

Often being ready for something means that we know what to look for, some unmistakable sign that shows us that something is about to happen. Let's take the weather as an example of this. If we see dark clouds in the west, we know that a storm is on its way, and maybe it would be time for us to get ready for what is to come. But if those clouds are green, we know that it's going to hail, so it's time to get everything inside so as to minimize the damage. And if, God forbid, those clouds are rotating, we know that a tornado may be on its way, in which case we need to get everyone inside to keep them safe. Signs like those show us what is to come, and knowing what to look for helps us to prepare for what will be.

But Christians, it's often important for us to look for the right signs as well, some unmistakable sign that shows exactly what's going to happen. Because not every cloud in the sky brings a storm, and sometimes even the signs that we see in the sky come to nothing. But Jesus is not talking about the weather here in Matthew chapter 24. Jesus is talking about his Second Coming, when he will come to judge the world. And so Jesus shows us, then, in this passage how to be ready for the end of all things. And if we want to be ready, we have to be absolutely certain about what is to come. Only then will we be fully prepared.

And so Jesus in our reading for today is answering a question that his disciples asked him at the beginning of this chapter. Verse 3 says: "As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'" And so to answer that question, Jesus first points towards the coming destruction of Jerusalem. Because God was about to destroy the city because of its sins. His patience was finally going to run out. And that destruction came in 70 A.D. when the Romans surrounded the city of Jerusalem and destroyed it, pulling it down to the ground. But when Jesus said these words, that was still about forty-some years away. It was still very much in the future. And so Jesus tells the disciples, then, what they need to watch for, the sign that judgment was about to fall upon the city. When they saw that sign, they would know that the end of the city was near. This is why Jesus says in verse 15 of our reading: "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand)." Jesus first points them back to the book of Daniel. If we want to understand what he means when he says this, we first have to unpack what it meant for Daniel.

So in the book of Daniel, then, especially in Chapter 11, although there's other places too, Daniel is told about a coming king who is going to cause problems for Israel. Daniel Chapter 11 says this: "Forces from him shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the regular burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate." Now, that was pointing towards a Greek king named Antiochus, one who would come a couple hundred years after Daniel. And Antiochus wanted everyone in his kingdom to be united. He wanted everyone to be one people, and that included the Jews. Everyone had to worship the same way. Everyone had to act the same way. Everyone had to be the same way. In other words, everyone had to become Greek. And in 167 B.C., Antiochus enforced that by violence, especially upon the Jews. In that year, he began to defile the temple. He tore down many things. He set up his own idols within the temple. He did all of these things in an effort to get them to conform, to get them to go along. Anyone who refused would be killed. Anyone who went along with it would live. And it was what Antiochus did, his actions in defiling the temple and the way that he treated the people of God, that was the abomination that makes desolate.

But Jesus here in Matthew 24 is not talking about Antiochus. Antiochus had died a couple hundred years before. He's long dead by this point. Rather, Jesus is talking about something that will be like Antiochus, a new sign that the temple was going to be desecrated again, that judgment would fall again just as it had done in the days of Antiochus. And that new sign, we are told, would be the coming of the Roman armies. Luke especially tells us, Luke chapter 21: "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near." So when they saw the Romans coming, that would be the sign, the unmistakable sign that the end of the city had come. And it certainly was the beginning of the end. Because the Romans would surround the city. They would tear it down. They would set up their own idols in the courts of the temple. Not one stone would be left upon another. And to be caught in the city when the Romans surrounded it would mean certain destruction, as it did for the hundreds of thousands who were still in the city when it was taken. It was a very terrible destruction indeed!

So, Jesus says, when you see the sign coming, when you see the Roman armies on their way, you will know that it is now time to leave. This is why he says in verse 16: "Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains." Don't bother to go get your things, Jesus says! There's not going to be enough time. If you care more about your stuff than you do about your own life, you're going to lose both when the Romans surround it. Don't even go back to get your coat, he says. It's not worth it! And alas for women who are slowed down by children in those days. Pray that it may not happen in winter when this flight would be difficult. Pray that it may not happen on a Sabbath when you shouldn't be doing it anyway. Pray that there would be more time. But when the sign appears, be ready to go. Be ready for what is to come!

But Jesus, of course, is not just talking about Jerusalem here. If he was only talking about Jerusalem, it wouldn't mean much to us. Because the destruction of Jerusalem happened a long time ago, Christians. 70 A.D. That's almost two thousand years ago. The Roman armies are long gone. But Jesus wants us to be prepared for what is to come, and so he's using Jerusalem as an example to get us ready, to be ready for his Second Coming. On that day, it will be far worse for all the unbelieving world than Jerusalem ever was. Because on that day when Christ returns, all evil will come violently to an end. On that day when Christ returns, all will be judged for what they have done. On that day when Christ returns, there will be no more opportunity. No more opportunity to turn away, no more opportunity to repent. And those who are not ready will be caught off guard, just like the people of Jerusalem, because Christ is coming to judge. And so we must be ready for what is to come!

But how will we know when that day is near? How will we know, and what sign will we have? Jesus actually doesn't give us one. The only sign that he gives us comes in verse 30 of our reading, where it says: "Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." In other words, the sign, the only sign that will be given, will happen on the same day. Jesus himself returning will be the only sign that we have. And when we see that sign, Christians, there will be no more time. There will be no more opportunity. Time will have run out!

And so what Jesus is warning us against here are false signs, things that give us a false hope, the wrong things to look for, because Jesus himself on that day will be the only true sign. Some will come, Jesus says, that will say that he has already come, that he is in secret places or that he is

over here and you just need to go see him, that his coming will be secret. They are false Christs. They are false prophets. Some will even try to say that they know when Christ is coming, that they know the day or the hour because they've done all the math. They've done all the calculations. They figured it out from the Bible. They know exactly when Jesus will appear. But Christians, no one knows the day or the hour. And we should not listen to them, no matter how convincing they may sound.

I think this is a warning we especially need to take to heart in these days. Because with the war going on in Israel right now, there are all kinds of people who are saying that this is a proof that Jesus is going to return very, very quickly, that they know that is going to happen very soon because God is moving along on his timeline, that this is one more step that the Bible has somehow prophesied. We should not listen to them, because no one knows the day or the hour. Jesus' coming cannot be predicted, not even vaguely. Rather, we must listen to what Jesus says. Verse 27: "For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." It will be as quick as lightning, Jesus says. It will be like that, without warning, and it will be here before we even know it. And on that day, there will be no more time. It will not be vague. It will not be something that we can mistake. That day will come suddenly. So we must be ready for what is to come!

So how do we get ready? How do we prepare for that day? By living as the Christians that God has called us to be. Peter says in 2 Peter 3: "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness." When we listen to Jesus, we will be ready for that day. When we are not caught up in the cares of this life, when we are not running after the things which ultimately perish, when we are at peace with one another, when we forgive one another as Christ first forgave us, as we love one another as Christ first loved us, then we will be ready for that day. We will not be surprised. That is how we prepare, Christians. That is how we get ready for that day: by being in Christ who gave himself for us. And no matter when that day will be--and it will be sudden--we will be ready for it when we are in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who will come in righteousness to judge the living and the dead, prepare us for that day. Lead us in the ways of righteousness, and teach us to listen to your voice, so that we may greet your coming with joy; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.