

The End Times (The Olivet Discourse)

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Written by Joseph F. Harwood

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In Matthew 24-25, Jesus teaches on the end times in what is known as the Olivet Discourse. Mark records his version of the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13. Luke records his version in Luke 21.

Matthew 24 begins with Jesus walking away from the temple in Jerusalem toward the Mount of Olives. He had just issued a scathing rebuke to the teachers of the law (scribes) and the Pharisees, as we can see from Matthew 23. At this point His disciples came up to Him to call His attention to the temple and its buildings.

Jesus responded to them saying: “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down.” (Matthew 24:2). Jesus here prophesied about the destruction of the temple, which did in fact occur around 40 years later in 70 A.D when the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem and the temple buildings.

In response to His prediction, some of His disciples came to him privately a short time later as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives with basically two questions: “Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3).

Apparently, the disciples believed that an event as dramatic as the destruction of the temple must surely mean that Jesus’ coming and the end of all things would follow shortly thereafter. Jesus knew that His disciples were

associating both events as occurring at around the same time, and He corrected their misconception in His answer to their questions, which began in verse 4 with the words, “See to it that no one misleads you.”

In the narrative that follows, Jesus gives His answer to the disciples’ questions. However, His answer to what is essentially two questions is not clearly delineated but interwoven together in one narrative.

In verses 5-14 Jesus discusses the events that must take place before the end comes. These events are the signs of His coming about which the disciples asked in verse 3. These signs included: many who would come in His name claiming to be Christ, wars and rumors of wars, famines, and earthquakes. Jesus also said that His people would be persecuted and put to death, and that many who claimed to be Christians would turn away from the faith. False prophets would also appear and deceive many people. He also said that because of the increase of wickedness at that time, the love of many would grow cold, but those who stood firm in their faith to the end would be saved. In verse 14, He said that the gospel of the kingdom would be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end would come.

In verses 15-22, Jesus addresses the destruction of the temple about which His disciples asked, but He does not answer their question as to when this would occur. Beginning in verse 15, we read: “Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains.” (Matthew 24:15-16).

The reference to the “abomination of desolation...standing in the holy place” which Jesus spoke about can be found in Daniel 9:27, 11:31, and 12:11. Some say that the first fulfillment of this prophecy was in 168 B.C. when Antiochus Epiphanes erected an altar to the pagan god Zeus on the sacred altar in the temple of Jerusalem. Jesus’ reference to a similar event occurring again as a sign of the imminent destruction of the temple in Jerusalem indicates that there was to be yet another fulfillment of Daniel’s prophesy. From reading Paul’s teaching in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4, we can assume that there will also be a third fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy which will occur in the end times before Jesus’ second coming.

In verse 21, Jesus spoke of the “great tribulation” that would occur around the time the temple was destroyed, and then the narrative turns again to discussion of the signs of the end times. From this apparently seamless integration of these

two events (the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, and Jesus coming and the end of the age), we could interpret the destruction of Jerusalem and the great tribulation of that time as being a symbolic figure and type of the destruction of the world which will occur at Jesus' coming and the great tribulation that will occur in those times.

Beginning in verse 23, Jesus' reveals more of the signs that will precede His coming. He warns of false Christs and false prophets that will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect, if that were possible. Then beginning in verse 29 we read:

“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. 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. 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.” (Matthew 24:29-31).

Regarding the signs that will precede His coming and the end of the age, Jesus told His disciples to learn a lesson from the fig tree: when its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, then summer is near. In the same way, when all these signs manifest themselves, then His coming is near. (Verses 32-33).

Beginning in verse 34 we read: “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.” (Matthew 24:34-35).

There has been much discussion over the centuries about the meaning of the Greek word that is translated as “generation” in verse 34. The word from the original Greek text is the word “genea”, which can refer to a generation, or the group of people alive during a certain span of time of about 30-40 years. It can also refer to the successive members of a particular genealogy or race. It could also refer to a group of people who are very much like each other in their character and manner of living. From the context of Matthew 24, we can assume that the word that is translated as “generation” in verse 34 refers either to the Jewish race or to all believers collectively, those who are the “chosen race”. (Consider 1 Peter 2:9).

As the narrative continues in verse 36, Jesus said that no one knows the day or the hour of His coming. The angels in Heaven did not know, nor did He know,

but only the Father knows. Some things in the Bible are difficult to understand, if not out of reach for men. God revealing Himself to men in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is one example. When we consider the fact the Jesus Himself is God (John 1:1, 14) manifested to man in human form, we may struggle with the fact that being God, He did not know when He would return.

What we can know from the Scriptures is that Jesus “had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” (Hebrews 2:17). Being like His brethren in every way during His time on the earth, He too had to walk by faith, not knowing all things as His Father knew, but walking in obedience and trusting God, as we also are called to do as believers, “for we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

We previously mentioned the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem as being a type or figure of the destruction of the world that would occur at Jesus’ second coming. Jesus uses another type and figure of things that will happen at His coming when He referenced the destruction of the world in Noah’s time, as we read beginning in verse 37:

“For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be.” (Matthew 24:37-39).

As the narrative continues in verse 40, Jesus again spoke of the time when the angels would gather His elect from the four winds (verse 31), when He said:

“Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. ***Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.*** But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. ***For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.***” (Matthew 24:40-44, emphasis added).

As Jesus is nearing the end of His teaching in Matthew 24, He emphasizes that the day of His coming will be at a time when we are not expecting it, like a

thief who comes unexpectedly in the night. Therefore, He exhorted us to “be on the alert”, to watch and “be ready”.

Peter also taught about the day of the Lord coming unexpectedly, like a thief. Peter wrote: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.” (2 Peter 3:10). Knowing that this day is coming, Peter exhorted us to live holy and godly lives as we wait for Jesus’ return (2 Peter 3:11-14).

As He concludes His teaching in Matthew 24, Jesus contrasts two different groups of people who are symbolized by two different servants, as we see from verses 45-51. The faithful and wise servant will heed the words of his Master. This servant symbolizes all those who have been called to faith in Christ and look for His appearing. These will be found watching for their Master’s return, obediently going about the tasks that have been assigned for them.

In contrast to the faithful and wise servant, the wicked servant will not heed the Master’s words. This servant symbolizes all those who are unregenerate. These will not be found to be faithfully watching for their Master’s return, but when He comes unexpectedly, as He will, they will be found to be living a life characterized by sinful behavior.

In conclusion, as we consider Jesus’ teaching on the end times given to us in the Olivet Discourse, our focus should be on what we are to do in response to the fact that He will, at some point in time unknown to any of us, come back to gather His elect from the four winds and from one end of the heavens to the other. As we watch and wait for Jesus’ return, we should all diligently obey everything that He has revealed to us through His Word, and we should obediently be about the particular tasks that God assigned for each of us when He called us to faith in His Son.

