Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew 24. One of my favorite moments in *The Lord of the Rings* takes place as Frodo and Sam (two of the book's heroes) begin walking into the darkness of the evil land of Mordor. "I don't like anything here at all," Frodo says, "Earth, air, and water all seem accursed." Then, as they walk through this cursed landscape, Frodo and Sam begin to talk about stories. Sam asks, "I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?" And Frodo responds, "I wonder… But I don't know. And that's the way of a real tale. Take anyone that you're fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don't know."[1] Every time I read that I want to shout into the page, "You're in a happy story!" "Hard? Yes, terribly hard. But happy in the end. So, keep going!"

As human beings, we have an instinctual tendency to think of our lives in terms of story. And we all want to know, "What sort of tale have we fallen into?" Where is my life going? Where is this world headed? Will our story have a happy or a sad ending? In our western context, if you were to travel back in time 130 years or so, most people would have given you an optimistic answer. After all, the 19th century was one of remarkable social, intellectual, and economic progress. And at the dawn of the 20th century, many people believed that human reason and technological development would soon usher in a utopian age. However, the reality of the 20th century was far from utopian. Two world wars left millions dead, tyrannical states committed horrible acts of injustice. And human ingenuity created means of human flourishing but also means of human destruction which we had never known before (like the atomic bomb).

Writing in 1999, one author observed that, "It seems impossible to control the technological… juggernaut which seems now to be hurtling without a driver toward Armageddon."[2] In 2026, with the dawn of AI, many people feel this even more acutely. So, with the myth of utopian progress largely dispelled, where does that leave us? Well, it leaves us once again wondering, what kind of tale have we fallen into? And in our anxious days, an increasing number of people are beginning to fear that our story will have a sad ending after all. But here's the wonderful news: the Author of our story has spoken. And in Matthew 24-25, he tells us the very thing I said I wanted to tell Frodo and Sam. "You're in a happy story!" "Hard? Yes, terribly hard. But happy in the end. So, keep going!" That's Jesus's message to his disciples in these chapters. And church, that's his message to us, and to all who will believe in him.

So, I'm eager for us to dive into these chapters over the next four Sundays. At the outset, I want to acknowledge that these chapters have been, and continue to be, the source of some serious debates among Christians. And there will be different perspectives here within our church. That's ok! I've done my best in prayerful study to try and offer you what I believe is the most accurate interpretation. But here's where we can all agree: What Jesus says in Matthew 24-25 about the end of the world and his return are words full of hope. Hope our anxious hearts desperately need. Because life in this fallen world is not easy. And that's the main thing I want you to see as we walk through our passage today. Jesus does not minimize the difficulty of our situation at all. In fact, he identifies…

Five realities of life in a fallen world

Painful realities, which all people—including his people—experience. This whole section of Matthew begins with a comment from Jesus and a question from his disciples. Look at verse 1: *Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the*

[1] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings,* 711.
[2] Bauckham and Hart, *Hope Against Hope,* 17.

buildings of the temple (Matthew 24:1).

Jesus and his disciples have spent most of their time together outside of Jerusalem. But here they are in the great city, and the disciples want to make sure Jesus is taking time to marvel at the temple complex. It's very big, and very impressive, and they say, "Take a look, Jesus! Isn't it amazing?" Verse 2: *But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down"* (Matthew 24:2). "Impressive? Sure," Jesus says, "But it's all going to be thrown down. It's all going to be destroyed."

It is hard to overstate the shock this would have caused among the disciples. Imagine a group of tourists in Manhattan prior to September 11, 2001. And as they all gaze upon the Twin Towers, someone tells them, "You see these? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." How could that be? That would be catastrophic! Yes. And for Jesus's disciples, the destruction of the temple was such a catastrophic idea, that in their minds, it could only mark the end of the world. Which is why they ask their question in verse 3: *As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"* (Matthew 24:3). This is the question Jesus answers over the next two chapters.

Though the disciples thought the end of the temple would be the end of the world, Jesus shows them the temple will fall soon, but his return will come later. And while they wait, they can expect to endure five painful realities… five realities we continue to face today as we wait for Christ's return. For the sake of time, I need to move through these quickly. But notice, Jesus begins with…

1. False messiahs

Look at verses 4-5: *And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray"* (Matthew 24:4-5).

Jesus is saying, "After I leave and ascend into heaven, and before I come again, many people will claim to be the Christ." The word "Christ" means messiah or savior. So, Jesus is saying, there will be many people who claim to be the savior. And, later in the chapter, he says their claim will appear very plausible, because they will be very powerful and very influential. Look at verses 23-24: "*Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect"* (Matthew 24:23-24).

This happened within the lifetime of the disciples. In the years following Jesus's death and resurrection, Jerusalem was broken up into various factions. Each had their own zealous leader, who saw himself as God's man for the moment, the savior of the people. And plenty of people, who did not follow Jesus, followed these men. They put their hope in them, gave their allegiance to them, and raged against all who opposed them. The same thing has happened throughout history and continues to happen today. Think of the unparalleled devotion some people offer to the leader of a cult, the teachings of a false religion, even a politician. But we must not be led astray. There is only one Savior. And his name is Jesus.

Second, Jesus speaks about…

2. International turmoil

Verses 6-7: "*And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom…"* (Matthew 24:6-7).

Tragically, in this fallen world, war—not peace—is often the norm. In 2025 there were 65 active international conflicts, the most since WWII, and the fighting continues around the world today. And we ourselves may not be living in a war-torn nation, but I know some of you have friends and family who have been casualties of war and some of you have loved ones currently engaged in a conflict right now. We grieve this reality, we fear when a new conflict erupts, and sometimes, we wonder, is this the beginning of the end? Perhaps we think of Einstein's famous quote, "I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones." Einstein knew that we possess the power to destroy civilizations, even to usher in our own extinction. And this terrifies us.

But Jesus says, "Don't be alarmed!" How can he say that?! Because international turmoil is inevitable in this fallen world, but the end is not yet! And he says the same about…

3. Natural disasters

Verses 7-8: "*…and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains"* (Matthew 24:7-8).

Earthquakes, famines, and other natural disasters are terrible events. This summer, we heard of back-to-back earthquakes in Venezuela that caused massive destruction and took thousands of lives. Right now, over 25 million people in Sudan are facing acute food insecurity and malnutrition because of famine. I'm so thankful for the many individuals and organizations who invest time, money, and all kinds of effort to alleviate this kind of suffering. Because, as long as we live in this fallen world, these disasters will continue to occur. They are not the kinds of things that only occur at the end of the world. In fact, Jesus says, they're like birth pains. Paul picks up on this picture in Romans 8:22 when he says, *For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now* (Romans 8:22).

Since Genesis 3, this creation has been corrupted by sin, and we see it in the disasters we face. But do you hear the hint of hope? It's pain, but it's birth pains! Which means it's going to end with something wonderful, just as whenever a healthy child is born the pain of labor and delivery ends in wonder and joy. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Because Jesus—speaking very honestly—also tells us that in this fallen world his people will experience…

4. Persecution

Verse 9: "*Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake"* (Matthew 24:9).

Just as life in this world is marked by false messiahs, international conflicts, and natural disasters that affect all people, this life is also marked by some particular sufferings experienced by God's people. In one way or another, persecution has marked the last 2000 years of church history, and it will not end until the return of Christ. We have global ministry partners who are facing opposition, threats, and even violence for the sake of Christ. And as we gather freely here today, we should ask ourselves, what can we do for these brothers and sisters? Let me offer two

answers.

First, we can pray for the persecuted church. We can lift our eyes and look around the globe. We can learn what other believers are facing and bring their needs before the Lord. In fact, we have an amazing opportunity to do this on December 5. That is the date of our annual Christmas Card Writing Party for the Persecuted Church. You can come to the Student Ministry center, write a note of encouragement to a believer imprisoned for their faith, and pray for them by name. So, we can pray for the persecuted church, and second, we can stand boldly for Christ ourselves, no matter what opposition we face.

Perhaps our lives are not at risk because we follow Jesus, but our reputations might be, or our relationships, or our jobs. But when we remain steadfast, refusing to relinquish our commitment to Christ, we not only honor him, but we also stand alongside our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world. But for some, this pressure is too great. So, Jesus says, in this fallen world we should also expect…

5. Apostasy

Look at verses 10 and 12: "*And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another... And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold"* (Matthew 24:10-12).

Jesus is saying, "Until I come back, there will be those who take part in the community of believers, but only for a time." Some will fall away because of the pressure of persecution. Some will become persecutors themselves. Others will simply lose the love for me they once expressed, because lawlessness, sinfulness, will get the better of them. Church, that's a tragedy. But we know it's a reality. In 15 years of pastoral ministry, I've seen some who once appeared committed to following Jesus but later fell away. And I know some of you have seen this in your children, other members of your family, or your friends. It's very painful. But Jesus said it would happen. The love of many will grow cold.

Now, you might be thinking, "I thought you said Jesus had hope for us in this passage. This all sounds awful!" I promise, hope is coming! So, hang with me! But I want you to appreciate Jesus's honesty here. He does not say, "Follow me, and everything will go well for you!" "Trust me and every day will be skies of blue and red roses too, because we live in this wonderful world!" This world is wonderful, but it's also fallen. And he wants his disciples to know it, so they are not unduly discouraged and disoriented. He's telling us, when you turn on the news, or scroll through your feed, or experience these things… when you see…

- False messiahs
- International conflicts
- Natural disasters
- Persecution
- And apostasy

Understand, these are not occurrences unique to the end of the world. They are regular realities of life in this fallen world. And sometimes, all of these realities occur together in some great calamity. This was certainly the case in Jerusalem in AD 70 when the city and the temple were destroyed by Rome. This event was preceded by false messiahs and natural disasters. It was the result of an international conflict. There was persecution and there was apostasy. And for those who experienced it, it must have felt like the end of the world. Jesus predicts all of this in

verses 15-22.

I wish we had more time to unpack this, but here are the highlights: Jesus speaks of the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel. He is referring to a prophesy from Daniel that someone would defile the temple. A prophesy first fulfilled in 168BC when a pagan king placed an altar to Zeus within the temple. And in 70AD, when the Roman army stormed the temple, once again the holy place was desolated, before it was ultimately destroyed. Jesus goes on to speak of the terror of this invasion, encouraging his disciples to flee, and to pray it may not come during winter or some other time that would make it difficult to escape the city. Because things will get so bad, Jesus says, that if God did not limit the suffering no one would survive.

And if you read the 1st century Jewish historian Josephus's account of 70AD, you'll see that what Jesus predicted was correct. It's an extreme example of just how painful life can be in this fallen world. And over the last 2000 years, we could note other extreme examples as well.

This world is marked by:
- False messiahs
- International conflicts
- Natural disasters
- Persecution
- Apostasy

Sometimes it all seems to occur at once in some great calamity. Jesus never tried to hide this from his disciples. But then, he showed them why—despite all of this—they can still have hope! So, in our final moments today, I want you to see…

Three reasons for resilient hope

What will keep us from falling into despair because of the darkness of this world? What does Jesus have to say here that will show us that despite the difficulty of this life, we're in a happy story after all?

1. The advance of the gospel

Did you notice verse 14 tucked into all of this? In the midst of all this evil, all this sorrow, Jesus says, "*And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come"* (Matthew 24:14).

Despite the deception of the false messiahs, despite the persecution of God's people, nothing will stop the advance of the gospel! As Jesus said earlier in Matthew: Like a little seed growing into a large tree, or a little yeast spreading through a lump of dough, the gospel will be proclaimed throughout the world! Before Christ returns, all nations will hear the good news of his sin-cleansing death, and his life-giving resurrection, and his immeasurable grace. Nothing will ever stop this gospel from reaching and changing lives around the planet. And that means, nothing will ever stop the church from proclaiming this gospel.

As Luther famously wrote, *Though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us. We will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us.*

Church, find hope in the advance of the gospel and in…

2. The endurance of God's people

In verse 13, after speaking of apostasy, Jesus says, "*But the one who endures to the end will be saved"* (Matthew 24:13).

Now, I confess, if endurance to the end was up to me, I would struggle to have hope. I know my weakness and I trust you know yours too. But as Christians, we are never alone! We are empowered by God's Holy Spirit, encouraged by his people, and kept by his grace. Speaking to believers facing great trials, false messiahs, persecution, and all the rest, Jude—at the end of his letter—reminds the church that God will keep us from stumbling! God will empower us and enable us to run all the way through the finish line! God will see that his people endure!

So, weary and worried Christian, entrust yourself to him! Find hope in the advance of the gospel, the endurance of God's people, and…

3. The coming of Christ

Remember, at the very beginning of our passage the disciples asked Jesus, "What will be the sign of your coming."

And Jesus answers, "It's not false messiahs…
- Or international conflict
- Or natural disasters
- Or persecution
- Or apostasy."

These are the realities of life in this fallen world. No, the sign of my coming will be unmistakable. Everyone will know. Everyone will see. Verses 27-28: "*For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather"* (Matthew 24:27-28).

You don't have to guess if there's a storm when you see lightning. You don't have to guess if there's a carcass when you see a flock of vultures. And in the end, no one will need to guess if Jesus has really come. Every eye will see. Everyone will know. And church, his return is our ultimate hope. He will come to deliver us from all evil. He will come to restore all things. He will come to bring our story to a happy ending. And that will be the focus of our next three weeks. I hope you'll be here.