



## Chapter 24

Are you a patient person? Are you able to peacefully endure long periods of anticipation and expectation? If you are, please share your secrets of success with your group!

### Icebreaker:

1. Describe a time in your life where you had to exercise great patience. What was happening and how did you handle it?

This chapter is a doozy! Among the interpretive obstacles is a clear call for great patience as we await Christ's return. More precisely, though, it's a call to an "active" patience because we must be ready for it even though we don't know when to expect it. All we know is that it's coming...at some future point...like a thief in the night!

### Verses 1-3

This takes place as Jesus and the disciples are looking at the temple from a distance on the Mount of Olives on their way back to Bethany. The disciples marvel at the temple structure, which leads us into a very difficult section of Matthew's Gospel. This is the last of Matthew's major sections of Jesus's teaching, and it's one that is full of intrigue. The two questions that drive Jesus's response are, in essence, *when will it happen* and *what signs will forewarn us*? Commentators point out how, for the disciples, they could not imagine how the destruction of the temple could not be synonymous with the end of the age. To help us understand the disciples' position, imagine finding out that the US will cease to exist in a few years. All the buildings in Washington DC will be destroyed and our government wiped out by an invader.

2. The analogy isn't perfect, but try to imagine a future beyond this. Could you see how easy it would be to assume it coincides with the return of Christ?

In sum, then, the disciples likely think they're asking about a single event: *the destruction of the Jerusalem temple which brings about the end of the age*.

### Verses 4-14

Jesus addresses the disciples' second question first, as it relates to the destruction of the temple. Each of these perils occurred prior to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Acts and 1 John both mention false messiahs and teachers; Rome was constantly at war; famines and earthquakes were recurring; persecution of believers was prevalent; and it could even be said that the gospel had made its way throughout the inhabited world of the Roman Empire (see Rom 10:18 and Col 1:6).

3. These "signs" are prevalent in our age as well (and in every age since the first century). Yet, as Donald Hagner states, "The signs point to and warn of the reality of future judgment, but not its time." How do we stand firm as we await "the end" (v. 14)?

Well-meaning readers of these verses have interpreted cataclysmic events of our day—earthquakes, wars, persecution, etc.—as signs of the nearness of Christ's return. It's important to keep in mind, though, how these are merely "the beginning of birth pains" (v. 8).

### **Verses 15-28**

Continuing on the question of signs, the destruction of the temple will happen after “the abomination of desolation spoken by the prophet Daniel.” This refers back to an event from 167 BC when a Syrian king slaughtered a pig and set up an idol in the temple. Jesus is saying this kind of desecrating event will be repeated, which in fact happened during the events and years leading up to the destruction of the temple between AD 66-70. Jesus’s instruction is for His followers to flee Jerusalem once they see this happening. The urgency in verses 17-20 matches the description of “great tribulation” and the need to “cut short” those days. Historical accounts outside the Bible tell us that the suffering in Jerusalem around this time was indeed unparalleled. Even so, scholars point out how the tribulation can also be a foreshadowing of the “church age” prior to the return of Christ. Jesus again (v. 4) warns that Messiah “pretenders” will rise up and try to deceive people away from loyalty to Him. There’s no need, however, to wonder about His return at the end of the age. You couldn’t miss it if you tried!

4. Jesus is warning that great suffering awaits His followers in Jerusalem. History and current events show us the prevalence of suffering for Christians in all generations and places. What can we do to encourage each other in the face of suffering?
5. False teachers (v. 24) are a part of the 21st century as well, so we need to be vigilant. Talk about whether you’ve had an encounter(s) with those who deceptively claim to represent God. How can we prepare for these encounters?

### **Verses 29-31**

These verses are especially thorny since Matthew seems to be recording Jesus saying that His return *would* happen “immediately after the tribulation of those days.” What is meant by this phrase? There are a number of potential explanations. For example, some see only an application to AD 70. Others see a reference to the entire period from AD 70 up until Christ’s return. Some see both. It’s probably wise to hold our position loosely and to emphasize what is more clear: that the return of Christ will happen at some point in the future that we can’t predict! The references to moon and stars is symbolic language found in the OT that marks key historical events.

6. These verses describe a final, global event where some will mourn the return of Jesus. It also portrays the culmination of God’s plan. What emotions does this stir, if any, as you consider that this moment is an actual event that is approaching?

### **Verses 32-35**

Most believe Jesus here summarizes the signs surrounding Jerusalem’s fall in AD 70 from verses 4-26. As these events take place with the temple’s demise then the disciples can know that Jesus’s return is near. NT scholar Craig Blomberg clarifies, though, that “nearness simply implies that nothing more in God’s plan of redemption must occur before the end can come.” It’s not implying a short timespan by human standards. It’s best to take “all these things” in verse 34 as a reference to all of the events of verses 4-26, which will occur within the generation (i.e., about 40 years).

7. Jesus “is near, at the very gates”! He could return in an instant or delay for another 2,000+ years. How does the uncertainty of the timing sit with you?

### **Verses 36-51**

It’s silly for us to think we can predict the timing of Jesus’s return when even Jesus didn’t know! We only know that it will be as unexpected as the flood was in Noah’s day. People were going

about their ordinary, self-absorbed lives, without any thought of how short their time was. Commentators disagree on whether “taken” in verses 40-41 means to judgment or reward. At any rate, the point is that Jesus’s return will be one of immediate consequence. The command to “stay awake” means “constant readiness” or “spiritual alertness.” Hagner explains that this command “involves an active dimension, namely, the faithful, righteous conduct of the disciples.” The remaining verses underscore both the uncertainty of Christ’s return and the need for constant spiritual vigilance. The attitude and actions of verses 48-50 are to be avoided at all cost. “Be about the business of the kingdom,” writes Blomberg, “so that whenever the end comes, however unexpectedly, you are ready.”

8. Like those in the days of Noah, is it possible that we too are going about our lives oblivious to the desires of God and what He is accomplishing? What can we do to reorient our lives to Him?

### **Tying the Bow**

We said at the start that this chapter, among all its complexities, includes a clear call for an active patience. We need patience because of the uncertainty of when Jesus might return. Our patience cannot be confused with apathy or passivity, though. Consider Donald Hagner’s observation that “Eschatology [i.e., study of the end times] is never presented for the sake of mere information but always and consistently as the motivation for ethical living.” The end times, then, is not something to “figure out” as much as it is something that should motivate us to righteous, Christ-honoring living in the present.

9. Let’s end this chapter with time in prayer that the uncertain timing of Jesus’s return would not lead us to spiritual apathy or slothfulness. Let’s pray as well that the certainty of His return would motivate us to righteous living in the moment, even while we wait!