INTRODUCTION:

What is the worst thing you can imagine?

This week we are celebrating America's 237th birthday. On August 24, 1814, when America was barely 38 years old, something happened which many Americans found inconceivable. British troops captured and burned Washington, DC.¹

Imagine you were a citizen of the United States at that time. Your country is barely a generation old, and a foreign power has destroyed one of its most important symbols.

If you can imagine that, you can imagine the shock and dismay felt by Jesus' disciples after the exchange we are about to examine.

I. Highest Hopes and Darkest Fears (vv. 5-9)

A. As Jesus was teaching on the temple mount in Jerusalem, some of his followers commented on the temple's ornate and majestic structure.

i. In Jesus' day, the Jewish temple was a magnificent complex covering an entire mountain peak overlooking the rest of the city of Jerusalem.

ii. This was actually the third, and largest, of three temples that had stood on the same site.

a) The original temple, which was in its self an architectural wonder, was built by King Solomon around 950 BC and destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC.

b) A smaller, less ornate temple was built after the Jews returned from the Babylonian Exile around 515 BC.²

c) In 20 BC, Herod the Great embarked on a massive reconstruction and expansion project on the temple, which continued until 63 AD.³

iii. This temple structure was constructed of huge, white stones which were said to gleam in the sunlight.

³ Ibid.
a) Some of the stones were as big as 45 feet long and nearly 10 feet high.\(^4\)

b) The first-century Jewish historian Josephus said that these giant stones were so white that from a distance the temple looked like a snow-capped mountain.\(^5\)

c) Herod’s temple was trimmed in gold, which added to its spectacular beauty.

B. The disciples’ adoration of Herod’s temple was an expression of their belief that the Messiah would restore Israel’s glory. (v. 5)

C. In response, Jesus confronted them with the worst thought they could imagine, then warned them that in the end things would get even worse. (vv. 6-9)

i. Essentially, Jesus said to the disciples, “Take a good look now, because the day is coming when all of this will be nothing but rubble.”

ii. For a first-century Jew, waiting expectantly for the Messiah, the thought of the temple being destroyed was the worst thing imaginable.

iii. What is the worst thing you can imagine?

a) For some, the unimaginable thing would be for the United States to fall.

b) Yet, over the past few years we have seen developments in our nation that make just such a scenario possible.

- Our economy has crumbled.
- Our politicians are corrupt.
- Our culture is increasingly decadent and fragmented.
- Our most-treasured rights are being re-written right before our eyes.
- Unless something changes we are planting the seeds of our own destruction.

c) America does not have a guaranteed seat at the Second Coming.

- Unless we as a nation repent and return to the Lord, we are in danger of placing ourselves outside of His protective hand.
- Most people in American cannot bring themselves to believe in a future where United States does not exist.


\(^5\) Josephus, Wars of the Jews, 5.5.6.
Then again, most people never thought they would see a day in America when two people of the same gender could be married, either.

- Note that the current debate over same-sex marriage is not the problem, only a symptom.

- Our real problem is that as a nation we have turned our backs on God.

II. Jesus’ Comments on the Destruction of Jerusalem (vv. 10-24)

A. In Jesus’ explanation, he is actually talking about two separate events.

i. The Destruction of Jerusalem. (vv. 10-24)

ii. The Coming of the Son of Man (aka The Day of the Lord, The Second Coming, or Judgment Day). (vv. 25-28)

iii. Note that Jesus implied that some interval of time would take place between the two.

a) In his response to the disciples, Jesus told them (v. 9), “When you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately.”

b) In v. 24, Jesus also indicates that some measure of time will take place between the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the world: “Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”

B. The predictions made by Jesus in vv. 10-24 were fulfilled literally in the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. (vv. 10-24)

i. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, who was alive at the time, the rebellion that led to Jerusalem’s destruction was prompted by a succession of false prophets claiming to be the Messiah, just as Jesus predicted in v.8.

ii. The destruction of Jerusalem took place against the backdrop of “nation rising up against nation and kingdom against kingdom.” (v. 10)

a) Among other conflicts, Rome was involved in conflicts in Britain (AD 43) and suppressing rebellion in Judea (AD 66).

b) Just as Roman troops were beginning their siege of Jerusalem, civil war

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6 Jospehus, *Wars of the Jews*, 5.5.2.
broke out in Rome following the suicide of Emperor Nero in AD 69. 7

- The vacuum created by Nero’s death led to what Roman historians call “The Year of the Four Emperors” as four different men laid claim to the throne. 8

- Ironically, it was the general who destroyed Jerusalem, Vespasian, who prevailed and was proclaimed Emperor.

iii. The destruction of Jerusalem also took place against the backdrop of “earthquakes…plagues and famines…terror and great signs in the heavens.” (v. 12)

a) Josephus not only mentions that natural disasters preceded Jerusalem’s fall, but takes note of supernatural signs that disturbed the people:

- “Thus there was a star resembling a sword which stood over the city, and a comet, that continued a whole year.” 9

- Josephus also reported that one night during the last Passover celebration before the Jewish rebellion, mysterious light, as “bright daytime”, surrounded the altar and the temple. 10

- Josephus reports other signs, including a massive gate that opened by itself just a few days before the Romans surrounded the city, and a quaking that was felt in the temple courtyards just as the siege began. 11

iv. The destruction of Jerusalem took place against a backdrop of the persecution of Jesus’ followers. (vv. 12-15)

a) We see this persecution beginning even in the days of the Apostles, as recording in the book of Acts. 12

- As Jesus predicted, some of this persecution came at the hands of Jewish officials, who perceived Christians as heretics.

- The more severe persecution came at the hands of Roman authorities, who perceived the Christians as threats to good order.

- Official persecution began when Nero tried to use Christians as scapegoats to avoid responsibility for the fire that destroyed part of

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8 Ibid.
9 Josephus, Wars of the Jews, 5.5.3.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
Rome in 64 AD.\textsuperscript{13} The first-century Roman historian Tacitus wrote, "To get rid of the report, N\o{}ro fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians \textsuperscript{[or Chrestians by the populace].}\textsuperscript{14}

v. Forty years before the fact, Jesus accurately predicted how the city of Jerusalem would meet its end.

- Jesus predicted that Jerusalem would be “surrounded by armies.” (v. 20)
  - History tells us that four different Roman legions surrounded the city.
  - These legions included the V Macedonica, XII Fulminata, XV Apollinaris, and the X Fretensis.\textsuperscript{15}

b) Jesus predicted that these armies would be composed of Gentiles. (v. 24)

c) Jesus predicted that these armies would level the temple, pulling it apart stone by stone. (v. 6)

d) Jesus predicted the inhuman conditions which would prevail inside the city during the siege. (vv. 20-23)

III. Jesus’ Comments on the End of the World (vv. 25-36)

A. The signs associated with the fall of Jerusalem foreshadow events that will precede the eventual return of the Lord Jesus and the end of the world. (vv. 25-28)

i. God loves dress rehearsals.

ii. The Bible predicts that the same kinds of things that happened in Jerusalem in 70 AD will happen in spades in the days leading up to Jesus’ return.

iii. Jesus himself alludes to coming of these signs in vv. 25-26.

a) Luke records Jesus as saying that things will get so bad that grown men will faint just thinking about them (v.26).

b) Jesus also said that the very powers of heaven will be shaken in the last days. (v. 26)

c) Matthew records Jesus as saying that, “There will be a great tribulation, such

\textsuperscript{14} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, XV.
as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved.” (Matt. 24:21-22)

B. Jesus gave his followers instructions on how to prepare for the end of the world. (vv. 28-33)

i. Prepare for the end of the world by remembering that God has a plan and He is in control. (vv. 28-33)

a) When we see these signs begin to align, our response should not be fear, but faith. (v. 28)

- The main point of prophecy is to remind us that no matter what happens, God is still in control.

- Our response to prophecy should not be in trying to decipher the schedule of events, but in being prepared to meet Jesus.

- Discover that you are in a burning building is not the time to contemplate where the fire started, the temperature of the flames, or the composition of the combustible materials.

- Instead, your first priority would be to get out safely and get as many other people out as safely as you can.

b) Jesus used the illustration of a budding fig tree to show how these signs should alert us to his pending return. (vv. 29-31)

c) Jesus reminds us that God always keeps His promise, no matter how long it takes. (vv. 32-33)

- Some of the very men who heard Jesus’ predictions were still alive when his words about Jerusalem came true.

- In the same way, human civilization will not pass away until Jesus’ prediction of his second coming takes place.

ii. Prepare for the end of the world by being alert to the signs pointing to Jesus’ return. (v. 34)

a) No one who truly is paying attention should be caught by surprise when Jesus returns.

b) As Jesus said, when we see these signs begin to align, we should look up in prayer and anticipation, because those who truly love Jesus will be eager for His coming.
iii. Prepare for the end of the world by making sure you are focused on the right priorities. (v. 34)

a) When the end of the world comes, no one will care about how many high scores you’ve reached on the x-box, or the size of the biggest fish you ever caught.

b) There is nothing wrong with video games, fishing, or any other recreational activity as long as they are kept in the proper perspective.

c) How many of us fritter our lives away in trivial things while neglecting to invest in those things which are truly eternal?

iv. Prepare for the end of the world by praying for the strength to persevere under suffering. (v. 36)

a) Many Christians today believe that somehow we will be exempt from the suffering that precedes Jesus’ return.

b) We have great theological discussions about the timing of the Rapture, the event where Jesus will call gather His church together.
   - We argue about whether Jesus will claim his Church pre-tribulation, post-tribulation, and mid-tribulation.
   - Perhaps the safest position to take is “pan-tribulation”, trusting that God will cause it all to “pan out in the end.”
   - Could it be that the reason that the pre-tribulation position is so popular among Christians is because of a secret desire to avoid suffering and persecution?
   - Even if the pre-trib position is correct, the Bible is clear that there will be a great deal of persecution and suffering leading up to the period Jesus called the Great Tribulation.
     - In this very passage, Jesus warns that this suffering will come upon “all who dwell on the face of the earth.” (v.35)
     - Jesus also calls on his followers to pray “that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place.” (v. 36)
     - Why would Jesus spend so much time warning his followers about the importance of perseverance unless He expected them to face suffering and persecution?
     - Christians have always suffered greatly for the faith, even today.
- May I suggest we pray that the pre-tribbers are right, but prepare like the post-tribbers are.

v. Prepare for the end of the world by remembering that persecution is an opportunity to testify about Jesus. (vv. 12-17)

a) When Jesus warned the disciples about persecution, he also revealed the true purpose behind persecution: “It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony.” (v. 13)

b) The word “martyr” comes from the Greek word for “giving testimony.”

c) Jesus promises his followers that when persecution comes, he will be with us and give us the words to respond. (vv. 14-15)

- Contrary to what some old-timers used to think, this is not a discouragement against studying and sermon preparation.

- After all, Paul called on pastors to, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” (2 Tim. 2:15)

- Rather, Jesus’ words are a reminder that when we speak on His behalf, we speak not only out of our own resources but in the power He provides.

d) Jesus promises his followers that even in the face of persecution, those who persevere eventually will be preserved. (vv. 16-19)

vi. Prepare for the end of the world by making sure you are ready to stand face to face with Jesus. (v. 36)

CONCLUSION:

There is a dramatic scene which takes place in nearly all the versions of the Robin Hood legend. King Richard the Lion-hearted has been away for years fighting the crusades, and his brother Prince John has usurped his authority at home. The populace is divided over those who have thrown in their lot with the wicked prince, and those who long for the day when Richard will return. At a climactic moment, a mysterious stranger unveils himself as King Richard. Those who followed Prince John are dismayed, knowing they will face judgment, while those who kept faith with the true King rejoice.

If Jesus were to come back today, would you be ready to meet him? Would you be able to greet the Lord of Lords and King of Kings in faith, knowing that you have already been redeemed by placing your faith in him, keeping watch in obedience and preparing for his return? Or will you shrink from Him in fear, knowing that you have been living in rebellion against the rightful sovereign?
What about those you care most about? What have you done to see that they are prepared to meet the King as well?

No matter how crazy or chaotic the world may get around us, Jesus is returning one day, and those who are prepared to meet Him will be spared. Will you ready to meet the King when He returns?

SOURCES


