

Don't Be Deceived

Matthew 24:1-35

The Temple was going to be torn down? That just didn't make any sense to Jesus' disciples. After all, at the beginning of the week, the crowd had hailed Him as the Son of David as He rode into Jerusalem. Surely, they thought, He would be raising His banner and announcing His reign at any moment. So, how could the destruction of the Temple possibly fit into their grandiose dreams of an earthly Davidic kingdom?

No, surely Jesus was just exaggerating. Perhaps He was just planning to remove some of the outbuildings and walls around the Temple so He could replace them with something even better. And perhaps that's why the disciples wanted to know what the sign of His coming would be – was He planning to proclaim His reign with the announcement of such an ambitious building project? Was He going to try to top Herod the Great? After all, Herod's massive program of improvements to the Temple complex was still underway at the time Jesus spoke these words (it wouldn't be finished until A.D. 63 or so).

If so, Jesus' answer couldn't have been more disappointing. For He didn't just say in verse 15 that the Temple was going to be desecrated, just as Daniel predicted. No, he said in verse 2 that it would be so completely destroyed that not one stone would be left standing on another. How could He have dashed their hopes any more completely?

But that wasn't the only thing in this passage that bewildered Jesus' disciples. For what was all this talk in verse 9 about His followers being afflicted and killed, about being hated on account of Jesus' name? Wasn't He going to rule and reign as the mighty Son of David? Wasn't He going to sweep all opposition before Him? Weren't all of His disciples going to be cabinet ministers in the new government of Judea? With visions of earthly glory dancing in their heads, none of this gloom-and-doom stuff made any sense to His twelve disciples.

And it doesn't make sense to many modern Christians either. Of course, we know all about how Jesus fulfilled His role as the Messiah. We know that Jesus came to declare His reign, not with a crown, but with a cross. We know that at the end of the week Jesus would be in a tomb, not on a throne. But let's be honest – even if we don't share the disciples' unrealistic expectations, there's still plenty in this passage that's hard for us to understand.

For in this passage, Jesus is clearly talking about two different events – the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans, and His own second coming. And to make matters more difficult, He shifts seamlessly between the descriptions of these two incidents, even though we now know that they will in fact be separated in time by at least 2000 years. So which verses are talking about which event?

Well, it's easy to sort out parts of the passage. After all, it's obvious that verses 15-20 are discussing the events of A.D. 70. Judea is specifically mentioned, and we know that only forty years after Jesus spoke these prophetic words, the Roman legions would indeed invade the region, killing countless people in order to put down a rebellion. And at the end of the campaign they would raze Jerusalem, leaving it a smoking ruin, with not one stone standing on top of another, just as Jesus predicted in verse 2. In fact, the destruction was so complete that modern-day archeologists aren't even sure where on the temple mount the Temple was located.

But if verses 15-20 are clearly describing events that took place 2000 years ago, it's just as obvious that the events of verses 29-31 haven't happened yet. For no matter what Jesus may have meant by signs in the sun and moon and stars, we know good and well that the Son of Man hasn't yet come in a cloud with power and great glory as Daniel had predicted, and as Jesus quotes in verse 30.

So, why does Jesus describe the destruction of Jerusalem and His second coming in one passage? Well, what did Jesus tell His disciples in verse 4? "See to it that no one deceives you or misleads you." In other words, He was trying to straighten out the disciples' thinking about His coming. He was trying to correct their unrealistic expectations of the way He would inaugurate His earthly reign. For before He would come on the clouds with the

power and glory that Daniel described, Jesus would first have to die, and then Jerusalem would have to be destroyed. And it turned out that the same sort of thing would also happen to every single one of them.

Yes, instead of enjoying the earthly power and glory that they all expected, the disciples of Jesus would all end up suffering for His sake. Some, like James, would die at the hands of the Jewish leaders. Some, like Peter, would be killed by the same Romans who would tear down the Temple. Even John, the beloved disciple who received the Revelation of the last days, would die in exile on Patmos. In one way or another, they would all follow Christ to the cross.

But the persecution of Christians didn't stop with the death of the apostles. No, the Romans threw Christians to the lions. The Muslims overran the Middle East and North Africa, compelling Christians to convert to Islam or die. The Vikings plundered Irish monasteries. The French kings slaughtered or deported the Huguenots. The atheist Communists all but outlawed the Church in the Soviet Union.

And the same kind of persecution continues today, all over the world. For example, earlier this month, Deborah Emmanuel Yakubu, a Nigerian college student, posted a voice message to WhatsApp, defending her Christian faith. In response, hundreds of Muslim students beat her with rods, stoned her and set her on fire. Also this month, Ninety-year old Cardinal Joseph Zen has been arrested by the Communist Chinese government for trying to help those who protested against the government.

So, what does the ancient destruction of Jerusalem and the ongoing persecution of Christians mean for us today? How can signs like these keep us from being misled or deceived? Cardinal Zen explains, echoing the words of Jesus in this passage: "Martyrdom is normal in our church ... We may not have to do that, but we may have to bear some pain and steel ourselves for our loyalty to our faith."

And we're getting the same message from within our own denomination. You remember when EPC minister Andrew Brunson was held in a Turkish prison for two years because of his faith in Christ. We joined Christians from all over the world in prayer for His safety and we rejoiced when he was finally released. But as a result of his experience, he is now warning American Christians not to be misled or deceived, not to become disillusioned with the increasing wickedness in the world, and not to be offended at God when difficult times come our way.

For how often do we pray for comfort and peace during our times of suffering? How often do we pray for safety and protection from the dangers all around us? Well, God didn't keep Andrew out of jail. And to make matters worse, Andrew didn't even feel God's presence during his time of imprisonment. He prayed for peace, but didn't feel any. He says, "I had grace, but it was an unfelt grace." And as a result, at the end of his first year in prison, he admits that he was spiritually broken.

But then, he made a decision to abandon his unrealistic expectations of safety or even of relief in this world. And so he prayed to God, "Whatever You do or don't do, I will follow You. If You do not give me Your voice, I'll still follow. If you don't give me Your presence, I'll still follow You. If You do not set me free, I'll still be faithful." In the midst of persecution, and in spite of his pain and confusion, He said to God, "I'm going to fight for my relationship with You and I choose to turn my eyes 'toward' rather than 'away.'"

No, Andrew wasn't deceived. He wasn't misled. He learned the lesson of the destruction of Jerusalem, the lesson of the first 2000 years of Christian history, the lesson that Jesus is trying to teach us in today's passage: the signs of His coming are not big, splashy building programs or trumpet fanfares or welcome parades. The signs of His coming aren't even the sorts of tragic events, the wars and famines and plagues that are all too common throughout human history. The signs of His coming are the sufferings of His people for His sake.

Of course, there are all sorts of false prophets who disagree, taking advantage of our understandable unwillingness to suffer for Christ. And over the last 2000 years, some have even gone so far as to insist that Jesus has in fact returned, but in secret, revealing Himself only to His devoted followers.

And scores of people have been deceived by such false prophets. The Shakers believed that Ann Lee was a female incarnation of Christ. The Rastafarians believed that Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie's reign marked the

Second Coming of Christ. The members of the Unification Church believe that Sun Myung Moon and his wife are the true parents of humankind. And we all remember the story of Jim Jones, who claimed to be Jesus and led his followers in a mass suicide ritual in Guyana. We can only hope that those who are currently following A.J. Miller's "Divine Truth" movement in Australia, those who believe he is the reincarnation of Christ, will not suffer a similar fate.

But there are many less dramatic ways to fall prey to false teaching. After all, the preachers of the prosperity gospel just as vehemently reject the suffering of Christ's people, insisting instead that God wants you to have everything you desire – and he'll give it to you if you only have enough faith, and of course if you give evidence of that faith with a big donation to their ministry. Many others who call themselves Christians have embraced the sort of lawlessness Jesus mentions in verse 12, believing and teaching that our own pleasures and preferences are more important than even the clearest teachings we find in God's Word. Oh yes, there are many ways to be deceived, many ways to be misled – and many of them involve denying the sign of suffering with Christ and for Christ.

So, what if the kind of persecution that has happened to Christians over the last 2000 years were to come to our shores? What if the suffering that Christians are currently experiencing in Nigeria and China and Turkey were to happen to our neighbors and friends and family members and even ourselves? What if we were to experience even subtle social pressures against our faith, the shaming and "canceling" that have become all too common in other parts of the country? If such suffering were to come our way, would our unrealistic expectations of comfort, peace and prosperity lead us to disappointment with God, to disillusionment, or even to despair? Would we become offended? Would our love wax cold?

Yes, how would we respond if God doesn't end up protecting us from the kinds of trauma inherent in a sinful world, the wars, famines and earthquakes that Jesus says will happen over and over again before He comes (verses 6 and 7)? Would we allow ourselves to be deceived and misled? Would we imagine that, if God allows us to go through all these kinds of things, that somehow means He doesn't love us?

Or would we believe what the writer to the Hebrews tells us? Would we believe that even the greatest difficulties, even the most serious forms of persecution can deepen our faith, healing our self-centeredness and training us in righteousness? Would we believe what Jesus says in verse 13 – that it is not the one who avoids the difficulties of life, but the one who endures them to the end who will be saved?

For how did Jesus bring salvation to all of us? How did Jesus gain all authority in Heaven and on Earth? Why does Jesus have the ability to bring perfect justice to the world, to right every wrong and to give us the safety and protection we need? It wasn't by staying up in Heaven, but becoming a human being just like us. It wasn't by overwhelming his enemies with His might and majesty but by letting them crucify Him. The only reason that He can one day come on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory is because He humbled Himself before His Father, accepting the punishment all our sins deserve and thus earning a name that is above every name.

So, don't be deceived. The Romantics and the Marxists and the peddlers of the prosperity gospel have it all wrong. Jesus didn't come to make us all happy and healthy and powerful – at least, not in this world. No, in this world there will continue to be wars and rumors of wars. There will continue to be famines and plagues and earthquakes. There will continue to be persecution and lawlessness. Jerusalem was destroyed, and our own cultures and institutions may very well face the same fate. We may even be called to lay down our lives as a testimony to our faith, just as so many of our Christian brothers and sisters are doing all around the world today.

But don't be offended at God, or let your love for Him grow cold because of all these things. Don't be deceived or misled by the false prophets. For it is not the one who avoids but the one who endures all these things who will be saved – and saved by the One Who chose to go through much worse things because He loves us so much. So even if deception and wickedness continue to increase in the world around us, let's remember that these are the signs of the coming of Christ, the One Who will one day gather all His people to Himself. So, when we see

the sign of suffering, let's trust in Him, being all the more convinced that He is coming to set all things right and make all things new.