was as if they were saying to Jesus, ***"Surely, you can't be talking about this wonderful building!"*** But, indeed, that's exactly the building that Jesus is talking about! ***"Do you see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down."***

It's at his point that we need to pause once more and reflect: **What were the disciples thinking?** You see, for a devout Jew, a curse against the Temple was the equivalent of declaring that *the end of the world was near!* In Jewish cosmology, Jerusalem was the navel...the centre...of the Universe. Furthermore, the Temple, at the heart of Jerusalem, was the Universe's foundation; it's bedrock. If the Temple was destroyed, how could the Universe continue? Everything must crumble! It was this idea which prompted them to ask, ***"When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?"***

In response, Jesus uttered those famous words: ***"See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in my name saying, "I am the Christ", and will mislead many. And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not frightened, for these things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and Kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes."***

And here's where all the confusion begins! For although these predictions may, at first, look very detailed and specific, the fact is that they are incredibly generalised and (I believe) deliberately obscure! The way I see it, Jesus is not interested in giving His disciples predictive details about the end of the world. He simply wants to alert them to the end of **their** world—that is, the world as they know it!

This, in fact, fits in with the original question that the disciples asked Him; ***"What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"*** This little word is critical, for what Jesus wants His disciples (and us) to remember is that every generation...every age...will come to an end! All the marvellous structures that we have built; all the power-bases that we have established; all the comfortable situations that we have made for ourselves—all these will vanish! **The end of our world must come!** And that must be our focus—not on the end of the world, but on the end of our world!

So, what would the end of **their world** mean for the disciples? Yes, it would mean *wars and rumours of wars*-- in particular, the wars that the Jews would soon be waging against the Roman Empire (starting in 66AD) as they attempted to overthrow their oppressive rule. It would also mean repeated *famines* which would come as a result of those wars. It would also mean *earthquakes*, some of which are mentioned in the Book of Acts.

That is why most Bible commentators see Jesus' predictions of "wars, famines and earthquakes" as directly referring to the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. And, you know what? They're probably right! BUT...it's far more than that! Just take a look at what Jesus says in verse 8! ***"But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pains."***

Our daughter, Stephanie, gave birth to a beautiful baby girl this past Thursday morning. But, she had to go through a 16 hour labour before this baby was born! Sixteen hours of "birth pains"! Some were fairly easy to handle; but others were excruciating!

What Jesus is saying here about 'birth pains' is the exact same idea that Paul brings up in Romans 8, namely that, **ever since the Fall...** ever since the day when Satan turned our hearts and minds away from our true King... since that day, ***"the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now."*** Jesus wasn't focusing all his thoughts on the up-coming destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies, although He surely had that in mind. Rather, He was telling His disciples (and us) the cosmic reality—that, in every generation...**in every age**...there will always be the need for God to destroy the man-made cities which have become the centre of our lives and in which we so dearly place our trust; **in every age**, God will need to interrupt the plans of the religious power-brokers, bringing down the mighty from their thrones; **in every age**, God must pull down our man-made Temples, one stone at a time, to teach us not to turn these things into idols!

And this is why God allows wars, famines and earthquakes to continue in every generation. As they did with **Job**, these *"earthquake events in our lives"* have the power to strip away and pull down all the things that we, as fallen human beings, tend to put our faith in...the things in which we trust.

And the truth is; wars, earthquakes and famines can never cause the end of the world—they merely bring on the end of **our world**! Why? So that we might see a new world brought to birth out of it!

Isn't that the only reason why any woman would put up with the pain of a 16-hour labour? Over those 16 hours, all your pride and sense of control...all your dignity and power...are stripped away! It's something you vow you will never go through again! And yet, at the end of it all, you have a beautiful new life wrapped up in your arms! It really is worth it!

In other words, all the wars, famines and earthquakes which have been experienced by the human race since the time of the Fall are a necessary part of the groaning of creation as she slowly moves towards the great, new birth of the Universe. And, **in every age**, we, too, must go through some of that same groaning and experience... some of the same humiliation of having everything stripped away...in order for us to (at least partially) experience a new world!

Now, you can be alarmed by these words..., or you can be excited by the new life it promises to bring! Jesus tells us, *Fear not!*

And so, I conclude with this thought—Jesus is standing on the Mount of Olives, the third of three mountains, with His disciples. Only moments before, He has called down God's **curse** on the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees. Then, He delivered words of **judgment** against Jerusalem and the Temple, predicting its utter destruction. Finally, when He's up on the mountain, He speaks to His disciples about wars, famines and earthquakes, almost as if these were necessary tools to bring the fulness of God's Kingdom to earth.

Some would say that He sounds terribly harsh...critical...judgmental... angry! But, remember the whole picture. This is the third mountain; the one that leads to the third battle... a battle, not against flesh and blood, but against the ruler of this world. What Jesus is judging, condemning and targeting for destruction is not the people who are held captive, but the one who has captured them. That's why Jesus came to destroy certain things, not only in the days of His incarnation, but he continues to destroy things in every generation...through war, famine, earthquake and a whole host of other means. What He is destroying are those things which stop the human race from seeing and welcoming the Kingdom of Heaven!

Indeed, you could say that He wants to bring us to the end of our world!

Let's pray.