

JOSEPH SMITH—MATTHEW

MATTHEW 23:37–24:51

The following is based on John W. Welch and Brent J. Schmidt, The Gospel of Matthew, BYU New Testament Commentary (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, forthcoming).

Matthew 23:37–39. Event 17: Jesus Laments and Weeps over Jerusalem

As He has asked us to do, Jesus Himself showed an increase of love after He had reproved these individuals. His lamenting over Jerusalem is a wonderful example to all who want to become like Jesus. Here, on the hillside just east of the temple, Jesus famously sorrows over the condition of the people in Jerusalem: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (Matthew 23:37). Eternally compassionate, Jesus had always been willing to gather them, was still then willing to do so, and would always be willing to, with sheltering wings to protect His people as a hen gathers her chicks (see also 3 Nephi 10:4–6).

Matthew 24:1–2. Event 18: Jesus Prophesies the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem

Jesus revealed a long list of signs of future events starting after the time of His death and going until the time of His Second Coming. Where on this list of developments are we today? Because of the way this text has been passed down, the events are all in the text but are rather scrambled. Joseph Smith received an enlightening series of revelations that clarified their sequence. It is in the Pearl of Great Price, as will be noted in the following insights.

The first point of prophecy here was that not one stone of the temple would be left standing on another. That destruction happened in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed the temple.

Matthew 24:3–14. Sign 6: Jesus Tells the Signs of the Coming of the End of the World

Following that prophecy, the disciples asked Jesus what the specific signs of His Second Coming would be. As is common with prophecy, one sign can represent events in more than one era. Although many of these prophecies have clearly come to pass, some may recur. Jesus's signs are given here in the order that they are given in Joseph's inspired translation of Matthew 24.

First, the disciples would be hated and killed. Then false prophets would start appearing. That clearly occurred in early Christianity. Latter-day Saints believe that God has once again called authorized prophets, but false prophets continue to appear.

The next part of the prophecy is that iniquity will abound and love will become cold. This is the essence of the Apostasy in the second century, and we are warned that it will occur once more. Then the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed. This destruction also happened in the second century when the Jews revolted again under Bar Kokhba. The Romans were so angry that they banished all Jews from Jerusalem—part of the “abomination of desolation,” an expression from the book of Daniel describing the time (or times) when Satan would have full reign over the affairs of the kingdom. Everything sacred would become deserted.

False messiahs and false prophets would appear and perform miracles. From Roman legal materials, it is clear that in the second and third centuries, wonderworkers and miracle performers increased in number and wanted to be paid to read palms, decipher horoscopes, and issue curses. The Romans tried to counter these popular diviners by increasing the worship of past and living emperors.

Wars and rumors of wars would then follow, which may refer to the collapse of the Roman Empire and to the eventual complete collapse of all world order at that time. There would be wars, invasions, and great instability, but the end is not yet. Some of this continues in our day.

People would then start saying that Jesus has returned. Jesus warns to not listen to these rumors, “for as the light of the morning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west, and covereth the whole earth, so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be.”

The list then jumps over a long period of spiritual desolation to a time when the elect would begin to be gathered from the four quarters of the earth. That began to happen with the Restoration when the power of the priesthood was restored, and the gathering of Israel began around the world. The expansion of missionary programs and the dedication of temples all over the world are indicators of the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Nation will fight against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. War used to be only kings fighting kings until the early modern period. Because of this, this prophecy seems to describe the nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries, when nationalism became the main impetus of war for the first time—a phenomena that continues today. Then there will be famines, pestilences, earthquakes, and instabilities, all of which are familiar to today’s readers.

The gospel of the kingdom will at that point be preached to all the world. Not everyone in every country will become part of the covenant immediately, but priesthood ordinances are now in almost every country, and the gospel is also being taught in the spirit world.

Matthew 24:15–28. Instruction 27: Stand in Holy Places to Withstand the Final Tribulations

After Jesus had given the harsh woes and condemnations, He reached out and not only showed an increase of love but also shared instructions of what all people can do to withstand these challenging and evil times. Jesus said that when we see the abomination of desolation, we should “stand in the holy place.” The holy place is the temple. One needs to be worthy and present in the temple. Jesus’s list is very enabling:

- Avoid iniquity
- Do not let charity wax cold
- Endure to the end; remain steadfast and be not overcome
- Read and understand the scriptures
- Flee wickedness and do not return to it
- Pray to the Lord so you will not need to flee on the Sabbath
- Pray to be able to do what is necessary without violating the law
- Keep the covenant
- Do not be troubled
- Gather the elect
- Do not be overcome
- Preach to all the world
- Treasure up the Lord’s words
- Be not deceived
- Know when the end-time is near
- Gather up the remainder
- Be watchful
- Be faithful like a wise serpent
- Be performing your duties when the Savior comes

Matthew 24:29–31. Sign 7: Jesus Gives the Signs of the Final Coming of the Son of Man

Sadly, in the end-time the abomination of desolation will return. While it will not be victorious, great evil will exist in the world. The faithful will be few, but those who endure to the end will be saved.

After the terrible days of desolation, the sun, moon, and stars will be darkened and the powers of heaven will be shaken. All the tribes of the earth will mourn because of the suffering and cataclysms coming upon them. Then, the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky.

The Lord refers here specifically to “the sign of the Son of man in heaven” rather than to the sequence of the signs of the times. Jesus says no more than that the sign will appear. Whereas the final sign may be the actual appearance of the Lord in His glory, several Christians today still believe that it will be the sign of the cross. According to Dummelow, this interpretation was already found in the Didache in the second century.¹ In the eleventh century, it was believed that “the Cross would then be seen in heaven shining more brightly than the sun as a reproof to the Jews, for when the Lord comes, He will display the Cross as the strongest evidence against the Jews, like one who shows the stone with which he was struck.”² However, if the Savior explained this sign further, that knowledge was not passed down.

In any event, Jesus will come in power and glory, as has been taught repeatedly in modern revelation. We find the following in different sections of the Doctrine and Covenants:

- “From heaven with power and great glory” (29:11)
- “Coming in power and great glory unto their deliverance” (56:18)
- “Come down in heaven, clothed in the brightness of his glory” (65:5)
- “In my glory in the clouds of heaven” (45:16)
- “They shall see me in the clouds of heaven, clothed with power and great glory” (45:43–44)

Joseph Smith said in his inspired text, “The Son of man shall come, and he shall send his angels before him with the great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together the remainder of his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:37). And in this dispensation the Lord advised, “Wherefore, be not deceived, but continue in steadfastness, looking forth for the heavens to be shaken, and the earth to tremble and to reel to and fro as a drunken man, and for the valleys to be exalted, and for the mountains to be made low, and for the rough places to become smooth—and all this when the angel shall sound his trumpet” (Doctrine and Covenants 49:23).³

Matthew 24:32–42. Parable 16: The Budding Fig Tree as a Harbinger of the Coming Season

Now trying to impress upon His disciples the urgency of preparing for the coming season, Jesus turns again to a nearby fig tree that apparently was ready to produce fruit. He had previously listed circumstances

that would indicate that His coming was approaching (21:18–19), and here He likens these signs to the tender early leaves of the fig tree that appear in early spring. As Leon Morris says, “anyone who has grown trees knows how satisfying it is to see the new leaves make their appearance. Then there is no doubt that the harsh days of winter are gone and that summer is near.”⁴ Likewise, signs of the Second Coming let us know that the time is approaching. This comment by Jesus is recorded not only in Matthew but also in Mark 13:28–32 and Luke 21:29–33.

Matthew 24:43–51. Parable 17: The Watchful and Unwatchful Servants

Knowing that important events are coming, Jesus admonishes His disciples and all Saints to be prepared at any time. “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come,” He said (Matthew 24:42). To further His point, He related a parable about two servants who were given responsibilities over the household, particularly to see that everyone was fed while the master was gone. When the master arrived home, one servant was busily working and doing what he was expected to. This was a happy circumstance, for which the master would give him greater opportunity and blessings. The other was a careless servant who thought to himself that the master would not be back for a long time, so he was unkind to the other servants and gave in to eating and drinking with the drunken. When the master came, this unruly servant, it says, “shall be cut asunder.” Whatever that might mean, it is understood that this fate would not be happy or pleasant.

Similar advice is found in Doctrine and Covenants 107:99–100: “Wherefore, now let every man learn his duty, and to act in the office in which he is appointed, in all diligence. He that is slothful shall not be counted worthy to stand, and he that learns not his duty and shows himself not approved shall not be counted worthy to stand. Even so. Amen.”

Notes

- 1 J. R. Dummelow, ed., *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1909), 704.
- 2 Theophylact of Ochrida, *The Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to St. Matthew*.
- 3 For close comparative analyses of Matthew 24 and its related texts, see Richard Draper, *The Savior’s Prophecies: From the Fall of Jerusalem to the Second Coming* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2001).
- 4 Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 611.

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