

## **LIVING IN THE INTERIM** **(Matthew 24:1-14)**

The first two years I was in college, the university I went to—OBU—had a three-week semester between the fall and spring semesters. This January term was called *Interim*. During interim, students had the opportunity to take fun classes they were outside of their degree plan. These were classes they would not normally take during the regular school year. One year, for example, I took bowling during interim. This class was held at the local bowling alley in Shawnee. For three weeks, we bowled an hour a day. On the first day, I bowled a 178. It was the highest I had ever bowled. Unfortunately, it is still the highest I have ever bowled. During those three weeks I never matched what I bowled the first day. Fortunately, our grade for the class was not based on improvement.

The word *interim* refers to a period of time between two other things. After Jerry retired as the pastor of this church and before this church called me as your pastor, the church chose to have an interim pastor. He was the bridge that spanned the time gap between two pastors.

In the opening verses of Matthew 24, Jesus informed His disciples that they would be living in the interim between what was and what would be. He let them know the kinds of things that would happen during that interim and how they were to respond.

Before we read our text—Matthew 24:1-14—I want you to know something very important. It is something that either people fail to realize or it is something they fail to keep in mind as they approach the Bible. Now, prepare to be shocked. What I want you to know is that the Bible wasn't written for you—it just wasn't. That is not to say that God doesn't want you to read the Bible; He does. That is not to say you can't benefit from reading the Bible. There is enormous benefit in doing so. What I am saying is that you weren't the original audience.

When Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Peter, and Jude put pen to paper not quite 2000 years ago and when the authors of the OT wrote even longer ago, they did not say to themselves, "I wonder what the concerns of the people living in 2020 will be because I want to be sure and address those." They didn't say that; they didn't think that.

Here is another important fact. The authors of the Bible were not 21<sup>st</sup> century, North American, Anglo-Saxons. And not a single one of them was a registered republican. But none of them were democrats either.

All of the writers of the NT, except for Luke, were 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews. None of them spoke English. All of them, probably, spoke Aramaic. They could read Hebrew, and they were conversant in Greek. All of the books of the NT were written in Greek.

When we read the NT or the OT, we need to ask, "What was the message that the author was seeking to convey to the people of his day?" Then, based on that, we can ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand how to apply that message to us today. And He will most certainly do that.

It is not uncommon to interpret a passage of Scripture based on what we have always heard about it rather than by what it actually says. I want you to pretend this morning that you have never heard these words I am about to read. Pretend that you have never heard a sermon from this text. You have never read a book in which these verses were cited. And,

as you hear these words, ask yourself, “What is it that Jesus is saying to the people of that day who heard Him?”

To set it up, Jesus was on the grounds of the temple complex where He had spoken to the Jewish leaders, to His disciples, and to the crowd that had assembled. Now, He is ready to leave. As He and His disciples make their way out of the temple grounds, the disciples look up at the beautiful buildings, and they were beautiful. They gleamed in the sun. The disciples were mostly country folk from the Galilee. They were awed by what they saw in the big city.

Look at what Jesus says in v. 2. It was like you could have heard the needle of a record player scratching the record. Seemingly, out of nowhere, Jesus drops a truth bomb on His disciples. He says that the temple of which they are so proud is going to be devastated.

This would be like me saying to you as you leave today. “Oh, by the way, the church building is going to be fire-bombed real soon. Have a nice day!”

Jesus and the disciples travel just outside of the city to the Mount of Olives that overlooks the city. We are told that Jesus sits down (v. 3). Jesus often sat down to teach. He sat down on a hillside near Lake Galilee when He delivered what we call the Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus spoke in the synagogue, He stood up to read the Scriptures, and then He sat down to teach. Here, on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sits down. And for two chapters, Jesus teaches. He first addresses questions that the disciples have. They have three questions. Look at v. 3.

Jesus had just told them that their cherished temple was going to be utterly destroyed. Their first question was, “When is this going to happen?”

Their second question was, “What will be the sign of your coming?” The disciples were not thinking of Jesus’ Second Coming. They had no concept of such a doctrine. They still believed that Jesus, as the Messiah, was going to overthrow the Roman yoke that had been placed around the necks of the Jewish people. They believed that Jesus was going to set up an earthly kingdom and sit upon a throne, and they wanted to know what sign to look for that this was about to happen. So, when they talk about His coming, it is His coming into power.

The third question was, “Also, give us a sign to look for indicating the end of the age has come?” We need to be careful here. They were not asking about the end of the world. The KJV uses the word *world*, but that is a bad translation. It is age not world, and the two are different. The Jews didn’t have a concept for end of the world. In their minds, they were in this present age of suffering and injustice, and they were looking for the Kingdom age when their suffering would cease, and their enslavement would end, and their Messiah would reign. They weren’t thinking about going to heaven as we do. They wanted to know, “When is the Kingdom age going to begin?”

By the way, they expected that all three things they asked about would happen at the same time. If the temple is going to be destroyed, it must happen when Jesus sits upon His throne and the Kingdom age begins.

Everything Jesus says from v. 4 through v. 35 all deals with answering the disciple’s first question, “When is the destruction of the temple going to happen?” I say that for several reasons. One of those reasons is what Jesus says in v. 34. He claims that the destruction of the temple and the events surrounding that terrible ordeal is going to take

place within one generation.

It is generally agreed by scholars that a generation in the Bible was 40 years. It is also believed that Jesus died in the spring between 30 and 33 AD. We know that the legions of Rome surrounded and laid siege to the City of Jerusalem in April of 70 AD. It lasted about four months. It concluded in August when the Roman army breached the city walls, set fire to the temple, and razed it to the ground. That took place within one generation just as Jesus said.

The first 35 verses are not about the Second Coming. They are about the destruction of the temple. Beginning with v. 36, however, Jesus does begin to talk about His Second Coming.

Quickly, I want to make four takeaways from this text. Just as the disciples were living in an interim, we are, too. We are living in the interim between time and eternity, between this evil world and the glory of the heaven come down to earth. How are you to live in this interim?

## **I. AS YOU LIVE IN THE INTERIM, ASK JESUS WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW.**

The disciples asked Jesus a series of questions, and the first words of v. 4 are, “And Jesus answered them.” If there is something you want to know, ask Jesus. In His teaching on prayer, Jesus promised, “Ask and you will receive.” James claimed in James 4:2b, “You do not have because you do not ask.” We are promised in Jeremiah 33:3, “Call to Me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.”

Instead of going to Jesus, some people go to experts who they think know what they are talking about. That isn’t always the case.

Philip Tetlock, who is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, conducted a 20-year analysis of 27,450 predictions from 284 experts. Tetlock concluded that as a group the experts did little better, and sometimes considerably worse, than “a dart-throwing chimpanzee.”

Here are some of the inaccurate predictions he uncovered:

- In 1914, the British journalist H. N. Norman proclaimed that “there will be no more wars among the six great powers.”
- In 1968, the president of Anaconda Copper Mining Company predicted that his company would be successful for 500 years. Less than ten years later, fiber optics made copper obsolete and Anaconda went out of business.
- Also, in 1968, Paul Ehrlich predicted that overpopulation would produce a total collapse in the world’s food supply. Instead, the world’s food supply increased dramatically.
- In 1974, Ehrlich asserted, “If I were a gambler, I would take even money that England will not exist in the year 2000.” If you haven’t noticed, England still exists.
- In 1990, the MIT economist Lester Thurow declared that Japan was “the betting favorite to win the economic honors of owning the 21st century.” Japan is struggling.
- In 2008, experts at Goldman Sachs predicted that oil prices would surge to over \$200 per barrel within six months. Instead, the price for petroleum fell to \$34 per barrel.

When you are perplexed, when you are stumbling in the dark, don't go to the experts. Go to Jesus. He can tell you what you need to know. Sometimes He whispers, but He does that so you will draw closer.

## **II. AS YOU LIVE IN THE INTERIM, DON'T LET YOURSELF BE LED ASTRAY.**

Look at the first thing Jesus said in v. 4-5. Note also v. 11. Jesus warned His followers to not be side-tracked by false teachers. In the first century there was not a shortage of those who claimed to be the Messiah.

People are often led away by what they are looking for. Jesus said He would come back, and there were some in the first century who tried to capitalize on that. They passed themselves off as the Messiah, and many fell for it.

You and I are not apt to follow someone who claims to be the Christ, but we can fall prey to those who offer whatever it is that we want. Advertisers know this. What man doesn't want rock hard abs? "Well, if you just take this supplement, that's what you will get," we are told.

What woman doesn't want wrinkle-free skin? "Well, if you just use this cream, the wrinkles will disappear."

The real problem comes when churches and religious organizations start offering what people are looking for. Come to this church. We won't make you feel guilty about anything. We won't ask you to make any commitment. We are not going to preach about controversial matters. We just want you to feel good and enjoy yourself.

It seems to me that I remember reading about how Jesus said, "If you are going to come after Me, you must deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow Me." In today's culture, people aren't into self-denial or cross-bearing. They might be willing to wear a cross around their neck, but they certainly don't want to have to carry a cross, much less be nailed to one. And they would rather follow a celebrity on Twitter than follow Jesus, because He just might go someplace that you don't want to go.

If you look hard enough, you can find a church that understands you, who speaks your language, and who will offer you exactly what you want.

To that, Jesus says, "Watch out! Don't be led astray."

## **III. AS YOU LIVE IN THE INTERIM, DON'T BE IMMOBILIZED BY FEAR.**

Look at v. 6. Jesus warns that persecution awaits those who belong to Him. In spite of the persecution and the terrible things that will happen, Jesus calls upon those who are His to persevere.

What Jesus says here is similar to what He said in Matthew 10:22. Look also at 10:26a, 28.

We are to keep on keeping on.

One of my favorite preachers is a man named Joel Gregory. Listen to some of what he had to say about how God is using what is going on right now in our world:

The virus that changed your life is a 1.25 Nanometer sphere. That is one-billionth of a yardstick, tiny but traumatic. For decades you worried about something tremendous, an

atomic war with blazing radioactivity. Yet that titanic threat with its megatons never happened. A tiny object that looks like a soccer ball with spikes has paralyzed the world.

God did not “cause” the virus. Jesus makes that kind of speculation clear in John 9:1-3 and Luke 13:1-5. No mortal can connect cause and effect with God and disease. You have already fallen through thin ice and are sinking into cold depths when you say God did a specific thing to that specific person/group. *But what God did not cause, God can definitely use.*

In your life and in mine he can use a tiny virus to stop us, make us look down so we can look up, and even take our breath away. This year, like every year, we finite, mortal, proud, independent, sinful people need to know we are all of that without him. He has used what he did not cause to arrest us with our finitude, reminded us of our mortality by going to the grocery store and hoping the guy next to us does not sneeze on us, humbled us in taking away mobility, workspace, and even toilet tissue, stuck our nose in our dependence on systems we do not understand, and reminded us that we are sinners on the way death. God used something one-billionth of a yard to do that.

But there is another tiny thing, faith. To be sure that does not mean faith in faith. The cheery and necessary human encouragement, “Cheer up, it will get better,” is nice but meaningless. Not one of us mortal creatures can make something “better” in any ultimate sense.

The faith Jesus commends is faith in the promises of God in his holy Word throwing yourself on that Word alone, without anything else to prop you up. It is not the *size* of your faith. Your faith may be the size of the virus, just barely able to be measured. The hope is in the *object* of your faith.

These are faith testing days. Faith may look tiny in the face of the present terror. Yet faith the size of the virus leaning on the risen Lord Jesus Christ can move the mountain of mortality because of a hill called Calvary. We are having to stay in our homes, but we have triumph because he did not stay in his tomb. Tiny faith can triumph in terrible times.

Eject paralyzing, immobilizing fear from your life by activating your faith in Jesus. Trust Him. He will see you through.

#### **IV. AS YOU LIVE IN THE INTERIM, DO WHAT PEOPLE OF FAITH SHOULD DO.**

Look at v. 12. Don't let your love grow cold. People of faith should be people of love.

One day this past week, I went to get my wife and Jacob some lunch. I drove by a man who was sitting in the shade holding up a sign that said “homeless.” I don't know what the rest of the side said because I didn't want to read it. I didn't look at him because I didn't want to make eye contact. I made excuses saying to myself, “He's probably faking it. He's just wanting to make a quick buck.”

Later I thought, “Maybe my love is growing cold.”

On Friday, I read a devotion that was dated for August 7<sup>th</sup> in the classic, devotional book, *Streams in the Desert*. It contained a story about Christmas Evans. He was called Christmas because he was born on December 25, 1766. He was a preacher in Wales. In his diary he wrote:

One Sunday afternoon I was traveling by horseback to an appointment. Suddenly, as I went along a very lonely road, I was convicted of having a cold

heart. I dismounted, tethered my horse to a tree, and found a secluded spot. Then, walking back and forth in agony, I reviewed my life. I waited before God in brokenness and sorrow for three hours. Finally, a sweet sense of His forgiving love broke over me, and I received a fresh filling of His holy Spirit.

As the sun was setting, I walked back to the road, found my horse, and road on to my appointment. The following day, I preached with so much new power, to a vast gathering of people on a hillside, that revival broke out and ultimately spread through all of Wales.

If we want God to use us, we just might have to repent of having a cold heart toward the lost or even to our fellow brothers and sisters. Keep on showing God's love to others.

Look at v. 14. Another thing that people of faith do is that they proclaim the gospel. If we never tell the good news of Jesus to anyone else, can we really consider ourselves to be Christ followers. Jesus said to those first disciples who made their living catch fish, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."

If we are not fishing for the souls of men and women, boys and girls, either Jesus lied or we are not really following Him.

Jesus is coming back. What are we doing in the meantime? What are we doing in the interim?

Let me paraphrase a quote from Benjamin Franklin. He wrote, "Do you love life? If so, don't squander time because time is the stuff of which life is made."

All of us get 86,400 seconds per day. None of us will be able to saved some back to use later. We will spend every last one of them. We must ask ourselves whether we are wasting those seconds or investing them into something worthwhile.

Spend your time on those things that matter to God.