

Is the End Near?
“False Christs and false prophets will appear...”

Passages: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
 Matthew 24:15-28

Are we living in the last days? Is the end of the world near?

As I said two weeks ago, maybe we need to rephrase those questions! Maybe the questions we ask should be a little more *personalised*...a little more *subjectively applied*! Maybe we should be asking, *“Am I living in **my** last days?”* *“Is the end of **my** world near?”*

It’s a shift in our thinking which, I believe, is Biblically warranted. After all, the Bible constantly takes what is *general* and makes it *personal*. It takes *abstract ideas and concepts* and applies them to our *subjective and experiential world*. The fact is that God doesn’t simply want me to think of the end of the world as some *distant, abstract idea*; He wants **me** to consider the end of **my** world, in the immediate context of **my** life. He wants me to reflect deeply on *who I am* and *how I live*, not simply in the light of some future ‘*Day of the Lord*’, but supremely in the light of the possibility that, perhaps even tomorrow, **my own personal “Day of the Lord” may arrive**... the day when I’m called home to see Jesus face to face!

This is an important aspect of how we should interpret Biblical prophecies. Biblical prophecies, you see, can often operate **on several levels**. So, whenever you read an OT prophecy, start by understanding it **in its historical** context; ask when the prophecy was first given and how it was fulfilled in the **past**. But your task is not yet complete. With most Biblical prophecies, you will see some clue as to how that same prophecy will be fulfilled in the distant **future**, at the end of the age...when Jesus returns! But don’t stop there! There is often a third level of fulfilment to be found in most Bible prophecies—a fulfilment that applies to the **immediate present**!

Today’s text from Matthew 24 has a good example of a prophecy that works on these three different levels. In verse 15, Jesus refers to **“the abomination that causes desolation”**. That phrase was originally coined by the prophet

Daniel, hundreds of years earlier. Moreover, this part of Daniel's prophecy had *already been fulfilled* back in 168 BC! During that infamous year, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Greek king of the Seleucid Empire, put an abrupt halt to worship in the Temple in Jerusalem and abolished the daily sacrifice. Later, in December of that same year, he set up an altar to Zeus inside the Temple! In other words, Daniel's prophecy had come true! ***'The abomination that causes desolation'*** was set up in the holy place!

Nevertheless, Jesus picks up that prophecy and applies it to His present situation. Listen again:

¹⁵ ***"So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."***

In only another 37 years, Daniel's prophecy will come true for a second time, when, in 70 AD, the Roman armies will invade Jerusalem and desecrate the Temple.

But, according to the Book of Revelation (Rev. 11), there will be a **third** time when this prophecy will be fulfilled-- some future day when *"the Holy City"* will again be *"trampled"* under the feet of Gentiles.

In this way, Daniel's words about an ***"abomination that causes desolation"*** is not just one incident, but several! Or, to put it another way, the original historic situation gets **recycled**...reintroduced into a new time period. How is this possible? It's possible because, although many things may change over the years, **the underlying spiritual problems have remained exactly the same!**

What were the underlying spiritual problems that originally prompted Daniel to make this warning about ***"abomination that causes desolation"***? If you remember, Daniel was in exile in Babylon, hundreds of kilometres away from Jerusalem. Indeed, a large part of Jerusalem's population was there in exile with him. The stories that they kept hearing from back home in Jerusalem, however, were frightening. The city was being torn down, stone by stone. Unthinkable things were happening in the Temple! (That's why they wept when they remembered Zion—Psalm 137!) Daniel's prophecy, however, was

an insistence that, despite all this havoc and destruction, God was still in control! And even though there would be an **“abomination that causes desolation”** set up in the Temple, Daniel insisted that God’s people need not worry! Instead of despairing about it, they needed to see the destruction of Jerusalem and the desecration of its Temple **as a sign that God’s redemption was near at hand.**

You see, underlying the whole prophecy of Daniel was this one key thought: **You must let go of it all!** Let go of the city; let go of the Temple; let go of the priesthood and the rituals. Let them all be destroyed! Let the evil powers have their way. Why? **Because, one day, God’s Kingdom will be restored to an even more glorious form at the coming of the Messiah, the Son of Man!**

Indeed, over hundreds of years, God’s prophets were called to repeat this same type of prophecy. **“Don’t become too proud of your city or your Temple. The buildings and religious practices may be beautiful and meaningful, but if you put your hope in the buildings or in the religious practices more than in God, God will have to come and take them away. If you put your faith in the Temple, believing that the Temple is your assurance that God is on your side, God will have to come and destroy it! If you trust that the city of Jerusalem is your fortress and protector, God may have to let it be overthrown so you’ll turn your eyes on Him instead! If you start believing that what you have built will last forever, you may need a simple reminder of how foolish you really are!”**

Once you understand this oft-repeated message of the prophets, then you’ll see why Jesus could so easily **recycle** Daniel’s prophecy, fitting it into His own contemporary situation! **In Jesus’ day**, God’s people were, once again, becoming mesmerised by the trappings of religion (—just look at the way the disciples gawked over the stones of the Temple)! The religious leaders were filled with self-assurance and religious pride. The religious institution, itself, was becoming corrupted with idolatrous practices. And so, by recycling Daniel’s prophecy, Jesus is simply repeating what had been said many years earlier: **“Don’t hold on to these things! Let them go! When the Romans armies invade, don’t fight back. Just run!”**

¹⁵ **“So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’^[a] spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the**

reader understand—¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.¹⁷ Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house.¹⁸ Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak.”

Jesus is telling the disciples to let go of it all—get out of there, and let the whole thing be laid to waste! For the fact is that these things have become a hindrance to true faith in God!

Let me stop, now, and ask you to consider: **If Jesus can take and “recycle” Daniel’s prophecy, applying it to His situation, can we do the same thing?** Can we take Daniel’s warning about the “*abomination that causes desolation*” and apply it to you and me and our present situation? I believe we can! After all, although we don’t live in Jerusalem, we all have our own ‘Jerusalems’, don’t we? We all have our own man-made Temples of which we have also become so proud! Take, for example:

1. Our beautiful church building! If we start making it far more than just a place to keep out of the rain or sun, perhaps it’s time for us to get ready to run! The “***abomination that causes desolation***” has come near.
2. What about our new steeple? If we start pointing to our new steeple more than we point to Jesus... it’s time for us to get ready to run! The “***abomination that causes desolation***” has come near.
3. Whenever we think our wonderful music team is essential to our worship; that we can’t worship Jesus without it... it’s time to get ready to run! The “***abomination that causes desolation***” has come near.
4. Whenever we think that what we do matters more than who we are becoming by God’s grace; whenever we believe that, by our efforts, we are building God’s Kingdom, or doing God a favour... it’s time for us to get ready to run! The “***abomination that causes desolation***” has come near.
5. Whenever we begin to think that, without the pastor or the assistant, we couldn’t go on in the faith; or without Holy Communion every Sunday we couldn’t follow Jesus, ...it’s time for us to get ready to run! The “***abomination that causes desolation***” has come near.
6. Whenever we proudly begin to believe that the Diocese of Sydney is better than all the other Dioceses in Australia...or even the world... it’s

time for us to get ready to run! The ***“abomination that causes desolation”*** has come near.

7. Whenever we lean so heavily on the institutions of the church, or on the hierarchy of the church, or on the rituals of the church, or on the social benefits of the church; whenever we look to them, and depend on them more than we depend on God... it’s time for us to get ready to run! The ***“abomination that causes desolation”*** has come near.
8. Even in our own personal lives, we could be setting up idols that stand as obstacles to the knowledge and love of God. If so, it’s time to get ready to run...to leave these things behind. The ***“abomination that causes desolation”*** has come near.

It happened in Daniel’s day; it happened in Jesus’ day; it can surely happen in our day!

Indeed, the more I see the way **Biblical prophecy** can be recycled through every generation, the more I begin to see how **false prophecy** can also be **recycled** through every generation! This is exactly where Jesus takes us next!

Listen to verses 23-26

²³ At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. ²⁴ For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you ahead of time. ²⁶ “So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the wilderness,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it.

Do you remember when the **Biblical prophets** (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc) were all prophesying about the destruction of Jerusalem and her Temple, how there were many **false prophets** in Israel who were predicting an age of **peace, prosperity and comfort**? Do you remember how, while the **Biblical prophets** were preaching about the invasion of the Babylonians and the exile of God’s people, **false prophets** were deliberately countering their words, saying things like; *“God is on our side! Don’t worry; our enemies will be defeated. We are secure. Our Temple proves that our God is bigger than theirs.”* Do you remember when the **Biblical prophets** were declaring that the evil powers would temporarily win the day but that God would use them to cleanse Israel of her idolatry and unbelief, how the **false prophets** were declaring that God

was happy with the status quo; that it was alright to stay as you are, and that there was no need to repent and be changed? (As Isaiah said, they were preaching “peace, peace”, when, in fact, there was no peace!)

Well, guess what? This was exactly the same pattern that reappeared in Jesus’ day, hundreds of years later! Jesus came to Israel as a prophet! (Of course, He was much more than a prophet-- He was Israel’s *prophet, priest and king!* But it was His prophetic role that is chiefly on view here, in today’s passage.) And so, He does what all the other prophets have done—He preaches the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple! Of course, as He does this, He is countered by **false prophets!** (These were the Pharisees and teachers of the Law whom, earlier, He had called “wolves in sheep’s clothing”.) And what were they preaching? You guessed it-- peace and prosperity! (“*Don’t worry. Rome is friendly. The Emperor is on our side. Herod has given us this Temple. All is well.*”) They were preaching “Peace, peace”, when there was no peace!

But that’s not all. Outside of Jerusalem, in the deserts and in secret meetings rooms around the provinces, Zealots were trying to encourage the nation of Israel *to fight* against the Romans. They, too, pretended to be God’s prophets, preaching victory and power in the name of Yahweh, encouraging the people to believe that God was on their side and that violence was the way to restore Israel to her former glory. And, of course, every time one of their little campaigns was ‘miraculously’ successful, more people joined their ranks!

But, according to Jesus, both groups were filled with false prophets, promising things that God never said! ***“For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.”*** People will try to steer you off track, just as it was in the days of the OT prophets.

And in the middle of them all stood Jesus, **the true prophet.** What He was suggesting was hard to swallow! Jerusalem needed to be destroyed; all the religious props and the external comforts of Israel’s institutional religion had to be torn down! No wonder they crucified Him!

We come, now, to the final 2 verses of today's passage. As I understand them, they act as a conclusion to this entire section about true and false prophets.

Let me read them again (vv. 27-28).

²⁷ For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.

Now, commentators have basically interpreted these words in two ways:

1. Some insist that Jesus is again talking about the coming destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. He will be the proverbial 'lightning bolt' who will come and level the city. (Of course, He will use the Roman army to do His work. They will be visible from the east to the west!)
2. Other commentators believe that Jesus was talking about the end of history, when Jesus will (as we say in the Creed) "*come again in glory to judge the living and the dead*". They imagine Jesus coming in power and glory, like sheet lightning on the summer evening, and every eye will see Him!

But me??? I see both as being correct. As I said, Biblical prophecy can be understood on many layers. In a sense, the 'lightning strike' of Jesus **has already occurred**, with the Roman army. And it **will occur once again**, at the end of history, in some other way! In other words, Jesus comes repeatedly to strike the earth with His *lightning*; bringing down sudden violence and destruction on His own people! But, don't forget—it can also happen in our generation. Perhaps even tomorrow!

That's because, whenever God's people are comfortable; whenever we are secure in our own man-made religion... Jesus will come and do us a great favour by stripping it all away. His lightning will turn it to cinders and ash!
²⁷ ***"For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man."*** None of us can be sure of where or when He will strike! But this is the way God's grace operates. In every generation, Jesus comes to liberate us from the backlog of what is unnecessary and unhelpful to our faith in Him!

In our Tuesday night cell group, we've been doing studies in this book by Peter Scazzero entitled, ***Emotionally Healthy Spirituality***. He says something very applicable to today's topic.

*"The critical issue on the journey with God is not, "Am I happy?" but "Am I free?". Am I growing in the freedom God gave me?...We are to live our lives as the rest of the world does—marrying, experiencing sorrow and joy, buying things and using them—but always with awareness that these things in themselves are not our lives. We are to be marked by eternity, free from the dominating power of things. **Detachment** is the great secret of interior peace. Along the way, in this journey with Christ, we get attached to behaviours, habits, things, and people in an unhealthy way...The journey with Jesus calls us to a life of undivided devotion to Him. This requires that we simplify our lives, removing distractions."* (Scazzero, p 132-133)

That's why Jesus needs to come down into every person's life as lightning! He comes to help us detach and let go; He comes to strip us from religious idols and pull away all the religious props, until we are naked before Him! It's a good thing!

But, what about the **vultures** in this passage? Why does Jesus, in the same breath, move from talking about **lightning**, to talking about **vultures**? What's the connection? Although it may seem as if He's mixing metaphors, there is a connection. For if we, as God's people, don't allow our lives to be simplified and stripped back by Jesus (by the heavenly lightning bolt), our church...our spiritual lives... will become nothing but **a dead carcass**! As it was in the days of Daniel and then Jesus, the life of God can become choked off by all the extraneous 'stuff' of religion until our spiritual life dies; it rots away! At that point, we become easy prey to the 'vultures' who will rise up and falsely prophecy "peace, prosperity and happiness" over us...even while the whole religious enterprise stinks!

As I've been saying, Biblical prophecy operates on many levels. And although the original, historic situation may have long-since passed, these same

prophecies can be (must be) recycled *in every generation* until their final and ultimate fulfilment is reached at the very end of the world, when Jesus returns for His purified bride. The ancient warnings are to be repeated for our own good, to keep us focused on the invisible reality of the Kingdom of Heaven, that we might be ready to receive our King, no matter when He might appear.

That's why, instead of asking the general/abstract questions, "Are we living in the last days?" ... or, "Is the end of the world near?", it's always more fruitful to ask the more personalised questions: "Am I living in **my** last days?" "Is the end of **my** world near?" The lightning needs to strike!

Let's pray.