

Anytime you get to the parts of the Bible that deal with the end of the world, it's tempting to let your imagination start to run wild with interpreting the text. We look at texts like our Gospel reading and try to approach them like a secret code or something. Has something on the news lately been the "abomination of desolation"? Are the portions of Daniel to which Jesus refers talking about the war in Israel? Has the great tribulation started?

As tempting as it might be to get lost in such speculation, Scripture is considerably clearer than that. What Jesus gives His disciples in these words from Matthew 24 is both a warning about suffering that will come, but also comfort and reassurance in the face of it all.

So the first thing to establish, which is necessary for rightly understanding this text, or any of the various parts of the Bible that talk about the end of this world, is to know that we are currently living in the last days. Today, we are in them. And so were your grandparents. And so were their grandparents.

The "last days" or "end times" began with the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Bible makes this clear in several places. For instance, 1 Corinthians 10:11 - "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come." St. Peter quotes the prophet Joel in Acts 2, saying, "But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,'" referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Why did the Ascension and Pentecost mark the start of the last days? Simply put, because there's nothing more that we're waiting for before Christ's return. Before this, there were prophecies that had to be fulfilled. For instance, in Old Testament times, the Messiah had to come to earth, suffer for the sins of the world, die, and rise again. But once Christ had come, paid for the sins of the world, risen in victory over death, and then ascended and sent the Spirit out into all the world, there's nothing more that needs to be done, from a salvation standpoint.

St. Peter writes and tells us the only thing we're still waiting on before Christ returns: "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." We're just waiting on the last of God's chosen people to be brought into His Kingdom, for the Good Shepherd to bring home the last of His straying sheep. After that, the end comes!

We're not waiting for the temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem, or the UN to formally become a one-world government, or anything else that some end-times "experts" say must happen before the end of all things. Remember, God tells us multiple times in His word that no one knows when the end is coming, and so we are to be watchful, because it could happen at any time. We are in the end times now, have been for nearly two millennia, and will be until Christ returns as lightning flashing from the east to the west.

So if that's the case, that the end times are this ongoing reality, why does Jesus give us words like in our Gospel text? What's the point in knowing the signs of His return, if it could happen anytime? Well, if we look at the signs that Jesus describes, and then we see how they've been fulfilled in the past, we can take and see them in our own day, and then also have an idea of what the future holds.

So where do we see these warnings taking place in history? A big one, perhaps the most commonly connected event to Jesus' words here, is the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in AD. 70. During that siege, one group of rebels who controlled the temple slaughtered hundreds of their countrymen in the temple, defiling the place that normally saw the blood of sacrifices filled instead with the blood of people. After the Romans had captured and destroyed the temple, they put up their imperial standards, showing the (supposed) triumph of their gods over the God who had dwelt in the temple. These both fit the description of the "abomination of desolation" quite well.

In addition to that sign, Jesus also speaks of incredible suffering that would be endured by His people. "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be." The records we have of this event show just that sort of suffering.

For one thing, there was incredible starvation in the city, in part because the Romans had fully encircled the city, but even more so because one of the groups within the city burned all the food stocks in an effort to make the people fight more desperately. People were eating their animals, eating the leather from their belts and shoes, even eating each other in cannibalism. It was horrific.

Adding to the misery was the fact that several groups within Jerusalem weren't just fighting the Romans, but each other as well. Fanatics were assassinating those on the other side, or those they thought were on the other side, causing terror within the walls. And then once the Romans finally breached the walls, it was a slaughter.

Imagine being a Christian inside Jerusalem at that point. By the grace of God, most of the Christians had been able to heed Jesus' warning and flee the city. But for those who remained, they were hated by everyone. The "moderate" Jews had tolerated the Christians before only because the Romans made them. And the Zealots, who were even murdering each other, saw Christians as the worst due to the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.

As a Christian, whoever you saw on the streets was likely to beat you, maybe even kill you, and certainly not share whatever scraps they had with you. Should you manage to endure the hunger, when the Roman legions finally come through the walls, they aren't stopping to ask the finer points of religious differences. They don't make distinctions. Everybody gets either sold into slavery or put to the sword.

Imagine the suffering that those Christians endured in that time! And imagine their temptations to deny Jesus as the Christ, to seek deliverance from those other groups who were there: those in the wilderness – the Romans – or those in the inner rooms – the Jewish Zealots. As tribulation increased, the desire for a way out, any way out, would have grown stronger and stronger.

Yet even in the midst of all the misery, the Lord never abandoned His people there in Jerusalem. He knew what they could endure, and never put them through more than that. As Jesus says, for the sake of the elect – His chosen people – those days were cut short. The siege did not go on any longer than God permitted it to.

For those whom the Lord had determined to bring through the catastrophe, He ensured that they did have daily bread, even if it wasn't a feast. For those who were captured and sold into slavery, He went with them, protecting them and even allowing them to bring the Gospel to new households and lands.

In the midst of temptation and suffering, God the Holy Spirit strengthened their faith, so that they didn't go seeking for other christs, but trusted in their Lord. By faith, they would have seen themselves following in the footsteps of Jesus, who had also been despised by the Jews and put to death by the Romans. Just as the Father had not abandoned His Son to death but had raised Him to glory, they knew that the glory of paradise likewise awaited them.

For those who died in the siege and warfare, they weren't "lost," but rather the Lord was cutting short the days of their tribulation. He was bringing them from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven. That's the comfort the words of Christ had given them. Things were so bad that no human strength could endure it, but God would give them His strength, that His people would be delivered. Temptation would be so great that no flesh would be able to resist it, but God the Holy Spirit, dwelling in the hearts of His elect, would preserve them from every deception and false hope.

The fall of Jerusalem was a horrific tragedy, a tribulation greater than any other for those who endured it, but as great as the tribulation had been, God's power to deliver His chosen ones was greater still.

This isn't the only event that fits the words of Jesus. Again, the end times have been ongoing since He ascended into heaven. We might think of the affliction of the papacy upon the Church, with the Roman pope declaring himself to speak for Christ, even where Christ has not spoken or against the clear teaching of Christ's word, and seeking to silence and destroy those who sought to restore the Gospel's light, such as John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, and Martin Luther.

Yet God preserved His Word, bringing it forth from the deception under which the medieval papacy had buried it, and He sent His angels to bring to His side all those reformers who were executed for proclaiming the clear teaching of Scripture.

Much more recently, we could think of the great suffering endured by the Christian Church in Russia during the rise of the Soviet Union. As that government sought to stamp out the Gospel in its lands, those who clung to Christ suffered in horrible ways. Yet the Lord never forsook them, granting them eternal life in the face of death. And when, by God's grace, that government fell, those whom God had preserved in the gulags gathered together in churches once more, openly proclaiming those words of God which they had secretly stored up in their hearts for all those years.

Jesus' words in Matthew 24 continue to be true for us still today. We need to watch for abominations of desolation setting themselves up in places that should be holy – set apart for God.

What might that be in the present? Well, the current pope, whom much of the world sees as a major voice representing Christianity, has said that Jesus is not the only way to salvation. That's the supposed vicar of Christ – the one who speaks authoritatively for Christ – saying that Christ isn't the only way to the Father. That's an abomination that desolates the truth of the Gospel, located in a visible church.

Or consider the state of many current denominations in the United States, including familiar ones like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – the ELCA. They are teaching things directly contrary to Scripture, twisting Scriptural ideas like “love” and “freedom” to justify it. They support abortion, even though Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me,” having Himself been an unborn child. They support transgenderism and homosexuality, even though the Word clearly states that God makes humanity male and female, and that marriage is between one man and one woman. This all stems from the great lie that the Scriptures are a mix of God's Word and man's, and that it's up to humans to be like God, deciding good and evil. This is abominable, causing desolation of faith, with those claiming to speak for God as the Church twisting and perverting the clear Word of God.

Consider also those non-religious organizations, such as government or private companies, that endorse beliefs contrary to God's Word and require their employees to affirm them. These very often have nothing to do with the employees' actual jobs or the purpose of the company or division, but nevertheless the group has gone beyond what God has established government or private industry to do and has tried to stand itself up in the holy place, even the hearts of Christians.

When someone encounters such evil, what should he do? As Jesus says, let them flee. As you are able, get out, lest your faith be poisoned and you be caught up in God's judgment against such wickedness. Remember Jesus' words, “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” Being in certain social circles or the ability to afford a comfortable lifestyle are not worth your eternal salvation, and even little pushes, little lies, over time can break down one's faith.

Yet what if you can't get out? What if you're like one of the Christians trapped in Jerusalem? This isn't really the case for churches, since those are voluntary associations, but for your job, you might not be able to find another one, at least right away. If this is the case, stay and remain faithful. Speak and act in accord with God's Word, not the desires and deceptions of this world. Don't go looking for false christs who would offer false hope. Remember that heaven and earth will pass away, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.

And know that your faithfulness will bring suffering. When you refuse to go along with the world, you will be attacked for it. It may be in subtle ways, little things that are manageable on their own, but when more keep coming, become a great burden. Or your tribulation may be more severe – jobs lost, friendships broken, family members who refuse to speak to you anymore. Though very rare in our country, the possibility is always there that you may even suffer physically for your confession of Christ.

Will it be as terrible as it was for those Christians in Jerusalem during the Roman siege? Likely not. But that doesn't mean it will be easy. Every Christian goes through tribulation of one form or another, suffering from the results of living in a world broken by sin and death.

Yet as you face whatever tribulations you do, know that the Lord will bring you through them, just as He has always done for His chosen ones. He brought Elijah through the attacks of Ahab and Jezebel. He brought Daniel and His friends through the lions' den and the fiery furnace. He brought St. Paul through beatings, stonings, imprisonments, and shipwrecks. He brought His Christians through the destruction of Jerusalem. He brought the reformers through the persecution of Rome. He has brought Christians through persecutions in the Soviet Union, China, Nigeria, and all over the world.

He has kept the light of truth burning in their hearts, protecting His elect from deception. He has sustained them even in the darkest times, cutting short the days of their tribulation that they would not be overwhelmed. As He did for them, He will certainly do for you. God promised through Malachi, "For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed," and His promise still stands.

Your Father tells you to ask Him for your daily bread, and He will not fail to answer that prayer. The Holy Spirit has lit the flame of faith in your heart, and He will not let it be snuffed out, even by the devil himself.

Though we do not know the day nor the hour when Christ will return, flashing like lightning from east to west, we do know that He will sustain us, and all His chosen people, until that day when we behold Him face to face.

In times of tribulation, pray to God for strength to be sustained. In times of plenty, pray to God in thanksgiving for His wonderful gifts. And know that every day, whether it brings tribulation or joy, brings us one day closer to our eternal deliverance.

In Jesus' name, amen.