

What are you waiting for? You might be waiting for results of a CAT scan. You might be waiting for a job interview. You might be waiting for your final exam grades or graduation or your wedding day, your retirement, the birth of a child, and on and on. Waiting for any of those events means more than marking time. It means you are expecting something good at the end of your waiting: a negative CAT scan, a job offer, good grades, etc. Just thinking about what you are waiting for gets your juices flowing, doesn't it? It's dangerous for me to get your mind going like that. I may have lost you for the rest of the morning.

My only chance of keeping you with me is to channel the powerful feelings you have set in motion. So, keep thinking about what you are waiting for, and think about what it means to wait. The event you are waiting for is future. That's why you have to wait. You also want what you are waiting for to be something good. But it might not be good, and that possibility makes waiting difficult. You feel anxious. You may not sleep well. You are distracted. But the difficulty doesn't defeat you, because a good outcome is possible, and you focus on that.

Four words define the experience of waiting: future, good, difficult, possible. We have another, more ancient and honorable word for this experience. We call it hope. Hope is what you experience, as you wait for important, future events in your life. The Apostle Paul placed hope very high among the powers of your soul. He said: **When I was a child, I talked like a child. I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me ... And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.** (1 Corinthians 13:11, 13)

Love is the greatest power in our souls, but hope is no slouch. Hope is sugar that sweetens the blandness and bitterness of life. The loss of hope means despair. The truth that Christ brought into the world comes alongside our ordinary hopes and prevents despair. That's really important, because ordinary hopes often disappoint us. Things don't work out the way we had hoped. If the disappointment is great enough, it can make a person cynical or bitter. Christian hope doesn't prevent disappointment, but it keeps life sweet, when ordinary hopes crash and burn. The Bible anchors Christian hope in Jesus Christ. His words that we read today in Matthew 24 convey hope.

## Background

These words continue what we read last Sunday. So, let's review what we talked about last Sunday. Jesus made a prediction that struck at Jewish national identity like a blow to the face. His disciples had made some comment about the magnificence of the Jerusalem temple. Jesus floored them with this statement: **"Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."**

It took them a while to respond. They did so with two questions. **"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 far as they were concerned, the end of the temple meant the end of the world. "So, Jesus, help us to be ready for it. How can we know when it is going to happen?" Jesus' answer to their questions occupies chapters 24 and 25.

At first, His answer ignored both questions. He was doing them a favor. They wanted a timetable. He did not give them one. Instead, He gave them what we called early warning signs. There are four of them: religious deception, political and natural

disaster, persecution of Christians, and the worldwide spread of Christianity. “You, my friends, want to know about the end of the world. That’s understandable, but I can’t let the end of the world divert your attention from what happens in the world before that time comes. There’s too much at stake to let that distract you.”

At last, His specific answer to their questions begins in Matthew 24:15. I should give you a heads up about His answer. In a nutshell Jesus said to them, “The end of the temple does not mean the end of the world. As catastrophic as it will be, the end of the temple just means the end of the temple and of the way of life that goes with it. That’s no small thing, but the world will continue on. God has plans you cannot possibly imagine.”

## Hanukkah

Now, we have the necessary background for what follows. We still need help with what follows. We find help in an unexpected quarter, the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah. This year, Hanukkah began at sundown on December 16 and will end at sundown on December 24. Here’s part of the story of Hanukkah.

“Around 200 B.C.,” (Jerusalem) “... came under the control of ... the ... king of Syria, who allowed the Jews who lived there to continue practicing their religion. His son ... proved less benevolent: ... he outlawed the Jewish religion and ordered the Jews to worship Greek gods. In 168 B.C., his soldiers descended upon Jerusalem, massacring thousands of people and desecrating the city’s ... Temple by erecting an altar to Zeus and sacrificing pigs within its sacred walls.” (<http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/hanukkah>, accessed 12/15/114)

The Jews had a name for that altar and those sacrifices. They called it “the abomination that causes desolation.” They hated it, and they hated the Syrians and the Greeks who had desecrated their holy city and their temple. They revolted. The Middle East is a tinderbox today, it was a tinderbox then. Guerilla warfare broke out. Around 166 B.C. a charismatic Jewish leader led the revolt. Judah Maccabee, Judah the Hammer, led a small army that drove the much larger Syrian army out of Jerusalem. They cleansed the temple of its pagan idols and restored its proper worship.

I apologize for telling only this part of the story. The whole story is well worth telling. I mean no disrespect. I am telling only enough that will help us Christians understand the Gospel of Matthew.

Now, we are ready for the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem. His disciples wanted to know when it would happen. Jesus’ answer comes in verse 15. “**So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’** you will know the time has come. In other words, “If you see the Romans doing what the Syrians did 170 years ago, then you know the temple is doomed.”

That was bad enough, but the human cost that went with it would be dreadful. When the temple desecration begins, says Jesus at the end of verses 16-17, “**Flee to the mountains. (Don’t) take anything out of the house.**” Just run! Verses 19-20 suggest horror. “**How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath.**”

And guess who shows up in all this misery. The deceivers. Verse 24: “**False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible.**”

Can we go back to the disciples? They thought the end of the temple meant the end of the world. You can see why. The only true God belonged to Israel, and He lived in Jerusalem, in the temple. The Jerusalem temple was God's home on earth. To see idolatrous soldiers going where no Gentile should ever go and desecrating and destroying God's home looked like the end of the world. And by the way, what Jesus predicted actually happened about 40 years after His death and resurrection. The Roman commander, Titus, and his soldiers put down a Jewish insurrection against Rome, and in their fury desecrated and destroyed one of the wonders of the ancient world. The temple was gone. The sacrifices were gone. The Jewish state was gone – again. The human suffering that went with that simply drove the point home that the end of all things must be at hand. It was awful.

### **The Second Coming**

But the end of all things was not at hand. Something else was coming. Something big. Verse 29: **“Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’”**

Jesus did not invent this language. He learned it in His Bible. He learned it from Isaiah 13:10: **The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.** Isaiah 34:4 says: **All the stars of heaven will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree.**

Isaiah wasn't talking astronomy; he was talking theology. The context of both passages was God's coming judgment on the powerful nations of the earth. God's judgment will bring such political and social disasters that you feel like you would feel, if you saw the sun and moon and stars lose their light and fall out of the sky. But even that is not the end of the world.

Jesus continues in Matthew 24:30-31. **“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. 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.”**

That is Jesus' summary of what we mean, when we talk about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The Bible has another name for it: **the blessed hope.** (Titus 2:13) That name recalls the pattern of hope we found in ourselves at the beginning of this sermon, doesn't it? The Second Coming is a future event, always more future than Christians would like. It is good. It is the event that will move swiftly to destroy the devil and death and the evil that wrecks our lives and the creation around us. No wonder the Bible calls it **the blessed hope.** It causes difficulty too because of all the waiting (2000 years and counting) and the increase of wickedness in the world. Why doesn't God just act and put an end to all that mars our lives? But the delay doesn't defeat us. The resurrection of Jesus assures us that the blessed event will happen. So, we press on, sometimes with anticipation of His coming in the forefront of our minds, sometimes in the back of our minds.

The Apostle Paul once wrote to new Christians in the Greek city of Thessalonica: **You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his**

**Son from heaven.** (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10) They waited for the Second Coming the way a bride waits for her wedding day. We don't wait for the Second Coming like that. It would be irresponsible even to try.

The Church's hope today for the Second Coming of Christ is like a mound of ashes that hides a smoldering fire. Maybe a sermon like the one last Sunday or this one will cause it to blaze up momentarily. More commonly, it blazes up, when earthly hopes don't work out, especially political hopes. Political hopes are the most dangerous, because they affect millions of people; and when those hopes collapse, they disillusion the people who believed in them.

Christian hope – belief in the Second Coming of Christ to establish the kingdom of God on earth – builds a firewall in your soul against all utopian promises that politicians, religious leaders, and charlatans make. And there is a prayer that builds this firewall in your soul stone by stone and layer by layer across the years. **Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.** I like to picture those Christians, who invest their lives in public service and the machinery of government, then go home and end each day by praying for the coming of the kingdom of God to earth. They know that the best efforts of them and their colleagues are provisional. There is no dishonor in their greater loyalty to the kingdom of heaven. It is in accord with reality, and it makes them better public servants, as it will make any of us better people and better at what we do.

### Take Away

If you are young, and you have high hopes for the future, I would say to you: Follow your dreams. God made you to have big dreams. As you follow those big dreams, stop two or three times a year and ask yourself, "How would I pursue my dreams, if I knew Christ was returning to the earth anytime within the next two years?" I don't mean you should give up your dreams. *Au contraire!* Keep your dreams. Pursue them hard. But ask how you should do that, knowing that when Christ returns, He will want to know if you pursued them to the glory of God. This exercise will develop you in such a way that you learn how to see your life in eternal perspective.

If you are older, and you remember the time in your life when you had big dreams, you have to face that fact that your dreams didn't come true the way you hoped. Maybe reality disintegrated your dreams, and your disappointment is so sharp that you no longer dream dreams for your future. No more Stardust in your eyes!

The Christian hope of Christ's Second Coming can take the sting out of your disappointment. It reminds you that there was always something more important than your dreams – the kingdom of heaven. It reminds you that your disappointment is as sharp as it is, because you cared more about failed dreams than you cared about God. Realizing that doesn't take away your disappointment, but it makes you wise not bitter.

"If you can dream – and not make dreams your master; if you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same;" (Kipling, *If*) it will be because **the blessed hope**, which transcends all human dreaming, has set your heart on fire and set you walking to a different drumbeat.