

The Anticipation of Difficulties
Matthew 24:4-14
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Matthew 24-25 records the Olivet Discourse, spoken by Jesus *“As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives”* (24:3), the last of Jesus’ five discourses in this Gospel (cf. chapters 5-7, 10, 13, and 18). These two chapters detail the events leading up to the second coming of Jesus in the establishment of the messianic kingdom upon earth. The Jewish nation had rejected their Messiah and stood judged accordingly (Matthew 23:34-36). The judgment included the temple being left by God desolate and spiritually worthless (Matthew 23:38). Ultimately, Jesus told them *“not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down”* (Matthew 24:2).

This discourse was precipitated when *“Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately”* (Mark 13:3), asking *“Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”* (Matthew 24:3). Jesus would not answer their first question about the timing of when the temple would be destroyed. Instead, He focused His words on the second question of His return and the end of the age. Therefore, all of Matthew 24-25 addresses events related to the sign of His coming and the end of the age.

Jesus is not addressing believers in the church era, for they will either have died or have been taken up by the Lord before this end of the age commences. *“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord”* (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). The events of the end of the age involve the final seven year period prophesied by Daniel 9:24-27.

Deception from false messiahs (24:4-5)

Jesus began with the words, *“See to it that no one misleads you.”* It is important that no one misleads the disciples into thinking that certain events, such as the destruction of Jerusalem, would be the sign of His coming and of the end of the age. Throughout church history, generations have considered the events of their day to be unprecedented and that they are at the end of the age. Jesus does not want us to be so misled. While His return for the church is imminent, His final work through Israel awaits the signs associated with the tribulation period.

The deception of false teachers exists throughout the church age. *“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned”* (2 Peter 2:1-2). This deception will escalate to an unprecedented level in the tribulation age.

People will claim *“I am the Christ!”* in their attempt to mislead many. When Jesus truly returns, there will be no need for anyone to analyze whether this is the real Jesus. When He comes, every knee will bow (cf. Philippians 2:10) and His arrival will be impossible to miss, *“But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory”* (Matthew 24:29-30).

Jesus will repeat this warning later in this discourse, *“Then if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here is the Christ,’ or ‘There He is,’ do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance”* (24:23-24). Given this dramatic description of the Lord’s return, if those living in the time when many will claim to be the Christ could deceive many, we should easily dismiss anyone who claims to be the Christ today.

Disputes between nations (24:6-7)

Just as there will be many claiming to be the Messiah, there will be an increase in conflicts between nations as a sign of the end of the age and of His coming. This generation experiencing these signs must not become frightened because these wars and rumors of wars are necessarily a part of God’s sovereign plan that is unfolding at the end of the age. There will be nations, or individual ethnic groups (cf. Matthew 28:19), which will rise up against one another, along with entire kingdoms of people groups which will be engaged in conflict.

The wars and rumors of wars have also been with us throughout the history of the church. Each generation can become greatly concerned about conflicts at their time. The book of Revelation gives further detail regarding these wars that the world will engage in during the coming tribulation period.

Devastation in the world (24:7-8)

Just as there is the sign of increased wars, there is the sign that *“in various places there will be famines and earthquakes.”* Luke 21:11 gives added information, *“and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.”* There will be great devastation in various parts of the world. Just as the wars affect nations and kingdoms, so too these plagues and earthquakes will be spread throughout the world.

These words are reflected in the events of the tribulation period described in the Book of Revelation:

- Revelation 6:8 describes the famine in the unveiling of the fourth scroll of judgment, *“to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth.”*
- Revelation 8:5ff describes an earthquake, *“Then the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar, and threw it to the earth; and there followed peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake.”*
- Revelation 9:18 describes a third of the earth being killed by plagues, *“A third of mankind was killed by these three plagues.”*

But these signs also are not the end of the age, they are the beginning of the end of the age, that is, the beginning of the tribulation period. This happens before the abomination of desolation stands in the holy place (Matthew 24:15). According to Daniel 12:11, *“From the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished and the abomination of desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days.”* When the abomination of desolation comes, it will then usher in the worst three and one-half years in world history.

Matthew 24:8, *“But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs,”* speaks to this beginning part of the tribulation period. The imagery of birth pains is used often in the Old Testament to describe the period of great distress which will precede the coming Messianic kingdom (Isaiah 13:8; 26:17; Jeremiah 4:31; 6:24; Micah 4:9-10; cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:3). It communicates the beginning of the events of the end of the age, just as birth pains communicate the beginning of the end of a pregnancy. Since labor pains do not begin at the conception of the pregnancy, it is wrong to view 24:8 as referencing the general events throughout the entire church age. This is limited to the final seven-year tribulation period where God concludes His work through the people of Israel.

Not only does birth pain signal that a woman is nearing the end of her pregnancy, they also intensify as the birth gets closer. This growth of the pain in labor corresponds with the suffering endured during the tribulation period. These initial wars, famines, plagues and earthquakes in the first part are only the beginning of the distress the people of that day will experience.

Also, birth pain precedes the joy of new life. There is a great hope and expectation of the birth of a child. The excitement of what is coming enables those suffering to endure. As the pain of labor precedes the new era of a birth of a child for a family, so the difficulties of this tribulation period precede the new era of the kingdom of God upon the earth.

If we compare the description of the beginning of birth pain in Matthew 24:5-7 with the seals of Revelation 6, we see that the beginning of birth pain corresponds to the breaking of the seals of judgment. Therefore, the pestilence, death, famine, earthquakes will begin the earlier part of the tribulation period.

Difficulties for believers (24:9)

Another effect of this period of great distress will impact the believers in Christ, *“Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name.”* While certainly the disciples that Jesus spoke to suffered great trials and most were killed, this extends beyond them. As with His other discourses, Jesus spoke these words not only to His disciples, but to generations beyond His disciples.

In 24:9, Jesus introduces the key word *“tribulation.”* This will be found again in 24:21, 29 and is only found in Matthew’s Gospel. It is the central characteristic of the period of time that Jesus addressed. These seven years will see an intense opposition to Christ’s disciples by *“all nations.”* This reference to being hated by all nations also shows that this refers to a time beyond the generation that Jesus spoke to. The going of the Lord’s people to all nations remains in the future.

This tribulation is on account of Christ’s name, for they hated Jesus first (John 15:18). This also corresponds to the fifth seal of Revelation 6:9-10, *“When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’”*

Defection of apostates (24:10-13)

Because of this persecution from the worldwide opposition to the followers of Jesus, there will be many who *“will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another.”* These are people who have enjoyed the blessing of the community of faith, but when great hardship appears, the benefits of participation no longer are worth the suffering. Worst of all, they do not simply depart the faith, but they contribute to the suffering of the believers through hateful betrayal, serving to intensify the time of tribulation.

These apostates were never sincere followers of Jesus. They were opportunists who served themselves. True believers can have times of weakness, such as when Peter denied knowing Jesus when he was fearful (Matthew 26:69-75). But these are those who merely professed faith in Jesus and because their faith was not real, they acted accordingly.

This turning away from the faith has occurred throughout church history, *“They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us”* (1 John 2:19). We ought not to be surprised when professing believers depart or even act in hateful ways. This is simply the manifestation of who they truly are, since you can only fake the Christian life for so long.

However, during the tribulation period, the suffering of believers will bring compressed time for such defections. This is due to the dramatic increase in the difficulties associated with following Jesus. This will even affect individual families, *“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by all because of My name”* (Mark 13:12-13). Such opposition has the effect of purifying the community of believers, both by absence of defectors from the God’s people, and by the trials they bring that produce endurance for the faithful (cf. James 1:2-4).

Not only will defections come because of the persecutions, but they will also come because *“Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many.”* As the evil one inflicts distress, he is behind those false prophets who lead many from the faith (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:13-14). These false prophets contribute to the increase in lawlessness and the love of people growing cold (24:12). False teachers often cause their followers to act sinfully and this results in others being against them. Because they are a false religion, this lack of love will create additional tribulations for the true believers.

Jesus' statement, *"But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved,"* does not mean that the person's endurance produces salvation, but rather that the endurance of the true believer demonstrates the reality of their salvation. Specifically, the one who endures to the end in the tribulation is the one who does not fall away. Sincere believers in Jesus will continue in the faith, because it is God who works in them for His good pleasure (cf. Philippians 2:13). *"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 1:6).

Endurance is seen as evidence of true belief in the Scripture. Jesus taught this earlier in Matthew 10:21-22, *"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved."* He also said, *"If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine"* (John 8:31). Those who have true saving faith will endure and not turn away from the Lord to join with those who persecute God's people.

Declaration of the gospel (24:14)

The final description of the tribulation period is, *"This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come."* This is another reason why Matthew 24 could not be fulfilled in the first century with the destruction of Jerusalem, for we still have not preached the gospel of the kingdom in the whole world.

Revelation 7:1-8 and 14:1-5 teach of the 144,000 that appear pivotal to reaching all people groups with the gospel. *"And I saw another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people"* (Revelation 14:6; cf. Revelation 7:9).

Many missionary-minded Christians have used verse 14 to teach that the gospel must be preached to all people in order for Christ to return. This verse does not teach this, for this is descriptive of the events of the tribulation age, not the church age. There is nothing necessary that must occur before Jesus can return for His church (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). He can come at any moment, *"in a twinkling of an eye"* (1 Corinthians 15:52). While we have a great responsibility that *"repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations"* (Luke 24:47), the return of the Lord for His church does not await the completion of this task. For now, we eagerly await His coming (Philippians 3:20-21; Titus 2:11-14).

Conclusion

Jesus chose to focus His response to His disciples on the second part of their question in verse three, *“what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”* He listed six signs that will signal the initial stage of the end of the age before He returns. The first was that people would come to lead many astray by claiming to be the Messiah (24:5). The second sign would be wars that would break out on the earth (24:6). The third sign continues that distress in the world, as famines and earthquakes occur in various places. Yet these things only signal the beginning of the signs of the end of the age.

The followers of Jesus will not only experience the difficulties of wars, famines and earthquakes, but they will also suffer hateful betrayal by those who have been led astray from the faith. There will be no nation that will be safe for God’s faithful as the lack of love, combined with an increasing unlawfulness, will bring persecution upon all true disciples of Christ. The hatred of the world because of Christ’s name is assisted by these apostate religious traitors.

Nevertheless, those who truly believe in Jesus Christ will, by the grace of God, continue in the faith until the end of the age. In spite of such persecution, God’s people will persevere throughout the time of the tribulation period. Not only will they endure, but they will abound in their service of the gospel of the kingdom. As a result of their faithfulness, the gospel will go forth to the whole world, leading to some people of every ethnic group belonging to Christ when He returns to establish His kingdom upon the earth.

For today, *“we wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come”* (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Not only should we take great encouragement in knowing that we will be rescued from the wrath of the tribulation period, as Christ will return for His church, but that He will be faithful to all believers, even those experiencing this time of great distress. The Lord is faithful and all those who are His will endure to the end.