



“Signs of the Second Coming?”

Part II

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Today, we continue our study of the Olivet discourse as it’s recorded in **Matthew 24**. Much is made of this chapter by modern prophecy preachers who claim that Jesus is describing events that would come to pass in relation to the eschatology of the world or end times. While I believe that Jesus later addresses the subject of the end of time, He first describes the end of the Jewish temple and the city of Jerusalem, which took place nearly forty years after He spoke these words in AD 70. Not only the context, but plain statements Jesus made here show this to be the case and can help us to see through the false theories that many have today concerning the second coming of Christ.

Last week, we spent most of our time in the first twenty-one verses of the chapter and we’ll continue further into the chapter this week. We’ll see what Jesus was talking about when He answered the disciples’ questions about the sign of His coming and of the end of the world. Let’s reread the first three verses of the chapter to set the stage.

Matthew 24:1-3 “And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?”

Remember that the disciples asked three questions in response to Jesus’ startling prophecy that the Jewish temple they had just beheld would be demolished. They wanted to know when the temple would be destroyed, what would be the sign of Christ’s coming, and would this mean the end of the age or world. As Jesus begins the famous discourse, He answers those questions. We’ll look closely at those answers in the continuation of our study.

One of the most widely believed doctrines in the evangelical world is that before the end of time, Jesus will rapture the church out of the world and a period of tribulation will commence before He returns to establish His kingdom in Jerusalem and reign on earth for a millennium. I don't believe the Bible teaches that theory. I believe Jesus reigns now and His kingdom is already present. But those who advocate this theory suggest that there are signs that indicate that all of those things are about to happen, and that Jesus is about to return. The Olivet discourse is always used to bolster this eschatological theory. Its proponents allege that the events that Jesus describes in the chapter will all accompany this ushering in of the end times and that Jesus is describing how the end times will unfold.

But was Jesus talking about the end of time? His disciples had been pointing out the beautiful buildings of the temple and Jesus replied that they would all be destroyed, *not one stone left upon another*. They imagined that if such happened, it would surely be the end of the world, so they later asked Jesus to tell them more about this, asking Him when the things He prophesied would take place and what would be the sign of His coming and of the end of the age. Jesus answered by telling them what WOULD NOT mean the end was near, then what WOULD signal that the destruction of the temple was at hand. Much is unnecessarily made of this chapter by overlooking the events that took place in the first century close to the time that Jesus made these divine predictions. In fact, later in the chapter, Jesus said that these very things would be fulfilled within that generation. It would happen during their lifetimes. He said first, in **verses 6 and 7** that there would be wars and rumors of wars with kingdom rising up against kingdom, as well as unsettling natural occurrences such as earthquakes, famines, and so forth. Sometimes people get all excited today when they hear about various political happenings, wars, earthquakes, fires...thinking that this must mean the world is rocking and Jesus is getting ready to come again.

But we pointed out last week that all those things Jesus mentioned were documented to have occurred in the first century after He spoke these words. Israel had enjoyed a measure of peace since coming under the control of the Romans leading up to the time when Jesus was born, but that was all about to change. There would be unrest in the empire and these upsetting events that would take place in the early years of the church after the Day of Pentecost would cause some to think that the end was near—just as those kind of events still do today. It would make it very easy for imposters to step in and claim to be the Messiah come to save the people from those tumultuous times. Jesus warned them in **verse 4**, *Take heed that no man deceive you*, that these things would come to pass and they did not mean the end was near. Earth has seen war, as well as natural disasters, for thousands of years and will continue to do so. Such events had nothing to do with the destruction of Jerusalem, nor do they have anything to do with the end of time. They are not signs of the end of time.

Jesus said that not only would there be all this unrest and turmoil in the world around them, but that hard times would come for His disciples and the church as well, and neither would those things mean that the end was near. He said that despite these things, the gospel would continue to be preached until it reached every nation. What does He mean by that? We know that, according to Paul in **Colossians 1:23**, by the AD 60's when Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians that the gospel had indeed been preached to *every creature*. So, that set the stage for the events that Jesus was prophesying here, putting them in the first century and not some future time that we're still waiting for.

Jesus said that once the gospel had been preached to the nations, which would take just over thirty years from the Day of Pentecost according to **Colossians 1:23**, they were to be watching for what He calls *the abomination of desolation* to appear. We learned last week from **Luke 21** that this refers to the

appearance of the pagan Roman armies which would encircle Jerusalem and very soon invade and destroy it. He specifically tells His disciples that when they saw this occurring, that was their warning to escape Jerusalem before horrible atrocities befell it (**Matthew 24:16-20**). Those in Judea were to flee to the mountains. The church was to leave Jerusalem and take refuge in the hills. They were to get out quickly, and thus pray that this didn't occur in the winter or on a Sabbath day when they would've been slowed down or hindered in making their escape. He says they would not want to remain in the city because there would be unspeakable tribulation take place (**verse 21**). It would be horrible. Anyone who remained in the city would suffer incredible horrors.

If you read Josephus, the Jewish historian, he describes the Roman siege of Jerusalem in his *The Wars of the Jews*, and he paints a revolting, shocking picture of what the Jews suffered when Titus occupied the city. There was starvation and death to the point when the Romans broke into the city, there were already so many rotting corpses that even the calloused soldiers were shocked by what they found. Fires were extinguished with Jewish blood. We could go on and on, but when it was all said and done, at least 1.1 million Jews died in the five-month siege and nearly a hundred thousand who survived were taken away as slaves, many back to Rome to build the Colosseum and so forth. Most significantly though, just as Jesus said, the beloved temple was utterly destroyed. It was demolished, and with it the Jewish nation was finished. The Old Testament religious system with its priesthood and sacrifices was forever gone.

What we learn in the verses to follow shows that it is nearly impossible to overstate the significance of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and what it signified in regards to the reign of Jesus Christ and His kingdom. It was not merely another event in the timeline of history. It was not simply an event that occurred in the history of the Jewish nation. It was an incredibly important and profound message from God Himself. It was an act of God's judgment and it was a pivotal theological statement made when Jerusalem was destroyed, God doing so by the hand of the Romans.

With that as our basis, let's read on beginning in **verse 23**. This is after they will have escaped from Jerusalem in AD 70.

Matthew 24:23-26 *“Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect (meaning even the church could be misled). See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it.”*

Once again, Jesus warns them not to be misled by false prophets and false messiahs. The destruction of the city would open the door for imposters to deceive even the Christians to look for the Christ to come and save Israel, that there might still be hope for the nation. They would claim that the Messiah had secretly returned to restore the people, the city, and the nation, but Jesus said they were not to believe it. They were not to be lured back into the city, not to fall for this trap, because He says when He actually comes again, there will be nothing secret about it.

Matthew 24:27 *“For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.”*

Up to this point, Jesus has been talking about the Romans and their arrival as God's ultimate judgment on the old Jewish nation. But here, Jesus uses the word for the first time, which refers to His second coming, His personal return, which will come at the end of time. Remember, the disciples had asked at

the beginning when would the temple be destroyed and what would be the sign of His coming and the end of the world. They were connecting all of that. They thought the temple would be destroyed when Jesus comes again, at the end of time. But Jesus says no, He would not personally appear when Jerusalem is destroyed. When He comes, it would be obvious and seen by all, just as lightning that streaks across the sky, and they were not to be misled into thinking there was a future for the nation of Israel by virtue of the Messiah's return. Instead, He says that Jerusalem and the system it had for so long represented was now dead and would be completely taken out of the way once and for all. The only ones who would be saved were the ones who would turn to Him through the preaching of the gospel before Jerusalem was destroyed. After that, the old physical nation would be no more.

Matthew 24:28 **“For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.”**

The word *eagles* could also be translated *vultures*. That's a familiar sight. The Israelites of the first century had their chance when the gospel was offered to them first of all, but those who had rejected the Christ were not the true Israel. They were not the remnant, and they are pictured by Christ here as a corpse, a dead body, with birds approaching their prey and hovering above—referring to the Romans who were God's instrument of punishment and destruction. So, the fall of Jerusalem marked the end of the old nation and confirmed the reign of Jesus over the new and true Israel of God—the church. There is no doubt that Jesus reigns and all the things testified to by the apostles in those thirty-some years after the Day of Pentecost were true. God vindicated all of that in the destruction of the city of Jerusalem.

Matthew 24:29-31 **“Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”**

What tribulation is He talking about? The tribulation He has just described: the siege of the city of Jerusalem that would happen in that generation. These particular verses are what tempt so many people to believe that Jesus is talking here about the end of time. They say this shows beyond a shadow of doubt that He is not talking about the first century destruction of Jerusalem but must be talking about the end of time. Such things as the sun and moon going dark, the stars falling from heaven, and so forth could only be describing the destruction of the material universe and, therefore, the end of everything. So, they say, these must be signs of Jesus' second coming and the end of the world.

But friend, it is important to note that this type of language was familiar language to the Jews of Jesus' day and had been for hundreds of years. It was used in the Old Testament by the inspired prophets and during the intertestamental period by the various writers of apocalyptic literature in circulation at that time. It was familiar language used commonly and figuratively to refer to the fall of nations, empires, and rulers. You see, it's prophetic language and not literal language. For example, look at **Isaiah 13** when the prophet describes the fall of ancient Babylon.

Isaiah 13:10 **“For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine.”**

That's not talking about the destruction of the universe and the end of time. Rather, it's talking about the fall of Babylon thousands of years ago. Later, the prophet foretold the judgment of God against the ancient Edomites:

Isaiah 34:4-5 "And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree. For my sword shall be bathed in heaven: behold, it shall come down upon Idumea, and upon the people of my curse, to judgment."

This doesn't refer to the destruction of the actual heavens above us. It was figurative for the fall of a nation. In this case, the Edomites of old.

Ezekiel uses similar terms. We know that the prophet is talking about Pharaoh and ancient Egypt from what he says in **verse 2**.

Ezekiel 32:2 "Son of man, take up a lamentation for Pharaoh king of Egypt, and say unto him, Thou art like a young lion of the nations, and thou art as a whale in the seas: and thou camest forth with thy rivers, and troubledst the waters with thy feet, and fouledst their rivers."

Now look at the judgment he promises will befall Pharaoh—not the universe, but Pharaoh and his government.

Ezekiel 32:7-8 "And when I shall put thee out, I will cover the heaven, and make the stars thereof dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee, and set darkness upon thy land, saith the Lord GOD."

Again, we see these figures pointing to judgments of God against earthly powers and nations at various times, and not to the end of the world. That's exactly how Jesus is using those terms in **Matthew 24** to refer to Jerusalem and fleshly Israel. This is His way of saying that when Jerusalem is destroyed in AD 70, it is God's repudiation of the old, physical, carnal nation of Israel and His vindication of the elect remnant that now constitutes the true Israel, the new Israel, spiritual Israel. Thus, in the very next sentence, Jesus says this:

Matthew 24:30 "And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."

Here again, someone says, *That's obviously referring to the second coming of Jesus*. But notice: He doesn't say the Son of man will appear in heaven. He says *the sign of the Son of man* because He is not talking about Christ's personal return at the end of time. He's talking about the obvious vindication of Christ and the church and God's repudiation of the old Israel and its religious system which had rejected Jesus. All of that was seen in the destruction of the city and its temple. He says when that happens, it will cause the tribes of earth to mourn. The Greek word for *earth* here refers to *land*. The tribes of Israel throughout the land. What land? The land of Canaan. They would mourn when they saw Jerusalem destroyed and their religion gone. The phrase *the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven* is another Old Testament phrase that does not refer to a literal appearance, but rather is figurative language for God's judgment (**Isaiah 19:1, Psalm 97:2-3**). In other words, when these things took place in AD 70, the

old physical nation would be judged and the Christ whom they had rejected would be vindicated and set forth to be the true king of spiritual Israel, just as had begun on the Day of Pentecost and had been testified by the apostles in miracles, signs, and wonders that accompanied them since that time.

Matthew 24:31 “And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

Angels doesn't necessarily refer to *heavenly creatures*, but the word simply means *messengers*. In this case, it refers to the apostles who were messengers of the gospel. *The sounding of the trumpet* is another Old Testament reference to when they would blow a trumpet to gather the people at various times for celebrations, proclamations, feasts, and so forth. Jesus is saying that with the destruction of Jerusalem, the gospel would finally call all of spiritual Israel together in one nation in Christ. We're living in that era now. It's the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether we be Jew or Gentile, if we are in Christ, Paul taught that we are the true children of Abraham and the true Israel of God (**Galatians 3**). So, you see, Jesus is not referring to the end of time. He is not giving signs of the end of the world. He is predicting the destruction of the ancient city of Jerusalem and the Old Testament temple and the symbolic ending of the old and confirmation of the new in Christ. So, what of the end of time? Jesus uses thirty-five verses of this great discourse to show them that the end of Jerusalem does not mean the end of the world. He answers their question about His second coming and the end of time beginning in **verse 36**.

Matthew 24:36 “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.”

He has given all of these signs and wonders of the destruction of Jerusalem, but He says of the day of His return, *no man knows the day or hour*. Not even the Son of man. He says that there will be no such signs of His coming as the signs pointing to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Jesus will come again one day to destroy the wicked and take the saved to heaven with Him. But we cannot know the time that will take place. Therefore, the message is plain: it could be today, tomorrow, a thousand years from now. And we should always be robed and ready for His return. For it will one day come, without warning, like a thief in the night.

Are you ready for the coming of Jesus? If you have not placed your faith in Him, repented of your sins, confessed that He is the Christ, the Son of God, and been buried with Him in baptism for the remission of your sins and added to His church, you are not prepared for His return. You need to get prepared. If we can help you in your obedience to the gospel, we would be delighted to do that today.

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