



HAVE NO FEAR

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This Tuesday, we will begin a chapter-by-chapter study of the Gospel according to Matthew, which is the first of four versions of the account of the Good News about Jesus Christ.

I want to encourage you to join me for this weekly study and discussion, which will be held each Tuesday evening in person (in the Family Room) and online (via Zoom). And I have several reasons for doing so.

Number One: to be a follower of Jesus Christ, you need to be a student of Him—a learner of His ways and of His words. By that, I don't mean that you must simply be acquainted with the story of His life, death, and resurrection, for that could be achieved by just attending church services at Christmas and Easter.

Nor do I mean that you should know what Jesus taught, or what commands He gave, as important as both of those pursuits are. Following Jesus is not about following words; it is about following a person—getting close to Him, hanging out with Him, both in planned and unplanned activities, and having conversations with Him about the things and people that are important to you, and, equally, about the things and people that are important to Him.

In order to accomplish this, you must follow Him closely through the only eyewitness records that we have of His background, His relationships and activities, and His motivations—the Gospels—and engage in discussions about all of this with others who are also following and observing (just like the first disciples did). To miss out on such interactions, is to remain simply an observer, not a participant.

Number Two: Matthew's account is to the rest of the New Testament what the book of Genesis is to the Old Testament—it is foundational, providing a carefully constructed bridge from the Old Testament to the New, and introducing key themes and teachings for all the books and letters that follow.

Matthew shows, through many quotations and allusions, that Jesus fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies about the Jewish Messiah, who was not only to restore the liberty of the chosen people of God, but also to release their God-given purpose to bring divine blessing to ALL of the peoples of the earth.

And Matthew introduces his readers to the Kingdom of Heaven as it breaks into our world in real-time. He recorded Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which describes and defines Kingdom living. He documented numerous stories (parables) that Jesus told about the nature of that Kingdom. He reported about some people's quest of the Kingdom, and some people's experiences of the Kingdom's impact. He also wrote down Jesus' predictions of the seasons and events that surround, and will surround, the coming of God's Kingdom to the earth. (It is this last feature that will be the focus of today's sermon.)

All in all, Matthew's Gospel account deserves your careful attention, if you are serious about following Jesus Christ, about doing God's will with your life, and about preparing yourself and your family for what is coming.

Political movements cannot block the coming Kingdom. Improving our economy will not delay its arrival. Saving the planet's ecology will not postpone Jesus' return.

He is coming back again, and He is coming, as Paul noted, "for all who eagerly look forward to His appearing." Does that include you? Does that describe you? Do other people recognize that you "eagerly look forward" to Jesus' return? Or, do the circumstances and challenges of your life eclipse the sunrise of that Day for you?

Let's listen to and think about some of Jesus' own words about the time that He clearly foresaw, while we ourselves would misunderstand it entirely, if it were not for His impassioned instruction.

For this, let's turn to one of the closing chapters of Matthew (24:4-12). There's no need for a "spoiler alert" here, as I won't give away anything critical, but I start near the ending so that you might gain a sense of what Jesus was moving toward with His entire life.

Matthew 24:4 And Jesus answered and said to them, "See to it that no one misleads you. ⁵ For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many. ⁶ You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. ⁸ But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.

Hear Jesus' tone. Not just His words, which can be so distracting, but the tone with which He spoke. He was imploring us—for our own safety and security: *See that no one misleads you.*

As God's Kingdom draws ever nearer and time on earth draws to a close, many people will want to be in leadership. So called "experts" will proliferate, in every significant field, vying

with one another for your attention and allegiance. They will propose answers—often conflicting with one another—to present or impending difficulties. Who should you listen to? Who *will* you listen to?

If they actually said, in so many words, “I am Jesus” or “I am Messiah,” we might be more reluctant to give them our attention. But if they simply allude to it by proposing short-term answers and resolutions that only depend on you turning over your faith and allegiance to them, we might not recognize our danger. After all, out of fear or compassion or simple weariness, we want answers, we want change, we want fixes.

See that no one misleads you.

There is only ONE Christ, only ONE Savior. And He is Savior of the whole world—not just all people, but all of creation and the systems that sustain it. See that no one leads you to put your trust elsewhere.

I do not suggest that politicians cannot be effective, or that economic and ecological measures cannot be beneficial. But Jesus is still and always the ultimate answer—not only in “ultimate matters,” but also in contemporary circumstances. He is the Savior of our Today, not just our Tomorrow.

See that you are not frightened.

This can be difficult, which is why Jesus was emphatic about it. This is up to you—it is a choice only you can make for yourself—because circumstances that we experience and circumstances that we hear about will be (and are already) frightening. Jesus acknowledged that.

You will hear of wars and rumors of wars between nations and kingdoms. You will hear about famines and earthquakes in various places. The news will be alarming (because that’s how the media thrive).

Yesterday was the 20th anniversary of 9/11—the day that ideological enemies of the United States gave their lives to destroy the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (representative of American freedoms and values). In one horrific hour, nearly 3,000 souls were killed. We were shocked! We were alarmed! Terrorism became a household word, and a national concern.

See that you are not frightened.

How could we *not* be frightened?!?

Only by the knowledge that God is still on His throne, superintending the throes of darkness in its last bitter effort to deceive and overcome the faithful. God still “works all things together for our good” and for His glory.

Only by the knowledge that our lives are firmly and protectively held in God’s hands and that no one and nothing that happens to us in this world can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. Our hope in Christ is strong! Our salvation is eternal!

Jesus continued:

Matthew 24:9 “Then you will be arrested, persecuted, and killed. You will be hated all over the world because you are My followers.

It is a matter of fact that the last century recorded more Christian martyrs than in the previous nineteen centuries combined! Most of us are willing to acknowledge mistreatment of Christians today... in OTHER parts of the world. But Jesus made it personal (you) and global (all over the world).

Christianity and the followers of Jesus Christ will be targeted with hatred. Concerted efforts will be made to exterminate those who are unwilling to divorce themselves from Him.

The organized church will remain in various lukewarm forms, but those followers who ardently believe in Christ will suffer. It is already happening. And it will spread.

See that you are not frightened.

If only all of our enemies were outsiders, and we ourselves were tightly banded together in the faith to stand back-to-back and shoulder-to-shoulder, as it were, in defense of one another! But, alas, Jesus warned us of growing animosity *within* the fellowship, also.

See that you are not frightened.

Matthew 24:10 At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another.

¹¹ Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. ¹² Because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold.

Some will leave the church. Maybe not officially, but functionally. They’ll just stop showing up. Our fellowship, our communion, will cease to be a priority in their lives.

Others, who continue to attend, will adopt the role of critic to undermine the faith and fruitfulness of others. Critical cliques will form. Gossip will increase. Complaints and betrayals will abound.

Hatred will grow—hatred of fellow Christians, perhaps because of prejudice against their background or ethnicity, perhaps because of envy of their gifts, perhaps because of pretense that presents superficial differences as core issues, perhaps because of the arrogance of self-appointed defenders of doctrine, who “strain at a gnat, but swallow a camel.”

Most people’s love will grow cold.

It was the overarching command of Jesus: *Love one another as I have loved you.* His was not a theoretical love, not a loving feeling only, or a conceptual love. His was an ACTUAL LOVE, an active love. God demonstrated His love toward us like this: Christ died for the ungodly, the unworthy, the unpleasant. Do we love one another like that?

Beware anyone or anything that threatens your active love of fellow believers. In words ascribed to one of our nation’s founders, Benjamin Franklin, “If we don’t hang together, we will surely hang separately.” Or, in Apostle Paul’s words, “*Bend every effort to maintain the unity given by the Holy Spirit.*”

See that no one misleads you.
See that you are not frightened.

See that you are ready to receive the coming Kingdom of God. See that you are worthy to enter it.

Your worth is not based on trying to do your best, nor on your accumulated religious works.

God counts us worthy if we trust in Jesus Christ. If we trust in Him sufficiently to follow Him alone when life is challenging. If we trust him sufficiently to obey Him resolutely when to do so may invite difficulty. If we trust him sufficiently to eagerly look for His return, in the face of a world full of frightening distractions.

See that no one misleads you.
See that you are not frightened.

Have no fear, other than the reverent fear of God.