



Study Series

Follow Me: Week Ten AM

The destruction of the Temple: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 24:1-8, 22-30 (NIV)

The Destruction of the Temple and Signs of the End Times

1 Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. **2** "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

3 As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

4 Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. **5** For many will come in my

name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many. **6** You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. **7** Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. **8** All these are the beginning of birth pains.

22 "If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. **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.

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.

29 "Immediately after the distress of those days

"the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

30 "Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.

Sermon Summary

One of the most difficult passages to understand in Matthew is Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple in 24:1-35. It is, however, well worth tackling. This is due to the simple fact that it is the only explicit charge Matthew includes in his trial (26:59-61). This suggests that this was more than a premonition of what would indeed take place in 70 AD.

To understand this text we need to understand the theological importance of the temple as the place where heaven met earth. The temple was a magnificent building, but as the house of God it was unique in all the world. It was where the offerings and sacrifices – which made up a significant percentage of the Law – were to be made. It was, in a theological sense, the very centre of the world. For Jesus to predict its destruction was, therefore, a big deal. However, there is more to it. To speak of its destruction wasn't just to describe a military failure or architectural disaster, but a theological judgment. This was how its destruction by the Babylonians was portrayed in the Old Testament and the reason for judgement of this scale was always the sin and unfaithfulness of God's people. This gets us closer to understanding why Jesus' enemies focused on this prediction at his trial. Jesus has stood in conflict with the religious establishment throughout the gospel, but his coming to Jerusalem in Matthew 21 sees this conflict escalate. When Jesus first enters

Jerusalem he clears a section of the temple quoting Jeremiah 7:11. This passage was an extended message of coming judgement on the temple in Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day. In the very next story Jesus curses a fig tree that has no fruit in what many commentators see as a metaphor for the temple; it looks fantastic, but it is fruitless and is destined for judgment. Then after a series of conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders Jesus predicts that the temple will be torn down.

What makes the passage more difficult is the kind of language that Jesus uses to describe this catastrophe. In Matthew 24:3 the disciples ask two questions: 'when will the temple be destroyed?' and 'what will be the signs of your coming at the end of the age?'. These two questions occupy Jesus' response. In vv. 4-35 Jesus answers the first. He is certain about the things that will happen and even declares that the generation listening to him would not pass away until they had happened (v. 34). In vv. 36-51 Jesus answers the second question about his second coming, about which he is not certain. He states that he doesn't know the timing of his second coming and urges watchfulness. This is all well and good, except that in describing the destruction of the temple Jesus uses language that sounds like the end. He even uses that phrase in vv. 6, 13-14. This apocalyptic language is actually a clue about the significance of the temple's destruction. Its destruction is an end, but what sort of end?

The help we need to unravel this text is in v. 29 when Jesus quotes Isaiah 13:10, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken." In its original context this is a prophecy of destruction of Babylon. What is important to notice is that the cosmic signs point, not to the end of the world, but to a judgment within history. What happened to Babylon is that it passed out of relevance in world history, it was reduced by God from a super power to an also ran. The same pattern is found in Isaiah 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7-8 and Joel 2:31. What Jesus is saying, therefore, is that the temple's destruction will be a sign of its irrelevance. The one place on earth where heaven met earth will be severed. But what will replace it? And when will this happen?

It turns out that the better question is, "Who will replace it?". There is one other Old Testament passage that sheds light on this question and that is Daniel 7:13-14 where one like a son of man approaches the ancient of days and is given all authority, dominion, and power and receives worship. His coming to the ancient of days is "with the clouds of heaven". This seems to be the passage that forms the basis for Jesus' favourite self-designation "son of man". In Matthew 24:30 we have an allusion to this same passage when there will appear the sign of the son of man, coming on the clouds of heaven with power and glory. If you return to the trial of Jesus he also cites this passage when he says that from now on the religious leaders will see him at the right hand of the Mighty One

and coming on the clouds. What happens next, of course, is Jesus' death and resurrection. To return to the questions about the temple, Jesus says that he will replace the temple as the one place where heaven meets earth and that this will happen at his death and resurrection. This might explain the tearing of the temple curtain at his death as well as his affirmation that he would rebuild the temple in three days, his acceptance of worship from his followers at his resurrection, and the statement in Matthew 28:18 that "all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me".

The actual destruction of the temple in 70 AD then, was the final destruction of an irrelevant institution; made irrelevant by Jesus' death and resurrection. I think we can understand why this was such an important charge made against him.

The implications for following Jesus are significant. Perhaps the most significant is that a building has been replaced by a person. One of the temptations of religion is to be content with being shaped by spiritual disciplines and practices rather than being transformed by relationship with God. The goal of the temple and all that it stood for was relationship with God but too often what resulted was a reliance on ritual. What was needed was a change of heart so that the rituals could be performed in integrity.

When Jesus replaced the temple as the place where earth meets heaven he placed relationship at the very heart of Christian experience. This requires trust in Jesus rather than in our ability to perform the rituals or observe the commandments or do good deeds. All of these are important and good things, but must come from a changed heart. This is what Jesus promises. So following Jesus becomes a journey of allowing him to change our hearts in order that we might have a genuine relationship with God.

Once again we see the crisis of decision that following Jesus creates in our lives; his outrageous claims demand that (eventually) we ask the question, "Do we trust him?".

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation, their depth comes from a willingness to engage with the implications of our reflections for how we live our lives. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. As Jesus talks with his disciples he uses a lot of imagery, metaphors and parables, leading them to bring their questions to him. If Jesus stood before you prepared to answer any question you had, what would you ask?
2. Read Matthew 24:1-36 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they?
3. Read Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7-8 and Joel 2:31. What other parallels are there between these passages that increase our understanding of Jesus' use of this imagery?
4. Rituals, habits and disciplines shape our lives in particular ways. How do your own habits shape your life? What role does the heart play in these habits?
5. Despite the temple's significance being superseded by Jesus as the place where heaven meets earth, Christians continue to place importance on particular places and objects (church buildings, liturgical furniture, treks to holy sites etc). In your own expression of following Jesus, where are you tempted to rebuild your own temple? What rituals are kept individually and corporately that we rely too heavily upon?
6. What is the difference between ritual and relationship? How have you seen these differences in your expression of faith?
7. What has been the biggest change in your life since choosing to follow Jesus? If you don't remember a specific time of beginning that journey perhaps you could share how you see Jesus leading change in your life today.

Prayer

In the light of your reflections on question 6 and 7, take some time to pray for each other, that we might be a people continually transformed by Jesus as we seek authentic relationship with Him.

If you want to go a little deeper with each other:

If we are the dwelling place of God (his temple, 1 Cor 6:19, Ephesians 2:21-22) and called to be a holy place, then what one thing within you would Jesus want to 'overturn' or 'clear out'? This could be an attitude, the way you treat people, your thought life, a particular behaviour or the way you prioritise. Share this in pairs and pray for each other.