

- *Talk to someone outside of the church about the end of the world. Find out what they think about this, and whether there is any sympathy now for the Christian belief in the return of Christ in glory to complete His church.*
- *Pray to ask the Lord for help in the right discernment of His Word. Clearly, Jesus believed that people would be led astray over the matter of His return, and gave the subject a fair amount of attention. Seek the Lord's will.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, be the cornerstone of my life's work and the foundation of my endeavours, I pray. I place my trust in You, and ask that as I travel from day to day, everything I do may contribute to the building of Your eternal Kingdom. Through Jesus Christ I pray; AMEN

Prayer

Dear Jesus, hear us as we show you the depths of feeling in our hearts. For there is a terrible sin within the church of God of hypocritical self righteousness, and even we who pray have sometimes fallen to its devastating grasp on human hearts. But as we confess our sin and that of others, we ask you, forgive us now and cleanse our church. Make us once again a people of the Apostolic Faith, a people of Your Word, a people set for Gospel work according to your call. Revive us once again, Lord Jesus, in power. Alleluia!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Weapons of War

Pray today for those involved in the industries of war; who design bombs and means of mass destruction. Pray that something of God's moral Word will speak into their hearts.

On-going prayers

- *Give thanks for the security of the life God has given you*
- *Pray for Thailand as its people continue to seek democracy*
- *Pray for the strained relationships between India and Pakistan*

Meditation

Prayer and mediation is a pause, a break,
A chance to take stock and think;
To refresh our spirits, and be at peace,
To stand aside from what we do each day ...

More than this, our God would speak to us,
And break the daily cycle of life
To reveal important things we fail to see
So let us give Him space, and let Him speak ...

Far beyond our natural consciousness,
God's plan unfolds with clarity;
He guides us with a willing hand of love
To walk a path our natural eyes can never see ...

Prayer and meditation does not stop
Our normal human faculties;
It opens up our lives to spiritual dynamite!
The presence of our God let loose in human flesh ...

Bible Study - Matthew 24:1-8

¹ *As Jesus left the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² Then he asked them, 'You see all these, do you not? Amen, I tell you; not a single stone here will be left upon another; everything will be pulled down.'*

³ *When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, 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?' ⁴ Jesus answered, 'Watch out that no*

one deceives. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Messiah!" and they will deceive many.

⁶ You will hear of wars and rumours of wars; ensure you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: ⁸ all these things are but the beginnings of the birth pangs.'

Review

To this day, many are confused about what will happen at the end of time, so it is invaluable that Jesus taught about this, beginning here in Matthew 24 and continuing into the next chapter. At the time Jesus spoke, He had just finished a day of contentious confrontation with the religious authorities; all had tried to outwit Jesus and failed, and all were seeking to trap Him so that they could charge Him with the offence of blasphemy, for which he could be killed. None of us can imagine the pressure on Jesus as He left and walked out of the city to the Mount of Olives (24:3), where He sat down to talk to His disciples. The Mount of Olives was the place people believed God would stand to announce the End, according to the prophecy of Zechariah (14:4), so the stage was set for a conversation between Jesus and the disciples of considerable importance.

The destruction of the temple From the Mount of Olives, the new and unfinished Temple built by Herod was a magnificent sight. The history of the site was precious to God's people, and referred to by many as 'Zion', the place of God's dwelling with His people. However, Jesus' recent experiences there had not been very positive (see chapters 21-23). The disciples asked Jesus what He really thought of the great temple (42:1)? His response was decisive; it would all be pulled down! To the disciples, this idea was extraordinary. Why should this happen? The Temple had been pulled down before by the Babylonians (Micah 3:2, Jer. 7:12-14, 26:1-19), so what did this prophecy mean?

It was years before the Romans, in AD70, fulfilled the prophecy by destroying the Temple in an action designed to stifle Jewish dissent at Rome. When this happened, many early Christians would have expected Jesus' second coming to happen almost immediately, for which they had been waiting since Jesus ascended. The fulfilment of one of Jesus' known prophecies about this would have seemed to them like confirmation of their hope. However, it did not happen, and history continued as it has until today.

The coming of the End Times? Matthew wrote to the people of the early church for whom this was a pressing issue, and he recalled Jesus' specific teaching in order to help them understand what was happening, and when the 'End' would come. Indeed, the disciples asked Jesus this specifically (24:3). It is interesting that Jesus' first answer was not what we might imagine. He said 'Watch out that no one deceives. For many will come in my name ...' (24:4,5). In other words, before saying any more, Jesus was concerned that His disciples would not be astray on the matter. The disciples themselves had been raised with the idea that the Messiah would come and bring God's Kingdom, which would immediately herald the 'End'. Jesus had taught them that the Kingdom was indeed 'at hand', so they naturally expected it to be completed? As Jesus continued it became clear that the popular idea of the time of the 'End' was not what God had in mind, and what Jesus said to the disciples was significantly new teaching. In addition, Jesus was also concerned that false teaching would create problems for His followers (24:4)

We know from the Acts of the Apostles that in the years immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection, there were false teachers in the church (Acts 5:36-37, 21:38). Paul wrote about this subject in most of his letters, coming across all manner of false and deceptive

teaching (2 Cor 11:13, Phil 1:18, also 2 Peter 2:1f.). False 'Messiahs' were the scourge of the early church, but the really difficult deception came from those who said they knew when Christ would come again. Jesus' direct teaching about this, however, was clear.

The end ... but not yet The last three verses of our text all warn of what is not a sign of the coming of Christ in at the 'End'. Jesus graphically spoke about 'wars and rumours of wars' (24:6), and natural disasters such as 'famines and earthquakes' (24:7), but clearly said that this was a feature of the beginnings of God's Kingdom on earth, already announced by Jesus (4:17f.). They were not a sign that the 'End' was about to happen! We can well imagine that ancient peoples believed natural disasters were acts of God that had particular meaning, as people do to this day. However, we do not know how God is involved in these natural phenomena, and Jesus told us in plain language that they were not necessarily a sign of the 'End' (24:8).

Jesus did describe these things as the 'beginnings of the birth-pangs' (24:8); the last word otherwise translatable as 'sufferings' and derived, of course, from the experience of women in labour. Jesus therefore meant that everything he had listed, such as wars and natural disasters, was part of human experience in every age and they were a foretaste of the sufferings and persecutions of God's people that would happen before the End. For God, the suffering of His people is something of great significance, and in the next few days, we will see more accurately how this relates to the End.

I find it strange when Christian people, despite these words of Jesus, still try to examine the wars and disasters of the world to see if they fit some prophetic passage of scripture from either the Old Testament (usually Daniel) of the New Testament (usually Revelation), and the coming of Christ. Jesus' teaching is clear; these things are a general function of history and they tell us that God's Kingdom is at hand, but they do not tell us when the 'End' will come.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group, or consider for yourself, what are your basic views about the coming of Christ? What does this text say about these views?
2. Imagine yourself in the place of the disciples. How would they have reacted to what Jesus said?
3. Is it true that there have been wars continuously in human history? If this is the case, what can we expect to learn anything from them?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

When thinking about the second coming of Christ and the End of the World, the one theme fundamental to Christian discipleship is our ability to live and work as if the Lord were to come at any moment, for we do not know when He will come. This lies behind all Jesus' teaching about the End Times, as well as the teaching of Paul in his letters. It is a motivation for action, rather than words, and for doing good rather than being inactive; for who would wish to be found by our Lord doing what is not right, if He were to come in glory at any moment of time? For some, this sounds like a threat. For me, it is a motivation to do all I can to serve my God and do it well.

Ideas for discipleship programme