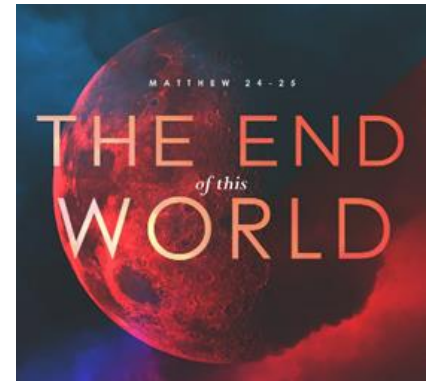


# Signs

Matthew 24:1-35

March 8, 2020



*Please read Matthew 24:1-14 before reading this manuscript.*

I can still remember, as a kid, listening to “The War of World’s” Radio Program.<sup>1</sup> How many of you remember this? It originally aired back in 1938. I wasn’t alive back then, of course, but I do remember hearing the story being rebroadcast over an AM radio station, back in the early 1980’s. At the time, I was fascinated by anything having to do with science fiction. As I listened to this radio drama about a Martian invasion, I was totally into it. The only problem, is that they kept interrupting the story to remind us listeners, that this wasn’t a true story. It was the fictional account of aliens from Mars invading planet earth. This seemed strange to me. Why would anyone think that this was actually real? But, apparently, according to some historical accounts, when this program originally aired back in 1938, it actually caused a bit of a panic for some people. Some people thought that this story was real, that Martians were actually invading the world right then and there.<sup>2</sup> So, for liability reasons, the rebroadcast kept interrupting the story to ensure no one got confused or panicked.

The reason I share this story, is that it illustrates our human tendency toward confusion and panic. Sometimes we grab onto one or two particular pieces of information, and then we run wild with it. All too often, rather than really thinking it through, we misinterpret the information. Not only do we misinterpret it, but we overreact to it. Or, at least we wrongly react to it. Today we’re beginning a new 4-week Sermon Series called, “The End of This World.” It’s based on Matthew 24-25. This is Mathew’s 5<sup>th</sup> and final discourse. It’s often referred to as the Olivet discourse, because Jesus was sitting up on “the Mount of Olives” when He taught it.<sup>3</sup> As Jesus sits up there, overlooking Jerusalem, He talks about a VERY compelling topic, “Signs of The End of This World.”

**1. Sometimes signs confuse or panic us.** Signs of the End of This World are not meant to do this though; they are meant to motivate us to godly living. And that will be our primary focus over the next 4 Sundays, godly living. Jesus’ disciples are pretty impressed with the temple buildings. But in Matthew 24:2, Jesus makes a startling statement that every stone of the temple would be thrown down.<sup>4</sup> This causes the disciples some concern; perhaps even a little panic or confusion. And it prompts them to ask Jesus some questions in private: “...when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3)<sup>5</sup> Jesus then goes on to answer these questions, with a long section of teaching. And He makes it clear, that rather than confuse or panic us,

**2. Signs are meant to warn us.** Signs are meant to prepare us and to wake us up to what really matters in this life! In verses 4-14, Jesus begins to answer their questions by giving them 4 warnings: First of all, Jesus warns them...

**1) Watch out that no one deceives you.**<sup>6</sup> In Matthew 24:4-5, “Jesus answered: ‘Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and will deceive

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_War\\_of\\_the\\_Worlds\\_\(1938\\_radio\\_drama\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_War_of_the_Worlds_(1938_radio_drama)) Steven Spielberg directed a movie by this title in 2005, starring Tom Cruise.

<sup>2</sup> So, if any of us think that “fake news” is something new, we need to take another look through our history records.

<sup>3</sup> The Mount of Olives is just a little ways east of Jerusalem, “rising about 200 feet above the city.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1633, footnote on Matthew 24:3. There is a great map of this on pp. 1686-7.

<sup>4</sup> This was fulfilled literally some 40 years later in AD 70. The Roman General Titus “completely destroyed Jerusalem and the temple buildings.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1633, footnote on Matthew 24:2.

<sup>5</sup> By this point in time, Jesus had already predicted His own death and resurrection 3 times. Jesus’ prediction in Matthew 16:21 brought about Peter’s rebuke. In 17:23 it filled the disciples with grief. And in 20:19 it led to an awkward power move by two brothers, James and John. This was followed by a clear message from Jesus on servant leadership. Apparently, by Matthew 24, they had accepted Jesus’ impending death and resurrection and were now anticipating His 2nd coming, His 2nd advent.

<sup>6</sup> Read 1 John 2:18 and any footnotes your Bible may have.

many.” Later on, in verse 11 He adds, “and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.” In other words, there’s going to be a LOT of confusion regarding the signs of Jesus’ 2<sup>nd</sup> coming. We should expect that. Jesus is warning them ahead of time, “WATCH OUT that no one deceives you.” As always, Jesus was right on the money with this prediction. Today it’s easy to find many examples in our world, of all kinds of false teaching, that revolves precisely around this topic of the End Times. Jesus’ 2<sup>nd</sup> warning is...

**2) See to it that you’re not alarmed.** Really? This seems like something we should probably be alarmed about. In fact, this feels like the perfect time to panic! But Jesus reassures His followers in Matthew 24:6, “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed....” Answer these questions honestly: Have you ever felt alarmed by what is going on in our world? Maybe by the Coronavirus, or by the stock market, or by political events? Maybe by our rampant drug problems or by human trafficking. Maybe you feel alarmed by the refugee crisis or by global warming, or by any number of other troubling world events. We humans are pretty frail creatures, so it’s not surprising that from time to time we become alarmed by the signs all around us. Some days it really does feel like the End of This World is upon us! Frankly, one day this world will come to an end. Jesus is honest with His followers about that. But, in the meantime, Jesus gives a clear warning for them (and for US!): See to it that you’re NOT alarmed. See to it that you don’t panic, that you don’t allow these confusing times to take your eyes off of Jesus. Jesus then goes on to give a 3<sup>rd</sup> warning:

**3) Such things must happen.** Right after Jesus says, “...see to it that you are not alarmed,” He goes on to say, “Such things must happen...” (Matthew 24:6) By every indicator, this world may look/feel out of control, but it’s not. All of these world events are within God’s foreknowledge; they are under His sovereign control. Verses 7-8 go on, “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.” In other words, as bad as these things might seem right now, this is only the beginning of how bad things are going to get. Even so, there is NO need for panic here. “Such things must happen” but they are not happening because God couldn’t stop them. God has not lost control of this world. This is all part of His greater plan. Such things must happen but God is still in control. Jesus then goes on to give a 4<sup>th</sup> warning. This is perhaps the most sobering of them all:

**4) You will be persecuted.** Jesus is pretty direct with His followers in Matthew 24:9, “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.” It’s helpful at this point, to keep a couple of things in mind: First of all, persecution shouldn’t surprise us. Jesus has been talking about persecution since the very beginning of His ministry. Way back in the beatitudes, in Matthew 5:10-12 Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” So persecution isn’t anything new for Christ-followers.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> thing to keep in mind is what Jesus said back in Matthew 24:6, “see to it that you are not alarmed.” Rather than confusion or panic, remember that persecution is a blessing. Our is the Kingdom of Heaven! When evil comes against us, because of our association with Jesus, we can rejoice and be glad. Acts 5:41-42 comes to mind, “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.” Rather than confuse or panic us, signs are meant to warn us of what we are up against. And to remind us that God is well aware of these realities, so we don’t need to be alarmed. But these signs aren’t just meant to warn us, they are also meant to encourage us.

**3. Signs are meant to encourage us toward godly living.** After warning them, Jesus goes on to encourage them. He just got done talking about things like: false teachers, wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, being put to death, being hated, and the increase of wickedness. Jesus then gives them two powerful encouragements. He motivates them to godly living in 2 particular areas:

**1) Stand firm to the end!** In Matthew 24:13, Jesus encourages them, “but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.” Stand firm despite the current and very real struggles that you are facing. Stand firm until Jesus’ returns. This struggle that you are going through, and this tension that you’re feeling, is only temporary.<sup>7</sup> We need to persevere in our own personal faith.<sup>8</sup> We need to endure the hardships and struggles of this present life.<sup>9</sup> As believers in Jesus, we are called to suffer for Him. In fact, perseverance is a hallmark for God’s children.<sup>10</sup> Standing firm to the end, is proof that we have a genuine salvation.<sup>11</sup> (As they say, “the proof is in the pudding.”) Then, Jesus encourages them to...

**2) Preach the gospel to all nations!**<sup>12</sup> Matthew 24:14 says, “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.” Last week, Pastor Eric talked about “Gaining a Global Perspective.” We need to share the Good News about Jesus in Bemidji and throughout the U.S. We need to share it in the 1040 window and all around the world. Just a few chapters after Matthew 24, Jesus is arrested, and tortured, and then crucified on the cross. He is then buried and rises from the dead on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day. Matthew then ends his Gospel account by recording Jesus’ Great Commission: “...go and make disciples of all nations....” The signs that Jesus has been telling His followers about, are meant to encourage us toward godly living. But what about verses 15-35? What about “the abomination that causes desolation” and the OT prophecies of Daniel? What about Matthew 24:21? “For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again.” What about the different views on the Rapture, and the Tribulation, and the Millennial reign of Jesus?

Pastor Jerry, “when are we going to get to that stuff? As a church, we’ve talked about all of these things before. And, I’m pretty sure that we’ll talk about them again at a future date. End Times eschatology is fascinating stuff. And, it’s important to learn about these things, because the Bible talks about them. But the fact is, it’s difficult to give clear, definitive answers to some of the questions that we’re asking. That’s because Jesus was not necessarily trying to lay out a comprehensive eschatology in Matthew 24. Bible scholars far more studied and educated than most of us, have discussed and debated Matthew 24 for years and years. And they still find this particular text, particularly difficult.<sup>13</sup> D.A. Carson summarizes it well, “Few chapters of the Bible have elicited more disagreement among interpreters than Matthew 24...”<sup>14</sup> So, for today, we’re going to avoid the potential distractions of the debates over this text. Instead, we are going to focus our energies on the more immediate application of Matthew 24.<sup>15</sup>

If you’re someone who has an interest in more deeply studying the End Times, I would be happy to chat with you over coffee some time. I would also highly recommend a helpful little paper called, “Has the ‘Prophecy Bug’ Bitten You?” It was written by our very own, Pastor Emeritus, Fred Martin. It’s available as a link on our church website.<sup>16</sup> <https://efcbemidji.org/article/has-the-prophecy-bug-bitten-you> We aren’t going to solve all of our End Times questions today. And frankly, we’re not going

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<sup>7</sup> See 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

<sup>8</sup> This ties in with something we learned back in Matthew 13:21, “But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.”

<sup>9</sup> See 2 Timothy 2:10-13; Hebrews 10:36-39; James 1:12.

<sup>10</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2070, footnote on Hebrews 3:6.

<sup>11</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1682, footnote on Mark 13:13. See Hebrews 3:6, 14; 6:11-12;

<sup>12</sup> Consider 2 Peter 3:1-18, especially verses 9b, 12a, and 15.

<sup>13</sup> See a comprehensive overview on pp. 548-557 of D.A. Carson’s *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9, Matthew & Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> “...and its parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21.” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9, Matthew & Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 548.

<sup>15</sup> Much of the confusion over the timing of these events, lies in figuring out which question from Matthew 24:3 Jesus is answering. In other words, is Jesus answering their 1st question or their 2nd question? There seem to be at least 2 different events being discussed in Matthew 24. Consider also the parallel passage in Luke 21:9, “...the end will not come right away.” Many events are characteristic of our present age as well as the final end of this world.

<sup>16</sup> <https://efcbemidji.org/article/has-the-prophecy-bug-bitten-you/>

to feel badly about that. What we are going to do, is respond to Jesus' words in Matthew 24, with something much better than confusion or panic: We're going to pay attention to the warnings that Jesus just talked about, and we're going to be motivated by His encouragement toward godly living.

***Dear Brother or Sister in Christ, carefully consider each of these questions:***

**4 Warnings “until He comes”:**

1. Are you being careful not to be deceived?
2. Are you making sure that these stressful times don't alarm you?
3. Are you trusting in God's sovereignty in these difficult times?
4. Are you ready to be persecuted for Jesus' sake?

**2 Encouragements “until He comes”:**

1. Are you standing firm to the end?
2. Are you telling people about Jesus?

As we consider our celebration of the Lord's Supper, let's think about that word: “UNTIL.” Until. Until Jesus' returns, these 4 warnings and 2 encouragements guide us in how we should live. Back in verse 6 we talked about the fact that “such things must happen.” But verse 6 then goes on to say, “but the end is still to come.” In other words, the end has not yet come. So we are still living in this in-between time. You could say that we are living in the days of “UNTIL.” Back in verse 13, Jesus urges His followers to stand firm, “to the end.” We could even say “UNTIL the end.” Stand firm “UNTIL the end.” In fact, we hear this word “UNTIL” every time that we celebrate the Lord's Supper. 1 Corinthians 11:26 reminds us, “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” So UNTIL our Lord comes, let's pay attention to His warnings and let's embrace His encouragements toward godly living!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
on March 8, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson