

INTRODUCTION

Very often surprise is a good way to cure boredom in life. In my early marriage years my wife and I sometimes staged surprise birthday parties for each other. In a particular year my in-laws visited us. So I asked my father-in-law to play a supporting role. I invited some brothers and sisters to hide in the kitchen waiting for my wife to come back from grocery shopping. When my wife finally arrived home my father-in-law calmly sat in the living room flipping over a newspaper, pretending that everything was normal. Just when my wife walked to the kitchen everyone popped out and shouted: "Happy Birthday!" On some other occasions my plan did not work out that well because other people involved did not act in sync. In one year a brother who was supposed to hide in my home came late. When my wife got home she met him in the parking lot. My wife was curious why he was there. This honest man was caught by surprise and did not know how to explain himself. Immediately, my wife knew what was going on.

Our God is sovereign. Nothing would surprise Him. He had everything well-planned. In Matthew 24 Jesus revealed to us the things that would occur leading to His second coming. This is a difficult passage to understand. When I read different commentaries there are contrasting interpretations. The position I take is that some of the events described in the passage have begun to occur, while the rest will be fulfilled in the future. Things that had been accomplished are indicators that the rest of the prophecies will also be fulfilled.

Gospel writers Mark and Luke recorded that at that time Jesus' disciples were praising the glorious appearance of the temple. Jesus then responded in [Matthew 24:2](#) - ... "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." Shocked by what they heard the disciples then asked Jesus in the [next verse](#): ... "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" As we shall see, in Jesus' answer He intertwined things that would begin to happen in the lifetime of the disciples with the things that Christians of the 21st century still look forward to. Therefore, as Christ's followers we have to stay vigilant as God gradually unfolds His plan.

EXPLANATION

1. 明顯的跡象 Prominent Signs

Let us first deal with the prominent signs Jesus told the disciples that they should be watch out for. There are four types of signs Jesus alerted the disciples.

A. 偽裝 Deception

First, there will be deception of the truth. Jesus said in [verse 5](#): For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. Then also in [verses 10-11](#): At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will

appear and deceive many people. Satan's tactic is use falsehood to lure people away from God. In [Acts 20:29-30](#) when Paul bid farewell to the Ephesus elders he warned these first century church leaders: 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. Since then false teaching keeps coming. In the recent few centuries there are the Mormons and the Jehovah Witnesses that preach a false gospel by denying that Jesus is the one true God. Also, in the human history there were times when people rose up to proclaim that they were the savior. We Chinese are not that far behind. The founder of the infamous Eastern Lightning is a lady who also claims to be the Messiah. We need to stay alert and verify what we hear with the truth in the Bible.

B. 戰爭 Dissension

Besides deception there will also be dissension. Jesus said in [verses 6-7](#): 6 You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed... 7 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom... It is estimated that the number of people died in wars in the 20th century were far greater than the sum total from the previous 1900 years. Why? A main reason is because nations developed more powerful weapons for destruction. Back in the old days soldiers had to engage in hand-to-hand combat with swords and spears. Later, people invented gun powder, then missiles, warships, tanks and fighter jets. There are also biochemical weapons and nuclear warheads. Soldiers can sit in a command center far away and launch missiles to attack their enemies. We frequently hear in the news about threats from radical Islam or North Korea. It is hard to comprehend that people growing up in these places are brainwashed with hatred toward the western world. Even within U.S. there is the so-called domestic terrorism where there are organized assault of innocent people with guns or bombs. Can we find peace anywhere? Take heed of Jesus' warning: watch out for dissension.

C. 災害 Disasters

Jesus told us that besides deception and dissension, disasters will also be on the increase. He said in second half of [verse 7](#): ... There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. As a result of wars people's normal life will be affected. They will be forced to leave their homeland, agricultural activities will be put on hold and food distribution will also be affected. When food is scarce famine may happen. Besides famines there are also earthquakes. According to Wikipedia, in 2016 alone there are 113 earthquakes with magnitudes of 6 or higher. Close to 1,200 people perished. One of the deadliest earthquakes in recent years in China was the one in Wenchuan of the Sichuan province in 2008. More than 70,000 people passed away. We are getting so used to all the statistics about death and property damage that we have become numb, as long as we or our loved ones are not victims. By earthquakes we can extend it to other natural disasters like hurricane, snow storm, drought, etc. A sister who just came back from Asia said that she encountered two typhoons in a span of one month. Jesus told us that things will only get worse. Be prepared.

D. 宣告 Declaration

So far what Jesus told us are all bad news. However, Jesus said in **verse 14** that in the midst of many challenges the gospel will be declared among the nations: And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations... Often religious persecution would fan the flame of evangelism. **Acts 8:1** tells us that immediately after Stephen was martyred there was oppression to the Jerusalem church: On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. What did those believers do as they left Jerusalem? Continue to read **verse 4**: Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. These believers took the gospel to different places. The same thing also happened in China. In 1949 all the western missionaries were forced to leave and there were subsequent political uprisings. At one time there were only 20 churches remained in Shanghai and 4 in Beijing. Today there are about twenty millions of believers in the Three-Self Churches. Someone estimated that if that number is added to the number of Christians in the house churches there may be over fifty millions of them. The gospel will continue to be declared in the world.

The four prominent signs we discussed – deception, dissension, disasters and declaration will be on the increase. Jesus used a specific term in **verse 8** to describe the situation: All these are the beginning of birth pains. The fine-prints in the Chinese Union Bible more accurately renders the original meaning of the word. The moms among us know exactly what birth pains feel like. At first, there would be mild and sporadic contractions. The baby is not ready to be born yet. Gradually as these contractions become stronger and regular this future mom would know that her baby is arriving. Jesus' point was that when all those prominent signs are becoming more vigorous and consistent then we will know that Christ's return is getting closer and closer.

2. 緊迫的景象 Imminent Scenes

There comes a time when the prominent signs will be transitioned to a series of imminent scenes that clearly point to Jesus' return in the near future. These imminent scenes are extraordinary phenomena that will catch everyone's attention.

A. 褻瀆 Desecration

First, there will be desecration of the holy place. Jesus said in **verse 15**: So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel - let the reader understand. Daniel used that expression four times in the book. One of which is in **Daniel 11:31** - His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation. The chapter talks about a mighty king of Greece who defeated Persia. But soon Greece would be divided into four pieces, and none of the four new rulers were the descendants of the mighty king. This mighty king was Alexander the Great. Daniel prophesied that one of the four future kings would enter the Jewish temple and desecrate the place by setting up 'the abomination that causes desolation.' What Daniel wrote was fulfilled in 168 B.C. The name of the king was Antiochus Epiphanes. He defiled the temple by setting up an altar for Zeus and sacrificed pigs on it. To the Jews, pigs are uncleaned animals. Jesus meant that there will be a greater desecration to come. Paul depicted the scene in **2 Thessalonians 2:3-4** that: 3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the

man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. This "man of lawlessness" is the Antichrist. Bible scholars believed the Jewish temple will be rebuilt in the future. But instead of worshipping God the Antichrist would force people to worship him in the temple. An imminent scene like that will be hard to miss.

B. 災難 Distress

Besides desecration of the holy place there will also be great distress. Jesus said in **verse 21**: For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now - and never to be equaled again. The conjunction "for" seems to indicate that the great distress Jesus mentioned is related to the desecration of the holy place. If so, then it is will be a form of religious persecution. This unprecedented distress is so great that Jesus described it to be unequalled in the human history. A great number of Christians will perish, so great that few people would fail to notice. However, in the height of this great distress God shows His grace. **Verse 22** reads: If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. If it is not because of God's intervention in the great distress all of God's people may simply perish. **Revelation 7:14** tells us that the believers who went through the great distress will gather in heaven - ... "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." These people will come from every nation who are rescued from the great distress.

C. 迷惑 Delusion

Imminent scenes will appear as Christ's return is coming near. There will be desecration of the holy place and there will be great distress. Thirdly, there will also be great delusion. Jesus told us in **verse 24**: For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect - if that were possible. Compared to what Jesus said earlier in verse 5 about the counterfeit Christs the fake agents here have the ability to perform great signs and miracles. The former group may deceive people by their false teaching, while the latter group will deceive even the Christians by their supernatural power. In **2 Thessalonians 2** we read earlier about the future Antichrist Paul told us that this man of lawlessness will be able to perform signs and miracles. **Verse 9** of the passage reads: The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders. The Antichrist will be given power from Satan to do supernatural things. These spectacles will make all the magicians or qi-gong performances look lame.

D. 降臨 Descent

Among the imminent scenes of Christ's return there is a final and the greatest scene Christians long for. Jesus said in **verses 30-31**: 30 At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. 31 And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. After all the catastrophic and imminent scenes have come to an end Jesus will descend from heaven. At that time people of the whole world will witness this greatest scene. With the

advancement of communication technology every person will be able to see Jesus' arrival. John echoed Jesus' prophecy in **Revelation 1:7** - "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen." There will be no doubt about whether it is truly Jesus Christ. He is coming back to take all His believers home. What a glorious scene that will be!

CONCLUSION

Jesus will surely return. As Christians we have to stay vigilant as God gradually unfolds His plan. Jesus concluded His prophecies in **verse 32-33** with a parable: 32 "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 33 Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door." The meaning of the parable is plain. When one sees green shoots spouting on a fig tree it denotes that summer is around the corner. Once the branches turn green the growing process will not be reversed. Therefore, when all the prominent signs and imminent scenes Jesus revealed become obvious we know that Christ's return is getting real close. How close? **Verse 34** may be a little tricky to understand: I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. "This generation" can be interpreted literally as the generation the disciples lived in. However, since Christ has not yet returned, such interpretation would mean that the complete fulfillment of Jesus' prophecies fell short. Another way to understand "this generation" would be the generation when the imminent scenes begin to appear. Once "the abomination that causes desolation" shows up in the world platform, and once the great distress and delusion break out Christ's return will happen within the same generation. Just like a TV announcer's jargon: stay tuned, Christians!