

## Matthew 24

### Prophetic perspective

#### See that no one leads you astray

<https://www.facebook.com/watch?v=624026825524052>

I was amazed by those drawings. Your brain forces you to see a man teetering over a chasm, or risking falling off those planks.

But go back a good few hundred years, and you might notice something different about the paintings of those days. Take a look at **these** I dug out on Google. You know there's something not quite right about them. There's an element of realism that is missing. I know that we have some very skillful artists among our congregation, and they'd latch onto this immediately.

It looks as if there are big houses and small houses, for example, and the small ones seem to be just perched on the top of the bigger ones. What's missing - either deliberately, or because it was before they had worked out how to portray things this way - is **perspective**. See how these pictures show how you can plan out a picture to make it look so much more realistic - as we saw in that video.

And now that would make more sense of the little houses perched on the bigger houses. Of course we could quickly work out that that was what the artist was trying to portray. The smaller houses weren't really smaller, just more distant.

But there is an added complication, which is much more modern maths than ancient art, a concept they call self-similarity. There are some kinds of structures that really give no clue as to what their scale is. Have a look at these two pictures: **Cornwall** and **(inverted) Italy**. I've seen this on an old tea-towel, with Italy the right way round, looking like rather wonky mirror images, but suggesting that Cornwall is just as wonderful and exotic a place to visit as Italy.

But think about the scale. If Cornwall is roughly 100 miles long ... could you tell just by looking at them like this how long Italy is? A quick bit of Google research comes up with the answer of ...? 600 miles. But you wouldn't have been able to work that out, just from the picture. Italy's jaggedness is very similar to Cornwall's jaggedness. And that means that, once again, you don't get the perspective of *scale* just from the outline of a country.

I reckon that this is the main thing that makes this chapter in Matthew's Gospel such a tricky one. It is like a picture painted without the clues of perspective that we have grown to expect. And that means that we don't know, immediately, as we read it, whether we're seeing at one point the 100 miles of Cornwall or the 600 miles of Italy. Or what I mean is, is Jesus talking about something that has already happened in history, the events of AD 70, when the Romans came and obliterated the Temple, or something still in the future for us, too, when, as Jesus says here ...

***“... they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”***

(Matthew 24:30)

I think that's fairly safe to pin down as still some time in our future - though we might still have to question how *far* in our future we're talking about. But a whole lot of the rest of what we see here, for us ... is it already past ... is it ongoing ... or is it still to come? What *perspective* are we supposed to have, at each point through this chapter?

Folks, today is still going to be tricky. I've spent a moment just trying to explain the different viewpoints that we have to distinguish between as we go through it, and we won't necessarily agree on every point that I say I think might be past, present or future for us. But there is an overall take-away message that we need to get into our heads as we try to unpick the puzzle that is Matthew chapter 24: **Jesus' answer warns and comforts his disciples about events in the near and the far future**

There's one key principle that applies in two very different ways throughout this passage, that we will need to put in place before we embark upon some tentative suggestions as regards what is past, what is present, and what is future here:

Be alert: “see that no one leads you astray” (4)

Be alert: “stay awake” (42)

Past, future and present

- **Be alert: “see that no one leads you astray” (4)**

Quick reminder of where we're at, first of all. In a couple of chapters, Matthew will be telling us about the arrest and trial and crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This looks to be some of his very last words before that final cycle starts. Matthew has shown us Jesus arriving in Jerusalem only a few days earlier. We've witnessed the final few verbal pyrotechnics in the Temple between Jesus and the various groups who successively attack him: the chief priests, the Jewish elders, the Pharisees, the scribes, the Herodians, the Sadducees.

We've heard - and probably rocked back on our heels - as Jesus denounces the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, in particular, in the previous chapter:

***“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! ...”***

(Matthew 23:13)

But Jesus is not seethingly angry. Every word of this, I would rather argue, is carefully controlled, and motivated just as much by grief as by anger. He *laments!*

***“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children***

***together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”***

(Matthew 23:37)

And, I think, we can see in a single short phrase, the reason for that lament. Despite all the hopes down through the OT for what this “house” - this *temple* - should be and signify ... that chapter is now closed.

***“See, your house is left to you desolate.”***

(Matthew 23:38)

The temple, the place where God would symbolically meet with human beings, has been declared **condemned**. It stands now ready for demolition.

***In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.***

(Hebrews 8:13)

And yet, as so often, Jesus’ disciples just don’t get it. There’s pathos in the words that start chapter 24, I reckon. This is like the final time you leave a building which was, at least in principle, home. The door is shut behind you one final time.

***Jesus left the temple and was going away, ...***

(Matthew 24:1)

But his disciples do not notice the sadness in his step. They are still enthusing about this place.

***... when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple.***

(Matthew 24:1)

And, humanly speaking, it was still a glorious sight. When the sun came up, particularly, the gold and the marble could be dazzlingly bright. But that was simply the outward shell. Inside, remember, Jesus now sees desolation. And with, I suspect, a heavy heart, Jesus knows he needs to puncture this rose-tinted bubble.

***But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”***

(Matthew 24:2)

It looks as if the short journey across from the temple to the Mount of Olives, over to the east of Jerusalem, might have been a silent one, in the light of Jesus’ words. Matthew at least chooses to record no words spoken as they make their way out of the city. It is only as they sit down - quite possibly looking back across the Kidron valley, to the outline of the temple, maybe now somewhat more in the shade

at the end of this long day of disputes. But questions have been brewing as they walked along.

***As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"***

(Matthew 24:3)

It's one question, the way Matthew records it. But do you think these disciples were expecting one or two answers? I've read stuff this week which insists that the disciples knew these were two *different* events - the destruction of the temple, and the end of the age - presuming that Jesus' "coming" pretty much coincides with "the end of the age". And I've read stuff which insists the opposite: that they thought all three things are going to happen at roughly the same point in human history.

And that is one of the big problems we get when it comes to working out what Jesus is saying here in this chapter. OK, I'm happy with the "coming" and "the end of the age" referring to the same kind of overall event - but is that separate from this enormous catastrophe falling upon Jerusalem, separated by, we would say now, with hindsight, thousands of years?

If it's all one event, that simplifies things in some ways. But then we get left with a verse like *this* sticking out like a sore thumb:

***"Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."***

(Matthew 24:34)

So you get people translating the word "generation" instead as "race" - the Jewish race, more broadly - or even the whole *human* race ... which seems a bit too obvious to have been worth saying in the first place.

Folks, I could spend absolutely ages outlining the backgrounds to a huge number of varying takes on this whole subject, giving it its theological name, of *eschatology*. Back when Jenny and I were still just "going out", we once listened together to a tape which we hoped would clarify the topic for us. It didn't. It was just the best part of an hour saying, basically, some people look at it this way, some other people look at it a different way. And though they didn't say this, it was left pretty much open, as if to say, *you pays your money, you takes your choice*.

To be quite honest, I still haven't quite paid my money and plumped for one particular choice here, even now. So don't think - or don't *fear* - that I'll just come up with one particular scheme this morning, and expect you all to but into it. But I do want to give you one key principle of interpretation that I *am* convinced of, and then just come back to this passage, and see what we can make of it together.

That one point I am convinced of, then: the book of Revelation *does not contain* a chronologically-organised, literal preview of the end times. I think most of it

is written very deliberately in largely symbolic terms. Most of the numbers there shouldn't be taken literally, but they have a different kind of symbolic meaning. And many of the characters we find there are symbolic, too - though it's not always very clear exactly what. I wonder if that isn't why we have that little interjection from Matthew in the middle of this chapter:

***“So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), ...”***

(Matthew 24:15)

I think I could maybe paraphrase that as something like “you'll see what I mean when you actually do see it - if you apply yourself properly”.

So we should be happy enough to let some of those characters in Revelation stay as symbols. We know who “the Lamb” is, that's quite clear enough. But “the beast”, for example? When I heard a BBC report from the town of Bolsover this week, I was reminded of a former MP from there. Anyone else remember **Dennis Skinner**? And his nickname? *The beast of Bolsover*. Not meaning that he was a literal animal ... but I suspect that anyone he seriously disagreed with would know they had a serious political fight on their hands. That's more the kind of thinking we need to apply to the *symbols* in Revelation.

So, coming back, *finally*, to Matthew 24, we don't have to import any timetables or schemes from Revelation. There are various different schemes anyway, and the people who insist they *can* derive a scheme from the book disagree with the schemes *other* people claim to have got from it. To be honest, it's all very much a “who knows?!” that I just feel I don't have the time for or the heart for. Why don't we just get back to what Jesus says here, for this morning at least?

And I think that that is in line with how Jesus starts to answer these questions, too. Did you notice that he didn't start by talking about this or that sign, but with a warning:

***And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray.”***

(Matthew 24:4)

This is a big, and confusing area. Even the search for “the right understanding”, if it becomes too big and time-consuming, can be a bit of a snare. There is some practical advice about how we are to live, in the light of this stuff, later in the chapter, and no matter *how* you interpret these things about the end times, the take-home message is going to be the same. You could waste years trying to fine-tune a scheme that will make no practical difference to your life or your appreciation of your Saviour.

So, says Jesus, there are going to be false teachers around. Some might even make the most audacious claim of all, to actually be the returned Jesus. And some people will fall for it.

***“For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.”***

(Matthew 24:5)

So, expect to be *religiously* unsettled by what is ahead. And expect to hear and experience things that are more naturally unsettling, too:

***“And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars.”***

(Matthew 24:6)

I grew up in the days of what was called “The Cold War”. There have been civil wars, at various scales. **Rwanda. Kosovo. Beirut. Afghanistan** - several times. Now there’s **Ukraine**. Plenty of others I could name. The world is an unsettling, dangerous place.

Sometimes we fear what we might hear in tomorrow’s news reports. We should *expect* this. But we must not make *too* much of it. Even if, in our days, we hear of *nuclear* conflict, even that does not mean that Jesus is due to return immediately. Don’t be hassled into rash decisions, just because life has started to become precarious. Folks, Jesus says that *even this*, so far, is only “little league”.

***“And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.”***

(Matthew 24:6-8)

See the emphasis here? Be alert, rather than alarmed. Don’t be bamboozled into doing something stupid or faithless! Don’t fall for the latest conspiracy theory about this or that. Just keep your wits around you, and remember that Jesus never said that the world was going to be a comfortable place for anyone.

And he also said it was never going to be a comfortable place for his followers, either. This alone should give the lie to all those “health and wealth” false prophets, who claim that God will without fail bless your wallet if you believe - and probably show that belief by giving to their particular so-called “ministry”.

***“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.”***

(Matthew 24:9)

Folks, some of the schemes put a capital T on “tribulation” there, and argue that Jesus will take his church out of the world before this hits. That’s actually contrary to what it says here. And it’s also contrary to Christian experience down through the centuries. We are not usually specially protected from this world’s general woes; believers have died from Coronavirus just as much as unbelievers have, for example. And we have *added* grief because of following Jesus, and

remaining true to him. It happened in Roman times. It is happening today around the world. Folks, we know scarcely anything of persecution in this country for the name of Jesus ... at present.

But the name of Jesus needs to be upheld and proclaimed on a world-wide scale, and it *will* be. Maybe not in every area that geographers define as countries and colour differently on our maps. Maybe not in every people-group that the anthropologists define. But when God sees that this condition is fulfilled ...

***“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”***

(Matthew 24:14)

Be alert - and don't be deceived. And also

- **Be alert: “stay awake” (42)**

There's one extra thing to be alert about. All we have is experience of the Lord *not* coming. We can get into the habit of thinking, in practice, that he will *never* come, not really. But that's not what Jesus says. This world will *not* go on as it is for ever. An end *will* come. And we need to be sufficiently prepared for that. There will be sufficient signs for that, at least.

***“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”***

(Matthew 24:32-33)

Some people take “fig tree” there to mean the re-establishment of the nation of Israel, but I'd suggest it's a more general point. There will be observable signs, if you are inclined to look for them. But, nevertheless, they will still be rather vague.

***“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”***

(Matthew 24:36)

Something like 30 years ago, I heard an interesting twist - and it *was* a twist - on this one. Someone said of this verse that although we couldn't know the day or hour, it doesn't say that we couldn't know the *year*. Which they then predicted. I think it might have been 1999, something like that. But someone had got hold of four or five copies of a book promoting this line, and added them to our church bookshelf in Harlow. As soon as I noticed them there, they went straight in the bin.

No, says Jesus, we are given a rough idea only. He implies that in his little parables here. Jesus says the thief would come at some *part of the night* - a “watch”, three or four hours, not a precisely specified moment, set your alarm for 2.15, he'll be here at 2.17.

***“But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”***

(Matthew 24:43-44)

But don't take advantage of that vagueness. There's maybe not as much time as you think. Don't think there is time to get away with things.

***“But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, ...***

(Matthew 24:48-49)

... and Jesus finishes this chapter with a frightful warning about the fate awaiting someone who abuses whatever God has entrusted to him to put to *good* use. Seeing “fellow servants” there, this would certainly include abuses of power in the church, but I doubt we need to restrict it that narrowly.

***But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, .... Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, ...***

(2 Peter 3:10-12)

So I think we've got some clear and fixed end-points to this chapter, both saying to us loud and clear about “staying alert” - to the danger of *deception* about the coming of Christ, or the danger of effectively *denying* the coming of Christ.

I think it's the latter one that we probably need to focus on, with relatively comfortable lives here in this country, at present, even if inflation is rising in response to the two years that Coronavirus has tossed us hither and thither. Are we really now just thinking ... hoping ... *praying* ... that we can get back on with real, normal life ... and forget that we should be, as the apostle Peter says there, *waiting for*, even *hastening* that Day-with-a-capital-D?

In fact, do we rather hope that God will postpone that day until our personal or family plans have reached fruition? Do we underneath it all think that Christ returning in glory would be some kind of annoyance - because we have located our hopes too much in *this* world?

But there is still, quite possibly, the rest of this chapter puzzling us. All that stuff I said at the start about perspective, perhaps ... how does that fit in here? So for the last few minutes I would just like to publicly hazard a few guesses about how I see this chapter speaks to us about ...

- **Past, future and present**



So there are quite a few things here, I'm arguing, that we can't really work out for sure where they come in time. We can't determine their scale, from the way Jesus has painted that portrait. But I wouldn't necessarily say that applies to everything here. So this stuff earlier on in the chapter ...

***“So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”***

(Matthew 24:15-16)

That's clearly in the Jewish context - *Judea*. That “abomination of desolation” is looking back to a prophecy in the OT that most people thought had been fulfilled once already, a couple of centuries earlier, when the emperor Antiochus Epiphanes had deliberately defiled the Jewish temple. But it's as, in musical terms, you have **harmonics** of notes that echo on at different pitches, and all of the describable as an F-sharp or whatever. So that has happened once, and will happen again - perhaps more than once. *Let the reader understand*. If the cap fits, wear it. Each time.

And in less than a generation, that temple *would* be defiled again - just as Jesus had said, back at the start of the chapter:

***“Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”***

(Matthew 24:2)

I think I see a lot of this earlier section fitting with the Romans finally coming and trashing Jerusalem in AD 70. And when certain signs were evident, it would be wise for people to flee from their lives, *immediately*:

***“Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.”***

(Matthew 24:17-18)

Fleeing is going to be worse for people in certain stages of life:

***“And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days!”***

(Matthew 24:19)

If it's winter, travelling is going to be worse, too. And if it happens to be a Sabbath, there will be no shops open for supplies on the way:

***“Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath.”***

(Matthew 24:20)

And even some of the more exotic sounding stuff *could* be an almost poetic description of the turmoil immediately preceding AD 70:

***“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 heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”***

(Matthew 24:29)

The powers of the heavens being shaken could have been a way to describe the worries around the Roman empire in AD 69, when there were successively *four* Roman emperors. The world, people would have been saying, was falling apart.

So some of this stuff, I’m sure, fits with what was *near* future for Jesus and those disciples. But this last verse already seems to be changing scale even as we look at it, and what follows really *can’t* be put down as something easily explained in terms of AD 70.

***“Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn,...”***

(Matthew 24:30)

What on earth is that “sign of the Son of Man” going to be? I reckon it will be something that, when it happens, we will know it for what it is: *let the reader understand!* It looks to me as if it will be very close to The End. Reading on:

***“... and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”***

(Matthew 24:30-31)

And there are other things again that look to me applicable to the whole of history AD. Do you think *this* is limited to just some future “end times”?

***“Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.”***

(Matthew 24:23-24)

That’s pretty much what the apostle John said they had already witnessed before the end of that first century:

***Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.***

(1 John 2:18)

It’s all a very long-drawn-out last hour, it seems. And people do just carry on with the normal routines of life:

***“For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ...”***  
(Matthew 24:38)

And the sad thing is that those things are not in themselves wrong, but they are not the ultimate point of life. A time is coming when the routine of life is going to be interrupted, and humanity divided, suddenly, irrevocably.

***“Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.”***  
(Matthew 24:40-41)

Folks, do not make the mistake that the wicked servant at the end of the chapter makes, saying ...

***“But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ ...”***  
(Matthew 24:48)

... and maybe that was a hint from Jesus that he wasn't due to return any time soon, when he said it ... the question is, are we relying upon that same false assumption that the Lord will not come to claim the kingdoms for his own any time soon? Folks, do you really believe that ...

***“This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”***  
(Acts 1:11)

Don't think that *you* don't need to be ready for that moment. Don't think that we can shelve all of this as just theoretical theology, really only of any pressing urgency to some far distant generation. Be alert. Don't be misled. Be ready. And live in such a way as to receive the blessing Jesus promised. Be a wise and faithful servant while the Master is delayed, and get on with your master's business here and now.

***“Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.”***  
(Matthew 24:46)

**See that no-one leads you astray**