

12 King versus temple (Matthew 23–24)

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. The opening of Charles Dickens' classic novel—*A Tale of Two Cities*—reminds us that life can be good and bad at the same time. That was Jesus's experience: heaven's kingdom was arriving in him, yet those in power executed him to block his authority.

Tonight we hear two prophetic messages from Jesus:

- In Chapter 23, Jesus declares seven woes on the temple leaders. The city that rejected his leadership would fall, and he held the temple leaders responsible.
- In Chapter 24, Jesus responds to questions about the fall of Jerusalem and the arrival of his kingship.

There's a lot of interest in Chapter 24—sometimes understood as signs of end times. Perhaps we can summarize Chapter 23, and spend most of our evening on Chapter 24.

12.1 The king berates the temple leaders (Matthew 23)

Jesus avoided confrontation with Herod. He didn't quarrel or raise his voice in the streets (12:18). Now he raises his voice in a sustained rant against the temple leaders. Why?

Unlike Herod or Caesar, the high priest was an anointed leader, with authority established by the Sinai covenant (Exodus 28:41). The king was also an anointed leader, with authority established by the covenant promise God gave to David (2 Samuel 7:16). The temple authorities were about to crucify the king of the Jews.

The king had returned to Jerusalem as God had promised (21:1-9), but the temple refused to recognize him (21:23-27). He warned them not to reject their Father's authority (21:28 – 22:14), calling them to recognize the son of David (22:43-46).

Jesus condemns the temple authorities as mere actors (*hypocrites*)—playing the role of serving God, but self-serving. They're not serving God if they're plotting to kill him:

- Jesus acknowledges that the Law gave authority to the priesthood (23:2), but the current leaders care only for human approval, not serving God (23:5-12).
- Seven times, he announces the downfall of the temple hierarchy (*woe x 7*). They're actors playing a role, not servants with God's authority (23:13-29).
- Like previous generations, these leaders will kill for power. God will hold them responsible for the murder they're plotting (23:30-36).
- Since the city they lead refuses its king, Jerusalem and its temple would fall (23:37-38). Recognizing God's Messiah is its only hope (23:39).

The concluding section (23:29-39) gives us Jesus' own understanding of the meaning of his death. Killing God's anointed is the ultimate expression of the rebellion against God (sin). God's salvation comes only when people recognize God's Christ, *the one who comes in the name of the Lord* (verse 39).

Does that brief summary cover Chapter 23? Do you have questions?

If that's okay, we'll skip to Chapter 24 now. Turn to §12.2 (page 161).

Who is the temple serving? (23:1-12)

We shudder at the word *hypocrite*. Who wants to be accused of duplicity? It's hard to defend against the accusation that my inner intentions don't match my actions. But that understanding of hypocrisy reflects our culture of individualism, where personal authenticity is the greatest virtue. There's a bit of that in Jesus' critique of the Pharisees and Torah scholars, but that wasn't his main concern.

In their collectivist culture, it was all about being **honoured** or **shamed** by the community. That's still the case in many places today. The Chinese government has a formal system of social credit: rewarding those who act honourably, restricting those who act shamefully (by government standards).

That was the Pharisees' game. Backed by Torah scholars, they took a social engineering role—controlling the community by assigning honour and shame. To those they regarded as scum they would say, "Shame on you! You're not keeping to the Law of the Lord! You're demeaning us all!"

Well, that's the kind of thing they **said**. But what they were **doing** was seeking honour for themselves. They wanted to be seen as the top dogs. It was all a power game.

That's why Jesus confronted them, shaming those who appointed themselves for honour. God had not appointed them. They were just role-playing. That's a dangerous game when the person God has appointed arrives.

Matthew 23:1-12 (my translation)

¹ Then Jesus addressed the crowds and his disciples. ² He said, "On Moses' seat sit the scholars and the Pharisees. ³ So whatever they tell you, do it and keep it all.

"But do not do the deeds they do, for what they say is not what they do.

⁴ They strap together heavy loads and lay them on people's shoulders, while they themselves don't want to lift a finger to move them.

⁵ "All the deeds they do are for human spectators. They wear wider phylacteries and thicker tassels. ⁶ They love the top seats at the dinner tables, and the leading chairs at the synagogues, ⁷ and being recognized at the markets, and having people call them, 'Rabbi.'

⁸ "You're not to be called *Rabbi*. No individual among you is the Teacher; you're all family. ⁹ No one of you on earth is to be called Father, for you have one heavenly Father. ¹⁰ None of you are to be called Instructors, since your instructor is the Anointed. ¹¹ Among you, the one who serves you all is greater. ¹² Whoever elevates himself on the social ladder will be brought down, and whoever comes down the social ladder will be elevated."

Jesus' authority is the regal power God promised to David, the authority God gives his anointed. The Pharisees and Torah scholars claimed a different authority—the authority of the Law given through Moses. The king affirms the authority of the Law for Israel: they need to *do it all* (23:3).

But these guys do not represent God in how they apply the Law. What burdens they place on people! They're more like Pharaoh's taskmasters than the God revealed by Moses, the God who lifts the oppression from his people (23:4).

What they want is human **recognition**. They dress for it (23:6). They take the top spots (23:7). They want the titles (23:7). That's how kingdoms of the world work: someone claims a title like *Caesar*, and all the plebs play along.

That's not how the kingdom of God works. Under God, there's no autocrat telling everyone what to do to (23:8). *Rabbi* was the title Pharisees wanted. *Teacher* was the top title at Qumran. But the kingdom of God is a family, with one Father in heaven (23:9), and one anointed ruler instructing his kingdom on earth (23:10).

Jesus subverts the whole pecking order. In any chicken pen, everyone pecks the hen at the bottom of the social ladder. She gets only leftovers. The kingdom of God inverts that: she's the most important, the one everybody looks out for and protects (23:11).

With the usual power pyramid, the least important people are crushed at the bottom. Turn it upside down, and those people are supported at the top. Jesus swung the social ladder 180°—the heaven-empowered servant rescuing his people.

The Pharisees were role-playing a game where they stay on top by pushing everyone else down. And pushing Jesus out (23:31-32).

According to the king, they were going down. If people followed them, the whole city would go down with them. That's what upset Jesus most (23:33 – 24:2).

Jesus couldn't leave them in place. He could not leave his people under their power. God had promised the kingdom to his anointed, and his people needed to know he was turning the world back the right way up.

Why “woe”? (23:13-32)

If you think Jesus deserves a Nobel Peace Prize, you might be shocked by the way he addressed his enemies. Seven times, Jesus announced “woe” on them.

Jesus had approached the capital to be recognized as king. The people recognized him as *the son of David, coming in the name of the Lord to save his people* (21:9). But their joyful news sent shock waves through the powerful people of the city.

Initially it wasn't the Roman Procurator who felt threatened. It was the temple leaders (high priests), the leading Torah scholars (scribes), the social engineers in control of the community's honour and shame (Pharisees). They were horrified by this Galilean overturning their authority (21:12-17).

“Who do you think you are?” they challenged (21:23). Jesus' told stories that exposed their authority as a sham. “You only feign obedience to our Father” (21:28-32). “You're the tenants who kill the son to keep the vineyard” (21:33-43). “You're the guests who refuse the king's call to honour his son” (22:1-14).

All their attempts to discredit him failed (22:15-40). A king greater than David was taking his seat in Jerusalem, expecting heaven to bring his enemies under his feet (22:41-46). That's why Jesus confronted his enemies as he did: not as a military commander, but as a prophet.

Jesus did not march into the city with an army to force his enemies under his feet. He arrived as the king of peace, receiving the kingship in the name of their heavenly

sovereign (21:1-8). His message was not Caesar's, "Resist me, and I'll kill you!" His was a prophet's message, "It won't go well for you if you resist what God decrees."

When a sign says, "Stay back; unstable cliffs," it isn't a threat but a warning. In the next chapter, the word *woe* (*ouai*) is translated, *how dreadful it will be*. When Jesus spoke of *woe for pregnant women and nursing mothers* (24:19), he wasn't wishing them evil; he was empathizing with how horrid it would be when Rome invaded. It's difficult for expectant mothers to run, for those with crying babies to hide.

That's what Jesus meant by *woe*. He warned they would find themselves on the wrong side of history if they murdered the king God had given them (23:29-39).

Matthew 23:13-29

¹³ **Woe** to you scholars and Pharisees, play-actors, because you block heaven's reign when it's right there in front of people. You not only refuse to go in; you prevent those who are going in from going in.

¹⁵ **Woe** to you scholars and Pharisees, play-actors, because you cross sea and desert to make one convert, and when it happens you turn him into twice the son of Gehenna you are.

¹⁶ **Woe** to you, blind guides! You say, 'If someone swears by the temple, it's nothing; but if someone swears by the gold of the temple, they must pay.' ¹⁷ Are you blind and stupid? Which is greater? The gold, or the temple that made the gold holy? ¹⁸ And 'If someone swears by the altar, it's nothing; but if someone swears by the gift on it, they must pay.'

¹⁹ You're blind! Which is greater? The gift, or the altar that makes the gift holy? ²⁰ Someone who swore by the altar takes their oath by it and by everything that's on it, ²¹ and someone who swore by the temple takes their oath by it and by everything within it. ²² and someone who swore by heaven takes their oath by the throne of God and by the one seated upon it.

²³ **Woe** to you, scholars and Pharisees, play-actors, because you tithe your garden herbs—mint, dill, cumin—and overlook the weighty matters of the Law: justice, mercy, faithfulness. Sure, you need to do your things, but not at the cost of the others. ²⁴ Blind guides! Filtering out the gnat, but swallowing a camel.

²⁵ **Woe** to you, scholars and Pharisees, play-actors, because you cleanse the outside of the cup and the dish that still hold plunder and anarchy inside. ²⁶ Blind Pharisee! First cleanse the inner face of the cup, so its outer face becomes clean too.

²⁷ **Woe** to you, scholars and Pharisees, play-actors, because you're like whitened tombs: shiny and stately outside, holding dead bones and unclean rot inside. ²⁸ That's you: superficially presenting people with what's right, but inside you're all pretence and lawlessness.

²⁹ **Woe** to you, scholars and Pharisees, play-actors, ...

Jesus began his ministry by announcing his kingship as *good news* for the people who'd been missing out (Matthew 5:3), grieving their losses (5:4), living without power (5:5), never received the justice (5:6). Now he announces the other side of that story: the gospel is disaster (woe) for those who act as if they have power over people. The true king exposes their power claims as mere role-playing (*hypokritēs* = play-acting: 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).



Actors' masks (Greek theatre)

Blessings for those who've missed out, and *woe* for those in power. The Christ is confrontational because heaven gave him authority to sort out what's wrong on earth.

The power of life and death (24:29-39)

The final woe (verses 29-36) gets to the heart of what's wrong. The temple leaders will kill for power.

At every level—from domestic violence, to community oppression, to cultural genocide, to international war—the heart of evil is people claiming power over others, power enforced by death (or the threat of death). We won't be at peace until we stop grasping power, and honour the One to whom it belongs.

That's why Jesus shamed those who had taken on the role of community leaders. The pretenders were blocking God's reign (23:13). In verse 25, Jesus accuses them of plundering (*harpagē*) without restraint (*akrasia*). That unusual pair of words turns up in Josephus' description of Antiochus IV seizing Jerusalem: he *plundered* it and slaughtered people excessively, overwhelmed by an *unrestrained* craving for revenge (*Wars*, 1.34). It's true: those who grasp power plunder the community and destroy the sheep because they're not answering to anyone (Ezekiel 34; John 10:7-11).

This was what was wrong in Jerusalem. They were the tenants in God's vineyard who say, *This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance* (21:38). The leaders of that generation continued the whole sordid history of rebellion against God by *completing what your ancestors started* (23:32).

Matthew 23:29-39

²⁹ **“Woe** to you, scholars and Pharisees, play-actors, because you construct tombs for the prophets and maintain the tombs of the righteous,³⁰ and you say, ‘If we'd lived in our ancestors' time, we would not have been participants in the blood of the prophets.’³¹ You're giving evidence against yourselves: you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets.³² Complete what your ancestors started!

³³ Serpents, born to snakes! How can you escape Gehenna's judgement?³⁴ See, as a result, I myself am sending you prophets and sages and scholars. Some of them you will kill and crucify. Some of them you will flog in your synagogues, and you will hound them from city to city.

³⁵ “It has all come on you: the blood of the righteous being poured on the ground—from the blood of righteous Abel, to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

³⁶ I tell you the truth: all these things will come upon this generation.

³⁷ “Jerusalem! Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you! How often I wanted to gather your children the way a hen gathers her young under her wings, but you didn't want to. ³⁸ Look! Your home is left deserted. ³⁹ For I tell you, you cannot see me now until you say, ‘Blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord.’

So, here's the tragedy. If they complete the reign of death by murdering God's anointed, the weight of history falls on them (23:36). He feels as powerless as the hen who sees the eagle hovering and calls her chicks to take refuge under her wings, but they're not willing. Jesus has observed in nature the difference between predatory power and loving leadership (23:37).

If Jerusalem refused her life-giving king, death would take over. It would be the desolation of the city of God's house on earth (23:38). That's exactly what Jesus enacted when he arrived as king and overturned the temple. He even echoed the words Jeremiah used to describe the city's destruction by Babylon: God's house had become *a den of bandits* (21:12-13, quoting Jeremiah 7:11). Now Jesus laments over Jerusalem (23:37) for the same reason the city fell previously: because the city's leaders *shed within her the blood of the righteous* (Lamentations 4:13). He continues to explain to his disciples the destruction they must expect (24:1-2).

If it ended there, the death of God's anointed would be the ultimate disaster for human history. The whole story from Abel to Zechariah would say: death reigns.

But it doesn't end there. As final as death appears to be, Jesus holds out hope of a new Jerusalem, a world coming under his kingship. The city that kills her king cannot see him until they say, *'Blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord'* (23:39). Is that even possible once they kill him?

Wasn't that what the crowds said when they recognized the arrival of their king? *Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord* (21:9, echoing Psalm 118:26). But the crowds were overruled by the play-actors pretending to represent God but whose power was rooted in death. Regardless of what they do, Jesus believes that God will raise him up. Death will be overruled by the eternal sovereign, the life-giver (compare 22:29-32).

History receives its answer when the dying world receives life from *the one who comes in the name of the Lord*. That is indeed where the Gospel according to Matthew takes us (28:18-20).

Did you recognize the gospel in Matthew 23? That's how Jesus described the life-and-death struggle he was about to endure, arguably the most detailed explanation of the meaning of the cross he ever gave.

12.2 The temple will fall, but Christ will be king (Matthew 24)

Jesus now answers the disciples' questions about the fall of Jerusalem. They can scarcely imagine a world where the temple is destroyed, where God no longer has a house for his sovereignty in Jerusalem.

To understand this chapter, we must hear it as the disciples heard it. Some people read Matthew 24 as if it was about our time. Some translations even insert a heading such as, "Signs of the End Times." That phrase is not in the text.

Like every chapter of Scripture, we need to hear it in context, asking, "What did it mean for them?" before we ask, "What does it mean for us?"

The setting of Matthew 24

Here's a basic example of how we can get things wrong. Say 1000 years from now, someone digs up a newspaper fragment from 2023 that reads:

Dockers Annihilate Eagles in Derby

Their Ancient English Dictionary defines a *docker* as "a person employed in a port to load and unload ships." An eagle is "a large bird of prey with a massive hooked bill and long broad wings." They imagine the eagles must have been swooping to steal food the dockers were loading it into the boats, so eventually the dockers arranged a cull of the eagles, eventually wiping them all out.

To confirm their interpretation, they must identify where this happened. If the dockers were loading boats, it must have been a coastal town. Sure enough, there was a town named Derby on the northwest coast of Australia! The archaeologists are confident they know where, when, and how these magnificent ancient birds became extinct.

None of us would even imagine reading the headline that way. We know who the Dockers and the Eagles are. We know what a derby is. For us, none of that needs to be said. But, people from another time don't come to the text with that knowledge.

That's why we must start by asking what the Bible text meant to them, in their time, in their culture. The basic principle is:

A text cannot mean what it never meant.²⁰

So, let's approach Matthew 24 in its **setting**. Matthew 21–28 is all about the conflict between king and temple. The king denounced the temple leaders (23:1-32) because they were plotting to assassinate him (23:33-36). He announced the fall of the city that refused his kingship, the desolation of the house that rejected his authority (23:37-39).

He explains he was talking about the literal destruction of the temple:

"Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" (24:2).

When the capital falls, it's the end of an era. When Babylon destroyed Solomon's temple in 586 BC, that was the end of era of the kingdom. If Rome destroys the second temple, it's the end of the present era. Could it also be the start of the era they were waiting for—heaven's reign restored to earth, in God's Anointed (Christ)?

²⁰ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, (Zondervan, 1993), 30.

Sitting on the Mount of Olives in full view of the city and temple, the disciples asked, “*When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*” (23:3)



Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives today. Photo: Allen Browne, 2017.

Surely the end of this present age (foreign rule) is what Jesus has been preparing them for all along. They've been waiting to be restored as God's

kingdom under Christ's reign—the *age to come*, as the prophets called it.

Unfortunately, the King James Version translated the disciples' question as:

“*What shall be the sign of thy coming and of the end of the world?*” (23:4, KJV)

That's wrong: the word is *aiōn* (era or age), not *kosmos* (world).

God is not giving up on the world, as if creation was a bad idea in the first place. God is bringing an end to the era of rebellion, restoring heaven's government in Christ, restoring what he created in the beginning.

Jesus never said, “God will annihilate the world.” Jesus expected *the renewal of all things—the Son of Man on his glorious throne*, with the twelve representing his government (19:28). It's not bad news about the world ending; it's the good news of the era (*aiōn*) reaching its goal (*synteleia*).

The disciples knew that. So, let's see how Jesus answered their question.

When will Jesus' kingship arrive, and how will they know? (24:4-14)

Matthew 24:1-14 (my translation)

¹ Leaving the temple, Jesus moved on. His disciples came up to draw his attention to the temple buildings. ² Jesus responded to them by saying, “You see all these, don't you? I tell you the truth, nothing will be left here. There's not a stone on top of another that won't be knocked down.”

³ As he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples approached him privately. “Tell us! When will these things be? What will be the sign that you've arrived and the era has finally reached its goal?”

⁴ In reply Jesus told them, “Watch out that no one misleads you. ⁵ For many will come with my authority saying, ‘I am the Anointed,’ and they will mislead many. ⁶ Inevitably, you hear wars and news of wars. Don't let it alarm you. Those things have to happen, but it isn't the goal. ⁷ For nation will be raised up against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there'll be famines and earthquakes in places. ⁸ All these are just the onset of labour pains.

⁹ “Then they’ll hand you over for torture, and kill you. Expect to be hated by all the nations because of my authority. ¹⁰ Many will be brought down. Many will betray and hate each other. ¹¹ Many pseudo-prophets will be raised up and will mislead many. ¹² Because lawlessness is so prolific, many people’s love will wane. ¹³ But someone who perseveres towards the goal, this one will be rescued. ¹⁴ This good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed through the whole world as a decree for all the nations. That’s when the goal will be reached.”

Evangelists who trade in fear love these verses. You’ve heard them: “We’re living in the last days! Every night the TV news is full of *wars and rumours of wars!* Israel and Gaza are in conflict. Nations rise against nations. Kingdoms rise against kingdoms. Famines grip Africa. Earthquakes shake Turkey and Morocco, with volcanoes and tsunamis in Indonesia. Australia and Hawaii have had their worst bush fires ever. Floods and hurricanes sweep through China and Florida. The world is coming to an end. And tonight might be your last chance to invite Jesus into your heart. You must respond now before it’s too late!”

That whole approach contradicts what Jesus said. Jesus did not say, “Be alarmed!” He said, “You’ll hear about a lot of bad things, but ***do not let it alarm you***” (verse 6). He acknowledged that they would hear about all these things, but “*All these are just the onset of labour pains*” (verse 8). All these troubles are to be expected. They are **NOT signs of the end**. They’re signs of hope, labour pains pointing to God delivering new life to his fractured and suffering world—in Christ.

The one who will deliver us is the Christ. The global conflict that really matters is about his kingship. That’s why Jesus told his disciples to expect to be handed over to those who currently run the nations (verses 9-10). Like he was.

Other rulers will call us to trust them to save the world from all its problems. In Bible times, someone who wanted to be king needed a prophet to proclaim them as king (e.g. Nehemiah 6:7). The **false prophets** (verses 11, 25) are those who **proclaim a false messiah**—someone other than Jesus as the ruler of the world.

There have always been Christians who make that mistake. Some of America’s TV evangelists have proclaimed Donald Trump to be God’s anointed leader for America and for the world. They’re false prophets.

If you watched the coronation of King Charles, you would have seen the Church of England proclaiming Charles as God’s anointed to the strains of Handel’s *Zakok the Priest*, just like God’s anointing of the original son of David (1 Kings 1:39).

When Jesus warned about false Messiahs (verse 5) and their false prophets (verse 11), he was warning us not to trust other leaders to save the world, anyone other than God’s Messiah. That only feeds the rebellion against God’s reign. Our single-hearted loyalty must be to God’s Christ. It’s only those who stick with him who receive the rescue God promised (verse 13).

Jesus gives us **only one sign** regarding the end: *This gospel of his kingship must be proclaimed through the whole world* (verse 14). The gospel is heaven’s decree that God’s Christ is our Lord, so the gospel calls all nations under Christ’s leadership. **The end** God has in mind for us is not the termination of everything; it’s the goal (*telos*) we’re moving towards: earth as a kingdom of heaven *the renewal of all things* (19:28).

God's clock is not set by the disasters that undermine people's trust in God as we journey towards being restored as his kingdom. God's clock is set by the proclamation of his gospel, his good-news-decree that has placed his Son over all the nations of the earth. That's where the world is headed. That's *the goal* in Matthew's Gospel. In the presence of the resurrected and enthroned Messiah, we call all nations to comply with his leadership (28:18-20).

The fall of the existing order—temple and city (24:15-28)

It's hard for the disciples to imagine a world with no house in Jerusalem when God lives and reigns. Jesus reminds them of a familiar story recounted in Daniel.

During the Greek period, Antiochus IV wanted the Jews to lose their uniqueness and become good Greek citizens. He entered the Jerusalem temple, and erected an idol: an image of Zeus. He sacrificed a pig so the altar could not be used to worship YHWH. For 3½ years, the desecrated temple was unusable. Judas Maccabeus led a rebellion, recaptured Jerusalem, and cleansed the temple. Jews today still celebrate Hannukah, the festival of lights that recalls the rededication of the temple in 164 BC.

Three times Daniel refers to how the temple was *desolated* by this *abomination* (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Jesus picks the familiar phrase to describe the abomination of gentiles entering the temple and desolating it so it can no longer be used.

40 years later (AD 70), Rome's armies overturned the city and destroyed the temple:

Matthew 24:15-28

¹⁵ "So, when you see 'the abomination of the desolation' (Daniel the prophet's phrase) erected in the holy place (comprehend, reader), ¹⁶ then, people of Judea, run for the hills!

¹⁷ If you're on the rooftop, don't go back to get anything from inside. ¹⁸ If you're in the field, don't go back to get your clothes.

¹⁹ How difficult it will be for those with a baby in the womb or in

your arms when this happens. ²⁰ Pray your flight isn't in winter or on a Sabbath. ²¹ For the pressure will be severe, unlike anything since the world began until now. ²² Unless the days were limited no one would survive, but the days will be limited for the sake of the chosen.

²³ "Then, if someone tells you, 'Look! Here's the Anointed' or 'Here!'—don't believe it! ²⁴ For pseudo-messiahs and pseudo-prophets will be raised up providing great signs and wonders in order to mislead the chosen if possible. ²⁵ Look, I've pre-warned you.

²⁶ "If they tell you, 'Look! He's in the wilderness' don't go out there. 'Look! In the storerooms'—don't believe it. ²⁷ As lightning shoots out from the east and flashes to the west, the arrival of the son of man will be like that. ²⁸ Wherever there's a corpse, the eagles will be gathered."



Arch of Titus panel depicting the capture of Jerusalem.

Jesus gave this warning to the *people of Judea* (verse 16). If the invasion began on a Sabbath, some observant Jews would not travel far enough to escape. He was literally talking to Jewish people who would need to abandon the city and escape for their lives within their own lifetime.

If he hadn't warned them, many would wonder, "If Jesus was the son of David as we expected, why didn't he prevent the fall of Jerusalem?" Remember John the Baptist's question: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for someone else?" (11:3). And just as Jesus did not spring John from Herod's prison, **Jesus would not prevent the Roman invasion of Jerusalem.**

It's not that he doesn't care. He acknowledges the suffering. How hard it will be for a mother to escape carrying a crying baby in her arms (verse 18). He acknowledges they'll face hypothermia if Rome attacks in winter and they can't go back home to get a coat (verse 20). He acknowledges it would be the worst time ever (verse 21).

This event would cause some Jews to go looking for another leader to save them. Rebel leaders often hid in the wilderness. The first king of Israel was found hiding among the supplies (1 Samuel 10:22). That's why he told them this ahead of time (verses 23-25).

Jesus' kingship will not come by fighting their enemies like kings of old: his kingship will arrive **like a lightning bolt from heaven** (verse 27). Rome will fight, but Jesus will not. Jerusalem will see many corpses under the banner of the **eagle** (verse 28).

(Note: some translations of verse 28 refer to vultures because eagles don't feed on corpses. But the word *aetos* always meant eagle, never vulture. The eagle was on the flag of the Roman armies.)

This entire section describes the tragedy of the Roman invasion of Jerusalem in AD 70. The temple was knocked down, brick by brick. The eagles on the Roman standards hovered over the corpses of those who had not escaped.



Roman Eagle emblem

The rise of his kingship, with heaven's help (24:29-31)

Why this tragedy? Jerusalem would fall **because it rejected his kingship**: *How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were unwilling* (23:37). The fall of Jerusalem removed the play-actors from God's house, the robbers who would kill the king to take his authority.

But **how** does Jesus receive the authority? If Rome captured Jerusalem, doesn't that put Jerusalem under Rome's power instead of Jesus? Will Jesus need to bring Rome down before he can fulfil his role as the heaven-anointed king?

No, says Jesus. He doesn't have to fight the beasts for the kingdom. Heaven will shake everything up, and bring down the beasts who are currently in power.

Matthew 24:29

²⁹ “Immediately after the anguish 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.’” [Isaiah 13:10 and 34:4]

This is apocalyptic language, very familiar to Jesus’ audience. It’s how the prophets spoke of **powers like Babylon falling**:

Isaiah 13:1-19 (NIV)

¹ A prophecy against Babylon: ...

⁹ See, the day of the LORD is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.

¹⁰ **The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light.** The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.

¹¹ I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless. ...

¹⁹ Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the pride and glory of the Babylonians, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah.

The apocalyptic language described the overthrow of **the nations**:

Isaiah 34:2-4 (NIV)

² The LORD is angry with all nations; his wrath is on all their armies. He will totally destroy them, he will give them over to slaughter. ³ Their slain will be thrown out, their dead bodies will stink; the mountains will be soaked with their blood. ⁴ **All the stars in the sky will be dissolved and the heavens rolled up like a scroll;** all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shrivelled figs from the fig tree.

None of Jesus’ audience thought stars were literally going to fall from the sky. The “stars” of their world were the rulers, rulers they understood as appointed by God. But they’d been under the wrong rulers for so long. God needed to bring down these stars, dissolving their claims to power, and redraw the map with his Messiah reigning over his people.

That’s exactly what Jesus goes on to say:

Matthew 24:30

³⁰ “Then will shine the sign of the son of man in heaven. Then all the tribes of the land will mourn and will see the son of man coming upon the clouds of heaven with power and much grandeur.”

Jesus’ phrases come from Daniel 7:

Daniel 7:13-14 (NIV)

¹³ In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was **one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven.** He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given **authority, glory and sovereign power;** all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

The beasts (emperors) of Daniel 7:1-6 received their power by conquering each other. The beasts had hosts of armies to force everyone under their power. *The son of man* doesn't become king like that. He receives his authority from the *Ancient of Days*, backed by hosts of angels instead of armies (*the clouds of heaven*). Because it's based on heaven's authority and not earthly force, the kingdom entrusted to the son of man endures across space (*all nations*) and time (*never destroyed*).

With no army but the angelic forces of heaven, the son of man (heir of humanity) regains the authority God gave humans in the beginning, bringing the earth back under heaven's reign, undoing what God did in the exile (Zechariah 2:6).

When Jesus envisaged *the tribes of the land mourning* for him, he was probably referencing Zechariah 12:10, where the people who had pierced God's heart turn to him and mourn as one mourns the loss of an only child.

In summary, **this is how the world becomes a kingdom of heaven again:**

- a) the existing order (city and temple) falls (verses 15-29),
- b) the reign of God's Christ arrives with the help of heaven (verses 30-31).

Having received this authority, the Messiah **gathers** the people of the earth under his leadership. Again, this isn't done by force but with heaven's help:

Matthew 24:31

³¹ "He will commission his angels with a great trumpet, and they will gather his chosen from the four winds, from one side of the heavens to the other side."

Ever since the beginning, Jesus has been talking about this goal of gathering the people under his kingship, gathering the sheep that were scattered without a shepherd, gathering the harvest in, gathering his people under his leadership as a hen gathers her chicks. With this heaven-installed authority, he is gathering so much more than the lost sheep of the house of Israel; he's gathering the people of all nations under his kingship: *from one side of the heavens to the other*.

Is this how you've read the chapter before? How is this approach sitting with you?

The "when" question (24:32-51)

"When will this happen," the disciples asked (v. 3). Jesus now addresses that question.

It will happen in their lifetime. They will see Jesus raised up from the dead, ascending into heaven to be seated with his Father where he rules and reigns. They will proclaim his kingship and see people recognizing him as king. And *within their generation*, all these things—including the fall of Jerusalem—will take place. (Compare 16:28).

Matthew 24:32-35

³² "Learn by comparing the fig tree. When its branch is already becoming supple and the leaves are sprouting, you know that summer is close.

³³ Similarly, when you see all these things, you know it's close, arriving at the doors. ³⁴ I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass on until all these things come to pass. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass on, but my words will not fail to come to pass."

But the actual dates are not within Jesus' power to give them:

Matthew 24:36-39

³⁶ “But about the day or hour of that moment, no one has been informed, not the angels of the heavens, not the son, no one except the Father alone. ³⁷ For just as the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the son of man. ³⁸ For just as it was in those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, right up to the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ unaware until the flood came and swept them all away—the coming of the son of man will be like that.

The Noah reference is clear. Noah knew God was about to save the earth from the violence that had overtaken it, but the people of his generation had no idea it would not be business as usual.

The next two verses have given rise to some elaborately constructed theories about how it will all end:

Matthew 24:40-41

⁴⁰ “Then two will be in the field; **one is taken and one released**;
⁴¹ two grinding at the mill, one is taken and one released.”

In the *Left Behind* series of films and books, God snatches away his people (rapture) while the world endures seven years of tribulation (3½ in some versions) before Jesus physically descends to Jerusalem to reign on a throne for 1000 years (the millennium) before everything is ultimately sorted out and we go off to heaven. This theory is called Pretribulation Premillennialism. There's no one Bible passage that teaches this; it's a way of putting texts together to assemble this picture of the future.

Nothing in Matthew 24 suggests that one person is taken to heaven while the other is left behind on earth. Jesus has been talking about Jerusalem being invaded, warning people to literally escape, so they're not captured. To be *taken* by the Roman army, that would not be a good thing! To be *left behind* meant you survived the invasion.

Two people doing exactly the same thing—working in a field, or grinding at the mill—end up with different outcomes. *One is captured; one released*. The invading force does whatever it likes with its power, without any reason, justice, or compassion. There's no logic as to who they *take* and who they *leave*.

Is that a possible way to hear verses 40-41?

Reliable servants of the king (24:42-51)

Jesus concludes by calling his followers to live as servants of their king. We're already serving him, and one day his kingship will be recognized globally.

Matthew 24:42-51

⁴² “So, stay vigilant, because you don't know which day your Lord comes. ⁴³ You know that if the householder had known which night-watch the thief would come, he'd have stayed alert and not let his house be robbed. ⁴⁴ Through what I'm telling you, become ready, since the son of man comes when you're not expecting him.

⁴⁵ “Who could be the dependable and insightful servant whom the lord of the house appointed to provide food for them at the right time?

⁴⁶ Blessed is the servant who is found doing that when his lord comes.

⁴⁷ Truly I say to you that he will appoint him over all his affairs.

⁴⁸ “But what if a bad servant says in his heart, ‘My lord is preoccupied,’

⁴⁹ and he starts to beat his fellow-servants, and to eat and drink with those who drink to excess? ⁵⁰ The servant’s lord will come on a day he is not expecting, at a time he doesn’t know, ⁵¹ and he will dissect him and assign him a role with the play-actors, where there’s anguish and remorse.”

In the parables of the wheat/weeds (13:24-43) and the drag net (13:47-50), Jesus spoke about a time when the rebellion against God was over and God sorted the wheat from the weeds, the good fish from the bad. God honours us by inviting us to participate with him in the present, and we are accountable in the end.

We don’t know when that day will come. That’s up to God. He will evaluate his earthly servants. Life is a gift from God. A good life is spent in his service, rather than serving the self.

12.3 Conclusion

Chapters 23–24 make perfect sense when you read them in context.

The literary context (Matthew 21–28) is the king/temple conflict. So:

- Matthew 23 is the king confronting the temple leaders for misrepresenting God and intending to kill the king God sent them.
- Matthew 24 is the king warning the city that rejected his kingship that the temple was no longer God’s house: it was marked for demolition. Despite this, God would raise up the son of man and give him the kingship based on heaven’s power (not earthly forces).

The social/political context was the fallen kingdom of Israel, oppressed by the “stars” of the ancient world, rulers whom God needed to bring down as he entrusted the whole earthly realm into the reign of the son of man to whom it had been promised.

Simultaneously, *it was the worst of times; it was the best of times*—the fall of the powers that have oppressed the earth, and the establishment of God’s reign in Christ.

Jesus’ kingship was good news for the whole world. God was doing far more than dealing with a local injustice (Israel’s oppression by the nations). By appointing his Messiah as Lord of all, God was restoring the whole world to heaven’s reign. The good news of the Christ’s kingship is the gospel for the entire world.

Despite all the bad stuff that happens and makes people feel like the world is out of control—wars and rumours of wars, kingdoms firing weapons on kingdoms, famines and earthquakes all over, and people’s hearts growing cold towards each other and against God—despite all the machination and power-grabs of history, God has not lost control. He knows how to rescue the earth and restore us to the goal he planned in the beginning.

It all comes to fruition as heaven gives the earth to the son of man, inheriting the authority God gave us in the beginning, restoring the world to God's original goal:

Matthew 24:14 (NIV)

¹⁴ This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end [goal] will come.

That is the gospel in a nutshell.

For more detail on Matthew 23–24, see:

Mat 23	Woe there: how did Jesus treat his enemies?
Mat 23:1-12	Leadership is supporting people, not social climbing (23:1-12)
Mat 23:13-32	Why did Jesus shame Jerusalem's leaders? (Matthew 23:13-39)
Mat 23:25-39	The power of life and death (Matthew 23:25-39)
Mat 24	Olivet Discourse: temple and kingship (Matthew 24)
Mat 24:1-14	The end: where are we headed? (Matthew 24:1-14)
Mat 24:6-41	Jesus on war: pacifism, or just war?
Mat 24:9-30	The tribulation and Jesus' kingship (Matthew 24:9-30)
Mat 24:15-28	The fall of the Jerusalem temple (Matthew 24:15-28)
Mat 24:23-25	Messiahs and their prophets (Matthew 24:23-25)
Mat 24:26-27	The coming of the son of man (Matthew 24:26-27)
Mat 24:29	Shaking the powers (Matthew 24:29)
Mat 24:30	Coming with the clouds (Matthew 24:30)
Mat 24:30-31	Why are the people of earth mourning? (Matthew 24:30-31)
Mat 24:32-35	Fig trees and seasonal change (Matthew 24:32-35)
Mat 24:36	Why we can't know when (Matthew 24:36)
Mat 24:37-41	One taken; one left (Matthew 24:37-41)
Mat 24:42-47	Coming like a thief (Matthew 24:42-47)
Mat 24:45-51	Serving in God's house (Matthew 24:45-51)

The links are from <https://allenbrowne.blog/scriptureindex/>

In preparation for next week, read Matthew 25–26.