

Matthew 24:29-51: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 24 verse 29 to 51. 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. So also when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

But concerning that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

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, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

[1 : 27] Then two men will be in the field, one will be taken, and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill, one will be taken, and one left.

Therefore stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 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.

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time?

Blessed is that servant, whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, My master is delayed, and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him, and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the hypocrites.

In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The language of the second part of Matthew 24 is arresting to us. It seems so extreme and cosmic that many people can't imagine it relating to anything other than the destruction of the entire universe on the last day.

[2 : 52] But it needn't be. If we look in the Old Testament, and we're familiar with Old Testament language, we'll see many examples of this sort of cosmic language being used to speak of events in history.

In Isaiah chapter 13, verses 6, 9-11 and 19, we read, So this arresting cosmic language in this passage refers to the fall of Babylon, an event in history.

But it's using the symbolism of stars and sun and moon. These represent rulers. If we spoke about 50 stars falling from the heavens, people would know what we meant.

Now, that cosmic imagery is more prevalent within the Old Testament and within the imagination of the ancient Near East, but we have it too. We have it on our flags. We put stars on our flags.

We put moons on our flags. We have suns on some flags as well. They represent authority. They represent power and things that are secure in the heavens.

[4 : 27] And those heavens being destroyed or rolled up, that's a sign of the world order being removed. Similar language can be found in Isaiah chapter 34, verses 3-4.

Again, the destruction of Babylon. Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise. The mountains shall flow with their blood. All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll.

All their hosts shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. Further examples of such language can be found in places like Ezekiel 32 or Joel 2 and 3.

One of the things that we should be alert to here is that the fall of Jerusalem is being described in the same sort of language as the fall of Babylon. It's become associated with that pagan city. Jesus then moves on to discuss the coming of the Son of Man.

Now, when we think about the coming of the Son of Man, we think of a downward movement from heaven to earth. That tends to be the way that Christians think about this concept. But it is the coming of the Son of Man into heaven itself that is in view here.

[5 : 33] And the background for this is once again in Old Testament prophecy. If we know our Old Testaments, much of this is not hard to read. It makes a lot of sense. Jesus, throughout the Gospels, speaks like a prophet.

He uses the language of prophets, the illustrations, the symbolism. He uses the practice of prophets in a way that associates them with characters like Elijah and Elisha.

He uses the parables of prophets. And here he uses the apocalyptic symbolism of prophets. In Daniel chapter 7 verses 9 to 14 we read, As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat.

His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool. His throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him.

A thousand thousands served him. And ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The courts sat in judgment, and the books were opened. I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking.

[6 : 34] And as I looked, the beast was killed and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beast, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

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. The sign of the Son of Man in heaven, the evidence of the Son of Man in heaven, the fact that we can see that he is in heaven, is the vindication of the exalted Son of Man by the dispossession of the wicked tenants.

This is the sign that he has been given the kingdom. They are removed from office. Christ also shows his power by using the Romans as his means of doing this.

And the result of this is that all the tribes of the earth will mourn. This is language that looks back to Zechariah chapter 12, verses 10 following. It's still focused on Israel, the tribes of the earth, or the land.

[7 : 46] This is not the world in general, it's the land. And it's Israel, the tribes, that are in view here. And all of this is about establishing the new age of the kingdom.

It's not about just the end of the world, it's starting something new. The angels, or literally the messengers, are then sent out to gather from the four winds. This is a new beginning.

It begins with a trumpet blast. It's a new year of jubilee. And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who are lost in the land of Assyria, and those who are driven out to the land of Egypt, will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.

That's Isaiah chapter 27, verse 13. And Jesus is using the same sort of language here. He's also using the language of Deuteronomy chapter 30, verses 1 to 4. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.

If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. God is going to gather all his children together.

[9 : 11] That's going to be from the four winds of heaven. It's going to be all the scattered Israelites who believe. It's going to be all of the Gentiles who believe. We see that in Matthew chapter 8, verses 11 to 12.

I tell you, many will come from east and west, and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that

place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Bear in mind the way that Jesus is picking up this same language here. He speaks then of the fig tree that's been connected with Israel earlier, in the sign of the cursing of the fig tree. They will see these signs, if they're faithful, and they will recognize that the time has come.

And he assures them once more, this generation will not pass away until everything occurs, including the sun and the moon being darkened, and all these sorts of things.

All of that is going to take place. Heaven and earth may pass away, but his word will not pass away. Many people have wondered whether Jesus is a false prophet, and that he makes all these predictions about the end of the world, and they don't actually come to pass.

[10:16] And so the early Christian movement is about learning to live with the fact that their founders' prophecies did not occur. But they did. They occurred in AD 70.

And he's not a false prophet, but he's in the tradition of prophets like Jeremiah, who prophesied the destruction of the temple and the exile. Jesus is speaking with the same sort of language.

And once we understand the language that he's using, and the world in which he's speaking, it makes sense. What he predicted came to pass. And he emphasises the absolute necessity of watchfulness.

He gives the example of Noah and of Lot. Everything seems to be going on, as it always has, and then suddenly, everything changes. In a single day, your entire world order, which you thought was so absolutely rock solid, completely collapses.

And he uses this illustration of these people out in the field, or these people in a bed, or working in a particular context. One taken, another left. For many Christians, this has been associated with the rapture.

[11:19] That the rapture is taking certain people up to heaven, and those who are left are going to face the tribulation. That's not what's being referred to here. Rather, one taken is taken in judgment.

Being taken is to face destruction. We should also maybe think of Matthew's attention to pairs and binaries coming in here. There is a distinction between the watchful and the unfaithful servant.

And maybe we are supposed to see that in the distinction between the one taken and the other left. That there are two different ways. You don't want to be taken. So, how are you going to ensure that?

Well, by being watchful. By being the faithful servant that Jesus talks about. Christ will come as a thief in the night. They cannot predict the time of the Son of Man's coming, but the signs will be there for the watchful and faithful servants, which they are called to be.

If they're paying attention, they will recognize that his hour has come. And Jesus knows that many of his disciples will start to doubt. His followers will start to wonder, well, 30 years have passed and we've not really seen any sign of this.

[12:29] We're all dying out and he said it would happen in this generation, but there seems to be no evidence. And so many would doubt at that point, maybe fall away. And we have evidence of that in places like 2 Peter, that that is a burning question at that stage in the church's life.

But it happens in that generation. Christ's word is fulfilled. And we can find this hard to understand because we think of this fall of Jerusalem as an event just in a backwater country within the Roman Empire.

But that's not what it is. It's the final collapse of the old covenant order, leaving the new covenant order to come into its own, the order of the kingdom. Now they will no longer go to Jerusalem to worship.

Its temple has been destroyed. There is no longer atonement to be found there. Rather, they will go to Christ. He will gather his elect from the four winds of heaven. Jew and Gentile alike will be brought into the kingdom.

And this is a new world order that's set up. The whole of the existing world order, a world order centered upon Jerusalem and what God was doing with that people, has been changed.

[13:36] And now something new has started. The church has been established in unrivaled significance as the place where God is working out his purposes.

And that is established through the events of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70. This is not a minor event. It's a radical change. A question to consider.

The attitude of the disciples in the run-up to the destruction of Jerusalem should be ours too. Our worlds too will face their final reckoning. What are some of the ways in which Jesus' description of

the sudden and devastating and unforeseen collapse of the world order and the watchfulness that shall characterize his disciples should inform our relationship to the world order that we inhabit in our own days?
Thank you.