

“My Lord, What a Morning!”

Matthew 24, read vv. 26-31 ¹

As we come to our fourth Sunday of Black History Month, the spiritual that underlies today’s message is “My Lord, What a Morning!” especially the chorus:

My Lord, what a morning!
My Lord, what a morning!
Oh, my Lord, what a morning
when the stars begin to fall.

The theme of the song is the return of King Jesus in glory at the end of time, and the image of “when the stars begin to fall” comes primarily from Jesus’ statement in verse 29 of Matthew 24, the chapter that is our text this morning, although the idea of the stars falling from the sky and the heavens being darkened is found in a number passages in both Testaments.²

Studying what the Bible teaches about the End of Time is called “eschatology,” which involves the idea that God is moving all of creation and human history toward a purposeful goal, a consummation that involves both judgment and salvation.³ And studying what the Bible teaches about the End of Time is a pursuit well known for generating more heat than light. We’ll see what we can do with it in this brief time together this morning.

The truth of the matter is that every generation since Jesus’ Ascension has believed it was the last; and, while there is wisdom in such expectation, there is the danger of much foolishness as well. It’s interesting that God seems not nearly so eager to give up on this world as we are. In every generation, doomsdayers have emerged to announce God’s displeasure at the mass of human evil and to announce an imminent end to all things because of God’s white-hot anger. Undoubtedly, God is unspeakably hurt by our sin. So far, however, He has not given up on us.

Even so, authors regularly publish books about the imminent End, claiming to know what Jesus said He did not know.⁴ It seems to me that if God had intended for us to have all the details of the future, God would surely have given them to us in a clearer fashion!

Welton Gaddy, the wise pastor who ordained me in Fort Worth many years ago, commented that “Never have so many pages been written on the basis of such scanty knowledge. On this subject, anything seems permissible.” E. Y. Mullins, one of the greatest theologians Baptists ever

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on February 23, 2014.

² See also Mark 13:25, which probably underlies Matthew’s account, together with Isaiah 13:10, 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; Zephaniah 1:15; Revelation 6:12-13, 8:12.

³ The idea that God moves history toward a goal involves the concept of “teleology,” or purpose.

⁴ The best-known writers about “the imminent End” are those known as “dispensational premillennialists.” If you’ve ever seen large, colorful charts about the end times, they were done by dispensational premillennialists.

Dispensational premillennialism dates only to the 1830’s when it was developed by an English pastor named J. N. Darby. An American pastor, Cyrus Scofield, brought Darby’s system to this country and popularized it with his Scofield Study Bible about 1900. You may also have heard of Hal Lindsey, who made millions with his 1970 book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*; and most recently, I imagine you’ve heard of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, who have made quite a lot of money with their *Left Behind* series of books and movies.

Unfortunately, it seems to me that dispensational premillennialists and their complex systems of interpretation are guilty of reading flagrant fancies into the Scripture and of employing circular reasoning in almost everything they do—that is, they assume the truth of the point they’re trying to prove and use that to “prove” their point.

produced, wrote that “No system of interpretation has yet been found that can successfully trace the meaning of all the details.”

W. T. Conner, another great Baptist theologian, wrote that “There has been, and is yet, great diversity of opinion in regard to the return of Christ to earth. A question on which there is so much difference of opinion among earnest Christians ought to be one in which there is a tolerant spirit manifested, and one that is approached with due caution and reserve of judgment. One should not be too dogmatic where it is evidently so easy to miss the way; and when one has pronounced convictions, he should have due respect for good and honest brethren who hold opposite opinions.”

With these many caveats, let me quickly affirm that to say we do not know nearly so much about God’s purposes for the future as some authors would have us believe, that does not leave us in the position of knowing nothing at all. Our task this morning is to identify some of the things we can know; and there’s a great deal we can learn from Matthew 24, if we approach the text with discernment.⁵

One of the most crucial pieces of information with which to begin is to remember that nearly all of the sixty-six documents that comprise our Bibles are edited documents. That is to say that, while these documents are fully inspired by God’s Spirit and are fully trustworthy for our study, they were put together in particular ways for particular purposes. The writers of our four Gospels each organized their material for particular audiences, and understanding this gives us some key insight about passages such as Matthew 24.

William Barclay, the wonderful Scottish commentator, pointed out that “It is one of the great characteristics of Matthew that he gathers together in large blocks the teaching of Jesus about different subjects. In chapter 24 he gathers together things that Jesus said about the future and gives us the vision of things to come. In so doing Matthew weaves together sayings of Jesus about different aspects of the future; and it will make this difficult chapter very much easier to understand if we can disentangle the various strands and look at them one by one.”⁶

This concept of woven threads of meaning is really the golden key that unlocks this chapter. You’ll want to have your Bible open as we make our way through the various threads.

Matthew appears to have blended three topical strands through the 24th chapter of his Gospel, and, while discerning where each strand comes to the fore is not an exact science, we can make a good bit of progress by using this approach. Here are the three themes in their order of first appearance:

1. The Doom of Jerusalem & the Grim Terror of the Siege (Matthew 24:1-2, 15-22, 32-35)
2. The Day of the Lord & The Return of the King (Matthew 24:3-4, 6-8, 14, 23-31, 36-51)
3. Persecution & other Threats to Faith (Matthew 24:4-5, 9-13)

And here are the themes in the order in which we’ll examine them:

1. The Doom of Jerusalem & the Grim Terror of the Siege (Matthew 24:1-2, 15-22, 32-35)

⁵ Taken together, Matthew 24-25 are known as “Jesus Final Discourse” (the fifth in Matthew) or as “the Matthean Apocalypse.”

⁶ William Barclay, “The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2,” *The Daily Study Bible Series*, revised edition (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 300.

2. Persecution & other Threats to Faith (Matthew 24:4-5, 9-13)
3. The Day of the Lord & The Return of the King (Matthew 24:3-4, 6-8, 14, 23-31, 36-51)

**Thread #1: The Doom of Jerusalem & the Grim Terror of the Siege
(Matthew 24:1-2, 15-22, 32-35)**

As chapter 24 begins, Jesus has just had what would be His last confrontation with the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law. As Jesus left the Temple precincts, His disciples invited His attention to the wonder and beauty of its architecture. This Temple was the second Jewish Temple to stand on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. The first was built by Solomon (1 Kings 6:1 ff.) and destroyed in 587 B.C. The second was built under the leadership of Zerubbabel after the Exile (Ezra 2:68 ff.), and it was greatly enhanced by Herod the Great in a huge building project intended to curry favor with the Jews. The Temple was one truly of the wonders of the world.

Barclay noted that “The summit of Mount Sion had been dug away to leave a plateau of 1,000 feet square. At the far end of it . . . the Temple was built of white marble plated with gold, and it shone in the sun so that a man could scarcely bear to look at it. . . . At the corners of the Temple angle stones have been found that measure from 20 to 40 feet in length and which weigh more than 100 tons. . . . Little wonder that the Galilean fishermen . . . called Jesus’ attention to them.”⁷

Jesus’ response to the disciples’ wonder at the marvels of the Temple must have caused greater wonder still: “*Do you see all these things?*” he asked. “*Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down*” (Matthew 24:2).

A little while later, as Jesus sat with the disciples on the Mount of Olives, one of His favorite places for teaching and talking, they asked Him to clarify that conundrum: “*Tell us,*” they said, “*when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*” (Matthew 24:3).

Frank Stagg noted that the disciples’ question revealed their assumption that the destruction of the Temple, the end of the age, and Jesus’ Return were all bound together in one bundle. Jesus broke the bundle and indicated that the catastrophe of the destruction of the temple would foreshadow the judgment at *the close of the age*, but it would not coincide with it.⁸

Stagg’s observation that “Jesus broke the bundle” is another way of saying that there are several streams of information contained in this chapter. The disciples were conflating Israel’s expectation of “the Day of the Lord” with the destruction of the Temple and with Jesus’ final Return, and Jesus told them that these were related but separate events.

Jesus’ answer would have been easier for us to understand if Matthew’s editing process had been more like that to which we are accustomed. One of the key misunderstandings that arises from Matthew’s structure is that it appears to us at first that Jesus’ words in vv. 32-35 apply to His Return rather than to the destruction of the Temple. Here’s what Jesus said:

“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. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

⁷ Barclay, pp. 304-305.

⁸ Frank Stagg, “Matthew,” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton Allen, volume 8 (Nashville: Broadman, 1969), p. 217.

William Barclay helps us unravel things when he asked, “What if the phrase *until these things have happened* has no reference to the Second Coming? What if their reference is, in fact, to the prophecy with which the chapter began, the siege and fall of Jerusalem? If we accept that, there is no difficulty. What Jesus is saying is that these grim warnings of his regarding the doom of Jerusalem will be fulfilled within that very generation—and they were, in fact, fulfilled forty years later. It seems by far the best course to take verses 32-35 as referring, not to the Second Coming, but to the doom of Jerusalem, for then all the difficulties . . . are removed.”⁹

In Matthew’s edited version of Jesus’ teaching, Jesus proceeded in verse 4 to talk about His Return. We’ll come to that in due time, but the next theme in order of logic has to do with the terrible siege that would destroy Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Jesus spoke of this siege in verses 15-22:

*“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 housetop go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get their 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, unequalled 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.”*¹⁰

When Jesus spoke of “*the abomination that causes desolation*,” He was using a phrase from Daniel 12:11 that referred to events in the second century B.C. You may remember that in about 170 B.C., Antiochus Epiphanes, the king of Syria, determined to stamp out Judaism and to introduce Greek religion into Judea. He captured Jerusalem and desecrated the Temple by erecting an altar to Zeus in the Temple Court, by sacrificing pigs upon the Altar of Burnt Offering, and by turning the Temple chambers into public brothels.

In response, the Jews went to war against their oppressors in what was known as the Maccabean Revolt, led by a man named Judas Maccabaeus. The revolt was successful, and the Temple was cleansed and made holy once more, an event celebrated to this day in the festival of Hanukkah.

Making reference to that event, Jesus prophesied that the same thing was going to happen again, that the Holy Place would be desecrated once more. Jesus saw coming upon Jerusalem a repetition of the terrible things that had happened nearly 200 years before; only this time there would be no Judas Maccabaeus. This time there would be no deliverance and no purification. There would be nothing but ultimate destruction.”¹¹

⁹ Barclay, p. 315. Ben Witherington III agrees: “Verse 34 and its phrase ‘this generation’ have been contorted in various ways and given various meanings (is it referring to ‘this race?’), but such exegetical gymnastics are unnecessary if the parable goes with vv. 1-28 rather than vv. 29-31. Elsewhere when the First Evangelist or Mark use the phrase ‘this generation,’ it refers to Jesus’ contemporaries (see Matthew 11:16, 12:41-44, 23:36; Mark 8:12, 38, 9:19) and is not a generic ethnic reference to a race of people. From a biblical point of view a generation was about forty years, and not coincidentally it was that length of time between the time of Jesus’ death and the destruction of the temple. Clearly the *tauta panta* [all these things] of v. 34 should be related to the same phrase in Jesus’ initial question (v. 2). Thus this verse was fulfilled quite literally around A.D. 70” (Ben Witherington III, “Matthew,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*, ed. R. Scott Nash (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), pp. 453-454).

¹⁰ Cp. Luke 21:20-24.

¹¹ Barclay, p. 306.

Jesus' prophecy did indeed come to pass within the lifetimes of many of His hearers when the Roman army laid siege to Jerusalem during the First Jewish-Roman War. This siege, one of the most terrible in human history, ended in A.D. 70 with the sacking of the city and the destruction of the Temple. The Arch of Titus still stands in Rome to celebrate this victory.¹²

Although many of the Christians in Jerusalem saw the signs Jesus foretold and fled the city prior to the beginning of the siege, thus saving their lives, other Jews fled into the city by the hundreds of thousands, nearly all going to their deaths.¹³ Josephus recorded that 1,100,000 persons starved during the siege and that 97,000 were taken captive when the city walls were breached.¹⁴

Thread #2: Persecution & other Threats to Faith (Matthew 24:4-5, 9-13)

When Jesus separated the destruction of Jerusalem from the time of His Return, He obviously identified an interim period between those two events. The second thread of teaching Matthew weaves into this chapter has to do with warnings and guidance about how to live in that interim period:

“Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and will deceive many. . . . Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matthew 24:4-5, 9-13).

Barclay pointed out that in these warnings, Jesus told us “that God has not abandoned the world; for all its wickedness, the world is still the scene in which God’s purpose is being worked out. It is not abandonment that God contemplates; it is intervention.”

In these warnings, Jesus told us “that even a [huge] crescendo of evil must not discourage us. An essential part of the [idea] of the Day of the Lord [was] that a complete breakdown of all moral standards and an apparently complete disintegration of [world order] must precede it. But, for all that, this is not the prelude to destruction; [so much as] it is the prelude to recreation.”

And finally, in these warnings Jesus told us that both judgment and a new creation are certain. These warnings reveal that God’s plan is not the obliteration of the world, but its renewal. Jesus’ main point in this section was that, whatever we humans may make of the world, God has not abandoned us.¹⁵

Thread #3: The Day of the Lord & The Return of the King (Matthew 24:3-4, 6-8, 14, 23-31, 36-51)

The third, and by far the most extensive, thread in Matthew 24 has to do with “The Day of the Lord” and “The Return of the King.” With this thread, we return again to the disciples’ initial question: “*Tell us,*” *they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”* (Matthew 24:3).

¹² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_\(70\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_(70))

¹³ www.academia.edu/2057245/

[Fleeing Forward the Departure of Christians from Jerusalem to Pella](#)

¹⁴ Barclay, p. 308. See Josephus, *Wars*, 5:10, 7:1; *Antiquities*, 15:11.

¹⁵ Barclay, pp. 308-309.

When the disciples asked Jesus about “*the sign of your coming*” (Matthew 24:3), the word translated “coming” is *parousia*,¹⁶ which is the normal Greek word for the arrival of a governor into his province or for the coming of a king to his subjects.¹⁷ As often as we use the words today, it’s interesting to note that the New Testament doesn’t ever use the phrase, “the Second Coming,” though it does tell us that Jesus *will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him* (Hebrews 9:28).

The key points Jesus made about His Return in His lengthy comments in this chapter are really pretty simple. **First, Jesus said in no uncertain terms that no one will know or will be able to predict when He will return**, affirming that “*the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him*” (Matthew 24:36, 42, 44).¹⁸ We can put our charts away.

Second, Jesus told us that prior to His return, though not revealing its specific timing, there will be enormous signs in the heavens: “*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*” (Matthew 24:29). Whatever specific events may be predicted here, it is clear that they will be obvious and cataclysmic. We might say that “all *heaven will break loose*”!¹⁹

Third, Jesus tells us that there will be absolutely no doubt about the fact that He has returned. Believers and unbelievers alike will see Him “*coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory*” (Matthew 24:30).²⁰ The New Testament knows of no secret coming of Christ for His own. When He comes, He will split the sky!

Fourth, when Jesus returns, He will come for separation and for judgment. Justice will be done in the Cosmos. Jesus referred to this judgment and this separation in chapter 24 when He spoke of the faithful and the wicked servants (Matthew 24:45-51), and then He gave the most famous example of separation and judgment in chapter 25 when He spoke about “the sheep and the goats” (Matthew 25:31-46).

Frank Stagg noted that in all of his reporting and editing, Matthew’s central concern in this passage is for a balanced eschatological faith. He wants us to seriously expect the imminent return of Christ on the one hand, and, on the other, to give careful attention to our personal readiness, to be faithful to our sacred trust, to be obedient to Christ’s commission to preach the gospel to all nations, to refuse to be misled by false prophets and false Messiahs, and to refuse to engage in speculation about the time of Christ’s return.²¹

Well after all this, so what? Here are a few takeaways:

- 1. Jesus is coming again.**
- 2. He is going to come *when least expected*.**

¹⁶ The term *parousia*, which appears in a number of places in the New Testament having to do with Jesus’ Return 1 Corinthians 15:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:19, 3:13; 2 Peter 3:4; 1 John 2:28), appears only in this chapter in the four Gospels (vv. 3, 27, 37, 39); Witherington, p. 449.

¹⁷ Barclay, p. 312.

¹⁸ Barclay went so far as to affirm that those who try to predict the time of Christ’s return are guilty of blasphemy (p. 315).

¹⁹ Signs in the heavens are commonly associated in the Old Testament with the Day of the Lord (Isaiah 13:10, 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Joel 2:10, 31, 3:15; cf. Revelation 6:12-14, 8:12) and so here as well (Witherington, p. 451).

²⁰ This statement reflects Old Testament descriptions of God’s coming; only this time the role of deity is taken by the Son of Man (Witherington, p. 454). See also Revelation 6:12-17.

²¹ Stagg, p. 215.

3. There will be *no doubt* that He has arrived.

4. *We will be judged* on the basis of whether we've been doing what He told us to do.

Since the Return of Christ cannot be predicted with specificity, Jesus urged us to stay constantly prepared for it. Jesus said that the stunning suddenness of His coming will be like that of a thief in the night, like lightning in a storm, like the terrible judgment that fell on Sodom, like the flood of Noah's day.

There is nothing wrong with eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, working in the field or grinding at the mill, which are examples Jesus used in this chapter. What is fatal is such preoccupation with these normal and necessary matters that we neglect to watch for the coming of the Lord and to be ready for it.²²

Barclay concluded that "To live without watchfulness invites disaster. . . . but to get this picture right, we must remember that **the watching of the Christian for the coming of Christ is not that of terror-stricken fear and shivering apprehension; it is the watching of eager expectation for the coming of glory and joy.**"²³

At the end of history (HisStory), the only thing that will matter is a relationship of love with God and obedience to God through Jesus Christ. For some, the time of Christ's coming will be a time of terror, not because of some calloused and arbitrary decision on God's part, but because of the settled direction of all the decisions of their lives.

For others, His coming will mark the completion of their salvation. Having accepted Jesus as Savior and followed Him as Lord, they—and perhaps we!—will sing and celebrate when He appears!

When we look at the world around us, you and I may sometimes wonder why Jesus hasn't already come back to drop the final curtain on this fractured, fragmented, and fermenting creation. Peter told us why: "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*" (2 Peter 3:9).

At the same time, Peter also told us that "*the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming*" (2 Peter 3:10-12a).

Finally, on this idea of "living holy and godly lives and looking forward to the day of God," here are the words to another black spiritual that wrap it all up pretty well:

"There's a King and a Captain high,
And He's coming by and by,
And He'll find me hoeing cotton when He comes.

You can hear His legions charging in the regions of the sky,
And He'll find me hoeing cotton when He comes.

²² Stagg, p. 222. It's worth noting that, exactly opposite to the dispensational ideas about "the Rapture," the "taken" ones are the unfortunate ones, swept away by judgment. The ones left behind or left standing are the fortunate ones, like Noah (Witherington, p. 455).

²³ Barclay, p. 317.

There's a Man they thrust aside,
Who was tortured till He died,
And He'll find me hoeing cotton when He comes.

He was hated and rejected,
He was scorned and crucified,
And He'll find me hoeing cotton when He comes.

When He comes! When He comes!
He'll be crowned by saints and angels when He comes!

They'll be shouting out Hosanna! to the Man that men denied,
And I'll kneel among my cotton when He comes."²⁴



²⁴ Cited in Barclay, p. 318. Probably comes from French Earl Oliver, *Oliver's Songs of Deliverance* (Kansas City, 1908).