

Devotional note: I have decided not to create a separate devotional this week. As regular users of the devotional know, we tend to hew pretty closely to the scripture and themes we used during the sermon. This sermon, for better or worse, covers a lot of ground in a relatively short space, and it is for this reason that I think it will be better for us to go over the sermon over the coming days than to piece it out into daily chunks.

So, I encourage you to approach your study and devotion with Revelation 24 in one hand and this sermon in the other (it is more or less what I hope to say on Sunday). You can do a point a day. You could do a couple. It might not be too much to do it in one sitting. But ask questions of the sermon and the text – I didn't cover it all verse by verse. If you have questions that you would like me to address, I am more than happy to do so upon my return. Email or reach out otherwise: pastorsethnormington@gmail.com.

There will also be a prayer guide for the next few weeks posted at www.cookscreekchurch.org/sermons which will focus on June 27-July 16.

Sermon Manuscript

We are wrapping up our sermon series called *The Future of Hope* today and so let's quickly be reminded of the core of what we have said that might be new or different than what we thought before we started this series:

1. The future is the full, eternal reign of Jesus Christ on this earth
2. The renewal of the earth is earth and heaven smashing together as one
3. God's grace through Jesus Christ opens up our future
4. Your future is to be resurrected as a transformed human being just like Jesus (not a disembodied spirit) on the new earth
5. What you do now will carry into God's future
6. Jesus speaks of the last judgment as separating those who feed, shelter, and visit those in need from those who do not.
7. The best way to approach the future is with diligent discipleship, not speculation.

I grew up reading MAD Magazine and enjoyed its wit, satire, and parody. I once received a book of the history of Mad Magazine and it had this ad in it of a guy messily smashing eight tomatoes into a single can. I guess in the 60's Concertina brand tomatoes advertised that there were eight tomatoes in each can. We are looking at almost all of Matthew chapter 24 today

and so it might feel like we are trying to smash eight tomatoes into one can, but I think we can make some key points in a hopefully elegant way that will wrap up our series nicely.

Collin is going to read the first 14 verses of Matthew 24 for us and we will invest ourselves most heavily in these verses. They are the more universally-applicable verses in what we will hear in Matthew 24 today. [Collin reads Matthew 24:1-14]

Jesus walks out of the temple in Jerusalem for the last time and from here through the rest of the gospel he does not teach the crowds only his close disciples. He starts by telling them that the holiest spot in the whole faith, a kind of eighth wonder of the world, will be destroyed. This would be a hard thought to bear because the temple is where the presence of God is supposed to reside but Jesus has been teaching them throughout their discipleship that he is the presence of God. Naturally, they want to know when this is going to happen and Jesus tells his 12 disciples but no one else – teaching about things of the end times for Jesus is not an evangelistic tool but knowledge for those who already follow him.

Jesus tells them eight things about the future that are coming no so much as political events to be deciphered or so that you can try to predict when it will all happen, but as we have seen in the past few weeks in Matthew 24 and 25, so that we can be level-headed and focused on serving our Lord for the long haul. Eight points! Don't fear, I have a plane to catch later today.

1. Don't let anyone trick you (v. 4): Christians can be so eager for predictive teachings about the future that we become easily susceptible to bad or false teaching. The biggest danger Jesus sees in talk of "end times" is for the flock to be taken in by false teachers who say they represent Jesus or the church with claims about the end of the world. Indeed, when crowds demand certain signs from Jesus in Matthew 12 and 16, he strongly discourages them. Jesus' sermon on the end that we have been exploring the past few weeks is meant to make us more Christ-like, not better at predicting the future. So, when the disciples ask for dates and signs to kickoff our passage, the first thing Jesus says is don't be tricked. Many people will come, Jesus says, claiming to be Christ, or more dangerously in our time, claiming to be Christ's special representative with the one and only true teaching on all these things and providing signs. And many people will follow them, Jesus says, but don't you be tricked. In our time, many "end of the world" teachers piece together various prophecies from the Old and New Testaments to come up with interesting teachings, but they rarely include the words of Jesus and that should be a huge red flag for us. Jesus specifically teaches on the end here in Matthew 24 and 25 and in the other gospels. If end time teachings don't robustly include the words of Jesus in the gospels, watch out! Don't be tricked!

2. Don't be terrified (v. 6): Don't be terrified of wars and news of wars and other terrible things. And don't let religious teachers whip you up into a frenzy or fear by connecting current events to religion in a way that leads to senses of doom or that the end is at hand – even for evangelistic ends. There are plenty of people down through the centuries to today who use current events to spell doom for the world or that satanic evil domination is just around the

corner. Don't be terrified by such provocations or start interpreting today's events in inflated ways.

Jesus doesn't want anyone to be terrified into discipleship – he doesn't think it really works. In times of crisis, Jesus followers should be the calmest people around since they have been given God's peace in Christ, because, as it says in Psalm 27:3: "³ Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident." The past year and a half has certainly been a test for us in this regard – remember the words of Jesus: do not be terrified. But, as we saw in the parables of the ten bridesmaids and the wise servant, we should not be overconfident that we are untouchable. People of great faith have died in the pandemic and people of no faith have survived. And not being terrified is also not an excuse to not care. Always remember that the Last Judgment Jesus teaches is dividing between those who feed, shelter, and visit those in need and those who do not. Don't be terrified and don't be cavalier. But...

3. You will be hated (v. 9): Unfortunately, it is popular in a segment of contemporary American Christianity to proclaim how much they are hated at every turn in an effort to appear persecuted. Personally, I think this slanders those who really are persecuted – in the history of the church, right now around the world and in America, and in the future. The early centuries of the church saw tens of thousands of Christians (and maybe more) killed because of their faith. Fast forward to the 20th century and millions of Jews were killed for their faith, the Communist East hated Christians as a core organizing principle, and more and more subtle hostility is found towards Christianity in the West.

But this hatred is not cause for us then, now, or in the future to be terrified or hateful ourselves. The people following Jesus and living out his call should not be surprised to receive the same treatment that Jesus received, especially Jesus said, in the last days. This doesn't mean that we should seek out hatred to fulfill Jesus' words: hatred has followed God's people for thousands of years. Instead, it is a call to be like Jesus in the midst of hatred. Be like Jesus as he is hated as he marches to and hangs from the cross: loving, peaceful, and closely connected to God. Do not lose hope! Because...

4. Many will be ashamed and drop out (v. 10): This hatred will lead many to drop out. It is hard to resist the need for the world's approval. Jesus followers will be (have been and are) a minority in the world. Indeed, Jesus' teaching here makes clear that those truly trying to be his disciples might even be a minority within all those claiming to follow Jesus. Jesus then says this actually leads to more false prophets – don't be tricked! Be theologically and spiritually sober. Remain loyal to the teachings of Jesus. But again, all this is no excuse not to be loving, peaceful, and dedicated to the mission Jesus lays out for us in Matthew 24 and 25. We often see groups who were once dominant, or thought they were dominant, receding in societal importance lash out with anger, hatred, and demands for supremacy – Jesus followers are absolutely not to engage in such practices. Stand with Jesus, not your hopes for worldly power and security, knowing that...

5. The mission will be glorious (v. 14): *But the person who sticks to the very end will be saved.* Amidst everything we just heard about such trouble, Jesus says that his church will thrive. The church has not only survived but thrived for two thousand years. Remember, these words of Jesus were just as applicable 500, 1,000, or 1,500 years ago as they are now. Through times of trickery, terror, hatred, and defections, the church has thrived. Jesus even says here that all he has said so far is wonderful news. Why? Because everything is in God's hands. Jesus knew and knows what is coming, predicted it, and tells us to not be shaken. Be calm and steadfast in discipleship so that you may, as Jesus says, proclaim his good news to the world. Jesus doesn't just hope for this mission, he guarantees it, and he guarantees that we will have joy in the mission.

So, those first five points come from vv. 1-14 which is Jesus' "big picture" message about the end of the world. He is now going to get particular in vv. 15-28 and here are those verses:

¹⁵ "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), ¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁷ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, ¹⁸ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. ¹⁹ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! ²⁰ Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. ²¹ For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. ²² And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. ²³ Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. ²⁴ For false christ and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

Jesus is describing the same events as the earlier passage that Collin read but from a different angle. The first angle was universal, this angle is very Judean (as in, the people of the region of Judea where Jerusalem is). From this section, we can get our next two points:

6. There will be great tribulation (v. 21): The language of "abomination of desolation" is rather scary. And in the Judean context, there was a great abomination of desolation that occurred in the generation of Jesus and I think this is the abomination of desolation to which Jesus refers here. This abomination was the destruction of the temple, the siege and massacres in Jerusalem, and all the horrors of the war that happened in and around AD 70. Everything Jesus says in this section fits in with what happened in that war time. In Luke 21:20, Jesus says, "²⁰ "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near." This happened in AD 70. Jesus' advice in v. 16 to run for the hills in that time is very practical and correct: those who ran for the hills instead of going behind the walls of Jerusalem when the Roman army surrounded the city did not get caught in the awful siege, starvation,

and massacre in Jerusalem. In v. 19, Jesus' heart goes out to the women who were pregnant at that time because it was going to be awful. In v. 21, Jesus talks about a great tribulation such that had never occurred before and indeed nothing so terrible had occurred in and around Jerusalem as occurred in AD 70. The first century Roman-Jewish historian Josephus says that 1.1 million were killed, many forced into cannibalism, legions carried away as prisoners of war, and that this was the end of Israel's religious life being centered in Jerusalem. That is certainly worse than anything that had occurred in Israel before. This is indeed the abomination of desolation.

And knowing this frees us from the temptation to speculate and be always on the lookout for future "abominations of desolations" and instead focus on Christ, for as Jesus has told us in Matthew 24 and 25, we need to focus on discipleship until Jesus returns. And...

7. Jesus' coming will be very clear (v. 27): Jesus warns us yet again about false teachings and false signs. Jesus teaches that when he returns it will be sudden and clear so that everyone will know it is happening all at once. The reference to lightning is Jesus using their understanding of horizontal lightening to poetically make this point: the people of that time believed that everyone in the world could see horizontal lightening at the same time, so Jesus uses that image to convey his return. Jesus' return will not be mysterious or secret, it will be the most obvious thing to ever happen.

So, any and all prophecies, predictions, and signs about Jesus' coming are bad teachings because Jesus will return suddenly and it will be obvious like a huge, worldwide flash of lightning. He backs this up with the rest of the passage (vv. 28-44):

²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ 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. ³² "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. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁶ "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ 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, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

I think what I just read makes it pretty clear that no one knows the time of Jesus' return except for God the Father. Don't accept predictions or approximations. And much of what Jesus says in this last piece affirms what we have already said. But one last point needs to be made as we have read this passage:

8. Before Jesus comes things will be normal (v. 37). Jesus uses the story of Moses and the Flood to drive home that the world will be carrying on as normal immediately – like a literal moment – before Jesus returns. Why is this important? Because it directly refutes the idea of a pretribulation rapture which is so popular in a wing of (particularly American) Christianity that says certain Christians will be raptured to heaven, seven years of terrible things happen, and then Jesus returns. If no one knows the day or the hour and life is carrying on normally until the instant Jesus arrives, this leaves absolutely no room for a pretribulation rapture. Instead, we clearly see in what Jesus teaches in this passage that he returns first and then one is taken and one is left. The standard of historical, orthodox Christianity should be your standard and understanding, too: Jesus comes first.

Jesus teaches that this rapture (which means “taken away to salvation” and in what we have said gets those living on the earth at the time prepared to be the resurrected people who inhabit the new heavens and earth with those who died in faith beforehand) is the first public event of his glorious return for all the world to witness and see. Whatever anyone wants to tell you about Christianity and end times, you must test against this question: does Jesus return *first*? If Jesus doesn't return first, in an instant, while the world is carrying on as “normal” (whatever that means these days), run from that teaching because it contradicts Jesus.

There is far more we could say (and I think that every week) but we shall leave it there. So, remember these things: don't let anyone trick you, don't be terrified, people living lives of discipleship to Jesus will be hated and as a result many will fall away, but the mission of Jesus will thrive and be glorious. We will go through times of trial and tribulation but we will always have Jesus and he is always in control. Jesus' return will be very clear and things will be quite normal until the instant he arrives. And before anything else theologically cosmic happens, Jesus will return. Jesus comes first. Jesus comes first in our lives, in this world, and in his return.

Jesus comes first and it will be glorious. Daniel 7:13–14 says, “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

