

Is the Pandemic a Sign of the End of the World? (Part 2)

Rich Nathan

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From Confusion to Clarity

Matthew 24

How many of you are familiar with the name Harry Truman? I see that hand. Are there any more? Yes, over there. Yes, in Westerville. Pickerington, anybody? Thank you, Charles Montgomery! But I'm not talking about that Harry Truman.

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Pres. Truman (Dewey defeats Truman)

I'm not talking about the 33rd president of the United States. Rather, I'm talking about this guy.

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Harry Truman (killed by Mt. Saint Helen's)

Some of you who are close to my age may remember this Harry Truman, at least when I refresh your memory. Back in 1980, there was a tremendous earthquake in an area of Washington right by Mount Saint Helen's. For a couple of months, authorities warned that a catastrophe was about to happen. Mount Saint Helen's was an active volcano and over the course of two months there were multiple earthquakes.

Well, Harry Truman refused to leave despite the warnings. The news media portrayed him as this rugged western individualist who was standing up to the government! He kept giving interviews where he said the danger was exaggerated! In one interview he said that he was knocked out of bed from the initial earthquake. But he said, "The earthquake hasn't hurt my place a bit. These GD geologists with their hair down to their butts don't scare Old Truman!"

Reporters celebrated Truman's refusal to leave. Every major news station rushed to get an interview with him. State officials tried one final time to get Truman off the mountain. He brushed them off and said, "I'm staying put! Nothing's going to move me. If the mountain blows, I'm going with it!" The next day, the **mountain blew** and Harry Truman was buried under thousands of tons of fiery hot ash and molten lava.

There are so many famous examples from history of people who refused to listen to warnings despite all of the evidence. For example, Joseph Stalin

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Stalin photo

Was warned over 100 times by Soviet Intelligence that Germany was about to invade the Soviet Union in 1941. Millions of German troops were massed on the border between Poland and Germany. Thousands and thousands of tanks and guns. But Stalin was convinced that Hitler would never risk a two front war. He just wouldn't believe the warnings. In fact, he even shot the head of intelligence who tried to break through his wall of denial. And then, Hitler invaded just as the intelligence reports warned and millions of Russians lost their lives.

Every year during hurricane season, forecasters warn people in coastal areas to evacuate. But folks stay put every year. Many people drown or are killed by falling debris during a hurricane because they said, "It's not going to happen to me. These warnings are exaggerated. I've seen worse."

How many of you smoke cigarettes or have a family member who smokes? Is there anyone living in America who isn't aware of the risks of smoking? But you know that the risk is in the future and you're one of the lucky ones who won't get cancer. Besides, medicine will figure it all out by the time you get old and have to face the risk. In the meantime, you're not going to quit. You're going to keep smoking.

It's easy to find current examples of people who won't heed warnings. All the folks who say, "I'm not going to socially distance or wear a mask or change any behavior during a pandemic! I'm going barhopping with 20 of my friends! I'll never get COVID." But today, I don't want to talk about listening to the warnings of experts or scientists or people in white lab coats. I want to ask each of you a simpler question: Even if we refuse to heed the warnings of so-called experts, are you a person who will heed the warnings of Jesus Christ? When Jesus speaks to us in the Bible, are you a person who listens to Jesus' warnings? That's what I want to talk about today in a message I've titled, "Is the Pandemic a Sign of the End of the World? (Part 2)". Let's pray.

Last week, Eric talked about the fact that COVID has created a whole new generation of people who have been wondering if this pandemic is a sign of the end. There are lots of folks producing last days newsletters. There are dozens of websites devoted to the relationship between COVID and the end times. And there are always TV preachers claiming to connect this current pandemic and all of the upheaval in the world to some obscure verses in the book of Revelation.

So, people have been asking: is this the end times? Are we living in the last days? Last week, Pastor Eric helpfully taught us that in one sense the answer is yes. We are living in the end times. We are living in the last days. Because according to the Bible, the entire period of time between Jesus' ascension when he ascended into heaven and sat at the right hand of God the Father Almighty and now is the last days.

People living in the year 100 AD were living in the last days. And the same thing was true about those living in 1000 AD, and those living in 1500 AD, and 1900, and 2020. We're all living in the last days – the period between Jesus' ascension and his return.

In Matthew 24, Jesus is not interested in producing followers who occupy themselves with charts and graphs and rapture clocks and becoming experts in how the COVID pandemic ties in with the coming of the Lord or believing we have the interpretive key to understanding obscure passages in the book of Revelation or the book of Ezekiel, instead of all of that. Instead, Jesus gives us very practical advice regarding how we are to live between his first coming and his second coming. Matthew 24 is practical counsel about how we followers of Jesus are supposed to live – whether we're living in the first century in Jerusalem or the 10th century in France or the 20th century in Ghana or the 21st century in the United States.

Jesus is far more interested in engaging his followers in his call rather than inciting his followers' curiosity. He is far more interested in getting super-practical about the way we live rather than getting us to sign up for the latest prophetic newsletter. He cares way more about how full our hearts are with the love of Jesus rather than how full our heads are with end times prophecy.

So, let's read verses 15-21.

Slide Matthew 24:15-21

¹⁵ “So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁷ Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house. ¹⁸ Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. ¹⁹ How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! ²⁰ Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. ²¹ For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again.

In these verses, I believe Jesus is giving his followers in every age a very practical warning

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Get ready for difficulty

Many modern prophecy teachers read these verses and use them to stir enthusiasm about the end times. Many people read these verses and say, “Well see, Jesus clearly predicts the rebuilding of another Temple in Jerusalem on the Temple Mount and that other Temple will be destroyed.” While I applaud anyone who is trying to encourage people to look forward to the coming of the Lord, I think the means by which this enthusiasm is being generated are false. You see, the text that I just read does not, in

my opinion, apply to a **future Temple** being destroyed at all. I think Jesus was talking to first century Jewish people about an event that was going to happen in their lifetimes – not at the end of time.

Why do I think this? Jesus said:

Slide Matthew 24:34

³⁴ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

Jesus is talking to the generation that was hearing his words. He was talking to real first century Jews. And he's talking about the destruction of the Temple that he could point to at that movement. He says, "This generation. This generation that I'm talking to right now will not pass away until everything I said happens." Certainly, this is the way first century Jewish Christians understood his words as I'll point out in a moment.

And, I'd say parenthetically – ends time prophecy teachers have always been wrong. They have a 100% failure rate. The attempt to take a prediction in the Bible about the very last days and apply it to current events has always been wrong. The same Bible teachers who in one decade take an obscure verse from Ezekiel or Revelation or Matthew 24 and say this proves that the Lord is about to return because we see such and such will take that same Bible verse and apply it to a totally different situation in the next decade and again say, "This proves the Lord is just about to return."

It seems to me that modern prophecy teachers seem to be unaware of the history of the destruction of Jerusalem that took place within a generation of Jesus' prophecy – just as Jesus predicted. Specifically, prophecy teachers appear to be unaware of how the early church, the church that lived in Jesus' own day, understood these words. Here are the particulars. I want you to see this.

Slide Matthew 24:15

¹⁵ "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—

What is the abomination that causes desolation? What does that mean? What is Jesus talking about? He's quoting the book of Daniel. About two centuries before Jesus uttered these words, there was a Syrian ruler who defiled the altar in the Jewish Temple causing an abomination that ruined the sanctuary of the Jewish Temple with desolation. A Syrian king named Antiochus Epiphanes claimed to be a god and he slaughtered a pig and poured pig's blood all over the Temple altar.

Jesus reaches back to that prophecy about an abomination that would cause desolation. He said, "There's going to be another abomination that causes desolation in the Jewish Temple that this generation is going to see!" What was Jesus talking about? The people

of Jesus' day believed if innocent Jewish blood was shed in the Temple that would be an abomination that would cause desolation.

The Jewish historian named Josephus tells us that in 66 AD, Roman soldiers slaughtered Jewish priests in the Temple. Here's the really interesting thing – are you following me, brothers and sisters? The famous church historian named Eusebius told us that when Jewish Christians saw this abomination that caused desolation, this slaughter of Jewish priests and the shedding of their blood by the Romans, they remembered Jesus' words in verses 16-17:

Slide Matthew 24:16-17

¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁷ Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house.

Jesus says, “When you see that, get out of there!” And then he tells us in verse 21:

Slide Matthew 24:21

²¹ For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again.

And Eusebius, the church historian, tells us that Jewish followers of Jesus took heed. They fled Jerusalem and went to the mountains. After the Jewish Christians left, Roman soldiers surrounded the city of Jerusalem. By 68 AD, nobody could get out. The rest of the Jews, who didn't heed the warnings of Jesus, were destroyed in Jerusalem when the Romans finally invaded in 70 AD. It was a horrible time. The Roman siege was – as Jesus predicted – a terrible time for pregnant women and nursing moms. Josephus tells us that not only did children die, but women were reduced to eating their own children. They were starving to death. They turned to cannibalism. While more Jews died during the Holocaust than during the destruction of Jerusalem, many historians say that never has a city in history suffered more than Jerusalem did during the Roman siege. The description of what happened in Jerusalem is unimaginably horrible. And Jesus warned his followers about this horror ahead of time.

If we listen to the warnings of Jesus in Matthew 24 about the characteristics of this age – wars, threats of war, famines, earthquakes, persecution against Christians and people falling away from the faith and so on, we could summarize it by saying – Jesus is telling us to get ready for hardship and difficulty.

One of the main problems facing Christians is an overly optimistic view of life in this world and what we should expect if we're followers of Jesus and we're trying to do the right thing. If I was applying the words of Jesus in Matthew 24 to this moment, the takeaway application would be “Life is hard! Don't be surprised by difficulty in this fallen world! Jesus has not yet returned!” Friend, your hope is not that your life will be easy!

We American Christians have a view that the Christian life ought to be like a pre-COVID cruise in the Caribbean. You swim in a pool and then you take a nap, then you eat and you take a walk around the deck and you eat some more. Then you take a nap. Then you eat some more. Life ought to be no more taxing than simply making a decision of what do I want to eat now?

American Christians live with the illusion that normal life should be easy and problem-free, stress-free. So, when we have problems, we immediately think, “Is God punishing me? Why is God treating me this way? Is the pandemic God’s judgment?” Hardship is never expected. Why would God allow me to get cancer? Why is God punishing me with the death of my child or allowing me to be out of work or to miss my senior year of high school or to have a family member who got COVID?” Jesus’ words throughout the gospels are unsettling to us. We don’t want to hear his warnings. We’re like Harry Truman, the man who said, “I’m staying put on Mount Saint Helen’s”. Jesus regularly calls us back to the real world and says, “In this world – this fallen, broken, sin-stained, devil-filled world – you will have trouble” but we don’t believe him! We think that applies to people living in other countries – people who don’t look like us, people who don’t have our education or aren’t nice like us. But surely we American Christians will never have it hard.

The Apostle Peter, one of Jesus’ closest friends and followers, said this:

Slide 1 Peter 4:12

¹² Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

Brothers and sisters, I think there’s nothing more important than that you recognize how normal it is for trials and difficulties to come into your life in this world before the return of Christ! Most people for most of history have struggled with their health. Pandemics have regularly taken place throughout history. It is normal to get sick. It’s normal for cars to break down. It’s normal to not have all the money that you want or even all the money that you need. Conflict is normal. Disagreement is normal. Family pressure is normal. Work pressure is normal. A Caribbean cruise is **NOT** normal. A problem-free life is **NOT** normal. The last days – the days between the time Jesus ascended into heaven and the time he returns – are characterized by conflict and struggle and difficulty. Jesus says, “Get ready for hardship”.

See, our hope as Christians is **not** that our lives in this world will be easy or pressure free. Our hope is that God will never leave us or forsake us regardless of our circumstances. The Christian hope is that we will never face any problem alone. Jesus will be with us until the close of the age, just as he promised. And he will certainly return and establish a kingdom of love and justice and mercy, a kingdom in which sick

people are healed, hungry people are fed, sin is forgiven and the dead are raised! That's the Christian hope! A problem-free life is not the Christian hope.

And in this text, between the ascension of Jesus and his return – Jesus warns us –

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Get ready for death

If the pandemic has taught us anything, especially those of us who have taken it seriously, if you're older like me or you have an underlying health condition or you have friends or relatives who have gotten COVID, the warning we need to listen to is get ready to death.

I was listening to a podcast by an author of a famous book on pandemics in history. He said the so-called black plague or the bubonic plague came in waves not over a few months but the black plague swept through Europe over four centuries, from the 1340's to the 1730's. It was infinitely more deadly than COVID. A person could be talking or laughing with their friends in a public market place and they would be stricken with the plague and be dead within a couple of hours. The suddenness of people's deaths meant that they didn't have time to get their spiritual affairs in order. So, for four centuries, artwork in Europe had continual reminders of death. Everywhere you looked there would be a reminder that you could die at any time.

Paintings and sculptures all over Europe had skulls and crossbones and in many paintings of the period, you would see an hourglass with sand running out of it.

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Painting

Many paintings had flowers that were beginning to wilt – a reminder of death. Or a candle that was about to be snuffed out. Churches were built to the saints who might intercede during this plague.

But in America today we deny the reality of death! We hide it away in hospital wards and nursing homes so we don't have to think about it. But Jesus is warning us in Matthew 24, "Get ready for the day of your death!"

Imagine, brothers and sisters, that you got COVID like a dear friend of mine recently did. And you're lying in a hospital bed and you're facing the real possibility that you might die. Or you're lying in a hospital bed and you're about to go in for an operation which has a really low chance of success. The doctors tell you in all likelihood you will die during the operation. What would you want at that point? Some of you would say, "Another doctor!"

But let's engage in a spiritual exercise. What if you really believed you faced death very, very soon? What would you want? I recently journaled about my own death. Here are the things that I would want: I would want to know that my sins were forgiven. I would not want to be filled with regret or fear about things I had done. I would want to have been kind, especially to my wife, to my children, to my grandchildren, to the family that God put me in, to my friends, and to those in the church. What would I want if I was lying in a hospital bed facing my own death? I would want to know in the deepest part of my soul that I was loved by God. That I was adopted into his family. That Jesus is my older brother, my friend and Savior. I would want to know that as best as I could, I loved and served Jesus Christ with all my heart and all my soul and all my mind and all my strength.

I'd want to know that I have not grieved the Holy Spirit and that the Spirit sealed me for the day of Redemption. I would want to know that Jesus was waiting to embrace me with open arms! What would you want, friend, if you knew you were about to die? Why not write down what you'd want and ask God to give you the grace to prepare for that day!

Get ready for difficulty. Get ready for death. And

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Get ready for the return of Christ

Slide Matthew 24:29-33

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. ³¹ And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

³² "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ³³ Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door.

Jesus said his coming will be obvious! Everyone will know when he returns. His return will be cosmic! It will be announced by trumpets! No secret coming! No guesswork or speculation! Eric closed last week with Matthew 24:14. I want to close in the same place this week.

Slide Matthew 24:14

¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

A definitive sign that the Lord's return is near is that the gospel will be preached in the whole world, and then the end will come. The other things, the pandemic, economic distress, earthquakes and wars, it's all just the beginning of the birth pains. They're all the "not yet" signs. There's one clear sign that the Lord will return and that is that the gospel will be preached to every ethnic group – that's literally what that means. When he says "every nation" that means "every ethnic group". People debate what that exactly is – is it every linguistic group, every cultural group – what is Jesus talking about? Jesus says, "Between my first coming and my second coming, I want you to occupy yourself not with prophecy charts or speculation, all this date setting from "the Bible in the News" people. I want you men and women and teenagers and children to occupy yourself with spreading the gospel of the kingdom and bringing it to the entire world."

God has chosen to work in partnership with people like you and me to bring substantial healing to the world through small acts of sacrifice, small acts of kindness and charity – calling a difficult relative you've been estranged from; tithing on our income; praying at night. Major sacrifice like moving away from the comfort of America and bringing the news of Jesus Christ to people who have never heard. Praying for relatives and friends to come into the kingdom, sharing your faith and feeding hungry people. And by the way, we can do all of this during a pandemic whether we meet in person in a church building or not.

Are you ready for the return of our Savior and our lover and friend, Jesus Christ? Let's pray.

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From Confusion to Clarity

Matthew 24

- I. Get ready for difficulty
- II. Get ready for death
- III. Get ready for the return of Christ