**Is this the End of the World?**

Matthew 24

Last week we studied ***the ascension of Jesus*** - part of His exaltation that started with the resurrection and will be completed in **His glorious return**. Our blessed hope is that King Jesus is coming back - and He is coming back soon! ***His return will be personal*** - it will be our Lord and Savior Himself who comes back for us! His return will be ***GLORIOUS*** - we will finally see Him in the fullness of His majesty and splendor! And His return will be ***VICTORIOUS*** - He will defeat all of His remaining enemies including the devil, all the demons, all the servants of evil, all sin, suffering and death - all of that will be obliterated in the moment of Jesus’ return when He shouts that final, “ENOUGH!”

Now, let’s take a short detour from Acts and rewind to the last week of Jesus’ life when He gave some key ***instructions to His disciples about His return*** and the end of the world. Notice first that Jesus initiated this topic. He pointed out the beautiful buildings in the temple area and predicted that every stone would be thrown down. As usual, they didn’t know what He was talking about so they asked:

“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Matthew 24:3

The disciples were understandably confused about what the destruction of the temple would mean, assuming it must mean **the end of the world** - so they jumped right to that question. Of course, we know the temple was torn down by Rome in AD 70 and that was NOT the end of the world.

So this is a helpful reminder that ***just because we experience a devastating event or series of events that does NOT mean it is the end of the world.*** We feel like COVID-19, race riots, a contentious election, an economic recession and massive hurricanes are devastating to our country - but none of that means it is the end of the world. Let’s look at what the Bible says DOES indicate the actual end of the world and the impending return of Jesus. Matthew 24 shows us a number of signs to watch for, so believers can remain watchful and ready. Later in this chapter Jesus says:

*“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…” Matthew 24:32-33*

***Are you ever shocked when summer comes?*** I know down here it’s like - will it come in February or March - but it’s never this shocking, stunning event, right? Up north, when all the leaves fall off the trees in the autumn, spring is even more obvious because the first buds start to appear in late April and by early May the grass is turning green from its sad brown winter, the flowers are starting to pop up and the trees eventually fill in again with leaves. Plus it warms up from cold, miserable chilliness into warmer, tolerable weather for people to play baseball again.

**The signs are obvious**. You aren’t surprised by summer. Christians will not be surprised by the return of Jesus.

**We cannot know the Exact Timing of the Lord’s Return but there are Obvious Signs to watch for**

*“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”* Matthew 24:32-33,36

This verse shows us we can make **two mistakes** when it comes to the end of the world: 1) we can get fixated on the exact timing or 2) we can ignore the signs altogether. We need to find the middle way - without attempting to pinpoint a date, to still remain watchful for the signs Jesus gave us. The other analogy Jesus used is in verse 9.

**We cannot know the Exact Timing of the Lord’s Return but there are Obvious Signs to watch for**

“All these are the beginning of the birth pains.” Matthew 24:8

**Those of you who have given birth**, were any of you shocked that suddenly you had a baby in your arms? Of course not! You watch that belly grow for 9 months. You don’t know the exact day or hour, but once you get to your ninth month you know it could be any day so you get your Go bag ready, you have your birth plan ready and your family and friends on high alert just waiting for the text. If you know what to watch for, you’re not surprised.

***Kristin was five days late*** with our first. Isn’t that a funny way to say it? Like it was her fault! “She was late.” If anything, Seth was late. But the doctor didn’t want to induce so we waited. And then at 2 in the morning Kristin shoved me and said, “Something happened!” The bed was soaked. It was 2 am. I was still mostly asleep. I had no idea what was going on. I was like - “Did you wet the bed? Did I wet the bed?” I was lost.

But she put it together: “My water just broke.” Ah! There it is! Once you know what to watch for, the signs are obvious. We jumped in the car and drove to the hospital.

Just like with childbirth and with summer, we can’t know the exact timing of the Lord’s return and the end of the world - ***but if we know what to watch for and pay attention, the signs will be obvious.*** There is one more analogy for the Lord’s return - a thief in the night. But that is how it will be for NON-BELIEVERS, not Christians. Listen to 1 Thes. 5:

**We cannot know the Exact Timing of the Lord’s Return but there are Obvious Signs to watch for**

“But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief.” 1 Thess. 5:4

***Christians know what to watch for.*** We have the teachings of Jesus. We have the Holy Spirit. We have the whole New Testament. The Day of the Lord will NOT catch us like a thief - the signs will be obvious. Ok, ***so what are the signs?*** Let’s go back to Matthew 24. There are seven major signs that come in **2 categories**: birth pains and the Tribulation. Here is a visual overview.



What we are feeling now, in 2020, are birth pains - really ***Braxton Hicks contractions***, which are like the warm up for the main event, right? You know you have entered active labor when the contractions come closer together and more intense. If 2020 calms down and 2021 is a more normal year we will look back and say, “Braxton Hicks.” But if 2020 keeps getting crazier and the birth pain signs keep getting more frequent and more intense, we might look back and say March 15 was the beginning of active labor - remember that thing called COVID-19?

Hold on, you say, ***“How long can active labor last?”*** Well - for us with Seth it was 16 hours, with Caleb it was 23 hours, with Joel it was 13 hours and with Micah - a scheduled C section. The point is - it depends. Each baby is different. But the main thing to notice is what the birth pains lead up to, what they “give birth to” is not the return of Christ, but the Great Tribulation. Some Christians believe they lead up to the rapture of the church, and if they’re right the start of the Great Tribulation will be that much more obvious.

My quick take on **the rapture** is this: I’d rather prepare to face the Great Tribulation and the Antichrist and be pleasantly surprised to be flying up into the clouds than to place a lot of hope in avoiding the tribulation and be unpleasantly surprised to have to go through it. If you want more on the views of the rapture, see the church blog.

For now just notice the **two categories** - birth pains and the tribulation. Both have obvious signs to watch. Let’s look at both of those categories and then talk about how this applies to us. First the birth pains - there are four.

**Increasing Birth Pains:**

1. **Deception**

“See to it that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, **‘I am the Christ,’** and they will lead many astray.” Matthew 24:4-5

Jesus’ primary concern here and Paul’s in 2 Thess. 2 is to ***prepare Christians to quickly perceive false teachings***, false Christs, false Saviors. And they are not talking vaguely about false religions. There is some application that way to watch out for Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses and Muslims and other false religions and cults that pop up. But the main warning here is of people claiming to actually BE JESUS.

We see **plenty of false teaching** - plenty of wacky stuff like Scientology, Wicca, new age and just plain secularism. Satan feeds all of that. But when active labor begins it will be another level - and it won’t just be one or two - there will be MANY who arise ***claiming to BE the Christ***. AND the more remarkable thing is that MANY will believe them! This implies that these false Christs will do miracles and be powerful preachers and charismatic leaders. But look at 2 Thes. 2:

**Increasing Birth Pains:**

1. **Deception**

“We ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word… that the day of the Lord has come.” 2 Thes. 2:2

For someone to claim to BE JESUS they have to argue that the Day of the Lord HAS COME. And we know **that day** will come with trumpets and angels and blinding lights and stars falling and the sun going dark and every eye seeing him at once. So, again, for Christians to be led astray, they have to really not be paying attention. The signs will be obvious. False Christs. False Messiahs - doing miracles, gathering followers. It’ll be weird. It’ll be obvious. It’ll be more intense than what we typically see these days. Second.

**Increasing Birth Pains:**

1. **Devastation**

“And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.” Matthew 24:6

“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.” Granted, this happens all the time right now. But it will ***increase in frequency and intensity***, like birth pains. It will be weird. It will be obvious. There will be devastation caused by people - revolutions, civil wars, national wars. And there will be devastation on the earth.

**Increasing Birth Pains:**

1. **Devastation**

“And there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of birth pains.” Matthew 24:7-8

This passage does not mention hurricanes and pandemics but it’s safe to say those are implied along with wildfires, tsunamis, tornadoes and killer hornets. Any disaster of the natural world would fit in this category. And the terrifying point here is that when active labor begins, these will ***INCREASE in frequency and intensity***. You think the world is going crazy now. Just wait. Listen to Revelation 6.

**Increasing Birth Pains:**

1. **Devastation**

“And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed him… to kill with sword and famine and pestilence…” Rev. 6:8

Revelation 6 describes the beginning of the Day of the Lord. I think the four horsemen of the apocalypse in John’s vision show us what happens when birth pains turn into ***ACTIVE LABOR***. This pale horse is the fourth one, coming after the conqueror, global war and total economic collapse. More on the conqueror in a few minutes. But since famine and war are explicitly listed as birth pains, it looks like enough overlap with the four horsemen to conclude that they will be the intensification from Braxton Hicks into the active labor that will give birth to the Great Tribulation.

Again, it won’t be unclear. When these seven seals are opened by Jesus it will become increasingly obvious, leading up to the sixth seal:

**Increasing Birth Pains:**

1. **Persecution**

“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake.” Matthew 24:9

This prophecy was fulfilled for **all eleven disciples**, plus Paul. John died in exile, living the longest so he was able to see the vision that allowed him to write the book of Revelation. The other 10 and Paul were all killed in violent, terrible ways. We have the most details about Paul, which we will see in our upcoming series in the book of Acts. But we know that all of the disciples were martyrs, foreshadowing the persecution all believers face to some extent, and that will intensify greatly once active labor begins.

Let’s not forget that **more Christians are persecuted and killed for their faith NOW** than at any time in history combined. We just don’t see it here in America. But it’s happening all over the middle east, in Muslim sections of Africa and throughout India, China and other parts of southeast Asia. Those are birth pains. When labor goes active ***persecution will become more visible*** and it will reach even to us here in the U.S. of A. Listen again to Revelation 6:

**Increasing Birth Pains:**

1. **Persecution**

“When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne… They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.” Rev. 6:9-11

There is **a full number of martyrs** who will join all who have already died for their faith in Jesus. Some of us may have the great privilege to join in that number - making the ultimate sacrifice of our lives!

The persecution and killing of Christians will increase and intensify leading up to the Great Tribulation and then during the Tribulation as well. Eventually ***the dividing line*** between those who believe in Jesus and those who don’t will become so clear you will literally either have a mark on your forehead showing you belong to Jesus or a mark on your hand showing you belong to the devil.

**There is a full number of martyrs**. Brothers and sisters, may we not be those who shrink back in fear of death. Death is a defeated enemy. The anthem of Christians in those final days will be DEFIANCE. We will say to those who kill us - “You cannot hurt us. You can only send us home.” And that is true. The Christian cannot be killed. Death is just the doorway to eternal life and joy. The enemy cannot hurt us. He can only send us home!

There is a full number of martyrs and there is **a full number of Gentiles** who will be saved. This is the final birth pain to watch for.

**Increasing Birth Pains:**

1. **Proclamation**

“Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.” Romans 11:25-26

It looks to me like **the Gospel** that sounded forth from Jerusalem and spread all over the world is steadily and powerfully ***making its way BACK to Jerusalem***. There is a full number of Gentiles who will be saved - many of them Muslim - and this will provoke ethnic Jews to great jealousy so that there will be a great revival in which many Jews embrace Jesus as their Messiah.

**Increasing Birth Pains:**

1. **Proclamation**

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” Matthew 24:14

**The only reason Jesus hasn’t come back** is that this prophecy has not been fulfilled. There are people who still have not heard the good news that God’s Son came to earth, died for their sins and rose again. This is one of the clearest signs to watch for and the main thing we need to be praying and WORKING toward - the completion of the Great Commission.

And brothers and sisters, be encouraged that there are **movements popping up all over the place** devoted to getting this done. Look at the **Joshua Project** - it has detailed information about the remaining unreached, unengaged people groups. We have the top 30 over on the table by the Prayer Board. You can sign up to get an email every day with an unreached people group to pray for.

* The **24-7 Prayer movement** continues to grow and one of the key outcomes from it is God calling people to mission and justice.
* **The Send** took place in Orlando last year and continues to rally young people, calling them to devote themselves wholly to the mission of God.
* **Wycliffe and Cru** are partnered together to increase the pace of Bible translation and delivery of the Jesus film and other gospel resources. Wycliffe has stated that the work COULD be finished in 10 years or less. That is a mind-boggling statement. But we sent an Oakwood family - the Rexroads - last year to help improve the computer technologies that are speeding up the pace of translation.
* **Christ Together** is a national organization devoted to pursuing Gospel saturation in cities so that every man, woman and child has opportunities to see, hear and respond to the good news of Jesus Christ. They have active networks in over 100 U.S. cities and are branching out in other countries as well. Tampa is hopefully about to become another Christ Together city!

Those are the birth pains: increasing deception, devastation, persecution and proclamation.



Now, much more briefly, what are the signs that **the Great Tribulation** has begun? There are several, but I will just mention the three major things that will mark the beginning of this seven year period of suffering and purification.

**Start of The Great Tribulation:**

1. A Global Leader
2. A Global Crisis
3. A Global “Peace”

As I mentioned before, I believe **the four horsemen** of Revelation 6 represent active labor and will initiate the Great Tribulation. The first of the four horsemen is a strong military leader.

**Start of The Great Tribulation:**

1. **A Global Leader**

“Behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.” Revelation 6:2

**The white horse** and crown represent ***the mockery of the Antichrist*** who will do all he can to appear like Jesus. Alexander the Great and Napoleon will pale in comparison to the charisma and might of this leader. Who will give this leader his crown? The majority of the people on earth eventually will, but to begin with, I think it will be the devil who anoints the Antichrist at the start of his public “ministry,” just as the Father did for Jesus. The devil, the antichrist and the false prophet form the **evil trinity** of the tribulation.

Christians for centuries have been watching for great leaders, wielding global influence. Martin Luther was convinced the pope was the antichrist. Many believed it was Napoleon or Hitler in more recent times. All evil conquerors embody the spirit of the antichrist, but when the real one arises, we will know. And he will rise to power through the second sign:

**Signs of The Great Tribulation:**

1. **A Global Crisis**

“Out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another.” Rev. 6:3

The second, third and fourth horsemen represent a great global crisis - first of violence and war, then of economic collapse and finally of great famine and disease so that fully one quarter of all people on earth die.

**COVID-19** has been devastating - as our US death toll approaches 200,000 and the global number approaches one million. But the end of the world will dwarf all disasters that have come before. 25% of the global population puts the death toll not in the millions, but approaching 2 BILLION people. It is the stuff of zombie movies and apocalypse books.

We wonder now how the world would come to embrace a lunatic who will demand that everyone worship him. The answer is - **FEAR**. With a big enough crisis, people will flock to a leader who promises them SAFETY and PEACE. “This is how democracy dies. To thunderous applause.” And that is the third sign of the Great Tribulation: a global peace.

**Signs of The Great Tribulation:**

1. **A Global “Peace”**

“He will confirm a covenant with many for one ‘seven.’ In the middle of the ‘seven’ he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. ” Daniel 9:27, NIV

The book of Revelation is largely an expansion of **the vision of Daniel**, from 500 B.C. It’s a complicated prophecy that summarized the next stage in salvation history with 70 “sevens,” or periods of time. 69 of those “weeks” took place from the time of Daniel to the time of Jesus. But one of those “sevens” remains. This final “week” of history will complete all that God has planned. 70 “sevens.” ***The completion of history.***

You say, “Pastor, why are you jumping all the way back to the book of Daniel? This seems quite a stretch!” Well, look back at Matthew 24.

**Signs of The Great Tribulation:**

1. **A Global “Peace”**

“So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place… flee to the mountains.” Matt. 24:15-16

Jesus explicitly told his disciples, “If you want to understand how the world will end, **study Daniel**. It’s all in there.” And a key event in Daniel is this “abomination of desolation.” The initial fulfillment of this prophecy was in Antiochus Epiphanes, who led the Seleucids to conquer Israel. Instead of giving the Jews freedom to worship as they chose, Antiochus defiled the temple and forced them to worship Zeus. Tradition indicates that he sacrificed a pig on the Jewish altar and set up idols in the temple area, persecuting and killing any Jews who would not obey his new laws.

This is what sparked the revolution of the ***Maccabees***, and their victory is what Jews still celebrate in Hanukkah. But Jesus did not look back on that terrible incident around 200 years before his time. Instead, Jesus used that graphic imagery to help his disciples understand what the future antichrist would be like.

He will be a deceiver who appears to come with peace and security but then betrays everyone and establishes himself as a god to be worshiped.

**Signs of The Great Tribulation:**

1. **A Global “Peace”**

“He will confirm a covenant with many for one ‘seven.’ ...And at the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.” Daniel 9:27, NIV

So these are the seven major signs that the Day of the Lord is at hand.

**Signs of the End of the World:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Increasing Birth Pains | The Great Tribulation |
| 1. Deception
2. Devastation
3. Persecution
4. Proclamation
 | 1. A Global Leader
2. A Global Crisis
3. A Global “Peace”
 |

Put all of these together - is THIS the end of the world? Not yet. But there is no doubt that God is using all of these things to awaken the church to the urgency of our mission. Time is short. Our Master has given us work to do! Here is one application as we close.

“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?” Matthew 24:44-45

We cannot know the day or the hour. We need to stay awake and watch for the major signs. But it is not for us to know the details or to obsess over the timing. Our job is to do the work our Master gave us to do.

**Live like Jesus is Coming Back Today**

“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?” Matthew 24:45

We have the BREAD OF LIFE. It is not for us to HOARD this bread and feast on it ourselves - but to share it with one another as a Gospel Community that loves and serves one another, and to bring this message of salvation to a dark, broken and dying world! And this brings us back to the book of Acts.

**Live like Jesus is Coming Back Today**

“He said to them: ‘It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’” Acts 1:7-8

This is our assignment. This is our mission. We have our marching orders. The Lord is coming back soon. ***Will He find us working?*** Or will He find us huddled up in fear, complacency and isolation?

If you KNEW that Jesus was coming back tonight, what would you do TODAY? Who would you call? What conversation would you have? What issue would you address?

We lack urgency because we think there is always more time. Brothers and sisters, the days are evil, and they will not be getting any better before the end. So we need to make the most of every moment we have. Let’s live like Jesus is coming back today. Let’s love each other well and let’s get out there to share this good news with everyone we possibly can!

BENEDICTION: “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.” 2 Thes. 2:15-17