

**Signs of the Times**  
**Mat 24:1-31, Romans 8:18-25**

Friends, one of the challenges that famous actors often face, is that people don't really know who they are. I'm not saying that people don't recognize them, but people don't really know who they are as individuals, as persons. And instead when fans see them or meet them they often relate to them as one of the famous characters they've played.

For example, when people see Leonard Nimoy – they think logical Dr. Spock from Star Trek. When people see Sean Connery they think superspy – James Bond, when people see Johnny Depp – they think Captain Jack Sparrow mate!

And we're so used to the characters which famous actors play that we expect them to act like them all the time. And if one of them begins acts a bit differently it makes us do a double take, because it's "out of character" for them.

And friends, the passage of scripture that we read this morning might also make us think that perhaps Jesus is speaking a bit differently as well, that he is acting out of character.

Normally when we read the Gospels Jesus is saying things "like blessed are the meek, blessed are the poor in spirit, do not be afraid, let he who is without sin cast the first stone, I and the Father are one."

Or He is teaching in parables, telling stories to explain things about the Kingdom of Heaven to the crowds and his disciples, or hinting about how He must suffer and die to fulfill His role as the Messiah.

But in this passage we have Jesus predicting future disaster, suffering and persecution and talking about the end of the world, in rather specific terms.

This is not like Jesus; it's a bit out of character for him, what's going on here? Well friends, Jesus is responding to some questions that the disciples had asked him.

Now it all started with the disciples admiring the magnificent temple complex and trying to get Jesus to look at it and admire it as well.

Now this wasn't Solomon's temple, that one had been destroyed when Daniel went into exile in Babylon years ago. This was the Temple 2.0 and it had been expanded and renovated on a grand scale by King Herod and was often referred to as Herod's Temple. It was a very impressive building, and has been referred to as the eighth wonder of the ancient world.

But Jesus is not impressed, and he responds to the disciples' admiration of the temple by saying – look around, this will all be completely destroyed!

And again, this seems to be out of character for Jesus, we know he did not care much for the religious leaders and their hypocrisy - but he had always seemed to have a positive view of the temple – staying behind in Jerusalem as a young boy to stay in the temple teaching the teachers of the law, and later on chasing the money lenders and vendors out from the gentile court, and spending time teaching the crowds in the temple courts...

It leaves us wondering what does Jesus have against the temple?

But friends, Jesus isn't predicting the demise of the temple because he's got something against it, or because it's symbolic of works based religion as some might think. He's predicting its demise because His life and work would soon render it obsolete

You see friends, the temple was the concrete, tangible proof that God was present with his covenant people. It was the place where forgiveness of sins was accomplished through sacrifice, the place where worship and teaching could take place.

But with the coming of the Messiah this was all going to change. While Herod might have built a larger, grander version of the temple – 2.0, the Messiah was going to be revealed as the temple's replacement.

In the person of Jesus Christ God is present in a whole new way with his covenant people – he has become one of them,

and Jesus would offer his life as a sacrifice for sin, and through Jesus all peoples on earth would be able to worship and pray to the one true God.

Jesus has become the living temple which will last forever.

And the disciples get this hint because later on they come to Jesus later on to ask him when this will happen, what will be the sign of his Messianic arrival and the end of the age?

And friends please notice, that what they ask for is a sign. They don't ask for an itinerary, or a detailed schedule of when things will occur, they just ask for a sign.

And a sign in this sense is something that occurs that points to something other than itself. It is an indicator, it is proof, it is evidence of a coming reality.

So when Jesus answers he is dealing with signs, not schedules. He identifies events, but not an agenda. And the fact that Jesus' response can be divided into two parallel sections shows us that what he says is not meant to be taken as linear series of events, but as a list of signs.

So, the first section is from vs. 1 to vs. 14 and the second section is from vs. 15 to vs. 31.

And these sections are parallel, meaning that each section makes reference to events in the following order.

i) the sign of the temple, ii) then the sign of the False One, iii) followed by Signs of Tribulation, iv) and signs of Persecution. v) Then there is the sign of Apostasy and finally there is the sign of vi) Judgment concluding with vii) the sign of the End of the Age.

So let's look at how these things are referred to.

In vs. 1 and vs.2 Jesus forecasts the destruction of the temple and then in vs. 15 Jesus makes another reference to the "Holy Place" which is another way of referring to the temple. So we have our first category of "Temple"

Then in vs. 4 Jesus warns the disciples about those who will come to deceive, posing as followers of Christ or even claiming to be Christ, and offering what seems to be salvation, but it is not true salvation, it is false. Also in vs. 15 Jesus

refers to “the abomination which causes desolation” which is an obscure term from another vision Daniel had, and it describes the action taken by a ruler, a leader of an empire who desecrates God’s temple to declare He is greater than God - which is false. So we have our second category of “The False One”

Moving on to vs. 6-8, Jesus talks about things like war, famine, natural disaster, which is paralleled in vs. 16-21, where Jesus expands these from general categories into more a specific description of what it would be like when war would eventually come to Jerusalem. So we have our third category of “Tribulation.”

Jesus continues on in vs. 9 predicting that his followers will be persecuted and killed. He returns to this theme again in vs. 22 to assure them however that when tribulations affect them, and lead to persecution and death that God is still in control. So we have our fourth category of “Persecution”

In vs. 10 Jesus predicts that many people will turn away from the true faith and be led astray by false prophets for something

made to look like the truth. Jesus returns to this theme in vs. 23 – 27, reiterating the fact that claims to have discovered the truth about Jesus will abound and lead many astray. So we have our fifth category of “Apostasy”

Jesus continues on, and in vs. 14 he describes how the gospel will proclaimed as a “testimony.” The original word in Greek is “Martyrion” from which we get our word Martyr. So this gospel proclamation is not going to be well received – it will result in martyrs. This however will not go unanswered by God. In vs. 29 Jesus quotes verses from the prophet Isaiah which speak about how one day God will destroy those who have rebelled against Him and have attacked his chosen people. Thus we have our sixth category of “Judgment”

And finally Jesus concludes the first half of his answer in vs. 14 by stating “and then the end will come!” And He also concludes the second half in vs. 30-31 by describing what that end, when He returns on the clouds of heaven, and gathers his chosen people to himself. So we have our final and seventh sign “The End of the Age”

So... one answer, two sections, seven signs... interesting but so what, right? What does it mean for us?

Well, to answer that question accurately we first need to consider what it would have meant to the disciples, after all Jesus is first and foremost giving an answer to their questions.

This is why you will notice what we might call “local references” in Jesus’ answer, like “the abomination which causes desolation” from Daniels visions, and the instructions for those in Judea to flee to the mountains and to pray that this trouble would not happen on the Sabbath.

To his disciples Jesus is answering that they will see the signs they have asked about very soon. In other words, if we remember what the nature of a “sign” is, then Jesus is telling his disciples that very soon things will begin to happen which will point to the fact that a new era of reality has begun.

And the first sign would be the destruction of the temple. Now as I said these signs are not given in a linear order. However,

the first and last signs set the parameters of the period of time which Jesus is speaking about.

Which means the other five signs will occur, and continue to reoccur within the boundaries of the temple being destroyed and the end of the age occurring when Christ returns.

Christ’s completed work – his life and death and resurrection rendered the temple obsolete, so a short time afterwards the first sign takes place. In 70 AD Rome completely destroys the temple and Jerusalem.

It is the abomination which causes desolation and it resulted in a terrible slaughter of many of the Jews. Those who fled to the mountains escaped, while those who sought safety in the walled city of Jerusalem, the City of God, which would never fall because it had the temple in it...they did not survive.

So when the disciples would later witness this destruction, they will realize Jesus had told them it points to the new reality of Jesus as the Messiah, that the age of the Mosaic covenant and the temple is no more.

And as time went by, other signs would occur as well – Christians were persecuted and killed at various times during the Roman Empire for refusing to confess Caesar was Lord.

And many Christians actually renounced their faith during the intense persecution they faced from the Roman Emperor Diocletian in 303 AD.

The early church and held numerous councils and debated for over 300 years to articulate clearly what the bible says about the human and divine natures of Jesus Christ and the nature of the Trinity so as to prevent false teachers from distorting the message of the gospel.

All the while the words of Jesus continued to assure his followers that these events actually point to the reality that the Messianic era actually now existed, even though the very nature of these events would seem to indicate this was not the case.

Persecution, apostasy, false teachers, tribulations – one would expect, and the OT prophets also predicted that in the

Messianic era there would be peace, faith, and harmony in nature.

But that is because the prophets only saw the end result. However in Jesus' answer and in the section we read from Romans we find references to birth pains.

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Rom 8:22)

And childbirth is an analogy that can help us understand the discrepancy between the signs and the reality which they point to.

When we see someone who is expecting – we naturally think about the bouncing little baby and its future life, that's what the OT prophets saw when they spoke about the Messianic era, or the Kingdom of Heaven. Their prophecy was pregnant with expectation.

But to bring that era about, to give birth to that new baby means that you need to go through labor. And who focuses on

the labor when you see a woman who is expecting? Nobody... except the person whose job it is to help prepare them to go through it right?

So while the signs that the messianic era has begun may seem out of character, in reality they're not. Christ instructs us and Paul echoes him, to see them as we would labor pains. Labor feels like you're going to die, and it is actually rather precarious, but going through it is what brings a new life into this world.

So what does this mean for us? Well friends, as followers of Christ we pick up where the disciples left off. We are still waiting for the final sign to occur, the return of Jesus Christ which is the birth of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is still the time of labor, where we see the signs of war, famine, earthquakes, persecution, apostasy and false teachers occurring in the world.

Just turn on the news – earthquakes and Tsunamis in Japan and civil war in Libya. If you stay connected to popular culture you'll see how many people in Europe and the West have turned away from their Christian heritage and now are openly

hostile to it, and instead flock to eastern spirituality or eco-theology in order to save the world.

As a result we rarely hear about Christians in other parts of the world who are actively persecuted, jailed or executed for openly declaring themselves followers of Jesus Christ.

Friends, the signs continue to occur, just as Jesus told us they would – as indicators that the Messianic Era has begun and continues towards the final sign – the End of the Age...

The end of the labor pains when the pregnant expectations of the OT prophets will come to pass as Christ returns and brings with him a new heavens and a new earth.

So back to the question so what? What does it mean for us? Friends, hear the words of the apostle Paul.

“ I consider that our **present** sufferings – and for us that would be our health, economic downturn, broken relationships, a sense of loss or loneliness, worrying about retirement, etc... for others in our world it might be famine, poverty, AIDS,

persecution, or having your home destroyed in a natural disaster... - our present sufferings....

are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us!

So, no matter what you are going through in your life right now... no matter what you may face in the near or distant future, whatever fears or anxieties you may have – know this - a better day is going to come! This life is not all that there is, it's not the final word, it is only the labor pains for the amazing new world that is to come!

The Messianic Age has begun! Jesus will return to renew the heavens and the earth! Do you doubt this? Well friends, the signs are all around us – tribulation, persecution, apostasy, false teachers... what more proof do you need?

Jesus is the Messiah, the history and the future of our world are right on track, and that the Kingdom of Heaven will one day come.

So put your faith and trust in the one who gave us these signs. Live your life as loyal to Him, and wait patiently but eagerly for the day when you will see him face to face!

Come Lord Jesus, come soon! Amen.