

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

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These verses open a chapter known as the “little apocalypse.” It draws upon the visionary material from Daniel, which has a place in other apocalyptic literature. References to “tribulations” and “desolating sacrilege” and the coming of the Son of Man all derive from biblical imagery. Even though this chapter shares aspects of such a worldview, this “extended forecast” is actually part of the passion story. Jesus’ inexorable march to his confrontation with the religious and political authorities that will mean his death pauses for an extended prediction, given by Jesus to his intimate circle of disciples, that offers a glimpse of what disciples – disciples like you and me, can expect of the time beyond the end of the Gospel.

The occasion for Jesus’ discourse is the disciples’ admiring comments about the Temple. These comments follow last week’s story of a widow who places her last coins in the temple treasury – which in turn follows Jesus’ castigation of the religious authorities “who devour widows’ houses.” That story actually serves as justification for Jesus’ prediction that not one stone will be left on another, that they will all be thrown down.

The leadership is corrupt,
concerned with appearance
while drawing sustenance from the poor and powerless

whom they ought to protect.

The Temple and its leadership will no longer live off such people.

There will not be left one stone on another.

The ability of religious institutions to draw life from people by absorbing time and energy and money

rather than freeing them for a life of service in the world,

leads to the prediction of the Jerusalem Temple's demise.

The Roman legions literally dismantled, breaking down every building and wall in the entire city of Jerusalem in 70CE.

But Jesus' dramatic sign and prediction of the Temple's fate mark only the beginning of the end – the end is “not yet.”

No one knows the precise time of the end except the Father.

The larger conflict that Jesus' followers are a part of will end only with Jesus' return.

One of the things I find striking is this chapter's somber tone.

The future the disciples could anticipate would include natural disasters – famines and earthquakes – wars, social dislocation, including the breakup of families and community strife.

What a strange counterpoint to Jesus' announcement that “the Kingdom of God is at hand”

and his healings and exorcisms with which the story begins!

It also strangely sounds like a summary of the news on your favorite app.

Jesus' words are unnervingly realistic.

Following Jesus will not provide an escape from difficulties and suffering, in fact, it may make life more difficult!

This chapter doesn't offer us any explanation.

The world is tied up in a terrible knot and is in a horrible grip from which Jesus is liberating people.

Jesus speaks of a day when that liberation will be complete, when the Son of Man sends angels to gather his harvest from the ends of the earth.

For all its somberness, however, the chapter is hopeful.

The chapter is hopeful that we might be hopeful!

That hope is sounded even in the opening verses.

The terrible sufferings ahead are only the prelude to a new day.

“This is but the beginning of birth pangs.”

Like the natural imagery on which Jesus draws in the parables about the kingdom earlier in the Gospel,

in which humble beginnings may conceal

the bounty of the harvest that is to come,

the unfolding of the world's future
is compared to the experience of childbirth.
The immediate future holds suffering and agony,
but these are signs that God's promised reign is near!
A new age is about to be born!

In living in such a world,
everything depends upon knowing where life is headed.
Much of the difficulty in life is due to the bondage of a world
that has no room for such a one as Jesus.
The Temple curtain tears at the moment of Jesus' death.
The history of promise,
though hidden deep within a future that looks dark and foreboding,
will finally deliver.
The sun will rise on a new world
when the Son returns on the clouds of heaven to gather us –
all will see!