

Most of us use them every day. We put them on sub consciously. We barely even think about doing it. Some of us need help to get them on or we help others get theirs on. If we don't wear them and the police see us, we might have to pay a fine. But even more drastic, if we're not wearing them, it could cost us our lives.

What are they? Seat belts. Whenever we get into our car or someone else's car, we strap on a seat belt. If we have little ones, we strap in their car seat or help them get on their seat belts. If we have some extra passengers and we need one of those rarely used seat belts, we may have to get down under the back seat to fish it out. But we get it to ensure everyone is buckled up. Then off we go to our destination. If we don't have ours on and a police officer sees us we could get pulled over and given a ticket.

For those of you about 25 and under, you never knew a world without seat belts. When I was a kid, we never wore them. I remember standing on the floor of the back seat of our car and watching out the front windshield for hours on end when we were on vacation. I loved seeing the road whip by and all the sights those privileged front seat people got to enjoy. But today, seat belts are mandatory.

So why do we wear them? Well ultimately we wear them to prepare for an event that may happen sometime in the future. Some of you have been in accidents or close calls where your seat belt hopefully helped. But some may never have actually been in an accident. Yet, we still buckle up for something that may happen in the future.

Buckling up a seat belt is not the only way we prepare for a possible or certain future event. We buy car insurance in case we hit or get hit by someone while driving. We buy home insurance in case of fire or some other damage that might strike our home. Some buy life insurance to provide for our loved ones in case something should happen to us. Many have wills. We prepare them because of the certainty of our own death unless Christ returns before then. We prepare a nursery when a baby is on the way. Or for a wedding upon an engagement. Some of us don't have these preparations in place. If we don't have those preparations in place, we may get a wakeup call to make preparations. Say we don't have house insurance. But then a neighbor's house burns down because of a fire. The reality of that event might move us to go out and get some house insurance. Or say we don't have a will. But then we experience a near crash in traffic. If we were one second earlier or later we would be dead. So we may begin to think more about a will. Or if we get a health scare that points to the possible end of our lives being closer than we planned, we might make preparations

for that end. We also might live differently in light of the possibility that we don't have as much time as we thought.

These events and signs move us to prepare for the future and live differently.

So we prepare for possible accidents, house fires, babies, weddings, and the certainty of our death. How prepared are we for the return of Christ? The Bible proclaims the inevitability of Jesus' second coming. Are you ready for it? Does your life and the choices you're making take into account the certainty of Christ's return?

Wherever you're at with this, we come upon some great help today. Jesus taught about this. Jesus prepared His disciples for the end and His return. He shared what they needed to know and how they needed to live until that time arrived. Today, we're going to continue to explore His teaching.

Last week we saw the disciples ask 2 specific questions of Jesus about the future. They asked in response to His comment about the coming destruction of the temple. They sit on the Mount of Olives from which they could see the massive temple complex. Jesus warned them to watch out for those who would lead them astray when it came to predicting the end times. He prepared them to expect persecution including their own deaths. Then he warned them to expect great upheaval among the community of believers. Many would fall away. Many would be led astray. So-called Christians would even betray and hate each other. So he calls them to endure and proclaims the mission of worldwide gospel proclamation before the end will come.

In our passage today, Jesus continues initially to talk about the destruction of the temple. But then we will see Him blending His teaching about the temple's destruction with His return at the end. These teachings help us prepare for His coming. We will conclude with how we can live with hope in light of Jesus' return.

Matthew 24:15-31 (ESV) (Page 698-699)

¹⁵ "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand),¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁷ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, ¹⁸ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. ¹⁹ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! ²⁰ Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. ²¹ For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. ²² And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. ²³ Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. ²⁴ For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. 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. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

²⁹ “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ 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. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

As we walk through this passage, I want you to be aware of four questions that Christians have disagreed over for centuries. What is the abomination of desolation talked about in verse 15? When is the great tribulation in verses 21 and 22? What does the parable about the vultures mean in verse 28? What is the sign of the Son of Man in verse 30? I will offer some possible explanation with my preference after the explanations. So please don't shoot me if my preferred interpretation doesn't exactly line up with yours. We need to keep the big picture in mind.

What does Jesus teach about the coming destruction of the temple?

He predicted that “there would not be one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” back in verse 2. Well now in verse 15 Jesus starts to address the disciple's question “when will these things be?” **By warning them to flee when they see the abomination that causes desolation. (15-20)**

But what is the “abomination of desolation?” Jesus refers us back to the prophet Daniel. In the Old Testament book of Daniel, he mentions this three times. Daniel 9:27 – And to the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator. Daniel 11:31 – And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate. Daniel 12:11 – And from the time that the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that makes desolate is set up, there shall be 1290 days.

Now with that in mind, notice carefully what Jesus says. “When you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel standing in the holy place.” So whatever it is, it will stand in the holy place. What's the holy place? It could be the temple. It could be a room or space inside the temple. It could be the temple mount. It could be part of Jerusalem. But Jesus says when you see this in the holy place flee. Does that mean the disciples have to literally see this abomination in the Holy Place? I don't think so. I think “seeing” could include getting word of or hearing about. But somehow knowledge that the abomination is standing in the holy place gets out. As soon as that happens, they need to flee.

But what is this abomination? An abomination in Old Testament language was some idolatrous insult or slur against the true worship of God. So it could be an idol placed in the Jewish holy place. It could be someone who demanded the

worship that only God deserved. It could be a symbol or standard of an idol. It could be an action that offended or assaulted the worship of God.

The ESV Study Bible talks about several times in Jewish history when they thought Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled. The most notable was when a Seleucid or Greek king called Antiochus Epiphanes the fourth conquered Jerusalem in 167 BC. He ordered construction of an altar to the Greek god Zeus inside the temple. Then he ordered that pigs and other unclean animals to the Jews be sacrificed there. This was a total assault on the true worship of God.

But Jesus says this is going to be a future even from the moment they sat there on the Mount of Olives. Well, it's very possible this was fulfilled during the Jewish revolt against the Romans from 66-73. In 66, the Romans killed some priests in the temple. So you have the shedding of innocent blood by pagans in a house of worship. That could have been part of it. But in the year 70, the Romans besieged Jerusalem and captured Jerusalem.

Then they went on a destructive and murderous frenzy. They tore down and burned the temple which directly fulfilled Jesus' prophecy back in verse 2. Then they placed their standards or flags that bore the image of the emperor on the temple site. The emperor claimed to be a god. So this was an affront to God. But on top of that, they then offered sacrifices to the standards. So maybe Jesus refers to the Roman standards that were carried along with the army that serve as the abomination of desolation. Those standards pointed to the worship of the Emperor, an affront to our Holy God. Those outside of Jerusalem could have seen these standards advancing upon Jerusalem during this time. When that happened they knew it was time to flee.

But this begs the question. Is there only one abomination of desolation? Might this be a recurring theme in Israel and the people of God's history? The Apostle Paul mentions a man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2:4. What does he want? He opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God proclaiming himself to be God. Then in Revelation 13, John talks about a beast. This beast is given authority from the dragon Satan and the people of the world worship the beast (Revelation 13:4). So there are several references to abominations that desire the worship that only God deserves. I think Jesus prepared the disciples for the times they would live through. They might see an abomination of desolation that occurred in their time. He continues to prepare us by warning that the ultimate abomination of desolation is still to come.

When we see or recognize this, Jesus commands His disciples and us to flee immediately. We're not talking about having a few hours to pack up our belongings. He urges immediate departure upon discovery of this abomination. Verse 16 – "Let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains." In ancient times, people in the country normally fled to the walled cities for protection. But in this time people fled to the mountains. One ancient church historian talks about Christians who fled to the mountains in the year 67 when it became obvious the Jewish revolt would turn into all-out war. Their lives may have been saved by Jesus' counsel here.

Verse 17 – "Those on the housetop should not even go into their house before they flee." That's weird to us because we don't spend time sitting on our roofs. But their roofs were flat. People sat up there especially in the evenings to cool down instead of staying in their hot house. But when they heard about this abomination, they should not even go from their roof into their house. Instead they must immediately flee.

Likewise, the person in the field in verse 18 should not even run to find their cloak. Ordinary people had one inner and outer garment. They slept in their outer garment and wore it as they went out to the fields in the morning. But when the day warmed up, they would lay it aside at the edge of a field. But if they were in the middle of a field and heard the news, they should just run and not get their cloak.

Jesus then sympathizes with the most vulnerable – pregnant and nursing women. Very harsh conditions would make things more difficult for them. He instructs the disciples to pray this doesn't happen during winter or on the Sabbath. Now winter I get. Traveling in any winter anywhere is risky. The winter roads in Israel would turn to mud with the rain. But why not on the Sabbath? Some argue it's because all city gates would be closed that day and no one could get provisions. Others say it's because Jews were forbidden from traveling any major distance on the Sabbath. Many Jews considered riding an animal on the Sabbath close to an unforgivable sin. So they'd have to flee with tormented consciences. Whatever Jesus meant, the point was clear. When God's people see or hear about the abomination of desolation, flee.

Jesus goes on with another statement that has caused great disagreement among Christians. **A great tribulation will come upon the world that no one could survive unless God cut it short (21-22).** Jesus talks about a time of intense suffering and destruction. It will be unlike any other time in history. No terrible event or war in history will match it. There would be nothing like it in the future. In fact, no one would survive it except for God's intervention. He cuts this

time short for the sake of the elect. The elect was Israel in the Old Testament. But in the New Testament, it came to mean any believer in Christ whether Jew or Gentile.

But when would this tribulation happen? By all accounts, the siege and destruction of Jerusalem was horrific. Was that the great tribulation? Yet following that siege, we have seen the holocaust, labor and death camps, world wars, mass disease and genocides. So are we in the great tribulation now? Or is the great tribulation still coming? It seems to me that Jesus has now switched back to answering their second question. What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age? It's likely the disciples thought the destruction of the temple – end of the age. But I think Jesus speaks to a broader audience here. His words will be preserved and speak to Christians throughout the centuries warning them of a coming Great Tribulation. Maybe just like there could be multiple fulfillments of the abomination of desolation until we reach the ultimate abomination, there could be multiple tribulations until we reach the ultimate great tribulation.

But then, it seems like Jesus switches back to disciples near term future. In verses 23-25. **Jesus warns the disciples against listening to anyone who claims to be Messiah in some remote or secret location.** Remember we talked last week about how when times are bad, end times fever picks up? False messiahs show up and make bold claims. People hear about them and say “that guy’s the Messiah” or “She will deliver us.” But Jesus predicts in verse 24 – “False Christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.” This picks up on one of Jesus’ greatest concerns. He started this speech back in verse 4 by declaring “See that no one leads you astray.” He warns about false Christs in verse 5. He warns about false prophets in verse 11. It seems like Jesus is more concerned about the disciples being deceived than their physical survival.

Have you ever thought about that? Believing a deception and giving your life to someone other than the one true God is worse than dying as a believer. That’s Jesus’ emphasis. Though instructing the disciples to flee shows some concern for their physical lives, He more emphatically emphasizes the danger of deception. Jesus even draws attention to the importance of this in verse 25. “See, I have told you beforehand.” People or spirits disguised as people will show up and do spectacular things. Don’t be fooled by them or you could lose your soul. Better to lose your physical life than your eternal soul.

Then Jesus gives them another specific warning that will help them discern. Verse 26. “So if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it.” False messiahs

had to go to the desert to raise a following. Why? It was far away from the authorities and the Roman garrisons. So you could claim to be Messiah in the desert and few people would bother you. But claim that in Jerusalem and you'll be arrested and killed. Look what happened to Jesus. Or the other option is to remain secretly in the city. You claim to be Messiah but you don't come out about it. But Jesus says, if someone says "we've got to keep this a secret" or "this revelation is only for true believers," be wary. How many times have we seen these cult leaders take their followers to some isolated spot and claim they are true believers. Or how often do we hear about these religious figures who claim to have some sort of secret knowledge that only those inside get to know. That's a deception and it has nothing to do with how Jesus will return.

What does Jesus teach about the sign of His coming and the end of the age? His return will be clearly visible to all.

(27-28) According to verse 27, Jesus' coming is going to be like lightning in the sky. You don't have to go to the desert to see lightning. You can just look up when it's happening. You don't have to check with someone who has secret knowledge about lightning to confirm that it's lightning. Everyone who looks up in the sky sees it. When Jesus returns, we won't have to convince anyone that Jesus has come. There won't be any secret or invisible return that some cults claim. Everyone in the entire world will know this happens.

This brings us to that strange little parable in verse 28. "Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." What does that mean? Some think it pictures the false messiah's and prophets feeding on the deceived. Some think that just as certainly as vultures gather to devour a corpse, people will gather to see Christ upon His return. But I think it most likely refers to when vultures circle a corpse from a great height, people can see it from everywhere. They know what's going on. In the same way, Jesus return will be greatly visible so people will know what's going on.

There will be some earth shattering disturbance when Jesus' returns. Verse 29 could describe a complete breakdown of the universe. A darkened sun, no moon light, falling stars and a shaking universe indicate a disturbance of the natural order. If that's what Jesus means, God would have to intervene in some way so we could all stay alive. So this could be a literal supernatural event. But some see it as political, economic and societal upheaval. Imagine if the governments of the world collapsed, all the banks went bankrupt and the whole nation lost electrical power. That would stop everyone in their tracks. That would catch everyone's attention.

Then **a sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven and the tribes of the earth will mourn (30a)**. Something will be visible in the sky. It will unmistakably indicate the return of Christ. For many years, it was thought this would be a cross. Others think it is simply Jesus Himself in the sky. But whatever the sign, the tribes or peoples of the earth will mourn. Why? It could be a mourning of repentance. But more likely, it's a mourning of lament for those who have rejected Christ and lived their lives in rebellion against Him. Suddenly, it will become crystal clear that He is the one True God and has all the power. It was foolish to go against Him. Now it's too late to turn to Him.

Then the Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (30b). This is another image from the prophet Daniel. In Daniel 7:13-14 we read "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." What did Jesus call Himself through the Gospel of Matthew? The Son of Man. 2 chapters over in Matthew 26, Jesus stands before the high priest facing condemnation. The High Priest asks "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus answers "you have said so. But I tell you, from now on, you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." At these words, the High Priest tears his robes and the council condemns Jesus to death. But here we discover Jesus' words to the High Priest will be fulfilled at His return.

Then He will direct his angels to gather all believers who live all over the earth and all those who live from one end of heaven to another. The angels gather them to be with Christ forever. If someone can order angels to do something, that someone is divine.

This is Jesus' teaching about the destruction of the temple, the end of the age and His return. Next time, we will see Him impress upon the disciples more about how they are to live and the urgency of what He's saying to them.

But for today, I want to conclude with the words of someone who was there that day and heard these words. He lived about 30 years more after this teaching. Sometime near the end of those years, he wrote a letter with his reflection on how to live in light of the second coming and return of Christ.

2 Peter 3:1-13 (NIV)

3 Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. ² I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

³ Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. ⁴ They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” ⁵ But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. ⁶ By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. ⁷ By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the Day of Judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

¹⁴ So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. ¹⁵ Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. ¹⁶ He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

¹⁷ Therefore, dear friends, since you have been forewarned, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position. ¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

What kind of people ought we to be? We ought to live holy and Godly lives as we look forward to Jesus’ return and somehow speed its coming. We can look forward with hope to the new heaven and new earth where righteousness will dwell. We can bear in mind that the Lord’s patience today means salvation. Every day that the Lord tarries is another opportunity for our lost loved ones to be found. Every day we live is a day to celebrate and give thanks for the salvation we have received from Him. But also, since this earth and everything done in it will be laid bare, ensure that you’re investing your life in things that will last – love for God, love for people and living for the glory of God. If you don’t know

Christ, please turn to Him before it's too late. You don't have your spiritual seatbelt on. We wear seatbelts to prepare for a possible accident. We write wills to prepare for a certain death. By God's Spirit we can live holy and Godly lives that prepare for Jesus' return tomorrow, 10 years from now or next century. Let's spur one another on to live accordingly.