

Sermons on Matthew When God Departs

Matthew 24:1-2

With Study Questions

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When God Departs

Matthew 24:1-2

Then __Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. ⁻²⁻ And Jesus said to them, “_Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, __not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.” ⁻³⁻ Now 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_” (Matthew 24:1-3)?

Introduction

Having spoken to numerous church members who grew weary of their pastor mounting his eschatological (study of last things) hobby horse, I have sought to be cautious of theological axe grinding—even though I believe the most popular position in our current culture has missed their eschatological mark.

I still have no intention of departing from my current pursuit of understanding, and being ministered to, by the Holy Spirit through the evangelist Matthew and launching into a full-blown pursuit of eschatology. An eschatology class is something we occasionally offer on Sunday evenings. Yet at the same time it will be impossible to go through the next two chapters of Matthew without showing, as it were, my eschatological cards.

Like any other subject in Scripture, I believe an accurate understanding of eschatology will yield blessings; likewise an inaccurate understanding will produce both confusion and at time paralysis of the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. Nonetheless my views of eschatology will only come into play when necessary to understand the passage. And we need to understand the passage in order for it to be blessing.

First and foremost, in the chapters before us, I will seek to speak of the things in the passage which challenge our thinking—that we might be more conformed to Christ; comfort our hearts—that we might know the depth of God’s love and grace; and bring honor to God—which is the highest and most noble pursuit of any mouth, heart or deed.

Then __Jesus went out and departed from the temple (Matthew 24:1a)

Jesus Departs

A popular religious figure was asked where God was on 9/11. She responded by saying that we've asked God to leave our country. The Ten Commandments are being removed from walls; prayer is removed from schools; documents, statements and symbols which bring our minds to the things of God are discarded. "We've asked God to leave," she said "and God, being a gentleman doesn't stay where He is not wanted."

I think she was half-right.

There is a sense in which God departs. We read here that Jesus departed from the temple. The Bible talks of God, at least in a certain sense, vacating the premises.

Be instructed, O Jerusalem, Lest _My soul depart from you; Lest I make you desolate, A land not inhabited (Jeremiah 6:8)_".

Furthermore He said to me, "_Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great __abominations that the house of Israel commits here, to make Me go far away from My sanctuary? Now turn again, you will see greater abominations_" (Ezekiel 8:6).

When men harden their hearts against God and seek to cut the cords of His counsel, wisdom, grace and goodness, they eventually get what they want. And although men fantasize that a world without God is a world liberated, they have failed to take into account the nightmare of the alternative.

A new movie, *The Golden Compass*, is making waves. Though apparently somewhat hidden in the movie, the books from which the movie is derived (written by an avowed atheist) make it clear that the quest is to rid the world of God and His tyranny. This begs the question, 'who then takes God's place?' We haven't time to discuss the alternatives, but every man system which has sought to bestow upon him/itself ultimate and unquestionable authority eventually descends into an evil and grotesque pandemonium.

The famous religious personality was half-right. The wisdom, love, grace and counsel of God does depart when men live in open and willful rebellion. But that does not mean God is absent. When men despise God, it will eventually and necessarily descend to cruelty and licentiousness, and there God is present, not in grace but in judgment. Such is the case before us regarding the temple.

Jesus departed from the temple. He would never re-enter it, nor would He ever again bless it with His instruction. His only visitation now to the house of God that had become a den of thieves (Matthew 21:13) would be a visitation of judgment.

God is not Switzerland. He is never neutral. God is not ambivalent toward those who seek His supreme role. And there is nothing darker than a house of God that has sought to extract Jesus from His rightful throne.

But some churches are pretty impressive.

...and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple (Matthew 24:1b).

A Beautiful Building

For many years I had witnessed to a friend who was politely dismissive. One day he excitedly came to me regarding a religious epiphany. He had entered into a beautiful church for a wedding or a funeral, I forget. He told me that if God exists, He's probably in that building. I thought he was joking, but alas.

The disciples are ogling over the temple. In Mark we read:

Then _as He went out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, “_Teacher, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here_” (Mark 13:1).

And in Luke we read:

_Then, as some spoke of the temple, how it was __adorned with beautiful stones and donations (Luke 21:5).

How easily and how dangerously we can be impressed! There is a saying: *Animo magno nihil magnum*—*To a great mind nothing is great.* In our dreams we think we are so above such superficial influences as a

beautiful building. But there are those in positions of religious influence who recognize this weakness in man.

Any non-Roman Catholic who has ever walked into St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is immediately struck by its architectural power (imagine if you were a 16th century peasant). Modern high-tech cathedrals and well-groomed temples achieve the same affect. The buildings established by the Latter Day Saints are often so impressive that they leave me scratching my head when I consider other, orthodox, denominations consigned to more humble facilities.

This is not anti-building chatter. Buildings are necessary and they should be well-kept and as aesthetically appropriate as is reasonable. But the building, regardless of how awe-inspiring, must be kept in its place. The disciples of Jesus could not resist speaking of the soul-arresting structural dynamics of the temple.

Josephus wrote of the stones of the temple, some 40 cubits (60 feet) long. The pillars supporting the porches were twenty-five cubits high (38 feet), all of one stone, and that of the whitest marble. Herod (who oversaw the construction and after whom the temple was named) kept ten thousand workmen employed on it for eight successive years.¹ The buildings of the temple were considered one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world.² In all, they took 46 years to build (John 2:20).

The disciples of Jesus, who had lived mostly in Galilee, had seldom, if ever seen the temple. It was enthralling. They thought Jesus, who had also lived in Galilee, would be also be captivated. They were very mistaken. Jesus knew too well, as should we, that adorned and washed white on the outside, does not mean there is life on the inside (Matthew 23:27).

The true church is not a building. Nor should true Christians be anticipating the constructing of another temple (never in the New Testament is there a word toward building another temple except when Jesus says He will build it in three days—speaking of His body [John 2:19-21]). Peter teaches that Christians are “living stones” being built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). That may be obvious, but it needs to be repeated.

Jesus then affirms with an oath, that this facility, which had overtaken their attention, would soon become a mound of ashes.

¹Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

²Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible commentary : 21st century edition*. Rev. ed. of: *The new Bible commentary*. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970. (4th ed.) (Mt 24:1). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

And Jesus said to them, “_Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, __not *one* stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down_” (Matthew 24:2)

God’s Presence in Blessings or Judgment

I said the popular religious figure was half-right. God does depart. But the absence of God in terms of grace, wisdom, goodness and blessing is at the same time the presence of God in calamity and judgment. How willingly people ignore Scriptures which address their very condition. The leaders of Israel would have been well acquainted with Jeremiah:

Zion shall be plowed *like* a field, Jerusalem shall become __heaps of ruins, And the mountain of the __temple Like the __bare hills of the forest (Jeremiah 26:18_).

We do not have prophets today telling us specifically when God’s judgments occur or what they consist of. But we are told in Scripture just what it is that incurs God’s judgment. The very last book in the Old Testament anticipates that which is fulfilled by the presence of Christ:

And I said: “_Hear now, O heads of Jacob, And you __rulers of the house of Israel: *Is it* not for you to know justice? ² You who hate good and love evil; Who strip the skin from __My people, And the flesh from their bones; ³ Who also _eat the flesh of My people, Flay their skin from them, Break their bones, And chop *them* in pieces Like *meat* for the pot, _Like flesh in the caldron.” ⁴ Then __they will cry to the Lord, But He will not hear them; He will even hide His face from them at that time, Because they have been evil in their deeds.

⁵ Thus says the Lord __concerning the prophets Who make my people stray; Who chant “_Peace_” _While they _chew with their teeth, But who prepare war against him _Who puts nothing into their mouths: ⁶ “_Therefore _you shall have night without _vision, And you shall have darkness without divination; The sun shall go down on the prophets, And the day shall be dark for __them. ⁷ So the seers shall be ashamed, And the diviners abashed; Indeed they shall all cover their lips; _For *there is* no answer from God.” ⁸ But truly I am full of power by the Spirit of the Lord, And of justice and might,

**_To declare to Jacob his transgression And to Israel his sin.
9 Now hear this, You heads of the house of Jacob And rulers
of the house of Israel, Who abhor justice And _pervert all
equity, 10 _Who build up Zion with __bloodshed And
Jerusalem with iniquity: 11 _Her heads judge for a bribe, _Her
priests teach for pay, And her prophets divine for __money.
_Yet they lean on the Lord, and say, “_Is not the Lord among
us? No harm can come upon us.” 12 Therefore because of you
Zion shall be _plowed *like* a field, _Jerusalem shall become
heaps of ruins, And __the mountain of the __temple Like the
bare hills of the forest (Micah 3:1-12).**

The temple would indeed become a heap of ruins. Josephus says that ‘Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the whole city and temple...(which) was laid so completely even with the ground, by those who dug it up from the foundation, that there was nothing left to make those who came there believe that it had ever been inhabited.’³

The Sacrificial System

That sacrificial system, for which the temple stood, would ironically incur God’s wrath by sacrificing the true Lamb of God. But their actions were not designed to please God or save men. Their actions were devious, vicious and cruel; while at the same time ordained by God (Acts 4:27, 28) to save the souls of men.

This was the time when all sacrifices would come to an end: the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, as well as all the Old Covenant sacrifices which had as their chief design the foreshadowing of the cross. It is this event we read of in Daniel.

**_And after the sixty-two weeks _Messiah shall __be cut off,
__but not for Himself; And __the people of the prince who is
to come _Shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of
it *shall be* with a flood, And till the end of the war desolations
are determined. 27 Then he shall confirm __a __covenant with
__many for one week; But in the middle of the week He shall
bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of
abominations shall be one who makes desolate, _Even until**

³*The treasury of scripture knowledge : Five hundred thousand scripture references and parallel passages.* 1995. Introduction by R.A. Torrey. (Mt 24:2). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

the consummation, which is determined, Is poured out on the __desolate_” (Daniel 9:26, 27).

It is not uncommon for this prophecy to be placed elsewhere in history. But if one compares the language (Messiah, destruction of city and sanctuary, desolation, end to sacrifice, abomination and as we shall see—consummation) the natural reading places it here.

A Judgment and a Blessing

The destruction of the city and the sanctuary, though a great and just judgment upon nation of despicable wickedness, was at the same time very advantageous to the faithful. The prophecy of Christ, and its soon coming fulfillment, made it evident to the faithful that attachment to the temple and its earthly and apostate elements were a mere distraction to the pursuit of true and pure faith in God’s promised Messiah.

There are few things more pernicious than things that resemble true faith. Another man I had witnessed to for years and years approached me while at breakfast. He thought I’d be encouraged that he had found the faith...until he revealed that his new found guide was Joel Osteen and his mass-marketed quasi-church. Jesus would not suffer His people to be confused by a building posing as a vast sanctuary while in reality merely a stadium of death.

Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives (Matthew 24:3a)

Splitting the Mount of Olives

I have covered the significance of the Mount of Olives elsewhere so I won’t labor the issue. Suffice it to say that Zechariah prophesies the Messiah standing upon the Mount of Olives. It will be a time of astonishing intensity, the mountain splits in two moving to the north and south, people shall flee, there will be no light, a day known but to the Lord (Zechariah 14:4-7). Zechariah tells us in that day,

**...it shall be—That living _waters shall flow from Jerusalem,
Half of them toward __the eastern sea And half of them
toward _the western sea; In both summer and winter it shall
occur. ⁹ And the Lord shall be _King over all the earth. In that**

day it shall be “_The Lord is one,_” And His name one (Zechariah 14:8, 9).

When did the living waters begin to flow from Jerusalem (John 4:10, 11; 7:38)? This is not a future event but something which occurred when Jesus accomplished His work of redemption.

The most popular understanding of the kingship of Christ in our current culture doesn't see it this way. Walvoord and Zuck in their *Bible Knowledge Commentary* suggest that this has not yet begun. Their understanding of the fulfillment of this passage happens when Christ **“establishes His millennial kingdom”**⁴ at some point in the future.

I respectfully disagree. Jesus has begun His kingdom. He has already stood upon the Mount of Olives, the living waters are flowing throughout the earth. The kingdom of God is not universally established in one cataclysmic visitation from God; it grows the way a mustard seed begins small and becomes large. The Lord shall be King over all the earth (by this we mean that His kingship will be universally recognized). But this is accomplished one soul at a time through word and sacrament.

Let us not make the same mistake made at the feeding of the 5000 when they sought to **“take Him by force and make Him king” (John 6:15)**. Let us not err with those at the Triumphal Entry (Matthew 21:9) or even the apostles at the ascension (Acts 1:6) who were apparently thought the establishment and advancement of the kingdom of God would be a hands off affair, where Jesus immediately and without instrumentation brings the kings of the earth to their knees.

We must recognize that we are God's instruments...the stewards of His grace (1 Peter 4:10). And the weapons **“_of our warfare are not _carnal but _mighty in God _for pulling down strongholds, -5- _casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4, 5)**. And the power through which the victory comes is the power of the gospel (Romans 1:16)

Jesus has established His kingdom, the foundation of which are the apostles and prophets and the cornerstone is Christ (Ephesians 2:20). The foundation has been laid and we are to build upon it (1 Corinthians 3:10). It is a great error to mistake Judgment Day with the establishment and growth of God's kingdom.

⁴Walvoord, J. F. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Zec 14:9). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

It is an error that is rampant today. This is understandable for it is a difficult subject (eschatology). As we proceed through the next two chapters I will give my opinion of what Jesus, in what is called the Olivet Discourse, is speaking of. There are a variety of opinions floating about. Eschatology is said to be a secondary issue. Whether that is true is hard to say...it's hard to say that anything proceeding from the mouth of Christ is secondary. We must all admit, at very least, that it is a difficult and sometimes confusing issue. I hope to make it less confusing. And I will begin next time by addressing the questions asked by the apostles which launched Jesus into this instruction.

Questions for Study

1. What is eschatology (page 2)?
2. What are some things preaching should accomplish (page 2)?
3. In what respect can God leave (pages 3, 4)?
4. Why does God leave (pages 3, 4)?
5. Who or what do people want to replace God? What would that be like (pages 3, 4)?
6. What kind of influence can a building or facility have on people (page 4)?
7. Is the true church a building? Explain (page 6).
8. What was going to happen to the temple? Why would this happen (pages 6, 7)?
9. How was the judgment of the temple a blessing (pages 8, 9)?
10. Discuss the significance of the Mount of Olives (pages 9, 10).

11. Discuss the establishment and growth of the kingdom of God? Why is it harmful to mistake this with Judgment Day (pages 9, 10)?