

Sermon begins after Scripture Readings and Sermon Text:

Ezekiel 38:1–11

¹ And the word of the Lord came to me saying, ² “Son of man, set your face toward Gog of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech and Tubal, and prophesy against him ³ and say, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Behold, I am against you, O Gog, prince of Rosh, Meshech and Tubal. ⁴ “I will turn you about and put hooks into your jaws, and I will bring you out, and all your army, horses and horsemen, all of them splendidly attired, a great company *with* buckler and shield, all of them wielding swords; ⁵ Persia, Ethiopia and Put with them, all of them *with* shield and helmet; ⁶ Gomer with all its troops; Beth-togarmah *from* the remote parts of the north with all its troops—many peoples with you. ⁷ “Be prepared, and prepare yourself, you and all your companies that are assembled about you, and be a guard for them. ⁸ “After many days you will be summoned; in the latter years you will come into the land that is restored from the sword, *whose inhabitants* have been gathered from many nations to the mountains of Israel which had been a continual waste; but its people were brought out from the nations, and they are living securely, all of them. ⁹ “You will go up, you will come like a storm; you will be like a cloud covering the land, you and all your troops, and many peoples with you.”

Matthew 24:29–31

²⁹ “But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ “And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. ³¹ “And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

Sermon Text –Acts 1:6–12 (Jesus’ Ascension into Heaven)

⁶ So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; ⁸ but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” ⁹ And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. ¹¹ They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” ¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away.

Easter Joy, but What’s Next?

2nd Congregational Church—Winsted, CT

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A man attended church one week, and he became increasingly agitated by the pastor’s message. On the way out, he stopped to speak to the pastor. He said, “You really have to do something about your sermons. You speak about the same topic every time I am here.” Stunned, the pastor replied, “But you only come on Easter Sunday.”

The man did have a point, however. Today is a day to focus on the resurrection, but we need to remember that the story does not end there.

Easter Joy Introduction

Before the dawn broke on that first Easter morning, the world sat in silence. The hope of the disciples had been buried. Dreams nailed to a cross. The stone was sealed, and it seemed

final. But then—everything changed. The grave could not hold Him. The darkness could not overcome Him. And death itself was defeated. Today we gather not to remember a tragedy, but to celebrate a victory.

The empty tomb declares that sin is forgiven, shame is broken, and eternal life has conquered death. If hope, peace, joy, and purpose seem elusive to you these days, Easter reminds us that God still brings life out of graves. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is still at work. So, lift your eyes. The stone is rolled away. Christ is risen—and because He lives, everything can change.

But not everyone is ready to accept the miracle of the resurrection. In the early 1800s, Thomas Jefferson created his own version of the New Testament, often called the Jefferson Bible. With a razor, he literally cut out every miracle—no virgin birth, no healings, no resurrection—leaving only moral teachings. Jefferson admired Jesus as a teacher but rejected the supernatural. The result was a gospel without power and a cross without victory. It reminds us that when we remove the miraculous from Christianity, we do not refine the faith—we empty it. The true gospel proclaims not only Jesus' teachings but also His resurrection, which saves sinners. It seems Jefferson was unacquainted with the abundant evidence for the New Testament's miraculous claims and did not consider that raising a man from the dead would be a trivial task for a God who created the universe and life.

I decided to take a slightly different approach today. I know what some of you might be thinking. How is he going to weave these Bible passages into a sermon? I pray for patience! We have all heard many Easter messages, and, as I said earlier, the story does not end there. My sermon today will span the events of the first century, consider the current events in the world, and the return of Jesus at His glorious Second Coming.

Exposition of Sermon text

Once Jesus' Earthly mission was complete, He ascended into heaven from whence He came and left it to His disciples to engage the culture to advance the kingdom of God on this Earth. Our sermon text describes the departure of Jesus from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, 40 days after His resurrection. Jesus final interaction with the disciples is the subject of our sermon text.

By some means, Jesus had called them together at the Mount of Olives for the event. Earlier, just ahead of our sermon text, Jesus had promised that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit, meaning that they would be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul says in Ephesians 3:16-17 that through the Spirit, Christ dwells in the hearts of believers, and therefore we remain joined to Him.

Now, as we see in Isaiah 32:15-20, it is a common theme in the Old Testament that the outpouring of the Spirit is associated with the coming of the kingdom of God. So it is not surprising that the disciples inquired of Jesus if it was at that time that He would restore the kingdom to Israel. The kingdom of God and Jesus will be established on the Earth in the future, and Christ will reign in Jerusalem for 1000 years on the throne of David, so it was a good question. Whoever asked the question probably wanted to know if that was the reason Jesus had called them together.

Jesus responds that it was not for the disciples to know the times or the epochs of His return to establish His kingdom. The Father has fixed the date and the events associated with the Second Coming, but that information will not be disclosed to the disciples. We are not to know, and probably for good reason. If we knew when Jesus was to return, it would probably strip us of our sense of urgency and our motivation to always be ready for His return, for it could come at any moment.

With this issue settled for the disciples, Jesus redirects them to the work that they must do. Instead of being worried about dates, they need to get to work. After they received power

from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, they were to carry the message of the gospel, that salvation has been purchased for all people who believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and they were to carry that message, the good news to the local area and even to the remotest part of the Earth, and it is to this work that we are also called.

Then a miraculous thing happened. Jesus ascended into the clouds out of sight of the disciples. Thomas Jefferson would have been blown away by Jesus' ability to control the laws of physics and levitate to the clouds. We absolutely do not know how Jesus accomplished it, but for Jesus, through whom the laws of physics and the universe had been created, as I said earlier, it would have been, yet again, a trivial matter.

The disciples were gazing intently into the sky, probably shocked by what they had just seen, when, behold, two angels, men in white, stood beside them with an important message for them. This Jesus, whom they had just seen ascend into heaven, would return in the same way they had watched Him go into heaven. Here, the angels are referring to the Second Coming of Jesus.

Since the disciples were on the Mount of Olives, we conclude that Jesus will descend to the Mount of Olives at His Second Coming. We find support for this conclusion in Zechariah 14:4 that describes the return of Jesus for the Battle of Armageddon, saying, "In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east...."

Now, we are not to fixate on setting dates for the Second Coming, as many have, misleading many and failing miserably, but we are called to be watchful and discerning of the signs of the times. Jesus says in Matthew 16:2-3 that we know fair weather is coming when the evening sky is red, but we often fail at discerning the signs of the times. God has planted many clues in Scripture as to the events that will foreshadow the Second Coming, but many are unaware, so let me share important signs that should get us motivated, not for setting dates for the return of Jesus, but for making sure we are doing the Master's business when He returns.

The Signs of the Times

So, what is next in the events that lead to the glorious return of our Lord, Jesus Christ? I believe, along with many other students of the Bible, that Scripture teaches that God has a different plan for the church and the Jewish people of the nation of Israel.

For the church, many theologians and Bible students would join me in saying the Rapture, the removal of the church from the Earth, is the next coming event, before the terrible Tribulation that will come upon the Earth. The Apostle Paul describes the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 where he says:

¹⁶For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

¹⁷Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

Jesus says in Matthew 24 that we must keep watch and always be ready for His return, and the church, since the first century, has stressed that Christians should live in a manner of always being ready for the return of the Lord. Notice, the Rapture is a different and earlier event than the Second Coming described in our Scripture reading from Matthew 24.

For Israel, I believe the next event is found in Ezekiel 38, which seems to clearly prophesy a future attack, led by Russia, in coordination with Iran, Turkey, and other Muslim nations in the latter days, which refers to the end times. I'll unpack that in a moment.

So, are we living in prophetic times, and are we nearing the return of Christ? It could be decades or centuries away, or it could be very soon. You see, some key prophecies have been fulfilled regarding Israel, and the current events in the Middle East, while not found in prophecy, perfectly set the stage for future prophecies about Israel and the glorious return of Jesus at His Second Coming. Allow me to elaborate and explain.

Our first Scripture Reading is from the Book of Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel, referred to as the son of man, is told to prophesy against Gog of Magog. This prophecy dates to 570 BC, almost 2600 years ago, and the conditions for the prophecy to be fulfilled have never existed until recently. In the prophecy, we are told of a massive attack on Israel, which will take place in the latter days, which in the Bible refers to the end times. The attack will be led by Gog of Magog, also known as the Prince of Rosh, whom God will use to accomplish His sovereign plan for the Nation of Israel. Gog is the leader of the attack, and in Ezekiel 38:15, he will come from the remote parts of the north, meaning the far north of Israel, which is exactly the location of Russia in relation to Israel. In fact, if you draw a line on a map directly north of Israel, it will pass through Moscow.

Furthermore, the ancient historian Josephus associates Magog with the land of the ancient Scythians, who inhabited the region that is now southern Russia and Ukraine, north of the Black Sea and toward the Caspian Sea. Gog's ally in the attack will be Persia, which is modern-day Iran. The others named in the coalition correspond to the modern-day nations of Sudan, Ethiopia, Libya, and Turkey, and perhaps others. God uses ancient weapons of war to describe the attack since Ezekiel would have had no understanding of tanks, bombs, fighter planes, and other weapons of modern warfare.

Verse 8 specifically identifies the timing as the latter years, and as I said, this indicates that the prophecy will be fulfilled in the end times near the return of Jesus. Notice also, verse 8 speaks of Israel as having been regathered from many nations, and according to the prophecy are living securely in their land.

Jews began returning to Israel in large numbers in 1882. The rebirth of **Israel** in 1948 followed decades of persecution, where the Jewish people sought a homeland amid growing European antisemitism. The **Balfour Declaration** (1917) expressed British support for Israel, and the **Holocaust** intensified global sympathy. After World War II, Britain withdrew from Palestine, and the **United Nations** proposed the partition of Palestine. Jewish leaders accepted the plan, and on May 14, 1948, Israel declared independence, immediately facing conflict with the surrounding Arab nations.

While Israel has been at war with its neighbors seeking to drive them out of the promised land, the prophecy does not describe that they are living in peace, only that they are secure in the land. We see at present that Israel is secure in their land since none of its neighbors is powerful enough to force it out.

As I mentioned last time, God is not done with the Jewish people, as confirmed by Paul in Romans 11 and Revelation 7. God has a plan for His chosen people, to turn them back to Him. We learn in Ezekiel 36 that this regathering of Israel was to be in unbelief, meaning that they would not have accepted their true Messiah, Jesus. This is exactly what happened in the last century when Israel was again officially declared a nation in 1948. The prophecy in Ezekiel 36 says that they will be gathered with hearts of stone, but God will open their eyes and give them hearts of flesh, and in the tribulation of the End Times as described in Revelation 7, a multitude of Jews will finally recognize Jesus as their Messiah.

I believe that this massive attack on Israel will be a main event in turning Israel back to God. Verse 9 of our Scripture reading says that the attacking forces will be like a cloud covering Israel, picturing an all-encompassing, all-consuming complement of forces, seemingly sealing the doom of Israel.

But the Bible tells us later in Ezekiel 38 the outcome of the coalition's attack on Israel. In the prophecy, no nation comes to the aid of Israel, which seems to indicate that either the United States has severed diplomatic ties with Israel by then, or they have somehow been incapacitated. But according to Ezekiel 38, God will supernaturally intervene, confusing the invading armies, like in the time of Gideon, turning them against each other, also causing

sickness to come upon them, as well as giant hail, fire, and brimstone. Then, we learn in Ezekiel 38:23 that many nations, including Israel, will know that God is the Lord from His supernatural intervention on behalf of Israel, and there will be no question that He is real.

Perhaps you heard that after the start of the recent war with Iran, after the installation of Iran's new Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei, the Kremlin issued a statement, saying, quote: "Vladimir Putin wished the Iranian people to overcome the harsh trials with dignity and stressed that in this difficult time Moscow remains a loyal friend and reliable partner of Tehran." Unquote.

It is not hard for us to imagine that Iran desires revenge on Israel. From the current headlines, we can see clearly that Russia and Iran are BFFs, best friends forever. Russia would love to destroy the only democracy in the Middle East to destabilize the Western world and aid its ally, Iran. Furthermore, it is no stretch to imagine that Muslim majority nations, like Sudan, Libya, and Turkey, that hate Israel and have sought to do it harm, will engage in the future with Russia and Iran in a murderous attack on Israel, given what has happened in the last couple of months. Yes, at present, it seems clear now that it is a very conceivable possibility that a coalition of the nations I just named would desire to attack and destroy Israel in the future, but Ezekiel informed us of this fact 2600 years ago. Incidentally, the prophetic foreknowledge, like this, displayed throughout the Bible, shows us that it is God's divine book. Dismiss it at your own risk.

Since the Jews incited the crucifixion of the Messiah in AD 33, the people of Israel have been dispersed throughout the world while their nation languished as a wasteland. I mentioned this another time. When Mark Twain visited Israel in 1867, he wrote in his travel book *The Innocents Abroad*, describing it as, quote:

A desolate country whose soil is rich enough, but is given over wholly to weeds... a silent mournful expanse... a desolation... We never saw a human being on the whole route... There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country.

Given Twain's gloomy assessment, Israel seemed dead and done. But now, just 150 years later, Israel is a thriving democracy, a productive agricultural powerhouse, and a center of technological excellence in the world. All of that has happened, and it is marvelous in our sight and 100% consistent with the prophecies we find in Ezekiel 36-39.

Dear friends, I don't want to alarm you, but it is my job to tell you the truth, and encourage you to be prepared. Rejoice in the resurrection, it means eternal joy, hope, and life for all who believe, but we are living in prophetic times. We do not know the time or the hour of our Lord's return, but it is drawing near.

Furthermore, when the church is removed from the Earth in the Rapture, those who are left behind will face a period of great danger and upheaval described in the Book of Revelation. Therefore, there is no time better than the present to be sure you are right with the Lord. Today is the day to repent and believe. I don't know when it will happen, but if Jesus came for the church today, would you be ready? Receive Jesus, and you will be ready and eternally secure.

Jesus says in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Have you placed your faith in Christ? Have you believed in Jesus? And yet again, Jesus says in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." All who are with Christ will be saved, but all who are without Christ will perish. That is challenging, but it is what the Bible teaches.

In our second Scripture reading, we come face to face with the return of our Lord at His Second Coming. It will be a surprise, surprise, ready or not, here He comes moment, following the great tribulation of the Book of Revelation, which I believe, after 25 years of study of this matter, comes not long after the events of Ezekiel 38 and the attack on Israel.

In the Scripture reading from Matthew 24, Jesus says that He will return immediately after the Tribulation, a terrible period of great distress where God calls the people of the Earth to repent and turn to Him. Great signs will appear in the sky. The Sun and moon will be darkened, the heavens will be shaken, and stars will fall from the sky, in perhaps great meteor showers. Then suddenly, Jesus, who is the Son of Man, will be seen coming on the clouds of the sky in great power and glory, and the elect, who are believers the world over, will be gathered to heaven.

I want you to notice that Jesus says in verse 30 of our Scripture reading that the nations of the Earth will mourn when they see Him returning. So, why will they mourn? The people of the nations will mourn because they will realize that the time of their judgment has come, and they are not ready, because they do not know Jesus.

I will close with this. Pastor Ben Virgo of Victoria Park Community Church in London describes the consequential meeting of William Wilberforce and a pastor, John Newton.

In December of 1785, a young man walked around Hoxton Square in London several times, trying to work up the courage to knock on the door of a pastor who lived there. The pastor's name was John Newton. And the young man's name was William Wilberforce. You see, Wilberforce was a brilliant young member of parliament, a great speaker, close friend of the prime minister, William Pitt. But Wilberforce had recently become a Christian, and he thought, "This is the end of my political career. They'll never take me seriously in parliament as a Christian. So, what do I do now?" [Wilberforce asked Newton?] John Newton advised him, "Don't leave Parliament. Stay with your friends."

Wilberforce took the advice and stayed, and two years later felt his heart burdened to fight the slave trade. He gave the rest of his life to that fight, achieving actual victory 3 days before he died in 1833, 46 years later.

How did John Newton know? How did he know that the young man he was sitting down with was going to change the world? How did he know that the world into which Wilberforce had been born was radically different to the one in which he would die and that Wilberforce would be the one who would make so much of that change? He didn't. What he did know was that Wilberforce had become preoccupied by many things and that only one thing is necessary.

Pastor Virgo continues:

You see, John Newton was not a good guy. John Newton had been a slave trader. He'd been a terrible person. He knew he had brought nothing to God that had impressed him. But that all he had brought had been his sin. John Newton knew that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. John Newton wrote a song about it that we will sing in a bit. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found. I was blind, but now I see.

Jesus Christ has not come to the world to be impressed by people. He has come to the world to save people. He does that by taking their blame, by taking their punishment and rising again. And his invitation is: "Come to me I'll give you rest."

[On this Easter Sunday, that is the true source of our Easter joy!] Like William Wilberforce, we are preoccupied by many things, but only one thing is

necessary, and that is Jesus. A relationship with Him through faith fills us with joy, hope, [purpose], and the confidence of eternal life.

John Newton, the former slave trader, never forgot his past. Late in life, he wrote, “It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.” Newton didn’t hide his sin—he confessed it. Yet he also declared, “I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great Savior.” Newton’s life reminds us that no past is too dark for God’s grace, and no sinner is beyond His mercy. We need only to turn to Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, live with urgency—because He is coming. Live with hope—because He reigns, and live with faithfulness—knowing your labor is not in vain. Anticipate His return, for He will come again. Amen.