

The End of the Age: Are We Simply Misunderstanding Matthew 24?

We've already reminded ourselves that the world will never really end, but it will end as we know it. Time will turn its page and start a new chapter called eternal life.

In the first verses of Matthew chapter 24, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. We shouldn't be surprised that in the next verses the disciples ask what we all want to know. They ask when the destruction will happen and what will be the sign that the end of the age has arrived. We must realize that the disciples are not asking one question but two.

The destruction of the temple and the end of the age are two separate events. This is important for them to know because it would be easy for a first-century Jew to watch the temple being completely destroyed and think well this must be the end of the world.

Multitudes of well-meaning Christians have done that very thing. They have taken two events and lumped them into one future event. Not so. The destruction of the temple happened in 70 AD, but the end of the age has still not come.

The key to understanding Matthew 24 is to know when Jesus is talking about the temple and when he is referring to the end of the age. I personally believe that most of the chapter is about the temple's destruction. The destruction of the temple was the end of an age for them.

There has never been a temple since in Jerusalem. Still, I give way to the many hints Jesus gives as to how things will go for the Jews in the days ahead of them.

The first thing to learn from Matthew 24 is not so much what the signs are but what they are not. Modern predictors of the end of the world are notorious users of disasters and catastrophes as signs. Their evidence of the near end are the numerous wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines. We the people have been programmed well by a world in chaos to have faith in those signs. Those without the spirit of God can easily develop a pessimistic outlook with the expectation that the world as we know it will eventually go down the drain.

The problem with the "end is near" disaster mentality is that it is not biblical and is exactly the opposite of what Jesus said. Yes, Jesus did predict wars, earthquakes and famines. However his predictions of chaos were followed by a clear message to all that the end is not yet.

In other words, contrary to much of the preaching today, the end doesn't come with disaster and chaos. In fact, as much as some predict the end of the world through these events, Jesus is saying just the opposite. The "signs" are not signs at all of the end. If they are signs, then they are signs that the world is still spinning. As long as there are catastrophes, the world is still alive and kicking.

In fact, rather than say these moments of disaster are the end, Jesus actually calls them the beginning. That's right—from a Jewish perspective—these signs of wars and nation rising against each other are only signs of the beginning and not the end.

The beginning of what? They are signs that birth pains have begun. Birth pains are not fun, but they don't bring death, they bring life. If we have birth pains, then we should expect a birth. Why does Jesus say this is just the beginning of the pain? It is just the beginning because the next pain will be the disciples experiencing persecution and trouble.

I would like to suggest the following as a possible idea. What

if the pains of birth continue for centuries? What if the birth of Israel in 1948 is what this has been all about? What if years of persecution and even the holocaust were but part of the painful birthing of a nation?

What if the time from the temple's destruction in 70 AD to the time of the birth of Israel in 1948 was one big season of tribulation? Is it possible that the days when Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles, mentioned in Luke's Gospel, was one great big long season of tribulation that ended in 1948 with the new Israel?

It just doesn't seem to make sense that God would birth a nation only to turn it over to Satan for more terrible destruction. I know it is a popular idea but that doesn't give it any more credence. Who would birth a nation only to give it away?

I think for me, the wisest train of thought would be to stick with the general expectation of most first century Jews. The bottom line is that at the end of this long journey was the expectation of restoration. I don't need a stopwatch or a clock to measure how slow or how fast it moving. I don't look around at the circumstances of the world to decide if it is happening. For me, this means a restoration of what it means to be human while still being human in a mortal body.

I am not sure what all that entails. I do know it would mean having a people that love God with all of their heart, extremely monotheistic with no other gods. It would mean that there would be a people on the earth totally submitted to God.

There would be nothing competing for the hearts of these people.

To make the restoration complete, this group would have to include both Jews and non-Jews like one brand new race of people set apart for God's use only on this earth. I like to think of this group of people pushing the limits of love for

God so far that they cannot go any farther while still on this earth in a natural body.

In order for any more restoration to take place, Jesus would have to appear and raise the dead and turn mortality into immortality. These people have advanced as far as is humanly possible while still strapped to a natural body. These never before seen kind of people will preach and declare the kingdom of God to every tribe, tongue and nation, and then the end will come.

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