

Jesus' Compelling Vision – Pastor Ray Harms-Wiebe – Matthew 24:1-14

Matthew 24:1–14

¹ Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

³ As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” ⁴ And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

⁹ “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

Let's Warm Up: Questions to break the ice.

1. How well do you deal with uncertainty?

Some uncertainty is predictable. We have generally regular elections. We don't always know who will be in charge, but we know when a possible change is coming. We don't know what the weather will be like, but we know when to expect summer/fall/winter/spring or at least summerish/fallish/winterish/springish.

Some uncertainty can be exciting. Millions of hockey fans were on the edge of their seats for over three hours until McDavid sealed the game in overtime. For many, the Superbowl wasn't as exciting, because it was pretty clear who would win early on.

Some uncertainty can be all around unpredictable. It feels like every day politicians, the economy, and world events happen in ways nobody saw coming. If you're a parent, you're likely worried about your child's safety due to daily shenanigans.

In this week's passage, Jesus tells the disciples that the world will certainly be crazy and how to respond.

2. What's the most impressive building you've been in and why should other people visit it?

Vancouverites may marvel (and invite others to marvel) at the Vancouver Public Library which looks more like a Roman Coliseum, the Convention Centre on a breathtaking waterfront, or the Simon Fraser campus (if you're into brutalist architecture). If you've traveled the world, maybe you've told people, "You got to see Buckingham Palace, the Burj Khalifa, and *especially* Sweet Willy." (<https://youtu.be/-lEKuphwpTI>).

I've been to the observation decks on the New York City World Trade Center (back in the 90s) and Taipei 101. If you're in Taipei, check out the 101. You'll feel your ears pop in the elevator on the way up. Everything looks so tiny from up high and you can see so far (assuming the weather is good). You'll also see the incredible tuned mass dampener (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tkz6b7Q3dRk>). And if you're hungry there's a Din Tai Fung on the ground floor.

In this week's passage, Jesus tells the disciples that God's magnificent temple would be utterly destroyed.

3. How do you manage information overload?

There is just so much information nowadays. I searched Google News for news on AI. There are articles on using AI in war, fast food drive-thrus, drafting legal documents, and picking stocks. All these articles are just from one day! Do the same for war, politics, the economy, or any other relevant topic and you'll be swarmed!

How do you prioritize the information you encounter? You can't read, watch, and learn about everything. Where does God fit? How do you filter what is true or not?

In this week's passage, Jesus tells the disciples how to respond to all the chaos in the world.

Let's Get Started: Questions to start thinking about the main themes.

4. What happens when people make failed predictions of Jesus' return?

Examples. Here are a few notable examples.

William Miller predicted Jesus would return before March 21, 1844. When Jesus didn't come back, he adjusted it to April 18, 1844. Another guy in his camp then said October 22, 1844. These failed attempts were, hilariously, called the Millerite Great Disappointment. In 1856, Ellen White, who founded the Seventh-day Adventist cult,¹ predicted some of her hearers would be alive when Jesus returned. Unless there's a living 170-year-old, she was wrong.

Charles Taze Russell, a Jehovah's Witness leader, predicted Jesus would return in 1874. The guy who came after, J. F. Rutherford, predicted Jesus would return to reign in 1925. Later, the Jehovah's Witnesses leadership said the end times would begin in 1975.

Harold Camping was the president of Family Radio. I used to listen to him as a kid. He predicted Jesus would return on May 21, 2011, with five months of judgment leading to the world being destroyed on October 21. I remember all the billboards and ads everywhere (<https://youtu.be/7Mzrb7XPG9Q>). When nothing happened, he pivoted and said he was wrong, but also somehow right because it was a spiritual event (<https://youtu.be/KBevUZE0TNw>).

Televangelist John Hagee has been making foolish predictions about Blood Moons and Jesus' return for a while.²

Results. What happens when these predictions don't come true? It makes Christians look stupid to non-Christians. Followers of Jesus could lose heart because they think Jesus let them down or that He's fake and never coming back. We waste time and effort that could be actually useful for God's kingdom.

5. Is the world getting better or worse over time? Where should our hope be?

Depending on who you ask, humanity is on a path to a higher moral order. Some celebrate human progress such as developing human rights (e.g., abolishing child marriages, decrying racism, countries supporting each other in times of disaster, and valuing people with physical/mental disabilities), the Internet allowing global communication, and new medical breakthroughs.

Others see a decline, seeing progress in the wrong direction in morals (e.g., going from strict, extrabiblical gender/sexual norms to overly blurred lines and definitions), use of technology (e.g., social media used for propaganda and exploiting people for profit, iPad kids), and climate change.

My take is that there will be progression in some areas but always regression in others. Humans have the imprint of God's image, but it's tainted. For example, Canada is going down a dangerous path by promoting gender/sexual fluidity and I'm concerned about that. But on the other hand, I'm glad we don't kidnap children and force them

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Seventh-Day-Adventism.html>

² Example: <https://youtu.be/mCYhpm5aR0U>

Critique: <https://www.challies.com/book-reviews/four-blood-moons/>

into extremely abusive and hostile residential schools. The desire to go back to some golden era will be good for some, but terrible for others.

Some place their hope on the world reaching utopia, where people are excellent to each other and party on, dudes, like some kind of Astro-Liberation for you Star Trek nerds. They experience despair or anxiety when humanity isn't going in that direction.

But in this week's passage, Jesus tells us that the world will be crazy, so we have to put our hope in Him.

Let's Dig In: Questions to discuss the passage and how we can respond.

6. Why was the temple important?

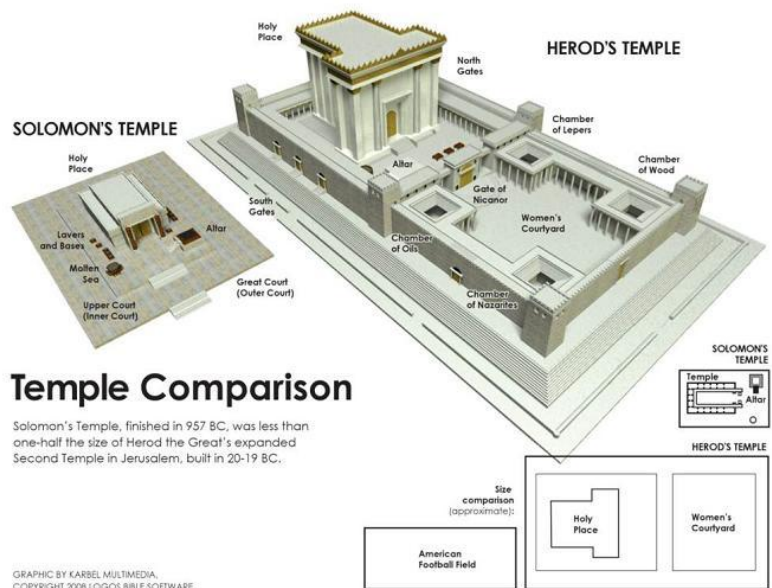
When God rescues His people from slavery in Egypt, He meets them on Mount Sinai. He tells the people to build a tent, called the Tabernacle. It would be where God meets His people (Numbers 9:15-23). Also, it's where they could offer sacrifices for their sins. It's portable because God's people were always on the move. They hadn't settled down.

A few hundred years later, God's people are settled in a stable Israelite kingdom. God tells King Solomon to build a temple in 957

BC (2 Chronicles 5:1). The people celebrate because they finally have a permanent, central place to approach and worship God through sacrifices and prayer. Although the people were spread out across the land, they gathered three times a year at the temple to worship God (Exodus 23:14-17). This is the **first temple or Solomon's temple**. It was also a beacon to draw foreigners to encounter God (1 Kings 8:41-43).

Lots of evil kings lead the people to worship other gods and they refuse to listen to God's messengers, so He sends Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, to destroy the city of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC (2 Chronicles 36:15-21). The people are captured and forcibly taken to Babylon. The nation's access to God is severed.

At the end of their exile, God sends His people back to rebuild the temple in 538 BC (Ezra 1:1-4). After many setbacks, the **second temple** is completed in 515 BC (Ezra 6:13-15). It wasn't as great as the first one (Ezra 3:10-13). Hundreds of years later, Herod the Great (who tries to kill baby Jesus) begins a temple expansion project that would last decades. By Jesus' time, work had been going on for 46 years (John 2:20)! By then it must have been a breathtaking spectacle.



Eventually, the Jewish people attempt to overthrow the Roman Empire. Their attempt fails and the Romans destroy Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD.

Check out this dramatization of the destruction of the temple: <https://youtu.be/cusVhmgEPw> (6.5 minutes). It gives you an idea of the violence and desperation. Here are some of the remains of the temple:

<https://youtube.com/shorts/eP3bLo7W004>.

This was a tragic event for the Jewish people. They could no longer meet and worship God as before. They also could not offer sacrifices to deal with their sins. Now the Jewish people can only pray at the remains of not the temple, but the wall around the temple complex (<https://youtu.be/cwiP2c6juaI>). Hundreds of thousands of people write prayers and cram them into the cracks in the walls (<https://youtu.be/iFnt7z0bq4E>). It's a far cry from the temple.

7. Why did God destroy the temple?

This is a big topic, so I'm just going to give some quick points.

Failed System. In the previous few chapters, Jesus expresses His disapproval of the temple system. He calls out the leaders for turning the temple a den of thieves (21:12-13), curses the fruitless fig tree that represents the religious system (21:18-19), says "sinners" are more receptive to God than religious leaders (21:28-32; 22:1-14), compares the religious leaders to evil tenants (Matthew 21:33-43), tells leaders they don't understand the Scriptures (22:29-33), and delivers a whole barrage of scathing rebukes (22:1-36). God wanted the temple and religious system to bring people's hearts to Him, but the temple wasn't doing that.

Rejection. God was pointing to the coming Messiah, Jesus, throughout the Bible (Luke 24:27). That includes all His laws about the temple system. Instead of listening to Jesus, they repeatedly challenge Him, try to trap Him with trick questions, and even plan to kill Him.

Obsolete. The priests had to daily offer sacrifices in the temple. Imagine killing innocent animals day after day to pay for people's sins! Never ending bloodshed. But Jesus offers Himself up as a final sacrifice so all those animal sacrifices are no longer needed (Hebrews 10:11-14). Now the Holy Spirit dwells in His believers, meaning the temple is not a building, but His people (1 Corinthians 3:16). Now people don't need to travel across the world to encounter God in a centralized place. God's people, the temple, disperse across the world so that the world can experience God wherever they are (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).

8. What are the conditions that characterize the era before Jesus' return and where do we see them today?

Pastor Ray drew out four themes to help us organize our thoughts.

Spiritual Deception (v. 4-5) Growing up in the late 20th century, there was a huge focus on *the* Anti-Christ. But in reality, there have been lots of Anti-Christ's soon after Jesus' death (1 John 2:18). It's anyone who denies Jesus (1 John 2:22), claiming to be the Messiah (24:4).

Pastor Ray shared three ways Anti-Christ's operate.

1. **Claim to be Messiah.** Eastern Lightning has tried to hunt for unsuspecting victims in our church. They say their founder is God's return in the flesh (<https://www.gotquestions.org/Church-of-Almighty-God.html>). Take a look at this list of people who have claimed to be Jesus just within the past 200 years (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_claimed_to_be_Jesus). So many!
2. **Deny Jesus was God's Son and Fully God and Fully Human.** Jehovah's Witnesses (<https://www.gotquestions.org/Jehovahs-Witnesses.html>), Iglesia Ni Cristo (<https://www.gotquestions.org/Iglesia-ni-Cristo.html>), Seventh Day Adventists (<https://www.gotquestions.org/Seventh-Day-Adventism.html>), and Mormons (<https://www.gotquestions.org/Mormons.html>) are all cults with founders who claimed some special access to God. They all claim that Jesus was a created being and not fully God.
3. **Supplant Jesus' Role in the Church.** As Senior Pastor, Pastor Ray is not the head of the church, but the head pointer to Jesus. He's one of my bosses and his job is to make sure I'm also pointing people to Jesus well (along with the rest of Willingdon staff). He doesn't replace Jesus. We don't treat him like we treat Jesus. We don't go to him instead of Jesus. Pastor Ray mutually submits to other leaders in the church, meaning he doesn't get to say and do whatever he wants. He also has to listen to and work alongside the rest of Willingdon's leadership (e.g., pastors, elders, and other staff).

But the Catholic church teaches that the Pope "has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 882) and his teaching is infallible (CCC 891). They believe the Pope is on another level and has all of Jesus' power and authority. What he says, goes. I've always felt it bizarre how a servant of God is treated like a celebrity (<https://youtu.be/OnOF9IFndLY>). You can't help but notice that the Pope is the center of attention and not Jesus. Check out this Jimmy Fallon clip about meeting the Pope (<https://youtu.be/YVQtNHxpW0g>).

Sadly, many pastors act like the heads of the churches they're supposed to serve, often leading to abuse. Or they ride on a cult of personality and turn into a celebrity.

Scores of Disasters (v. 6-8) In the years after Jesus' death, there were famines (Acts 11:28). As mentioned earlier, the Jewish people revolted against Rome, eventually suffering complete defeat. Before that, there were other uprisings, such as the Jacob and Simon uprising.

Open the news and tons of disasters going on right now. Wars and conflicts have been going on for years while other conflicts are always about to start.

Specific Discrimination. Jewish religious leaders persecuted Jesus and His followers (e.g., Acts 5:12-18). Paul was famously a Jesus hater before He became a Christian (Acts 9:1-2). Herod killed the apostle James (Acts 12:2). Nero persecuted Christians in 64 AD. A mob of Artemis worshippers attacked the Christians in Ephesus (Acts 19:21-41). There are lots of stories in and outside of the Bible of Christians being persecuted way back then.

As Pastor Ray mentioned, more than 380 million Christians suffered high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith in 2024. Check out Open Doors for more info: <https://www.opendoorscanada.org/worldwatchlist/>.

Sweeping Dissemination. Finally, something to be excited about! Ironically, the Gospel spreads the best often through persecution. Christianity mostly stayed in Jerusalem until Paul and others began mass persecution (Acts 8:1-4). Christians scattered across the Roman Empire and took their faith with them.

Did you know some of the fastest-growing churches in the world are in Iran and Afghanistan?³ Churches are shutting down where people are too comfortable and Christianity is watered down, but it's growing where hope in Jesus is the central message.

The Gospel is also continuing to go places it's never been. The Bible has been translated into hundreds of languages and the number keeps growing. Check out Wycliffe's statistics: <https://www.wycliffe.net/resources/statistics/>. The Gospel is spreading!

Yes, the world is a crazy place, but Jesus is bringing His Good News to the ends of the earth.

9. How should we respond to the signs of Jesus' return?

I once listened to an end-times talk radio show while in seminary in Dallas, Texas. One caller asked if Arnold Schwarzenegger was the Anti-Christ. His reason? He said Arnold was a charismatic leader and had recently won his re-election as governor of California. I realized how silly predicting the Anti-Christ and the ushering of the end times could get. Besides, Arnold fought against Satan to prevent the birth of the Anti-Christ in a movie I wasn't allowed to see in 1999. How could he be the Anti-Christ?

As Pastor Ray said, "[Jesus'] intent is not to give them a timetable of when things will happen, but to focus on the character qualities and the vision that should guide them in the days and years ahead." He gives us six things we can do to live in light of Jesus' second coming.

1. Encourage one another to be holy and persevere.
2. Know that God is sovereignly accomplishing his purposes.
3. Be aware of hardship for followers of Jesus.

³ <https://www.persecution.org/2023/07/20/the-worlds-fastest-growing-church/>

4. Live with the hope of Jesus' Second Coming.
5. Have the knowledge that we will be saved!
6. Boldly proclaim the gospel to all people groups!

Which are you doing well in? Which do you need help with?

10. Pastor Ray said, "We believe that the Lord of the harvest is raising up workers, at Willingdon and Austin Heights, for his harvest in Metro Vancouver and beyond. We are called to join Jesus in his ultimate purpose; that is, to see all nations, languages, and people groups give glory to God in unity." How can you participate?

Here are some possible steps you can take.

Learn the Gospel. To tell people the Good News about Jesus, we have to know it! As I've shared before, I grew up in the church and learned a lot from the Bible. It wasn't until I was almost 21 that I realized I knew a bunch of facts, but I didn't know the Gospel. Many of us may have learned the Gospel and were able to share it long ago, but now we're rusty.

Many Life Groups are going through *What Is the Gospel* by Greg Gilbert. This can be a good start for you, too!

Consider How to Relate People's Needs to Jesus. What are people in your life experiencing and how can Jesus meet those needs? Are they anxious about the future? Give them hope that all will be well when Jesus returns and brings us to live in a flawless world with Him. Are they struggling with their own moral failures? Jesus knows their sin and took on their punishment. Are people feeling alone in the turbulent waters of life? Jesus gives us the body of Christ to be a source of encouragement, love, and support.

People don't usually see their ultimate needs, but their immediate needs can be a great doorway to the Gospel.

Practice in Your Group. It can be intimidating to tell non-Christians about Jesus. Practice with other people in your group. It will help you get used to sharing the Gospel, reveal gaps in your understanding, and learn how to adapt your sharing to different people. It's a safe place, so you don't have to worry about slipping up or freezing. We're all in this to help each other grow!

Pray. Some of us have too many people we can share with or none we can think of. Ask God to point you to someone who needs to know about Jesus. If you have someone in mind, ask God to prepare an opportunity to share, for the Holy Spirit to speak through you, and for the Spirit to work in their heart. If you're nervous, pray for boldness (Ephesians 6:19-20). Even Paul needed prayer for boldness!

Team Up. You don't have to tell others about Jesus alone. Find more experienced people and join them in evangelism. Volunteer in one of our many ministries (<https://willingdon.org/volunteer/>). Perhaps you and another person in your group have a mutual friend. Team up to share about Jesus or invite them to worship on Sunday. Join one of Willingdon's many short-term mission Teams (<https://willingdon.org/events/stm2025/>).