

LEARN AND KNOW

Matthew 24:32-35

32 “Now learn the parable from the fig tree:
when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves,
you know that summer is near;
33 so, you too, when you see all these things,
recognize that He is near, right at the door.
34 Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away
until all these things take place.
35 Heaven and earth will pass away,
but My words will not pass away.
(Matthew 24:32–35, 2022 LSB)

THE SETTING

At the start of Matthew 24, Jesus’ disciples point out the glory and majesty of the Temple. Jesus tells them that the Temple will be completely destroyed: “Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down.” This is shocking news, and they ask Him three questions: First, when will all these things happen? Second, what will be the sign of His Second Coming? And third, what will be the sign of the end of the age? The remainder of Matthew 24 and 25 are His answers to their questions.

He prepared them for the chaos that was to come. “See to it that you are not deceived ... see that you are not alarmed,” He says.

He describes the decline of the world into wars and rumors of wars, famines, and earthquakes. All these things, Jesus says, are just the beginning of the birth pains of the end.

He says that tribulation against His people is coming, with hatred and violence and false prophets, but the one who endures in faith will be saved.

The end itself will begin with the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place. A man will arise, whom the New Testament calls the Antichrist. He will be clothed with abominations and wickedness and set himself up as the Christ. In the title “Antichrist,” the Greek prefix anti- doesn’t mean against, but instead of. The Antichrist is, of course, against Christ, but he is called the Antichrist because he sets himself up as a substitute for Christ.

Tremendous tribulation will follow the Antichrist. Much will be God's judgment against the world, as described in Revelation 6-18. But much will be Satan's persecution against believers and his attempt to destroy Israel before her restoration by Christ.

Jesus brings the first part of Matthew 24 to a close by describing His Second Coming. Jesus' answers make it clear that He wants us to be diligent and watchful.

- *See to it* that no one deceives you (Matthew 24:4).
- *See that* you are not alarmed (Matthew 24:6).
- Therefore *when you see ...* (Matthew 24:15).
- If anyone says, "Here or there is the Christ," *do not believe him* (Matthew 24:23)
- Behold, *I have told you in advance* (Matthew 24:25).
- If they say, "He is in the wilderness or the inner rooms," *do not believe them* (Matthew 24:26).

Jesus was determined to give His twelve disciples, and all His disciples throughout history, adequate preparation and warning. He continues that theme in our passage today. He wants us to *learn* so that we *know with certainty*. Learning is about our minds; knowing with certainty is about our hearts. He wants our confidence in Him and His Word to be equally strong. He wants our confidence to be in His Word, not in someone else's claims or even in our own experience. He wants us to be like Himself, completely dependent upon the Father. And He ties the events of the end times into the greatest cataclysm of the early world.

Let's go to the text together.

LEARN AND KNOW

Matthew 24:32-33

32 "Now **learn** [this is a command, beloved] the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near;

33 so, you too, when you see all these things,

recognize (or know) [this is also a command] that He [the Son of Man, v. 30-31] is near, right at the door."

(Matthew 24:32-33, 2022 LSB)

May I condense this? **Learn** so that you **know**. It's silly to say this, but if you will not **learn**, you

will not **know**. You cannot **know** if you will not **learn**.

What are we to learn? That the Second Coming of Christ will be preceded by specific signs already given to us by the Lord Jesus.

- The abomination of desolation (v. 15).
- The Great Tribulation (v. 21).
- Various rumors of Christ's return (v. 23).
- An increase in the number of false prophets (v. 24).

Jesus will not come again until these signs exist. When they come to pass, then His Second Coming will be truly near, right around the corner, not far off at all. Every Christian, not just the twelve disciples, has been given the opportunity to *learn* what signs precede the Second Coming of Christ so that they will know with certainty when He is near and, more importantly, know with certainty when He is not near.

Why is it more important to recognize when the Second Coming of Christ is *not* near? Paul wrote the Thessalonians,

1 Now we ask you, brothers,
with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him,
2 that you not be quickly shaken in your mind or be alarmed
whether by a spirit or a word or a letter as if from us,
to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.
3 Let no one in any way deceive you,
for it has not come unless the apostasy comes first, [the love of many will grow cold, Matt 24:12]
and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,
4 who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship,
so that he takes his seat in the sanctuary of God,
exhibiting himself as being God. [The abomination of desolation, Matt 24:15]
(2 Thessalonians 2:1–4, 2022 LSB)

The Thessalonians had been hearing rumors that the day of the Lord had already come, and they had missed it. Paul wrote these words around 51 or 52 A.D. Since then, there have been countless predictions of the Lord's return. Some have been by false teachers, like Pope Sylvester II, Charles Taze Russell, Joseph Smith, and Reverend Sun Myung Moon. Some have been by people we never associate with religion at all, like Sandro Botticelli (a painter), Christopher Columbus, and Charles Manson. Some have been known for their fascination with the end times, like Pat

Robertson, Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, and Jerry Jenkins (LaHaye and Jenkins wrote the “Left Behind” series of books, and they recanted their prediction before the date arrived). But others have been trusted pastors, like Martin Luther, Cotton Mather, and Chuck Smith.

Jesus begins His teaching in Matthew 24 by commanding us to see to it that we are neither deceived nor alarmed. The Thessalonians allowed themselves to be deceived, and it caused them tremendous alarm and anxiety.

The end times are mysterious, certainly, because we don’t know when exactly they will begin. But they are not a mystery. Jesus has clearly stated what signs will and won’t precede His coming. Wars, rumors of wars, nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom, famines, earthquakes – the sorts of events that cause us distress and uncertainty – are *not* signs that His return is imminent. The abomination of desolation, the Great Tribulation, countless rumors that Jesus is in hiding somewhere, and an increase in the number of false prophets are the signs that His return IS imminent.

THE DEVIL’S STRATEGY

Jesus doesn’t want us to be victims of deception at all, and so He tells us what is clearly true: He will not come until these signs have come to pass. Now, this information is extremely useful to those living in that final generation, but what about the rest of us? Is any of this meaningful for the generations that are NOT part of the final generation? Yes, absolutely.

Let me explain.

The devil has a very simple, two-pronged strategy. He seeks to set God against man and man against God.

How does the devil set God against Man? By tempting people to sin. Man is God’s highest creation. Only man was created in the image of God. God created Adam, put him in the garden, and warned him that if he ate the forbidden fruit, he would die. God would punish Adam’s sin with death (Genesis 2:). What a great day that must have been for the devil! If he could convince Adam to sin, God would kill him, His most beloved creation! Adam was created in the image of God; it was almost like making God kill Himself! God still punishes sin with death, and the devil still tempts people to sin in order to set God against them.

How does the devil set Man against God? By convincing man that God is untrustworthy. God

told Adam that if he sinned, he would die. “You will not die,” Satan told Eve, “God is just jealous of you.” God the Father became God the Jealous, God the Competitor, God the Enemy. The devil’s temptation of Jesus is a good example of His approach. God isn’t providing for you? Satisfy yourself. God’s love is doubtful? Make Him prove He loves you. God’s plan is too painful? Take the easy way. Satan has used the prosperity movement to set Man against God. The devil’s teachers tell people that God wants them happy, healthy, and rich. God has made no such promise, but when they give money and name and claim, and nothing happens, God has obviously broken His promise. Those who don’t abandon faith altogether often become disillusioned and embittered.

Beloved, the devil wants you to sin so that you earn God’s judgment. And he wants you to be disappointed in God so that you abandon Him.

Let me tell you about the great dragon, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world (Revelation 12:9). There is no deception he won’t try on you. There is nothing in your life he won’t exploit to conquer you. There is no pain in your life that he will mercifully leave untouched. There is no loss that you have suffered that Satan will not manipulate for his own purposes. You can be sure that the devil will stop at nothing to convince you to sin or to reject your Creator.

There is only one Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is only one Word of God. There is only one Savior and Lord. There is only one Gospel.

But Satan offers the world an endless variety of choices. Frankly, he doesn’t care which lie you believe as long as you do not rest in the truth. You might become an extremist. You might end up apathetic. It doesn’t matter to the devil; it’s all the same to him.

So Jesus’ words to His disciples 2,000 years ago are deeply necessary and meaningful today. If we are willing to submit to His Word and wisdom – that is, if we are willing to *learn* and *know with certainty* – we can recognize the lies of the enemy and protect ourselves against being deceived and alarmed.

ETERNAL WORDS OF THE ETERNAL WORD

Matthew 24:34-35

34 “Truly I say to you,
 this generation will not pass away
 until all these things take place.
35 Heaven and earth will pass away,

but My words will not pass away.”
(Matthew 24:34–35, 2022 LSB)

By “this generation,” Jesus means those who observe the signs of His Second Coming. The generation that sees those signs will see His return:

- The abomination of desolation,
- the Great Tribulation,
- rumors of Christ’s secret return in the wilderness or inner rooms,
- the increase of false prophets,
- The darkening of the sun and moon,
- the stars falling,
- and the powers of heaven being shaken.

All these signs must take place. All of them WILL take place, just as Jesus promised. We have His Word on it. And to make sure we understand Him, Jesus reminds us of the authority of His Word: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.” The Lord made this as emphatic as human language would allow. His words will never, ever, under any circumstances, lose their significance or fade into obscurity.

Back in Matthew 5:18, Jesus said the very same thing:

18 “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away,
 not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law
 until all is accomplished.”
(Matthew 5:18, 2022 LSB)

Put these verses together and you see that Jesus’ words and the Word of God are the same Word and that His Word, the Word of God, is eternal.

You know, we love to hear ourselves talk. We are a storytelling, songwriting, playacting, book-writing, movie-making race. We love stories.

But God never talks just to hear Himself talk. He speaks to reveal Himself. He speaks to enact His will. He speaks to exercise His power. God is Spirit; He has no physical form with which to act upon anything. God is Spirit; if He were physical, the universe could not hold Him. In fact, if God were physical, there would be no room for anything else but Him. But God is Spirit, and He speaks to do. His Word is how He works. The Son of God is the Word of God, which does not mean that

God talks to us through His Son, but that God has fully and perfectly expressed Himself in His Son.

So when Jesus says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away,” He doesn’t simply mean that they will be remembered forever. He means that His Words share His nature and power. Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus “upholds all things by **the Word of His power.**” Romans 1:16 says that the Gospel – the Word of God to sinners – is **God’s power** for salvation to everyone who believes. First Corinthians 1:18 says that “the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is **the power of God.**”

Jesus has spoken to us regarding the last days. He has spoken about His Second Coming. If any of His people are caught off-guard by His return, it won’t be for lack of information but because they have disobeyed Him.

More importantly, if any of us fall prey to false predictions of His return or fall for the lies and deceptions of false prophets, we cannot blame the Lord. He has given us fair warning of the existence of false prophets. We know that false prophets will increase as the end times approach. We have His perfect Word, which enables us to evaluate and measure and weigh and judge and dismiss every false prophet.

BRINGING IT HOME

Jesus has given us His Word so that we may learn and know with confidence. “Come, let us reason together,” Yahweh said to idolatrous Israel (Isaiah 1:18). God is truth. Jesus Christ is truth. The Word of God is truth. He wants us to think, yes, but according to the truth that He has given us in Scripture.

But in order for His Word to do in us what He wishes, we must follow His commands. “Learn,” He says. That means reading. Studying. Meditating on His Word. Being taught His Word by reliable teachers. It means that we never, ever take a person’s word for something. You must not take MY word for anything! Each of us is responsible for testing all things according to Scripture so that we may disregard and reject what is in error and hold to what is true.

Having learned His Word, we must then hold to it in the confidence that it is true. Does Jesus say that He will secretly return and conceal Himself in the wilderness, revealing Himself only to those who are worthy? No. What if someone tells you that He did teach that? They are lying. What if they say that the Lord revealed it to them? They are lying. What if it is someone you really respect? They are still lying. What if it is your best friend? Oh, that’s different, right? No, they are lying.

My friends, the devil has set up countless millions for deception. For decades, the charismatic movement has been teaching that the New Testament gift of prophecy is different than the Old Testament gift. New Testament prophets can get it wrong, they say, without being false prophets. Old Testament prophecies were “Thus says the Lord.” New Testament prophecies, they say, are “It seems the Lord might be saying,” or “I think the Spirit might possibly be moving in this direction.” Dozens of so-called prophets predicted that Donald Trump would win a second term in office; they were all completely wrong. Not one of those prophets predicted COVID-19; not one.

The only way you and I can protect ourselves against the devil’s ambassadors is to know and trust the Word of God. The only way for you and I to have assurance of God’s sovereign purposes is to know and trust the Word of God. The only way to live in peace and contentment is to know and trust the Word of God.