

Last Day Events



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 19:5, 6; Matthew 23; John 12:20–26; Matthew 24; 1 Thess. 4:16.*

Memory Text: “‘And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted’” (*Matthew 23:12, NKJV*).

The second coming of Jesus is the climax of the Christian faith. The First Advent of Jesus and His death on the cross are the crucial precursors for the Second Coming. The Second Advent couldn't happen without the first, and the first is fruitless without the second. Both are inseparably linked, if not in time yet in purpose, which is the redemption of humanity and the end of the great controversy. The first coming is over and done, complete and finished; we now longingly and eagerly await the second.

This week we will look at what is recorded in Matthew 23, with Jesus' final appeal to some of the Jewish leaders to repent and accept Him, their only hope of salvation. Next, in Matthew 24, Jesus responded to questions about what events will unfold prior to His second coming. Here Jesus presents a rather solemn picture, linking the destruction of Jerusalem with what will precede His return.

And yet, no matter how hard things become (i.e., war, famine, betrayal), we are left with the promise of “‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory’” (*Matt. 24:30, NKJV*). In other words, despite the toils and sorrow, we do have every reason to rejoice.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 11.

Blind Guides

It was Jesus Himself who had led the children of Israel into Jerusalem, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. On eagle’s wings He had carried them out of Egypt and brought them to Himself. “ ‘Out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ ” (*Exod. 19:5, 6, NIV*).

In a sense, Jesus had proposed to Israel on a beautiful mountain called Sinai. Exodus 24 says that leaders and elders “went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. . . . They saw God, and they ate and drank” (*Exod. 24:9–11, NIV*). Christ offered the cup of His covenant to Israel, like a man offering a cup to the woman whom He desires to marry and to give a wonderful future. Israel received the cup and said, *Yes, we want to live forever with You in the land of promise.*

With this background in mind, read Matthew 23. What is Jesus saying to the leaders of Israel? What warning is being given? More important, what lessons can we draw for ourselves regarding the things He has specifically chided them for? How can we make sure that we don’t become guilty of the same?

Matthew 23 was Jesus’ final desperate plea for reconciliation with His beloved. But His beloved left Him. He accepted her decision, and for the final time He walked out of their house—the temple. “ ‘Look,’ ” He said, “ ‘your house is left to you desolate’ ” (*Matt. 23:38, NIV*). As Jesus left the temple, it became desolate, empty, abandoned, like the wilderness from which the Lord had first rescued them.

A great transition in salvation history was about to take place, and these leaders, and those they would lead into deception, would miss it. Meanwhile, many others, Jews and soon Gentiles, open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, would continue the great work and calling of Israel. They would become Abraham’s true seed “and heirs according to the promise” (*Gal. 3:29*). We, too, today, are part of the same people, with the same divine calling.

Signs of the End

After Jesus rebuked the specific Jewish leaders who rejected Him, John 12:20–26 records a fascinating request. Christ is told about Gentiles who wanted “to see Jesus” (*NKJV*). Yet, these Gentiles first make their request to Jews who are faithful to Jesus. Before long, something similar would happen on a much larger scale: while some Jews would reject Jesus, others would be the primary means through which many Gentiles would come to the knowledge of Him. How fascinating that this request would come right after Jesus told the leaders that their house would be left desolate. Truly, the old would soon give way to the new, and to that which had always been God’s intention: the salvation of the Gentiles, as well as the Jews.

In Matthew 24:1–14, what kind of picture does Jesus present, both for the faithful believers and for the world in general?

Jesus gives this answer in response to the questions about the sign of His coming and the end of the world: “Jesus did not answer His disciples by taking up separately the destruction of Jerusalem and the great day of His coming. He mingled the description of these two events. Had He opened to His disciples future events as He beheld them, they would have been unable to endure the sight. In mercy to them He blended the description of the two great crises, leaving the disciples to study out the meaning for themselves. . . . This entire discourse was given, not for the disciples only, but for those who should live in the last scenes of this earth’s history.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 628.

One thing is very clear in Jesus’ answer: the events leading up to His return are not pretty. Jesus doesn’t predict any earthly utopia or earthly millennial reign of peace. War, betrayal, natural disasters, a church facing persecution, false christs, and even false brethren. The most positive thing depicted here is the promise that the “kingdom shall be preached in all the world” (*Matt. 24:14*).

In Matthew 24:13, Jesus says that “he who endures to the end shall be saved” (*NKJV*). What can you do to keep yourself spiritually strong amid trials that could easily wear you down and cause you to give up? We have seen this happen in others; why must we not be foolish enough to think it couldn’t happen to us, as well?

The Demise of Jerusalem

Read Matthew 24:15–22. What is Jesus talking about here? Again, what kind of picture does He present in response to the questions asked Him?

“The abomination of desolation” is generally understood as some kind of sacrilege or desecration of what is holy. Jesus is obviously talking about the destruction of Jerusalem, which would come in A.D. 70. As we saw yesterday, Jesus mingled His depiction of this event with those surrounding the state of the world before His second coming. “Christ saw in Jerusalem a symbol of the world hardened in unbelief and rebellion, and hastening on to meet the retributive judgments of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 22.

Yet, even amid the desolation, the Lord seeks to save all who will be saved. In Luke, Jesus actually tells the disciples to flee *before* the abomination is set up: “ ‘When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written’ ” (*Luke 21:20–22, NIV*).

When Christians in Jerusalem saw this happen, they fled out of the city as Jesus instructed, whereas most of the Jews were left behind and perished. It is estimated that more than one million Jews perished during the siege of Jerusalem, with 97,000 more taken captive. “However, during a temporary respite, when the Romans unexpectedly raised their siege of Jerusalem, all the Christians fled, and it is said that not one of them lost his life. Their place of retreat was Pella, a city in the foothills east of the Jordan River, about 17 mi. (c. 27 km.) south of the Lake of Galilee.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 499.

Think of a time when someone warned you about something and, to your own later dismay, you didn’t listen. Why is it so crucial that, besides listening to the wonderful promises in God’s Word, we also listen to its warnings?

The Second Coming of Jesus

Jesus' response here in Matthew 24 was in regard to "the sign of Your coming" (*Matt. 24:3, NKJV*); that is, of Christ's coming to reign.

What other warning does Jesus give in the context of events before His return, and how has this been seen through history? *Matt. 24:23–26*.

Here's Jesus, from a worldly perspective nothing but an itinerant Galilean preacher with a small following; yet, He predicts that many will come in His name, claiming to be Him? Of course, that's exactly what has happened through the centuries and even into our day, a fact that gives us more powerful evidence for the truth of God's Word.

Read Matthew 24:27–31. How is the Second Coming described? What happens when He comes?

After warning that many will come claiming to be the Christ, Jesus then describes what His return will really be like.

First, the second coming of Jesus is personal, and literal. It is Jesus Himself who is coming back to the earth. "The Lord Himself will descend from heaven" (*1 Thess. 4:16, NKJV*) is a blatant refutation of those who claim that Christ's return is an ideal or simply a new era in human history. His return is going to be visible, like lightning across the sky. "Every eye shall see him" (*Rev. 1:7*). The trumpet imagery reveals that it's going to be loud, loud enough even to wake the dead! And most important, if the first coming was one of humiliation, at the second, Jesus will come as a triumphant King (*Rev. 19:16*) victorious over all of His (and our) enemies (*1 Cor. 15:25*).

At a time of so much turmoil and uncertainty in our world about the future, how can we learn to draw personal strength and hope from the promise of the Second Coming?

Keeping Watch

The second coming of Jesus is the culmination of all Christian hopes; it is the fulfillment of all that we have been promised. Without it—what? We would rot in the ground after death just as everyone else does. Without the Second Coming and all that it entails, everything else about our faith becomes a lie, a farce, everything that the critics and opponents have claimed against it.

No wonder, then, that in eager anticipation of His return, some Christians have set dates for His return. After all, so much hinges on that return. Of course, as we know, every past date set for the return of Christ has been wrong.

How does Matthew 24:36, 42 explain why date setters get it wrong?

Precisely because we don't know when Christ will return, we are told that we must be ready and that we must "keep watch."

Read Matthew 24:42–51. What is Jesus saying here about what it means to keep watch and to be ready for the Second Advent?

Jesus is clear: we do not know when He is going to come back. In fact, He's coming when we don't expect Him. So, we need always to be ready for Him when He does come back. We need to live as if He could come back anytime, even if we don't know when. The thinking that, *Well, He isn't coming back for a long time; so I can do as my heart desires* is precisely the attitude that Jesus is warning against. We should seek to be faithful because we love the Lord and want to do what is right by Him, regardless of when He returns. Besides, too, with all the texts that warn about judgment, especially against those who treat others badly, the timing of the Second Coming doesn't really matter. Sooner or later, judgment will come.

As Seventh-day Adventists who have long believed in Christ's return, how can we make sure we don't make the mistake, even if only in a subtle way, of this "evil servant"?

Further Thought: In the context of the events depicted in Matthew 24, Jesus also said, “ ‘Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place’ ” (*vs. 34, NKJV*). This text has led to confusion because, obviously, all these things didn’t take place in a single temporal generation. Dr. Richard Lehmann, writing in *The Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, says that the Greek word translated “generation” corresponds to the Hebrew word *dôr*; which is often used to designate a group or class of people, such as a “stubborn and rebellious generation” (*Ps. 78:8*). Thus, Jesus was not using the word to depict time or dates but to depict the class of evil people whom He had been referring to. “In harmony with this OT usage, Jesus would have used the term ‘this generation’ without a temporal meaning, to refer to a class of people. The evil generation would include all who share evil characteristics (Matt. 12:39; 16:4; Mark 8:38).”—*Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2000), p. 904. In other words, evil will remain until the end of time, until Jesus comes back.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As Seventh-day Adventists, how do we deal with what seems like an apparent delay? Haven’t previous generations of Adventists believed that Jesus would come back in their lifetimes? And don’t many of us expect it in ours? At the same time, isn’t expecting Him to return during any given period a form of date setting? How do we find the right balance in how we deal with the Second Coming? How do we avoid the attitude of the “evil servant” while at the same time avoiding that of those who see in every headline a sign of the immediate end? What should the attitude be among those of us who are awaiting the Second Coming?
- 2 Read again Jesus’ description of what the Second Coming will be like. How does it differ from some of the popular conceptions of the Second Coming? Considering how clear the texts are, why do so many believe what is so contrary to Scripture? What arguments do they bring up to defend their views, and how should we respond?
- 3 How do we learn to live with delay? What Bible characters had to live with delay, and what can we learn from them? For example, Joseph, Abraham and Sarah, Caleb and Joshua? Also, what does Revelation 6:9, 10 say about delay?

Try Jesus: Part 1

It was time for my children to arrive home from school, and I went to wait for them on the veranda of our house in Sydney. Smiling, I watched Lauren, my seven-year-old daughter, stand on her tiptoes to lift the mail out of the mailbox, as she did every day before coming up the driveway.

A few seconds later she was charging toward me, waving a small piece of paper above her head.

“Mummy, mummy, this card says I can have a free Bible. May I fill it in, please, please?”

I met the children at the door, and we walked into the house as Lauren excitedly read what the card said. “See, Mummy,” she said, proudly reciting the words. “It says ‘Try Jesus’ on the front, and on the back there’s a place to fill in our name and address.”

I was skeptical. Our family had never belonged to a church, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to give our address to strangers. But when I saw how eager Lauren was to have the free Bible, I decided to let her send in the card.

We had lived in Sydney only a few weeks, and we hardly knew anyone in Australia. Our family had lived in South Africa until just a few months earlier. But when we saw the crime spiraling out of control, we agreed that we needed to start a new life somewhere else.

We tried England, but it didn’t work out, so we turned our hopes to Australia. My husband, Neal, applied for work at several places. Finally, we located a job in Sydney. So we packed our things, exchanged heart-wrenching goodbyes with our families and friends in South Africa, and started out on a new journey, a new life, on a new continent.

Although we weren’t Christians, I remember thinking that when both our house and business in South Africa sold quickly in an otherwise poor market, that Someone or some power was directing our lives. We found a house in Sydney and enrolled the children in school. Everything seemed to be falling into place. But after the excitement of moving began to wear off and the pressures of everyday life in a new place surfaced, we felt homesick, sad, and a little depressed.

That was when Lauren found the “Try Jesus” card in the mailbox. She was so excited and eager to fill in our address on the card. How could I deny her wish?

I wrote our address on a piece of paper, and she carefully copied it onto the spaces on the card.

To be continued in next week’s Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 23:12*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Acquire a balanced understanding of prophetic predictions that is neither anxiety centered nor willfully ignorant.

Feel: Feel divine reassurance through God’s unfailing promises of compassionate protection.

Do: Cultivate reasonable approaches to eschatological events that avoid apathetic indifference *and* fearmongering.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: When Will It End?

A What was the significance of Christ’s warnings considering the exalted callings of the Jewish priesthood?

B How might eschatological predictions be interpreted without developing “foxhole,” “doomsday” mentalities?

II. Feel: Who Embraces Us Through the End?

A Why should believers remain hopeful amid crumbling societies, violent outbreaks, and chaotic international conflicts?

B What difference does God’s assured presence bring to believers’ outlooks compared with that of nonbelievers?

III. Do: How Should Believers Prepare for the End?

A What roles should diligent prayer and scriptural immersion have among believers preparing for earth’s eventual destruction?

B How should believers’ eschatological knowledge affect their interaction with nonbelievers?

► **Summary:** Matthew’s prophetic chapters have generated uncontrollable anxiety and irrepressible optimism. What causes this difference? Spiritually minded believers press forward expectantly because God’s judgment separates wheat from chaff, generating that sinless world reminiscent of Eden. Closing events cause *temporary* deprivation. They, nonetheless, announce Satan’s overthrow and death’s ultimate destruction.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 23:12*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Christ has scheduled one breathtaking reunion with His bride, the church. Lovingly, Jesus prepares His followers, partially by revealing those events, conditions, and circumstances that will attend His return.

Opening Activity: Wherever hymnals are available, distribute copies to all participants, inviting them to peruse the “Second Advent” and “Early Advent” sections. Describe what the lyrics emphasize and their personal meaning and impact upon the readers. Discuss the lyrics in the context of geopolitical events, worldwide financial crises, and societal breakdown. Should hymnals not be available, utilize Scripture, especially the Gospels and certain psalms.

Consider This: How might these lyrical messages restore hopefulness amid darkness and despair?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The solemn spiritual warnings within Matthew 23 are overtaken by the prophetic utterances of chapter 24. The earlier chapter witnesses a dramatic reversal of Christ’s confrontational method. The metaphorical parables and symbolic actions of earlier encounters are discarded. Jesus comes out swinging. “Blind guides!” “Hypocrites!” “Whitewashed tombs!” “Twice the child of hell!” “Filthy!” “Greedy!” “Self-indulgent!” “Murderers!” “Snakes!” Opportunities for winning friends and influencing people have passed. Judgment has arrived at God’s house. The ordained priesthood is held accountable. The Pharisees’ faction is directly challenged. Chapter 24 pronounces God’s punishment against the Jerusalem temple itself. Nothing escapes. Naturally, Christ’s followers, who associated these punishments with the world’s demise, wanted additional information—specifically, some timetable. Later, they questioned Him privately. Christ’s response is outlined in chapter 24.

Bible Commentary

I. Straightforward Communication (Review Matthew 23:1–24:2 with the class.)

Angrily and tearfully, Christ pronounces the divine indictment against the priesthood (the following citations are from the New Living Translation).

A. They don't practice what they teach (*Matt. 23:3*).

B. They crush people with unbearable religious demands (*Matt. 23:4*).

C. Everything they do is for show (*Matt. 23:5*).

D. They love the seats of honor in the synagogues (*Matt. 23:6*).

E. They love to receive respectful greetings (*Matt. 23:7*). (Christ has addressed the Pharisees hitherto with third person, ostensibly speaking to the multitude; with Matthew 23:13, He starts addressing the Pharisees directly; that is, using second person.)

F. You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces (*Matt. 23:13*).

G. You shamelessly cheat widows out of their property (*Matt. 23:14, margin*).

H. (You) pretend to be pious by making long prayers (*Matt. 23:14, margin*).

I. You turn that person (convert) into twice the child of hell that you yourselves are (*Matt. 23:15*).

J. You say that it means nothing to swear "by God's Temple" (*Matt. 23:16*).

K. You ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith (*Matt. 23:23*).

L. You strain your water so you won't accidentally swallow a gnat, but you swallow a camel instead (*Matt. 23:24*).

M. Inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence (*Matt. 23:25*).

N. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness (*Matt. 23:28*).

O. You testify against yourselves that you are indeed the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. . . . You will be held responsible for the murder of all godly people (*Matt. 23:29–35*).

Christ issues this 15-point indictment against the corrupt priesthood and anticipates their lack of repentance, reflected in the terms of punishment He dictates against them: utter desolation and destruction of the temple.

Consider This: What sober truth does the judgment passed on the priesthood teach us about Christ's sense of justice? How does this understanding deepen our own sense of accountability toward the sacred duties with which we have been entrusted as members of Christ's royal priesthood?

II. Fearful Future (Review Matthew 24 with the class.)

Chapter 24 is sometimes referred to as Matthew's apocalypse because Christ intermingles apocalyptic and prophetic expressions. His discourse springs from His disciples' appeal, "What will signal Your coming?" "Coming" derives from the Greek *parousia*, basically meaning "presence." Anciently, this expression developed two specialized meanings: (A) a cultic expression signifying some hidden divinity, which reveals its presence by unveiling power, and someone whose presence is celebrated by cultic followers, or (B) official terminology for highly ranked persons (for example, emperors) making provincial visits. Obviously, Christ qualifies from both angles—veiled divinity and kingship.

Wherever New Testament writers make application to Christ, the term *parousia* nearly always signifies His glorious Messianic Advent for cosmic judgment at the conclusion of time. Interestingly, Matthew is the only Gospel writer who employs the term, although Paul uses it frequently. Also noteworthy is Paul's obvious dependence on Matthew's account in writing his apocalyptic sentiments in 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Consider This: How are Christ's veiled divinity and ultimate kingship revealed in the Gospel narratives? In apostolic writings?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: One's theological understanding of Matthew's apocalypse strongly influences the application of these verses. *Dispensationalist* believers teach that prior to Christ's *parousia* a "secret rapture" occurs, variously three-and-a-half or seven years before Jesus' return. During this "rapture," genuine believers are taken to heaven, leaving pretenders behind. Between this rapture and Christ's return, the remaining earthly inhabitants have another chance to repent; that is, get their acts together.

Amillennialist believers interpret all apocalyptic literature as merely symbolic of spiritual conflict and Christ's eventual triumph.

Postmillennialists explain Christ's return as the culminating event of 1,000 years of progressive enlightenment during which earth's inhabitants outgrow immature tendencies toward violence and conflict and utilize scientific discoveries to conquer diseases.

Premillennialists and *historicists* (to which Seventh-day Adventists belong) believe that Christ's predictions find literal, historical fulfillments that are not merely symbolic. These views result from a scriptural understanding of how the spiritual conflict between Christ and Satan will be resolved, which cannot be remedied by progressive enlighten-

ment but can be resolved only by divine intervention. Christ's return celebrates the righteous' redemption and observes the unrighteous' destruction. Additional opportunities for repentance are not extended during a "second-chance period." Christ's coming signifies His family's reunion and the final destruction of everything evil.

Thought Questions:

- ❶ How might the *dispensationalist* position promote spiritual procrastination?
- ❷ Why might you suppose that *postmillennialism* has virtually no contemporary supporters? What was happening during the nineteenth century that tempted some Christians to accept this position? What changed during the twentieth century?
- ❸ What might be the greatest shortcoming of the *amillennialist* position?
- ❹ What are the primary strengths of the *historicist* position? How might these surpass the positions other Christians take regarding Christ's second coming?

Application Questions:

- ❶ What implications does Christ's second coming have for emotional depression?
- ❷ How does the promise of Christ's return affect my everyday choices regarding financial management, marriage, education, entertainment, and employment?
- ❸ What actions might fearful, anxious Christians take compared with joyful, balanced believers in preparation for Christ's coming?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Dramatic productions frequently unveil climactic events during the denouement (the concluding segment during which everything is clarified and all questions find answers). Matthew's apocalyptic drama follows this pattern.

Closing Activity: Distribute stationery to participants, inviting them to write letters describing what they hope to experience after Christ's return. The addressee is Christ Himself. These letters should serve to express creatively and concretely faith in Jesus' promises, anticipating their future fulfillment. Alternately, to do this activity without supplies, invite class members to share what they would like to put in a letter to Him, regarding those heavenly experiences.