

How to Interpret the Signs of the Times

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[0:00] A few years ago, in 2024, a solar eclipse occurred over the United States that caused much excitement.

! Because not only did the path of this particular solar eclipse cross over the previous solar eclipse to create the shape of a cross over the continental United States, the solar eclipse passed over two U.S. towns, one called Rapture and one called Nineveh.

And so you can imagine the excitement that was caused in the build-up to the solar eclipse.

Everything was on the Internet about God's impending judgment coming to the world.

Much excitement, of course, that came and went and nothing happened. Ten years before that, over the years of 2014 and 2015, there were four blood moons, lunar eclipses, which happened to fall all on Jewish feast days.

And books were written and movies were made about how these are going to signal the end of the world. It seems every few years we have one of these sort of apocalyptic scares, some new end-of-the-world prophecy.

[1:18] And you get both religious versions and secular versions. If you're old enough, you might remember Y2K. Remember the Y2K scare at the end of the 90s as we were going to year 2000, and everybody thought that the computers won't be able to handle crossing over the clocks, and there's going to be a global catastrophe and an economic meltdown.

And everybody was, well, not everybody, but a lot of people were stocking up tinned food in bunkers in the late 90s, waiting for Y2K to come and destroy the world.

Of course, nothing happened. But this happens regularly, on a regular basis. These kind of end-of-the-world signs or prophecies. Everybody seems to be looking for signs for the end of the world, and everybody is really quick to see signs that point us to our impending doom.

Now, you know what? We are actually wired. Psychologists say we are wired to look for signs. We are wired to see patterns that point us to what's ahead, because we really want to know what's coming.

And it's not just the crazies. Even the most rational scientific people see things like climate change and stories of rogue AIs as signs of where the world is going.

[2:49] And Christians are no different. Christians, many Christians have a very keen interest in conflicts in the Middle East.

Many Christians are very quick to open that video that your friend sends you of how some obscure prophecy in Zechariah is now being fulfilled in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or whatever it is.

The truth is, though, we're all very confused when it comes to the end times. And we can't seem to agree on what is a sign and what isn't a sign, and what signs are really the ones that God wants us to take note of.

And if you've ever been confused by this topic of the end times, well, then you're in the right place this morning. Because in Matthew 24, the passage that we have in front of us this morning, Jesus' disciples actually come to him and ask him straight, what are the signs we must be looking for? What are the signs that point us forward to the end? And in this chapter, Matthew 24, which is one of the, if not the most misunderstood chapter in the New Testament, Jesus answers them, and he teaches his disciples exactly what they need to know and how to interpret the signs of the times correctly so that they will live appropriately in the world.

[4:24] And we're going to read it carefully. And as we do, and as we look at Jesus' answer carefully, and I would encourage you to have your Bible open in front of you. Don't just take my word for it. I want you to see these things for yourself in front of you and so that you can go back and you can read them and you can refer to them because these are important ideas and important

verses.

And as we read Jesus' answer, what we discover is the first thing Jesus says to his disciples is not to see signs that aren't there.

Don't see signs that aren't there. Look how he starts from verse 1. So Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came to him and called his attention to its buildings.

So the temple's buildings right in Jerusalem. These amazing buildings. For the day, they would have been like a wonder of the world in that region. And then Jesus says, Do you see all these buildings?

Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another. Every one will be thrown down. And as Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, now the Mount of Olives is just across the valley from Jerusalem.

[5 : 41] It's where the photographs of Jerusalem today, you see the Dome of the Rock and you see the kind of city skyline of Jerusalem that's normally taken from the Mount of Olives. And they now were sitting and looking over the city.

Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives. The disciples came to him privately. Tell us, they said. When will this happen? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?

Okay, so that's how it starts. Jesus, as they're walking through the temple precinct, he tells his disciples, the temple, this massive building, is now going to be destroyed.

Not one stone will be left on another. And the disciples, of course, are shocked. And they think, okay, this is going to be the end of the world. So they're thinking about it. And then when they sit down together, they want to know, okay, Jesus, tell us, how are we going to know?

What are the signs that are going to tell us how to prepare for this? And so Jesus answers them.

But before he tells them, this is really interesting. You've got to get this.

[6 : 42] Before he tells them, in answer to their question, what signs to look out for, he tells them what won't be signs. So verse 4, Jesus answered, Watch out that no one deceives you.

For many will come in my name, claiming I am the Messiah, and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen. But the end is still to come.

Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. Now what I find mind-boggling is how many Christians read these verses as signs of the end times.

Have you heard that? People saying, yeah, this says that, you know, as we go to the end, the signs will be that there will be an increase in wars. So look out for it. There will be an increase in earthquakes and famines. That's how you will know the end is coming.

That's how you will know we're close. But that is, these are literally the things Jesus says are not the signs. Verse 6. He says, you will hear of these things, but see to it you are not alarmed.

[7 : 59] Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Literally, the end is not yet. These are, in other words, not signs of the end. These are inevitable things that will happen in our fallen world, in every generation, Jesus is saying.

The war between Russia and Ukraine. The conflicts in Israel and Palestine. Tsunamis in Asia. Earthquakes in Venezuela. Jesus says, these things will keep happening in every generation, right up till the end of this age.

They are not going to necessarily point to something, because they happen every generation.

These are the normal things of living in a fallen world, including the persecution of Christians and moral decline in society.

From verse 9. 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. So this is, Jesus is saying, these are just the things that are going to happen, the inevitable results of being in a world that is in rebellion against God.

[9 : 21] And they're going to keep happening. And I mean, we read these, and you can see examples of them all over. False prophets, love of people growing cold. And these are things that happen in every generation.

They're not signs of anything in particular, Jesus is saying. And that is why Jesus starts his answer with these words, watch out that no one deceives you.

Because he wants his disciples, before he tells them the signs they must look out for, he wants them to be sensible and not speculate about things that aren't signs. Things that are just the normal results of living in a broken world.

He doesn't want his disciples to speculate about hidden meanings of world events. And to be, you know, caught up by endless YouTube videos made by people who want to increase subscriptions, and so they're very sensationalist about how Iran is fulfilling some prophecy in Ezekiel.

Jesus doesn't want his disciples to be distracted by those things, and that's why he's saying this. And yet so many are. And the reason Jesus doesn't want his disciples to be caught up by things that aren't really signs is that he wants them to stay focused on what's important, despite all the confusion and the upheaval in global events.

[10:49] And we see that in verse 13 and 14. He says, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved, and this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

He's saying, that's what matters, people. The gospel of the kingdom, the news about who Jesus is and what he's done, that news is far more important than the news about the Middle East.

And that news, the news of Jesus, is what we should be talking about. That's what we should be focused on. Okay, so does that mean now that we just can focus on that and ignore history and ignore what's going on in the world around us and just ignore global events and just be so spiritually minded that we forget about what's happening in the world?

No. Actually, because of what Jesus goes on to say. And as we read on, we realize in his answer to his disciples, not only does he tell them to not see signs that aren't there, but he goes on to tell them to not miss the signs that are there.

So from verse 15, he starts talking about the signs his disciples will see in their world and what they should do about it.

[12:18] So, have a look from verse 15. Now things start to get really interesting. 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. Okay, now, pause. What on earth is he talking about?

what is the abomination of desolation? It sounds very hectic. Now, many Christians think that he's talking about some mysterious figure that's still to come in history that will point to the end of the world.

But what we need to understand is that this abomination of desolation Jesus is talking about is something that has already happened. It's already been fulfilled in history.

So, he says the abomination of desolation spoken of through the prophet Daniel. Now, we don't have time to go to all the necessary passages but when you read Daniel and you look up Daniel 9, Daniel 7, other passages like that.

[13:31] Now, remember, Daniel wrote, he's the prophet Daniel, he wrote about 500, 600 years before Jesus came. about 550 BC and his prophecies are all about the rise and the fall of great kingdoms that are symbolized by various beasts very similar to kind of revelation language.

But he talks about these kingdoms and it's quite clear that as you look at history these prophecies were fulfilled in the times between the New Testament and the Old Testament after Daniel wrote the Macedonian kingdom the Babylonian the Assyrians the Seleucid Empire the Roman Empire all if you look at history they were all fulfilled exactly as Daniel prophesied it's actually a great Daniel's a great book to go to if you want to prove that the Bible's prophecies are true because we know he wrote before those things happened and they happened exactly as he said and this abomination of desolation Daniel talks about you can trace it and see that that was actually fulfilled when an empire called the Seleucid Empire invaded Jerusalem and desolated the temple that's why it's called the abomination of desolation they came into the temple the holy place which had to be holy and clean and these gentile invaders came in and they deliberately set up a shrine to their gods their Greek gods over the altar and they started sacrificing pigs which were unclean animals and that happened and the temple sacrifices were stopped until the people called the Maccabees revolted and they rose against their overlords and they took over Jerusalem again and the Jews still celebrate that event today in Hanukkah the Jews celebrate Hanukkah every year to

remember that event now that already happened it was an actual historical event that the disciples knew about when Jesus said these words what he's saying to them now is that's going to happen again just as it happened before enemy armies are going to come in they're going to invade Jerusalem and they're going to desecrate the sanctuary and 40 years after Jesus said these words that is exactly what happened the Romans who were the great superpower of the day and they had these great armies they came in and they besieged and destroyed Jerusalem from 66 to 70 AD it's a great historical event and it's been heavily written about and recorded eyewitness testimonies this huge

Roman siege that lasted three or four years and eventually ended with the complete destruction of the city of Jerusalem and this is the event that Jesus is talking about to his disciples here it is the answer to their original question when will the temple be destroyed and what are the signs and he's now answering that question and it turns out that it happened in 70 AD and this whole chapter is mostly about that event and that's we've got to be very clear when we read it it's mostly Jesus talking about that event which was going to happen in the disciples lifetime and they needed to know about most of this chapter is not about the end of the world for us now we want it to be about the end of the world we want this to be talking about the end of the world and signs in our time because let's be honest 70 AD is pretty boring but actually most Christians don't actually realize how important what happened to Jerusalem that Jesus is talking about here how important that is for the whole story of Israel in the

Bible and if we do if we actually understood the importance of that historical event it would really help about how we think about Israel today and other global events you see because what happened here the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem now in the Old Testament the temple was the center of everything God was doing in the world and the center of Jewish religion and so the destruction that was prophesied beforehand by Jesus here of that temple the utter complete destruction of it and you know when Jesus says not one stone will be left on another he was being accurate history records that the gold in the temple had a lot of gold and when the Romans came in and put it to the torch that it got so hot that that gold melted down into the stones so that after the destruction the Roman soldiers who wanted a little bit of a payout took all the stones they didn't need to take all the stones one off the other but they took it all off so that they could get down to each little bit of gold so Jesus prediction happened exactly as he said 40 years later and this moment in history the destruction the complete utter destruction of the temple in Jerusalem was [18:49] God's prophesied and public judgment of the nation of Israel who up until then had been his people through whom he did his work in the world and what happened in 70 AD changed all of that this moment in history was literally the end of the age for Israel as a nation they were being essentially fired and they were told they must clear their desk because security is about to escort them off the premises and Jesus had for the last few chapters if you've been with us in Matthew you'll understand why what was leading up to this Jesus has made it very clear why it had come to this why God was doing this to the nation of Israel I remind you of how we ended last week's chapter in Matthew 23 37 to 38 listen again to these words

Jesus says as he's looking over the city he says Jerusalem Jerusalem you who kill the prophets and stone those who sent to you how often I've longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings and you were not willing look your house is left to you desolate and that is exactly what happened the house of Israel the city of Jerusalem was utterly destroyed in 70 AD just as Jesus is prophesying here and that is why Jesus says things like this to his disciples from verse 16 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 this is not talking about the rapture in the future it's talking about what was going to happen in the first century in Jerusalem 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 this word Jesus uses great distress is translated in older Bible versions great tribulation and again that's often seen as something that's going to happen in the future but Jesus is talking about the great tribulation his disciples in the city of Jerusalem would face in the next few decades this is not talking about some future apocalyptic event but it's talking about what happened 40 years after Jesus said these words to a city and nation that God had loved and this was happening to them because of their constant unchanging rebellion against him and it was

as devastating as Jesus says that's why he's using such strong language historians when you go back to the history and you read what actually happened and there's a lot written on it they say that the entire population of Jerusalem was destroyed over a million people were destroyed over those years which for that ancient time is a huge amount of people the entire city no one escaped the entire population of the city was destroyed at the end people escaped before and the reason is because

Jesus warned them the Christians managed to escape because they had Matthew 24 in their Bibles but the rest of them were completely destroyed you know the Romans even hired we're told false prophets they hired people to pretend to be Jewish prophets who went into the city of Jerusalem and told the Jews God is going to deliver you God is going to deliver you so that they would stay there so that the Romans could kill all of them that's the length they went to and that is why by the way Jesus says in verse 24 to his disciples false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive if possible even the elect so Jesus is actually warning them of these Roman mercenary prophets who were going to come in don't fall for it and it was a devastating war historians say that in the streets of Jerusalem you couldn't even see the ground because of the bodies and Jesus disciples would have been amongst those bodies and we would have never heard the gospel if Jesus had not told them the signs to pay attention to but then what he goes on to do is that

Jesus describes what would happen after the destruction of the temple from verse 29 and it gets even more interesting listen to what he says immediately after the distress of those days not 2000 years after but immediately after the distress of those days 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 then will appear the sign of the son of man in heaven and then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with great power and great glory and he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds from one end of the heavens to the other okay now surely surely this is talking about the future return of Jesus come on nope it's not everything

[24 : 55] Jesus writes here has already happened how do we know that because of verse 34 a few verses later at the end of the section he says these words verse 34 truly I tell you this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened that is the standard language Jesus used to say to his disciples this is going to happen within your lifetime all of these things that he said before verse 34 are going to happen within the lifetime of the disciples okay so when did this happen the sun being darkened and the moon not giving its light well some say that Jesus is describing the result of the smoke from the destruction of Jerusalem of this burning city rising and blocking out the light of the sun and the moon and the stars which it could have been but in the old testament you can actually find the exact same words the exact same language used to describe whenever a major change to world order happened whenever a major power was defeated like Babylon or Egypt the exact same words Jesus uses here were used in the old testament to describe the fall of those nations in history when a huge shift in world power changes the removal of authority from nations that's what this kind of symbolic language describes and here it is describing the removal of

Israel's spiritual authority in the world they have as a nation now fallen from their heavenly position as God's special people that's what he's describing in these words okay but then what about wait a minute what about verse 30 they will see the son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory what's that about when did that happen because remember Jesus said all of these things were going to happen within the lifetime of the disciples and so this is not talking about his future return in our future which by the way he does talk about from verse 36 onwards and we're going to look at that next week so come back but this when he talks about the son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory is describing symbolically his rule now that he exercises on earth from heaven a rule and an authority that is powerful and it is seen even though it is not seen that's what he's describing here it's from the clouds it's an authority which Jesus isn't on earth and yet his authority is felt and seen here it's kind of like the authority that a rugby coach has in a game okay when you watch

I mean we watched the game yesterday let's not talk too much about that but you'll have noticed they're looking at the players playing the game right and all the things are happening on the field every now and again the camera goes and catches a view of the coach in the coach's box and you

know even though the coach is not there on the field and you can't see him on the field you know his authority is over what is happening in that game that he's ruling from on high well that's kind of a picture of what is being described here there is the authority of Jesus ruling on earth from on high that is how Jesus is now exercising his authority on earth and the words he uses to describe it here because it's not visible to us right now he rolls back the curtain and shows us what's happening in the heavenly realms Jesus is in command and he is ruling and he is sending his angels and he is doing things on earth you know at the end of Matthew the very last closing words of Matthew Jesus says all authority in heaven and earth has now been given to me when he sends his disciples out and it's the same thing he's talking about here okay but then what has he been doing since then 2000 years ago with this authority in heaven well he tells us in the next verse verse 31 and he will send he tells his disciples what's going to happen he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds from one end of the heavens to the other this is not talking about something in our future but this is talking about something Jesus has already started to do and has been doing for the last 2000 years gathering his elect from the four winds ever since the fall of old Israel because of their refusal to be gathered to God

Jesus has begun to gather a new people of God from every nation as his church all around the world takes the news of Jesus this gospel this news to the world assisted by unseen heavenly forces we've been seeing that in our growth groups as we've been walking through the book of Acts we see the work of the church and yet the work of heaven is accompanying and that's what Jesus means when he's sending out his angels that we're involved in this supernatural angelic mission to call his elect from the four winds Jesus is gathering his elect those who are willing to be gathered to him from every corner of the world from every tribe and every race and every nation are you one of them because that is what is happening right now in this stage of history there is a purpose to what has happened in history it is heading somewhere and it always has been heading somewhere all the signs have pointed to it for thousands of years all the prophecies have been fulfilled that tell us that right now a great gathering is occurring in our age before Jesus returns in glory have you been gathered to him yet don't ignore all of these signs of history that tell us what's going on in our world and don't refuse to be gathered into Christ's kingdom and come under his rule don't ignore his call in your life and don't be a hypocrite remember he has already told us the danger of hypocrisy pretending to go through this religious thing but still actually we're living our own life with our own command of our life don't do that

[32:04] Israel try to do that and look what happened to them you know what happened in AD 70 is a massive warning to anybody who still stubbornly refuses to be gathered to God today and to live under his rule because they want to still live life their way it didn't end well for Israel and it won't end well for you there is an authority over this world now there is an authority over your life and it is not you and the sooner you realize that the better but if you have been gathered to Jesus and you have come under his rule as your king and your lord well then what does all this mean for you today all this AD 70 abomination of desolation stuff what does this mean for you the Christian well I think what it means is you need to stop being so confused about all the voices that are out there and you need to realize where we are in history right now we need to realize where we are in history right now we are living in the final age where God through his church is gathering his elect from all nations and that is the only thing left to happen

Jesus says then the end will come there are no other signs we need to wait for they've all happened this is the last thing that needs to happen the gathering of God's elect and so that gathering is the only thing that matters now in this stage of history it's the only thing that's important and it is the only thing worth focusing on and investing our time and our energy and our lives into and you can do that by being an active part of one of Christ's churches in the world this church for example we are here St. Mark's is here in Plumstead on 9 Casino Road for one reason and one reason alone to gather God's elect in Plumstead before Jesus returns that is why we do everything we do that is why we sing songs that is why we play music that is why we have a welcome team that is why we do a roster that is why we do tea it's why we do sound ministry everything we do is so that Jesus can gather his elect from this town from this suburb because that is the only thing that matters now in this age of history and I don't want to focus on anything else in my life and you shouldn't either and if you want to know maybe you are going I'm not a minister I'm not in ministry how can I do that well tonight's course that we're starting good news people is a perfect course because it teaches exactly how ordinary Christians can be people who take the good news into the

world that so desperately needs to hear it so don't miss that opportunity because you've got more important things to do you don't actually come tonight join us as we equip each other and encourage each other to be good news people six o'clock to seven o'clock but that is the only thing that matters if you zoom out and you look at all this and you see how all the prophecies have been fulfilled and all the signs have happened the only thing that matters now the last thing to happen before the history comes to a final close and the new creation begins the only thing that matters is the gathering of God's elect from this world there is nothing else that is important if we understand history correctly and so what do we learn from this in closing what do we learn from Matthew 24 we learn do not let the confusion of this world and everything that is going on in it distract you from what really matters Jesus ends this section by saying these words verse 35 heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away he's using hyperbolic language to just describe things are going to change things are going to shift in heaven and on earth but my words won't change you can trust them in a world where you don't know what's true and what's false you can trust the words that Jesus said because you know what he died and he rose again in history to prove that everything he said is 100% reliable and it's important to remember that in all the chaos of human history we have here words that are true the only words that we know are 100% reliable and trustworthy to guide us through the fog of this life and this world because they tell us where history is going so that we can focus on what really matters which is to make the truth of Jesus known to gather his elect in preparation for his return which he will tell us about in the next passage so come back next week in the meantime let me pray and ask for his help heavenly father we thank you for revealing to us the truth of history that we can know where we are in the great big picture of history and what has been happening in this world for thousands of years and lord as we realize we are in the very final stage and nothing else needs to happen and we pray that you would help each of us to know how we can be involved in the most important work of you gathering your elect from all nations lord excite us about this and help us to look forward to your return and to live in light of it and bring us back next week so that we can learn how better to do that in Jesus name amen