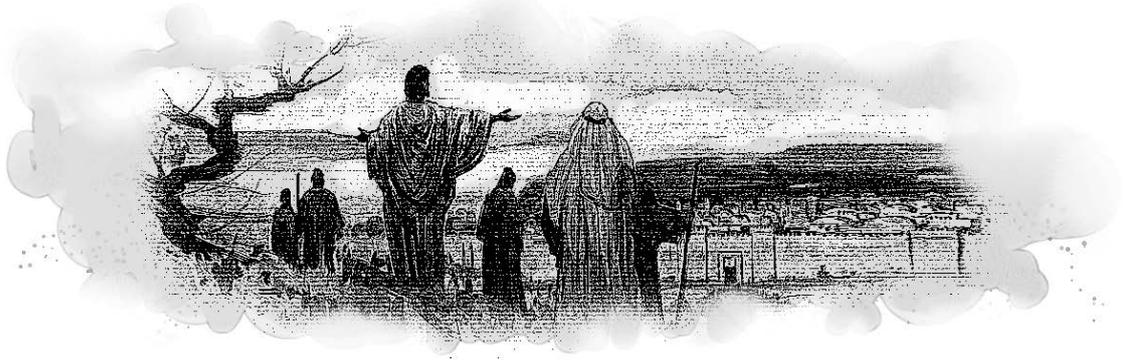


Last Day Events



SABBATH—JUNE 4

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Exodus 19:5, 6; Matthew 23; John 12:20–26; Matthew 24.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘Anyone who lifts himself up will be brought down. And anyone who is brought down will be lifted up’ ” (Matthew 23:12, NIV).

THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS is the glorious (beautiful; honorable) goal of the Christian faith. The first coming of Jesus and His death on the cross point to the Second Coming. The Second Advent could not happen without the First Advent. And the First Advent is useless without the Second Advent. Both are inseparably connected because they both mean the rescue and salvation of humans and the end of the great controversy (war between Christ and Satan).

This week we will look at what is written in Matthew 23, with Jesus' final plea to some of the Jewish leaders to repent (turn away from sin) and accept Him as their only hope of salvation. Next, in Matthew 24, Jesus answers questions about what events will happen before His second coming. Here Jesus gives a rather serious picture. He connects the destruction of Jerusalem with what will happen before His return.

No matter how hard things become (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 [praise; beauty; honor]’ ” (Matthew 24:30, NKJV). In other words, we may have hardships and sorrow in this life, but we also have every reason to be joyful.

BLIND GUIDES (Matthew 23)

Jesus Himself had led the children of Israel into Jerusalem, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. On eagle's wings He had carried them out of Egypt and brought them to Himself. “ ‘ “Out of all the nations you will be my special treasure. The whole earth is mine. . . . But you will be my holy nation” ’ ” (Exodus 19:5, 6, Nlrv).

In a way, Jesus had proposed (made an offer of marriage) to Israel on a beautiful mountain called Sinai. Exodus 24 says that leaders and elders “went up. They saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a street made out of sapphire. It was as clear as the sky itself. . . . They saw God. And they ate and drank” (Exodus 24:9–11, Nlrv). Christ offered the cup of His covenant¹ to Israel, like a man offering a cup to the woman whom He wants to marry and to whom he wants 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 learn for ourselves about the things He has scolded them for? How can we make sure that we do not become guilty of the same?

Matthew 23 is Jesus' final desperate plea for reunion and peace with His beloved (Israel). But His beloved leaves Him. He accepts her decision, and for the final time He walks out of their house—the temple. “ ‘Look, your house is left empty’ ” (Matthew 23:38, Nlrv). As Jesus leaves the temple, it becomes empty like the wilderness from which the Lord had first rescued them.

A great change in salvation history was about to take place. The leaders, who would lead people into believing in lies, would miss being a part of that change. Meanwhile, many others, Jews and soon Gentiles (non-Jews), would be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Together they would continue the great work and calling of Israel. They would become Abraham's true seed “and heirs [receivers] according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29). We, too, today, are part of the same people. And God has given the same work to us.

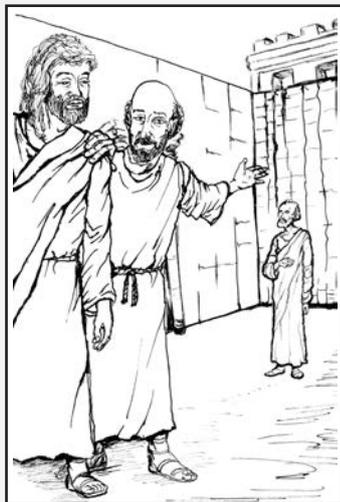


Matthew 23 is Christ's last plea for His beloved, Israel. But she left Him. And He accepted her decision.

DEFINITIONS

1. covenant—having to do with the agreement or promise made between God and His people.

SIGNS OF THE END (Matthew 24:1–14)



Christ is told about the Gentile who wanted “to see Jesus.”

Jesus scolds certain Jewish leaders who refuse to accept Him. After this scolding, we read in John 12:20–26 an interesting plea. Christ is told about Gentiles who wanted “to see Jesus” (NKJV). These Gentiles first make their plea to Jews who are faithful to Jesus. Before long, something like this would happen on a much larger scale. While some Jews would not accept Jesus, others would lead many Gentiles to know Him. It is interesting that this plea would come right after Jesus tells the leaders that their house would be left empty. The old would soon give way to the new. And that has always been part of God’s plan: the salvation of the Gentiles and the Jews, too.

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

Jesus gives this answer 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 joined these two events into one event. If He had opened to His disciples future events as He saw them, they would have been unable to accept them. In mercy to them, Jesus mixed the description of the two great crises together and let the disciples study out the meaning for themselves. . . . This entire speech was given, not for the disciples only but for those who should live in the last days of this earth’s history.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 628.

One thing is very clear in Jesus’ answer: the events leading up to His return are not pretty. Jesus does not foresee any earthly “heaven” or peace. Instead, He sees war, betrayal, terrible natural events, a church facing attacks against it, false christs, and even false church leaders. The most positive thing here is the promise that the “ ‘ kingdom shall be preached in all the world’ ” (Matthew 24:14).

In Matthew 24:13, Jesus says that “ ‘the one who stands firm to the end will be saved’ ” (NirV). What can you do to keep yourself spiritually strong through troubles that could easily wear you down and cause you to give up? We have seen this happen in others. Why must we be careful not to think it could not happen to us, too?

THE FALL OF JERUSALEM (Matthew 24:15–22)

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

“The abomination of desolation [“the hated thing that destroys” (Matthew 24:15, NlrV)]” is understood as something unholy destroying what is holy. Jesus is clearly talking about Jerusalem being destroyed, which would come in A.D. 70. As we saw yesterday, Jesus mixes together His explanation of this event and the last scenes of the world before His second coming. “Christ saw in Jerusalem a symbol of the world hardened in unbelief and rebellion [war against God], hurrying on to meet God’s punishment.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, page 22.

Even as the destruction happens, the Lord tries to save all who will be saved. In Luke, Jesus tells the disciples to flee before the destruction takes place: “ ‘A time is coming when you will see armies surround Jerusalem. Then you will know that it will soon be destroyed. Those who are in Judea should then escape to the mountains. Those in the city should get out. Those in the country should not enter the city. This is the time when God will punish Jerusalem. Everything will come true, just as it has been written’ ” (Luke 21:20–22, NlrV).

When Christians in Jerusalem saw this happen, they fled out of the city as Jesus warned them. Meanwhile, most of the Jews were left behind and killed. The guess is that more than one million Jews died during the attack against Jerusalem, with 97,000 more taken as slaves. “But, during a temporary break, when the Romans unexpectedly suspended their attack against Jerusalem, all the Christians fled. And it is said that not one of them lost his or her life. The place of their escape was Pella, a city in the foothills east of the Jordan River, about 17 miles (27 kilometers) south of the Lake of Galilee.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 5, page 499.

Think of a time when someone warned you about something but, to your own sorrow (sadness), you did not listen. Why is it so important that, while listening to the wonderful promises in God’s Word (the Bible), we also listen to its warnings?



When Christians saw the Roman armies surround Jerusalem, they fled just as Jesus warned them to.

THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS (Matthew 24:23–26)

Here in Matthew 24, Jesus answers His disciples' question about "the sign of [His] coming" (Matthew 24:3, NKJV). That means Christ's coming as King.

What other warning does Jesus give about the meaning of events before His return? And how has this event been repeated throughout history? Read Matthew 24:23–26.



The Second Coming is personal and real.

Here is Jesus as the world sees Him: nothing but a traveling Galilean preacher with a small crowd of believers. But He foretells that many will come in His name, claiming to be Him. Of course, that is exactly what has happened through many hundreds of years and even into our day, a fact that gives us more powerful proof of the truth of God's Word.

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

Jesus warns that many will come claiming to be the Christ. Then He describes what His return will really be like.

First, the second coming of Jesus is personal and real. It is Jesus Himself who is coming back to the earth. "The Lord Himself will descend [come down] from heaven" (1 Thessalonians 4:16, NKJV) is a strong argument against those who claim that Christ's return is only an ideal or just a new time period in human history. His return is going to be visible (something that can be seen), like lightning across the sky. "Every eye shall see him" (Revelation 1:7). The symbol of the trumpet shows that it is going to be loud, loud enough even to wake the dead! And most important, if at the first coming Jesus suffered insults, then, at the Second Coming, He will come as a victorious King (Revelation 19:16), having defeated all of His (and our) enemies (1 Corinthians 15:25).

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

KEEPING WATCH (Matthew 24:36, 42)

The second coming of Jesus is the great hope of all Christians who have ever lived on this earth. It is the fulfillment of all that we have been promised. Without it—what? We would not rise from the dead. Instead, we would spoil in the ground after death. Without the Second Coming, everything else about our faith becomes a lie. It becomes everything that the critics (faultfinders) and enemies have claimed against it.

No wonder, then, that in eager expectation of His coming, some Christians have set dates for His return. After all, so much has depended 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?

Because we do not 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 (Coming)?

Jesus is clear: we do not know when He is going to come back. In fact, He is coming when we do not 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 do not know when. The thinking, *Well, He is not coming back for a long time, so I can do as my heart desires* is exactly the wrong attitude (thought; feeling) that Jesus is warning against. We should be faithful because we love the Lord and want to do what is right by Him, no matter when He returns. Also, with all the verses that warn about judgment against those who treat others badly, the specific time of the Second Coming is not what we should focus on. Sooner or later, judgment will come.

As Seventh-day Adventists who have long believed in Christ’s return, how can we make sure we do not make the mistake of the evil servant in Matthew 24:48–51?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: In the study of the events shown in Matthew 24, Jesus also says, “ ‘I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly [surely] not pass away until all these things have happened’ ” (Matthew 24:34, NIV). This verse has led to confusion because all these things did not take place in one generation. Writing in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Dr. Richard Lehmann says that the Greek word translated “generation” is based on the Hebrew word *dôr*. The Hebrew word is often used to show a group or class of people, such as a “stubborn and rebellious [warring against God] generation” (Psalm 78:8). So, Jesus was not using the word to show time or dates. Instead, He pictured the class of evil people about whom He had been talking. “In harmony with this Old Testament use, Jesus would have used the wording ‘this generation’ to mean a certain class of people, without speaking about a certain time. The evil generation would include all who share evil characteristics [thoughts; feelings; actions] (Matthew 12:39; Matthew 16:4; Mark 8:38).”—Adapted from *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2000), page 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 a long delay? Have not past generations of Adventists believed that Jesus would come back in their lifetimes? And do not many of us expect it in ours? At the same time, how is not expecting Him to return during any given period also a form of date setting? How do we find the right balance in how we deal with the Second Coming?
- ② Read again Jesus’ description of what the Second Coming will be like. How is it different from some of the popular ideas about the Second Coming? The verses in the Bible are very clear. But why do so many believe in ideas that the Bible does not teach? What arguments do they bring up to defend their views, and how should we answer them?
- 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, and Caleb and Joshua? Also, what does Revelation 6:9, 10 say about delay?