

THE “IN-BETWEEN” TIME (PT. 2) MATTHEW 24:11-14

Forty days after Jesus rose from the dead, He gathered His followers on the Mount of Olives. There was an air of excitement and anticipation, strangely reminiscent of the day a few weeks earlier when they had ushered Jesus down the Mount of Olives and into Jerusalem in what we now call *The Triumphal Entry*. Things didn't turn out exactly as the disciples thought on that day, but then they didn't yet understand about His need to die for our sins and rise from the dead, all of which took place the week after the Triumphal Entry.

But forty days later, as they gathered around their risen Lord, I'm pretty sure many of the disciples thought *this* was going to be Coronation Day. Having won the victories over sin and death, the only enemy left to defeat was Rome. Thus, this would be the day when they would once again usher Jesus down the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, and up through the East Gate of Jerusalem, where He would take His rightful place on the throne of His father David.

And so, as they gathered around Him, straining to hear His instructions, the words that came out of His mouth must have seemed very strange indeed. He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father—the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit? Wait...what? Which prompted someone to ask what probably all of them were thinking, *“Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”* “You've done everything you said you were going to do, except for one thing. You haven't established the visible kingdom of God. You haven't begun your visible reign as King Jesus the Messiah. So, did we miss something or will you, at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? Will you take your seat on the throne today?”

Notably, Jesus, did not get exasperated with them and say, “You guys still don't get it, do you? How many times do I have to say it, and how many parables do I have to tell for you to understand that the visible manifestation of the kingdom is not going to happen right away. Remember the parable of the mustard seed? And the one about the wheat and the weeds? And the one about the leaven?”

Instead, Jesus simply and calmly said, ⁷ *“It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority”* (Acts 1:7).

Then He returned to the subject at hand—the baptism of the Holy Spirit—and after explaining the reason for this baptism, He *“was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as He went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven”* (9-11).

I submit to you that this was the moment when the disciples finally put two and two together. It finally sunk in that Jesus was leaving the earth and going to heaven for an indeterminate period of time, and that, at some point in the future, He would return. There would be a *Second Coming*. And then the kingdom would be established on earth in its visible form.

Once the disciples understood that there would be an “in-between” time, and especially once they understood *why* there would be an “in-between” time, it put everything in a new light. It changed their perspective about the world, about their role in the world, about how Jesus wanted them to spend their time in the world. Now, it all made sense.

A month and a half earlier, during the few days between the Triumphal Entry and His death on the cross, Jesus had been talking to His disciples about these very matters in response to some of their questions about the timing of His kingly reign. **Verse 3.** ***3 As He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be (i.e. when will the Temple be destroyed), and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"***

Jesus answers these questions in what we now call the Olivet Discourse, and in so doing gives several clues as to how future events will unfold in relation to the kingdom, its advancement, and its consummation. And He begins by prophesying about this "in-between" time between His first and second coming.

Look at **verses 4-10.** ***"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.

Jesus is describing what the world will be like and what it will be like for His followers during the time between His first and second coming, the time in which we are now living. It is a dark time, a bleak time, a time of great distress and tribulation. He describes a world rife with deception, hostility, and suffering. And He says that it will be especially difficult for His followers because of their identification with Him. In fact, it will be so difficult for Jesus' followers that many who were once part of His community and who profess to be His followers will fall away from Him and the faith.

We talked about this last week, and I submitted to you that those who fall away from Jesus and the faith never truly belonged to Him in the first place. They are like the seed that fell on rocky ground in Jesus' parable of the soils in Matthew 13. Jesus described such people this way: He said, ***20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, 21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. (Matt. 13:20-21).***

There are other passages in Scripture which reinforce this point. The Apostle John, in describing those who were once part of the Christian community but who had fallen away from the Faith, said, ***"They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us"*** (1 John 2:19).

Those who are truly born again, who have crossed over from death to life, will persevere in the Faith. I'm not saying they won't struggle, or that they won't have doubts or dark nights of the soul. I'm saying they will continue to walk with Christ and remain loyal and faithful to Christ throughout their lives, even if they are called upon to deny Him or else. Their perseverance proves that their faith is genuine.

I believe that is what Jesus is saying in **verse 13.** ***13 But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*** Jesus is making a statement here; He is not giving an admonition or a warning. He is not saying, "The walk of faith is precarious, so you'd better make sure you

don't trip or stray from the path; otherwise, you're not going to make it to heaven." No. He is merely stating that those who *do* endure, those who truly belong to Christ and prove it by not falling away, are going to have a huge reward.

The emphasis in verse 13 is on the kind of salvation those who endure receive. Jesus had just told them that some of them would be persecuted and put to death, verse 9, and so this cannot refer to being "saved" from physical harm or death. Salvation, here, must refer to eternal life. Those who endure persecution and martyrdom prove that they truly belong to Jesus and will be rewarded by sharing in His inheritance in the kingdom of light.

For those of us who live in a western culture where persecution and martyrdom are rare, verse 13 ought to give us pause. If Jesus is describing people who *professed* to be Christ followers and *thought* they were Christ followers, and the way they discovered they really were *not* Christ followers is because they bailed on Jesus when they got harassed and persecuted for being associated with Him, how will we know if we truly belong to Jesus in a culture where we do *not* get harassed or persecuted? Persecution was the fire that tested their metal. How is our metal tested?

Don't forget, Jesus said earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, ²¹ *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*

Jesus is describing professing followers of Jesus on the Day of Judgment, and he is saying that when they come face to face with Jesus on that Day they will be in for the shock of their lives. They sincerely thought they were going to heaven, and then they discovered, too late, that they were going to the other place. And this is not the fate of a few people, but *many*. I don't know about you, but I would rather live in a culture and a context of persecution where the metal of my faith was tested to see if it really was genuine, than not be tested and discover on that Day that my faith was a sham.

Jesus will say more about this later in this Olivet Discourse where He tells us how we can be prepared for that Day. But at this point in His discourse, Jesus is describing what things will be like on earth and what they will be like for His followers during the period of time between Jesus' first and second comings. Once again, it is a dark time, a bleak time, a time of great distress and tribulation.

Which raises a number of questions: Why does God's plan of salvation include this gap period (this 'in-between' time)? If things are going to be so hard and so bad during this time, what good purpose does it serve? Why not eradicate evil (and suffering) once and for all...*now*? It would sure prevent a lot of misery and heartache and destruction. It would sure make life a lot easier and more enjoyable.

Jesus answers these questions in **verse 14**. 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.*

Up until now, Jesus has cautioned His disciples not to make false assumptions about what will signal the end. Now, in verse 14, He gives us an explicit condition that must be met, an activity that must be accomplished during this "in-between" time before the end will come. *"The gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world...and then the end will come."* To say it negatively, the end will *not* come until the gospel of the kingdom is proclaimed throughout the whole world.

So, what does Jesus mean by proclaiming the gospel throughout the whole world? *Gospel* means “good news.” The gospel of the kingdom, which is a phrase used repeatedly and exclusively by Matthew, combines the good news of salvation with the arrival of the kingdom (Wilkins, 776). The good news is that God has established His kingdom through what Jesus has done for people who live in darkness. He has provided a way for them to come into the light—to be forgiven of their sins, to be reconciled to their Creator, and to live with Him forever and ever.

Don’t forget, the disciples did not fully understand the gospel at this point. They were still living in denial about His impending death and resurrection, so they had not even contemplated the theological significance of those events in relation to salvation. So, I’m not sure the disciples comprehended what Jesus was talking about regarding the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom throughout the whole world.

It wasn’t until forty days after Jesus had risen from the dead, just before He ascended into heaven, that any of this would have begun to make sense. Earlier we looked at Acts 1, where Jesus ordered His followers to remain in Jerusalem and wait for the gift the Father wanted to give them, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Confused, they asked Him if He was now going to restore the kingdom to Israel. ⁷ *He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*

The reason for the baptism of the Spirit is to empower Christ followers to be witnesses to the ends of the earth, or, to say it another way, to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom throughout the world. Which tells us something about the heart of God.

We sing a song sometimes that has a line in it that, I’m pretty sure, causes some dissonance in some of us. “You didn’t want heaven without us” (*What a Beautiful Name*, Hillsong). For some of us, those words sound a bit flippant. But they are absolutely true. The reason there is a gap between Jesus’ first and second comings is because God loves us and wants us to have eternal life with Him. Listen to these words from Scripture:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“He (Jesus) is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

And then, in the context of those who scoff at Christians who are living for Jesus’ return, yet months and years keep going by, Peter says, ⁸ *But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance* (2 Peter 3:8-9).

So, to answer the questions we asked earlier, “why does God’s plan of salvation include this gap period (this ‘in-between’ time)”? Because God loves people in the world and wants them to be saved.

If things are going to be so hard and so bad during this time, what good purpose does it serve? The salvation of countless people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Why not eradicate evil (and suffering) once and for all...*now*? Because God is patient and merciful and is giving the whole world an opportunity to hear the gospel and embrace Jesus as their Savior and Lord. And though many will reject Him and perish, He is not wishing that any would perish but that all would reach repentance and have eternal life. And we read in Revelation that in heaven there will be people from every tribe, nation, and tongue

in heaven. Which means that the gospel *will* have been proclaimed throughout the world.

As I read Jesus' words in Matthew 24, I am struck by two main points of application. First, we ought to live in perpetual gratitude for the patience and mercy of God. The fact that God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance, and that he would delay the end of the age until more people could be brought into the kingdom, has application to you, your children, your grandchildren, and everyone you love. Had there not have been an in-between time, an indeterminate period of time between Jesus' first coming and the end of the age, we would not exist, and, therefore, none of us would be included family of God. None of us would be part of that heavenly throng of people surrounding the throne of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The reason He has delayed His coming, is because, as crass as it may sound, He didn't want heaven without us. What a merciful God we serve! What a patient God we serve! Especially in light of the fact that the world is a mess. There is so much heartache and evil and suffering and hostility in this present age, and yet He puts up with it so that more and more people can be saved.

Which brings me to the second point of application. Our primary purpose on earth is to proclaim the gospel to the whole world. In Matthew 28 we will explore Jesus' Great Commission "Go...and make disciples of all nations!" (28:19). That's our mandate. That's our mission! The church is a missionary community, and all followers of Jesus are missionaries. Our purpose is to proclaim the gospel throughout the world.

Jesus did not save us so that we could live as comfortably and peacefully as possible on this earth while we wait for Him to come. Jesus did not tell us to have a fortress mentality where we close ranks so we can defend ourselves from the world and keep it from overtaking us.

He called us to go. He told us to advance. He commissioned us to take *new* ground for the kingdom, not merely hold our own ground. And that's because He loves people. And He wants us to love them, too. He wants us to love them so much that we tell them how they can know Him and have eternal life just like us.

And, we have been baptized with the Holy Spirit, just as the disciples at Pentecost were, so that we could carry out this Great Commission with His power and wisdom, for His honor and glory. Amen.

The "In-Between" Time (pt. 2)

Matthew 24:3-14

Main Idea: Jesus will return only after the gospel has been proclaimed throughout the whole world.

The time leading up to Jesus' return

Normal occurrences in the world (5-8)

"False Christs" will appear and deceive many (5a)

International hostilities will abound (6-7a)

Famines and earthquakes will be prevalent (7b-8)

Normal occurrences in the Christian community (9-13)

Persecution and martyrdom (9)

Widespread apostasy (10a)

Betrayal and hatred (10b)

Proliferation of false prophets (11)

Increasing lawlessness leading to lovelessness (12)

The promise of salvation for those who endure to the end (13)

A statement, not an admonition or warning

Endurance is the proof of genuine faith

The condition for Christ's return (14)

The meaning of the "gospel of the kingdom"

The meaning of "proclaimed"

The meaning of "whole world"

The motive behind this condition

Principles from this passage:

- Jesus predicted the "in-between" time in which we are now living, and all His predictions have come true
- The period of time prior to Christ's return will be characterized by a growing polarization between good and evil
- God's people will increase in power, witness, and impact in the world, even as persecution and hostility intensify and global conditions deteriorate
- Not all who profess Christ persevere, but those who persevere demonstrate they truly belong to Christ
- The gospel must be proclaimed to all nations (people groups) before Jesus comes