



**Sermon Notes: Cameron Webber,  
“Keep Watch”**

**10 March 2024**

**Readings: Matt 24: 1 - 44. Malachi 4:1 - 6**

**Introduction**



Do you remember the Year 2000, all the ‘end the millennium’ hype, the Y2K bug and so on? Christian and secular bookshops were bombarded with more ‘paper-back prophets’ than usual, all forecasting war, holocaust, famine, ecological disasters, and the ‘end of the world’.

It might have intensified then, but it’s been going on for ages. Some Christians compile a ‘Rapture Index’ - counting wars, earthquakes, and other disasters - to work out just how close the end is. When the expected date comes and goes they simply revise and carry on.

In 1988 Edgar Whisenant published ‘88 Reasons Why the Rapture will be in 1988.’ It sold like hotcakes... until the end of 1988. Undaunted, the following year he released, ‘The Final Shout - Rapture Report 1989!’ And there have been more books since.

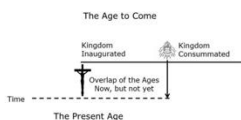
Some Christians seem intent on coming up with a date, or at least a year in which they say Jesus will return, but as we have just read... About that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (Matthew 24:36)

So what do we make of Matthew 24, and Revelation and Daniel and all those parts of the Bible which deal with things we really don’t really have the categories for... ‘the end of time.’



Is the end near? Are we living in “The Last Days”? The answer is “Yes!” How do I know? Peter in his address to the crowds on the day of Pentecost says, in Acts 2:16-17 quoting Joel 2:28. Speaking about what is happening he says, ‘This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.’

Peter is saying that what God said through the prophet Joel has happened. The Holy Spirit has been poured out, so we are in the last days and have been for almost 2,000 years. We are in the period between the first coming of Jesus Messiah - his life, death and resurrection to glory - and his return, his coming again. We are in the Last Days.



In Jesus’ first coming the Kingdom of God was inaugurated but we await the consummation at the end of the present age. We live in the tension of the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’, we live in the age of the Holy Spirit.

And so we come to Matthew 24. Don Carson notes that ‘few chapters of the Bible have called forth more disagreement among interpreters than Matthew 24.’ So what do we do with Matthew 24?

I certainly encourage you to have a look at study 6 in the parallel Bible Studies for this sermon series which touches on some things we don’t have time to address this morning, and before we go any further, we had better pray.

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, as we look at this part of your word to us this morning, I pray that you would enlighten our minds by your Holy Spirit, and that we would learn, not a calendar of a series of eschatological events, but rather what it means for us to live in these times.

We ask this, Jesus, that you would be glorified through us and that we and many others would be ready when you come.

Amen

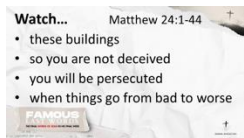
### 1. Watch These Buildings (24:1-3)



Whatever the complexities of this chapter, if there is a repeated idea, I think it is summed up with the word, 'Watch!' It's there clearly at the end of our reading... Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. (24:42)

Jesus is in Jerusalem - just a couple of days from his death. His disciples are mainly from Galilee, up north, out in the sticks, so it's not surprising that on the trip to the big smoke 'his disciples came up to him to call his attention to [the temple] buildings.' (24:1

And the temple was an impressive building. King Herod rebuilt and enlarged the temple. The main structure was finished between 19 and 9 BC and work continued on it until 64 AD.



But Jesus is not impressed. 'See [*literally* watch] these things. Not one stone here will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down.' (24:2)

Watch these buildings - They are going down. Watch this temple. Don't be captivated by the magnificence. Look at it from God's perspective. Yes, the temple might look fantastic - but its days are numbered. It is being replaced by Christ as the way to God. It is being replaced by the church – God's people gathered as the place of his presence. And so just a few short years after its completion in 64AD it was destroyed by the Romans in 70AD.

The disciples are to see the temple from God's perspective. They are to watch - be attentive and discerning, and be on their guard as they look at the externally magnificent. We too need to examine / understand / evaluate our culture from God's perspective. Because people are made in God's image there is much to be admired. But we are easily far too impressed with the externals of wealth, power, fame, learning, technology, architecture, art, entertainment and so on, and don't think through the moral and spiritual dimensions.

And because we are fallen image bearers we are impressed by human accomplishment but neglect the underlying idolatry. Even in the church we are easily impressed by the best show in town, the latest singer or speaker.

Jesus says, 'See [watch] these things. Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.' (24:2)

This sets alarm bells ringing for the disciples, and they ask, 'When? What is the Sign?' (24:3)

Jesus doesn't answer their question in a straight forward way. Rather he gives them a mixture of signs and non-signs from God's perspective.

### 2. Watch, so you are not deceived (24:4-8)

Jesus starts in v4-8 to respond to their question by listing a whole lot of bad things that will happen:

- 24:5 - There will be false Messiahs
- 24:6 - There will be wars and international strife
- 24:7 - There will be natural disasters (earthquakes and famines).

Jesus begins his answer to their question for a sign by telling them what are *not* signs.

- 24:6b - Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.
- 24:8 - These are the beginning of birth pains.

False Messiahs, wars, disasters are simply the part of a process. You don't have to be a great historian, or Bible scholar to know that this kind of thing has been going on since before Jesus and ever since Jesus. When Jesus says these things must happen, he is simply recognising that we live in a fallen world, and these things are the result of human sinfulness.

So what are the disciples to do? 'Watch out that no one deceives you.' (24:4)

Despite the coming of the kingdom of God, in Jesus, while this world continues, so will these bad things. It was like that for the disciples, and it's been like that for the 2000 years since Jesus uttered these words, and it's like that for us to. Drought, flood, war, sickness, death.

So we too must watch, be on our guard, so we are not lead astray, so we don't give up on God. We need to be alert, but 'not alarmed.' (24:6). Jesus came up with the slogan first!

Life in this world of war and floods and heat waves and famine; life in this world of false messiahs, promising all manner of get rich quick / get fit quick / get chicks quick schemes should not cause us undue alarm and despite what some Christians say, these things, Jesus says, do not signal the end.

But we must be alert. We must 'Watch out that no one deceives you.' (24:4) We must be awake, watchful, discerning and on our guard, or we can be deceived and led astray.

### **3. Watch, you will be persecuted (24:9-14)**

But that's not all. We need to be watching, be on our guard, because we will be persecuted. In addition to all the bad things in this world that happen to all, Jesus goes on to say some bad things will happen to the disciples, to Christians, because they are Christians, '...because of me.' (24:9c)

Watch - because persecution is going to happen to Christians. Read the story of the early church in Acts. Read church history. Read information from Voice of the Martyrs and from Open Doors. Persecution is still going on.

So what does Jesus say to his disciples about this? Pray for persecution to cease? No! He says, 'stand firm to the end ... so you will be saved.' (24:13)

In Australia at this time we are unlikely to face the kind of persecution that Matthew's first readers were facing or that which many in the world face today. Maybe though we should be concerned if we are never shunned, or are never the butt of jokes because we belong to Jesus.

### **4. Watch, when things go from bad to worse (24:15-26)**

But then things get even worse in 24:15-26. The 'abomination that causes desolation' will appear. It will be time to flee. It will be a time of incredible distress, but it won't go on forever. There will be false Messiahs. No wonder we need to, 'Watch out that no one deceives you.' (24:4)

What is this terrible time - is it the end of time, or is it something else? The 'abomination that causes desolation' is a quote from the Book of Daniel. As far as the Jews were concerned, this prophecy had already been fulfilled in 168 BC. You can read about it in 1 Maccabees: Antiochus Epiphanes, stuck a pagan statue in the Jewish temple and sacrificed pigs to it. Now that was an abomination to the Jews. But Jesus takes the prophecy of Daniel and says it's going to happen again.

I think it is best to see this as referring to the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 AD and the literal destruction of the temple at that time. Luke, in giving his account of this teaching of

Jesus, has it as: 'When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies...' (Luke 21:20). The description of events in Matthew 24 is of what was to happen in 70 AD. Some people stayed at the temple to the end, and so died, but Christians did flee.

**4a. A Parable: The Fig Tree (24:32-35)**

The disciples has asked, 'When will this happen?' referring to the destruction of the temple, and, 'What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' (24:3)

Jesus has answered in terms of the ongoing life of the Christian in this fallen world of natural disasters and war; in this world where Christians are persecuted; and he has also spoken about the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple.

And that's what he's talking about with the lesson from the fig-tree. (24:32) The tender twigs and fig leaves means summer is near. Jesus says you can know some things in the unfolding present age of trouble.

Jesus is talking about things leading up to and to do with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. These things were clear and obvious to anyone. And they happened with one generation as Jesus said they would in 24:34.

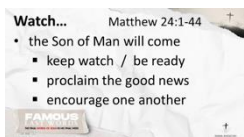
So 24:2 and 24:15-26 are probably best understood as being fulfilled in 70AD. Unlike the events described in 24:4-14, which go on and on, this part is pretty much anchored in history.

Although we can see similar things throughout history, where the ongoing events of 24:4-14 intensify, where Christians have no longer been able to cling to the comfort of some nationalistic symbol, but have had to flee. (e.g. Christians in Germany in the 1930s.) In the midst of general bad things, and persecution, every now and then something very bad will happen.

So watch! Be discerning! Be awake and attentive, be on your guard, be watchful, seeing things from God's perspective so we are not deceived, particularly when things get very bad. And don't be surprised when they do. Jesus specifically told us it would happen.

**5. Watch - The Son of Man Will Come (24:27-31)**

Most of the chapter does not refer to the Second Coming, the return of Jesus, the end of this age, the consummation of the kingdom - but some does!



24:29 '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.'" [Is 13:10; 34:4]

You get this apocalyptic language of cosmic disturbance occurring at some unspecified time after the distresses of 24:4-26, and then (24:30-31) '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 power and great glory. [Dan7:13-14] 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.'

It's a very brief part of the whole chapter, but it is crucial. All of history is heading to that day when Jesus returns and takes us to be with him - all who have place their faith in Jesus.

Life is tough (24:1-26) but for those who put their trust in Jesus it has a glorious end, that will occur sometime in the days after Jerusalem falls, and it will be unexpected.

'About that day or hour no one knows, only the Father.' (24:36) It will be as unexpected as the flood in Noah's time (24:37-40).

24:42 'Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.'

24:44 'So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.'

Are we in the last days? Yes, since the pouring out of the Holy Spirit almost 2,000 years ago. Are we in the 'very' last days? No one knows! In the whole chapter Jesus does nothing to eliminate our uncertainty about the end of time, rather he tells us how to cope with it.

The way we cope with that uncertain timing is the same way we cope with the vagaries of life - the good, the bad, the very bad, the persecution: **Watch!** - be alert, be discerning, be ready.

Jesus answers the question about the destruction of the temple by putting it in the context of everyday life, and by putting it in the context of his return. Life in the fallen world will go on, and bad things will happen. And for the Christian there will be persecution. And even the temple will be destroyed and perhaps other really bad things happen. That is life, look around, it's obvious.

But after all that, some time, we don't know when, Jesus is coming back in power and glory to gather his elect. That gives us real certainty for the future.

So with both realism and hope, Jesus also tells us how to live in the meantime, how we should live in the light of what life will be like...

Watch! Be on your guard, be alert and awake; Be attentive and vigilant; Pay attention and be discerning; Be faithful under pressure - alert but not alarmed, persevering, not being deceived, and proclaiming the gospel. Because there is one thing that is clear (24:14) This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come' when Jesus comes in power and glory.

In a couple of chapters, in a couple of days, as Jesus prays in Gethsemane, the disciples will not watch but sleep. Are you watching? Or sleeping? Are you spending time reading the Bible and praying so you can watch from God's perspective. so you won't be deceived, so you can stand firm? Are you encouraging and building up others, meeting together? The alternative is to be sleeping; to be going through the motions; not really paying attention; off your guard - so that the values of the world shape us more than the word of God.

## **Conclusion**

The return of Jesus can be a topic of division among Christians, but the Second Coming is not intended to be a topic of theological nit-picking, rather it is a source of great encouragement.

Paul talks about it to the church in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 4:14-18)... 'We believe that Jesus died and rose again. ... The Lord himself will come down from heaven ... and so we will be with the Lord for ever. Therefore, encourage one another with these words.'

This passage doesn't help us map out specific timelines and fill in all the all the details, because no one knows. But it is instructive about how we live as Christians awaiting the return of Christ. And that context should govern how we live as Christians, how we be church together, how we relate to the world around us. And that context should shape what flows into the AGM and from the AGM.

So Watch! 'And may God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.' (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)

Amen