

The Address to the Disciples
Matthew 24:1-3
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

Matthew 24-25 records the last of Jesus' five discourses in this Gospel (cf. chapters 5-7, 10, 13, and 18). This address, known as the Olivet Discourse, as it was given by Jesus "*As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives*" (24:3), details the events leading up to the second coming of Jesus in the establishment of the messianic kingdom upon earth. The Olivet Discourse immediately follows the condemnation of the religious leaders in Matthew 23. This is important because Jesus then spoke of the coming judgment to the nation that had rejected Him as God's plan for Israel reaches its final stage.

All three synoptic Gospels have parallel passages (cf. Mark 13:1-37; Luke 21:5-36), but Matthew's account is much longer. Mark and Luke cover much of Matthew 24:1-44, while Matthew continues with three additional parables (the parables of the two servants, the ten virgins, and the talents, before concluding with the judgment upon the nations. Because Matthew's account is fuller than the other Gospels, chapters 24-25 becomes the central passage for any study of end times theology in the synoptic Gospels.

As people have studied Matthew 24-25, there has been substantial disagreement in interpretations regarding what Jesus spoke about. There are fundamentally two approaches to the meaning of this passage, with the first considering Jesus to be speaking of the coming destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and the second considering Jesus to be speaking of the events leading up to His return that still awaits its fulfillment today. There are some of the first view who see this passage as speaking of Christ's future return in Matthew 24:29-31 but see the events of 28:4-28 as speaking of the past destruction of Jerusalem.

There are many reasons why this passage must be understood as yet to be fulfilled. Throughout the study of this passage the places that demand this interpretation will be noted. As such, this understanding of this passage fits well with the Old Testament prophecies of the future judgment of Israel before the coming of the kingdom of God to earth. If we study the prophetic texts of the kingdom literally, we are compelled to view Matthew 24-25 as being futuristic in nature. Since all prophecy that has been fulfilled in the past has been fulfilled literally, there is no reason to consider this prophetic section of Scripture to be anything other than literal in its interpretation.

Jesus' question after leaving the temple (24:1-2)

The setting for this last address by Jesus in Matthew 24-25 is the Mount of Olives (24:3), but equally important is where Jesus went to this mountain from, namely the temple. Matthew transitions from Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees to the result of this condemnation, which centered around the temple, when they depart from to go to the Mount of Olives. Jesus no longer referred to the temple as His house (21:13), but "*your house,*" since they turned the temple from a house of prayer into "*a robbers' den.*" It was why their house would be left desolate, both spiritually when the church would become the dwelling place of God, "*you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you*" (1 Corinthians 3:16), and physically (cf. 23:38).

The specific question by Jesus, "*Do you not see all these things?*" was precipitated by disciples' marveling at the magnificence of the temple as they departed. Mark 13:1 tells us what the disciples said to Jesus as they pointed out the temple buildings, "*Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!*" They considered it to be that it was "*adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts*" (cf. Luke 21:5). Therefore, Jesus did not initiate the teaching about the temple, but the synoptic Gospel writers included it as it shows the turning of the work of God from the temple in Israel to the Holy Spirit in the church.

Jesus had just spoken publicly about the desolation of the temple, "*Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!*" (23:38). Now Jesus used their exclamation about the external beauty of the temple to teach them its temporary nature. But He prefaced His statement about its destruction with the rhetorical question, "Do you not see all these things?" The obvious answer is that the disciples did not see.

What the disciples failed to see was not the temple, or that it would be destroyed, for that would be decades into the future, but that the temple was being left behind in the work of God in the world. They only saw beautiful architecture, built with massive stones, some weighing an estimated one hundred tons, and with 100,000 talents of gold. But this was only an external valuation. The real importance of the temple was that it was God's house, and they missed that it was at the end of its spiritual usefulness.

For Jesus to say "*not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down*" was remarkable. For the disciples, such a thing would be an unimaginable destruction of such magnificence. Even though Jesus had said the temple would be left desolate, this degree of destruction would be shocking.

The disciples' question after arriving on the Mount of Olives (24:3)

Between Jesus' words to the disciples in verse 2 and their questions to Him in verse 3, they had all moved to the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives was to the east of Jerusalem, on the eastern side of the Kidron Valley, which separated the Mount of Olives from Mount Zion. This location is why the address by Jesus is known as the Olivet Discourse.

It is fitting that Jesus spoke the words of Matthew 24-25 while sitting on the Mount of Olives, since this was where the prophet Zechariah predicted that the Messiah would stand in judgment of the nations when He establishes the kingdom of God on the earth. *"In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south"* (Zechariah 14:4).

The book of Zechariah will be fundamental to this discourse. Matthew 24:30 alludes to Zechariah 12:10-11, which speaks of a time when the *"all tribes of the earth mourn"* as they *"look on him whom they have pierced and they will mourn for Him."* Matthew 24:31 includes the language from Zechariah 9:14, *"And the Lord GOD will blow the trumpet"* when the prophet spoke of Judah's deliverance. Matthew 24:36 states that the final day is known only to God, similar to Zechariah 14:7, *"For it will be a unique day which is known to the LORD, neither day nor night, but it will come about that at evening time there will be light."* Also, both Zechariah 14:4-5 and Matthew 25:31 describe the Messiah coming in His glory with all the angels.

It was upon the Mount of Olives that the disciples asked Jesus for more information about the destruction of the temple, *"Tell us, when will these things happen?"* They also asked a second question, *"and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"* For the disciples, the destruction of the temple would coincide with the coming of Jesus to bring the end to this present age by ushering the nation of Israel into the kingdom of God.

Historically, we know the answer to the question of when the temple would be destroyed would be in 70 AD. It was begun by Herod the Great in 20 BC to replace Solomon's temple, which was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Herod sought to expand it to be the largest religious structure in the ancient world and while it would only take 18 months to build, the expanses of the area would take several more years and would not be fully completed until 64 AD.

Although there was an answer to the question of when the temple would be destroyed, this was not the question that Jesus answered. Nowhere in Matthew 24-25 does Jesus explain the timing of when these things would happen. But this leaves the question about whether Matthew 24-25 addresses the destruction of the temple at all. Those who believe that it does are known as Preterists, and view Matthew 24 as speaking about the destruction of the temple, while those who believe that Jesus only addresses the second question of the signs of His coming and the end of the age are known as Futurists.

The Preterist view does not see the second coming of Jesus (Matthew 24:29-31) as being a literal return to earth but rather as a spiritual judgment in 70 AD. All these details of Matthew 24:4-35 are historical to the destruction of Jerusalem.

This view sees the disciples' questions as a singular unit, and it appeals to how Mark 13:4 and Luke 21:7 leave off the phrase about the end of the age from their question. The premise is that if Jesus was addressing some future time, the other Gospels would have included the part about when the end of the age would be. However, the disciples did ask about when the end of the age would be, and simply because one Gospel includes more detail, does not imply that detail is insignificant. For example, Mark's Gospel tells us that "*Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately*" (Mark 13:3), yet this additional information does not change the meaning of the text in any Gospel, it only adds to it. Indeed, "*what will be the sign of your coming*" corresponds to "*the end of the age.*"

The Preterist view also points to Matthew 24:34 to prove that this discourse is limited to the first century, "*Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.*" The assumption then is that the people that Jesus lived with would still be alive when "*all these things take place.*" However, the more straightforward reading of the context is that Jesus spoke of the generation that would be the generation that would see His coming.

A related interpretation sees only part of Matthew 24-25 as related to the destruction of Jerusalem. Some see Matthew 24:36 and following as referencing the future, and others see Matthew 24:29 and following as referencing the future. But in both cases, the reading of Matthew 24:4-28 cannot possibly be understood literally. This loose spiritualization of direct prophetic statements is indicative of theological perspectives that deny the truth of a coming earthly millennial kingdom upon the earth.

The futurist view sees Jesus as describing events in Matthew 24:4-25:46 that would be occurring entirely in the future. This would mean Jesus did not answer the question of when the temple could be destroyed, but rather He focused solely on their question, *“and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”* This second question is grammatically one singular question, connecting the end of the age with His second coming.

There are many reasons why the futurist view is the correct approach for interpreting Matthew 24-25.

1. The depiction of the return of Christ in Matthew 24:29-31 is in a literal sense. These things that really will happen include the actual return of Christ and the gathering of the elect. To consider the return of Christ to be only in a spiritual sense is inconsistent with the literal sense of the many passages that speak of a rule of the Messiah on the earth, which is why the Jewish people expected their Messiah to be a conquering king and failed to understand the nature of Jesus' first coming. It is in Christ's return that we will one day see the manifestation of His rule on earth.

2. The Great Tribulation has never occurred. Matthew 24:21-22 describes this Great Tribulation period, *“For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”*

There is in no literal sense that anyone could view the Roman destruction of Jerusalem as coming close to matching the severity of other world conflicts, most notably World Wars I and II. Jesus speaks of such a distressful era of time that would be unprecedented in both scope and severity. As horrible as the Holocaust was for Jewish people under Nazi Germany, the Great Tribulation will be even worse.

This future view of a Great Tribulation period is consistent with Old Testament prophecies in Daniel 12:1, *“And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued,”* and *“Alas! for that day is great, There is none like it; And it is the time of Jacob's distress, But he will be saved from it”* (Jeremiah 30:7). This is described in the Book of Revelation, *“And he said to me, ‘These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’”* (7:14).

3. The abomination of desolation is described in a literal sense. Jesus referred to the *"abomination of desolation, which was spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place"* (Matthew 24:15). This is a future Antichrist figure who will desecrate a rebuilt Jewish temple. The passage that Jesus referenced is Daniel 9:27, *"And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate."*

This was not fulfilled in the destruction of 70 AD because there was no unique evil ruler making a firm covenant with Israel and setting himself up in the temple to be worshipped (cf. Mark 13:14). The New Testament describes this in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 as in the future (cf. Revelation 13:11-18).

4. The cosmic signs that Jesus spoke of, *"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"* (Matthew 24:29), have never occurred. This cannot be some metaphorical description of the fall of the Jewish religious and political system of power.

5. The gospel has not been preached throughout the world. When Jesus said, *"This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come"* (Matthew 24:14), He could not have meant the end would come in 70 AD. Even the known world at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem had not seen the gospel preached in all of it. Even today, we still are working to bring the gospel to thousands of ethnic groups around the globe. This fulfillment awaits the tribulation period.

6. The futurist view correlates with many other biblical texts. Matthew 24 with other prophetic passages in the Old Testament, such as Daniel 9-12, Isaiah 24, Ezekiel 38-39, and Zechariah 13-14. A consistent, literal reading across these texts points to future, interconnected events such as the rise of the Antichrist, a rebuilt temple, and global tribulation. The same is true of the second coming of Jesus. The Old Testament spoke of a literal coming with a literal kingdom in Daniel 7:13-14 *"One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed."* And certainly the Book of Revelation is likewise best understood in a futuristic sense.

Conclusion

The condemnation of the Jewish leaders in Matthew 23 is followed by the prophecy of Jesus about His future coming with His kingdom. He used the opportunity to teach this to His disciples when they were curious about what He told them about the coming destruction of the temple as they admired its grandeur. Jesus taught them this discourse outside the city, since He had been formally rejected in it, had pronounced judgment on it, and had withdrawn from it. The temple had been left behind in the plan of God, to be replaced in the days ahead by the coming of the Holy Spirit.

All prophecy is for a purpose. It is not simply to inform, but to encourage faithfulness to the Lord, among present and future generations. We can look back at what the Lord has promised and observe His faithfulness. This can be done by reading His words in a normal, plain sense. Therefore, we ought to take this same approach toward reading any unfulfilled promises.

To know of the Lord's future faithfulness to bring about His kingdom should give us great hope in remaining steadfast during any difficult situation. Just as He has been faithful in the past, so He will be in the future. We can learn from His past words and their past fulfillment, and we can learn from His present words that await a future fulfillment. After Paul revealed the truth of the rapture of the church, he wrote, *"Therefore comfort one another with these words"* (1 Thessalonians 4:18). Therefore, prophecy is very important for our spiritual encouragement.

"Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Galatians 6:9-10).