

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing our examination of eschatology, the doctrine of last things. Dr. Spencer, in our last session you indicated that the idea of the kingdom of God already being present, but not yet being here in its fullness was difficult even for Jesus' personal disciples to grasp and you referenced Chapter Twenty-Four of Matthew's gospel. Can you explain what you were referring to?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. I was referring to the fact that the disciples assumed that the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, Christ's second coming, and the end of the ages would all be simultaneous. In Matthew Chapter Twenty-Three Jesus was teaching in the temple area of Jerusalem and then, in Matthew 24:1 we are told that "Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings."¹

Marc Roby: For those listeners who may not know, we should probably explain that this temple, which was called Herod's temple, was a truly magnificent structure. The whole temple mount was an incredibly impressive and imposing area.

Dr. Spencer: And it was exactly that fact to which Jesus' disciples were drawing his attention. Even now, 2,000 years later, with the temple fully destroyed, what is left of the temple mount is an impressive structure and the ruins are impressive as well. It doesn't take much imagination to see how incredible the original structure must have been. In fact, if any of our listeners are planning a trip to Jerusalem, I highly recommend the 1/50th-scale model of Jerusalem and the temple at the time of Christ that is at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.²

Marc Roby: I agree, that model is quite impressive and well worth seeing.

Dr. Spencer: And, moving on in Matthew Chapter Twenty-Four, Jesus then shocked his disciples by making an incredible statement. We read in Matthew 24:2, "'Do you see all these things?' Jesus asked, 'I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.'"

Marc Roby: Yes, I'm sure that statement did shock them.

Dr. Spencer: Which was, I'm sure, Jesus' intent. We tend to be very impressed with earthly accomplishments and the great structures and feats that human beings have been able to produce. But God is not impressed with anything we produce. He *made* us, he gave us whatever abilities we have and he provided all of the raw materials we have to use. He wants us to see that nothing in this present world is eternal. It is all passing away. We should, in the ultimate sense, be impressed with God alone.

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² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holyland_Model_of_Jerusalem

Marc Roby: And we are told how the disciples responded to these statements in Verse 3, where we read that “As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. ‘Tell us,’ they said, ‘when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’”

Dr. Spencer: And it was that question, or more accurately, questions – plural – to which I was referring when I said that even Jesus’ disciples had a hard time grasping his teaching. They phrased it all as one question because, as I said at the beginning, they assumed that the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, Christ’s second coming, and the end of the ages would all be simultaneous, which is wrong. There are really three separate questions involved here. The first question is, “When will the temple be destroyed?”

Marc Roby: And, in that regard, Jesus was clearly referring to the destruction of the temple by the Romans, which took place in 70 AD.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I think it is obvious that was what he was referring to. The second event mentioned by his disciples is his second coming, and the third event is the end of the age. And Jesus’ lengthy answer, given in the rest of Chapter Twenty-Four is difficult to interpret. He does not give the kind of clear-cut, unambiguous response we might like.

Marc Roby: But, of course, Jesus isn’t obligated to satisfy our curiosity.

Dr. Spencer: No, he isn’t obligated to us for anything. And with regard to this passage, you can find very good, Bible-believing scholars who disagree about exactly how to interpret Jesus’ teaching in this chapter. Some think he was only speaking about the coming destruction of the temple. Some break his response into pieces with different pieces answering the different individual questions, and some think his answers have both an immediate fulfillment in the destruction of the temple and then a complete fulfillment later.³ And I’m certainly not going to try and give the definitive treatment of this passage.

Marc Roby: Well, that’s disappointing!

Dr. Spencer: I’m sure it is. But I’ve got three reasons for not doing so. First of all, I am not qualified to try and give a definitive answer, secondly, I’m not sure myself exactly how to interpret all that is said in that passage, and third, I don’t think an exact understanding is necessary. Even without it, there are some important things we can say for certain from Jesus’ teaching.

Marc Roby: And what are those things?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we must first notice that Jesus started with a warning. In Matthew 24:4-5 he said, “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many.”

³ e.g., see Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. III, pp 797-800

Marc Roby: Yes, we've seen that kind of deception even in our own lifetimes. I remember David Koresh claiming that he was the Christ. And a lot of people dying in the siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas.

Dr. Spencer: I remember that too, although there is some dispute about whether he actually claimed to be Jesus, the confusion coming, at least in part, because his views of the Trinity were wildly unbiblical.⁴ Nevertheless, Jesus' warning was necessary. All kinds of people have tried to deceive the world about Christ's second coming. They have mostly not claimed to actually *be* Jesus Christ, but many, for example, have predicted exactly when he would come.

Marc Roby: And they have all been wrong.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, they have all been wrong. And because such deceivers were going to come, Jesus went on to warn his disciples about terrible events that would take place in the world and about the persecution that would come to them. He warned them that many would turn away from the faith and said, in Verse 13, that "he who stands firm to the end will be saved."

Marc Roby: Jesus' concern was that his followers would faithfully persevere in obedience to his teachings.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. That is one of the main applications we can draw from this passage. We must not let worldly events disturb our trust in Christ or prevent us from doing our best to faithfully obey his commands.

Marc Roby: Christians are called to live an overcoming life and to persevere to the end.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we are. A good start is of no value by itself. You must finish the race. And so, Jesus tells the truth and warns his disciples, including all of us, that terrible times will come. In Verse 21 he said that "then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again." As I noted before, theologians have disagreed about whether this is speaking about the end times or the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 70AD, but no matter what it refers to, it is a clear warning to all who follow Christ.

Marc Roby: It is clear that he was speaking about a time of extremely intense trouble. He says the distress will be unequalled from the beginning of the world until now, and never to be equaled again. Given some of the horrendous things that have happened in history, that is a strong statement indeed.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is a very strong statement, which is why I personally think he is referring to the end times. But the exact time he was referring to is not critically important. We should listen carefully to what he says next. In Verses 23-28 Jesus said, "At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time. So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the

⁴ <https://www.cdamm.org/articles/koresh-davidians>

east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.”

Marc Roby: It is amazing to think that false prophets will perform great signs and miracles to deceive people.

Dr. Spencer: Although I agree with those who would say that no false prophet can perform a *true* miracle, they will always be counterfeit miracles of one sort or another. Nevertheless, it is obvious that they will have great power to deceive. And I would say these false prophets have already appeared many times and continue to do so today.

Marc Roby: And, I'm sure, more will come in the future as well. But it is comforting that Jesus said that they would deceive even the elect "if that were possible." It is clear that he is saying it is *not* possible to deceive the elect.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. As Jesus told us in John 10:28-29, no one can snatch his sheep, who are the elect, out of his hand, and no one can snatch the elect out of the Father's hand either. If we are truly God's children, we are eternally secure. We are held in the hands of Jesus and God the Father.

Marc Roby: Praise God!

Dr. Spencer: Praise God indeed. But getting back to the passage in Matthew 24:23-38, Jesus' main point is clear; he said, "as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." The idea that has been espoused by many that Jesus has come, or will come at some time in a secret way without everyone knowing about it is simply unbiblical. When Jesus comes again, everyone will know it. You won't have to wonder about it. When he added that "Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather", he was making the point that his second coming will be as obvious as the vultures gathering around a carcass.

Marc Roby: Yes, that is one passage that is not ambiguous in any way.

Dr. Spencer: No. His teaching in this passage is clear. He then goes on to discuss more signs that will appear, and again there are different interpretations offered by good Bible scholars. But in Matthew 24:35 he again makes a completely clear statement, about which we should have no reason for doubting his meaning. He said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."

Marc Roby: And Jesus didn't simply mean that his words would be preserved forever.

Dr. Spencer: No, he didn't. He meant something much more profound. He meant that his words are absolutely true and everything he says will happen will, in fact, happen.

Then, in Verse 36 he again makes a clear statement. He said, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

Marc Roby: And that statement should have shut the mouth of ever single person who has ever wanted to predict the exact day of Christ's return.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it *should* have shut their mouths, but it didn't. But it should cause all true Christians to ignore any such predictions. We noted in Session 241 that Jesus went on to give us a very strong warning in the next verses. In Matthew 24:37-38 he said, "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark". In other words, destruction will come on every non-Christian who is alive when Christ returns. Only Christians, those who are *in Christ* as Noah and his family were in the ark, will be saved.

Marc Roby: That is a serious warning to all who reject Christ and a great promise to those who acknowledge him as Lord.

Dr. Spencer: And I think we have illustrated that even though Jesus did not give the kind of precise answer we might like to the questions his disciples posed, there are things that we can draw from his answer about which we can and should be certain.

And, as we noted in our previous session, part of the reason that the New Testament teaching about the end times is difficult to understand is that there is this eschatological dualism.

Marc Roby: Which you noted last time is a fancy way of saying that there is a sense in which the kingdom of God has already come even though it is not yet here in the fullest sense.

Dr. Spencer: And we see this dualism not only in Jesus' teaching, but all throughout the New Testament.

Marc Roby: Can you give us some other examples?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. In doing so, I will draw heavily on the treatment given by Robert Reymond in his excellent Systematic Theology.⁵ But first, let me present how Reymond summarizes Jesus' teaching on eschatology.

He summarizes this teaching in three statements. First, he says that Jesus taught there are two ages, "this present (evil) age and the age to come", which cover all of the remainder of human existence. Second, he says "These two ages are consecutive, that is, they neither overlap nor is there any indication of a gap between them, but the age to come follows immediately upon this present age." And third, he says that "The great epochal event that terminates this age and ushers in the age to come is the glorious return of Christ and its concomitants."⁶

Marc Roby: That is a clear summary and sticks to those things that seem to be certain in the teaching of Jesus.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. It doesn't say everything of course because we *are* given more information elsewhere, but it avoids speculating about debatable points. Although I should say that even this bare-bones description would probably be objected to by some.

⁵ Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd Ed., Zondervan Academic, 1998, pp 1008ff

⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 1008

Marc Roby: I'm sure you're right about that. And I don't think we have time to get into any of the other New Testament teachings today, so that will have to wait for our next session. For now, let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. And we will do our best to answer.