

2. Imminent Judgment in The Olivet Discourse

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And when he drew nigh, he saw the city and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known in this day, even thou, the things which belong unto peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, when thine enemies shall cast up a bank about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, and shall dash thee to the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation. (Jesus, as he approached Jerusalem the last week of His life, Lk. 19.41-44).

This chapter examines one of the most difficult, perplexing, abused, and misapplied passages of scripture in all the Bible, the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth chapters of Matthew. As one of the most difficult, it suffers the most speculative interpretations, and many religious leaders base their false doctrines upon it. For example, this chapter is the starting place for many false teachings propagated today about a final end-of-time return of Christ. It is also the favorite ground of many who hold to false theories about the Kingdom of Christ. The Worldwide Church of God, founded by Herbert W. Armstrong, and Jehovah's Witnesses use the passage to substantiate their teachings about their organization and a final end-of-time coming of Christ. It is also the basis for Hal Lindsey's popular *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

Contrariwise, our Mormon friends take a different approach. When they challenge us to show that Joseph Smith was not a prophet of God, we use authoritative Mormon sources that admit his prophecies were not fulfilled at all, much less at the time Smith foretold. Folks reading these prophecies often say, "Don't Mormons know these prophecies are false?" Sure they do, but they assert what they think is a Biblical argument to show it's no big deal. They claim Jesus also made prophe-

cies, including a time element, that weren't fulfilled. Can you guess which ones they have in mind? Matthew 24!

So was Jesus mistaken as a false prophet, just like Joseph Smith? Mormons assume Smith was every bit on par with Jesus—both were mistaken! How about you? Do you think it's a big deal if Jesus couldn't make accurate prophecies about time elements? To explore other material on such prophecies, please see Chapter 11, "Was Joseph Smith a Prophet of God?" in the author's *Denominational Doctrines: Explained, Examined, & Exposed* [Bowie, TX: SGD Press, 2010].

In addition, Jewish and Muslim skeptics, as well as prominent atheists, deny that Jesus was a prophet of God based on Matthew 24. For a full discussion of this point, please see Chapter 19, "The Faithless Basis of Dispensational Premillennialism" in the author's *Essays on Eschatology: An Introductory Overview of the Study of Last Things*.

Matthew 24 has also suffered at the hands of liberal theologians, who think Jesus taught the imminence of an end-of-time return.

One modernist, David Strauss, summed the matter up this way:

Jesus at first speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem and farther on, and until the close, of his return at the end of all things, and that he places the two events in immediate connection. (David Strauss, *Life of Jesus, Vol. III*, translated by George Eliot [New York: MacMillan & Co., 1898], cited by J. Marcellus Kik, *Matthew Twenty-Four* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1948], p. vii.)

From this viewpoint of the chapter, Strauss came to the same conclusion many theologians of our time have, which is that the "announcement of Jesus appears so far to have been erroneous." (*Ibid.*, p. 85.) Another modernist, C. C. McCown wrote:

Either Jesus is mistaken or these discourses are not from him. The Christian church cannot without disloyalty escape this dilemma. (C. C. McCown, *The Search for the Real Jesus* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940], pp. 243-244, cited by J. Marcellus Kik, *Matthew Twenty-Four* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1948], p. vii.)

An outstandingly influential German modernist, Rudolf Bultmann, made many frank statements about Jesus' teaching not be-

ing worthy of trust on eschatology, the study of “last things” including Christ’s return, the resurrection, and the judgment. Bultmann wrote:

The problem of eschatology grew out of the fact that the expected end of the world failed to arrive, that the “Son of man” did not appear in the clouds of heaven, that history went on, and that the eschatological community could not fail to recognize that it had become a historical phenomenon and that the Christian faith had taken on the shape of a new religion. (Rudolph Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: the Presence of Eternity* [Harper and Brothers New York, 1957], p. 38.)

Then Bultmann said:

The mythical eschatology is untenable for the simple reason that the parousia [coming or presence—SGD] of Christ never took place as the New Testament expected. History did not come to an end, and, as every school-boy knows, it will continue to run its course. The problem of Eschatology grew out of the fact that the expected end of the world failed to arrive, that the “Son of Man” did not appear in the clouds of heaven. (*Ibid.*)

Bultmann thought Jesus had spread myths because he didn’t know any more about the future than a schoolboy. These words came from a man claiming to be a Christian scholar. Through his extensive writings, he’s influenced millions of lifelong Bible students and preachers, yet he sounds like an atheist or a skeptic, doesn’t he? Surely, if you claim to be a Christian, this probably isn’t the view you have of Jesus.

Obviously, modernist scholars who make such statements believe that (1) Jesus was wrong, and (2) they know better than the Son of God himself. However, we’re going to learn that (3) many felt that they had to rescue Jesus from the problem he deluded himself into. I doubt that you believe you know better than Jesus or that you have to rescue him.

Why Would These Men Continue to Be Bible Scholars?

The question arises: Why would men continue to devote their lives to studying the word of a God who cannot maintain his own sovereign-

ty or carry out his own will? Why study the Bible that says God makes his plans and no one can frustrate them, when they don't believe it? Why assert their faith in a God who says there is no God like him and he will accomplish all his good pleasure, when they declare that Christ's church wasn't even in God's plan, but an amendment only necessary because of Jesus's failure to establish his kingdom the only time he ever tried to bring it about?

In their view, God is no more trustworthy than an idol who couldn't bring about his will! Why set themselves forth as experts on the teaching of Christ when they think Jesus was a mistaken sap who didn't know any more than a schoolboy who, as he was being delivered up, mocked, killed, and rising on the third day, claimed he was fulfilling all things written through the prophets? Why devote their lives to studying the teaching of such a self-deceived man?

How ridiculous that these men claim to be "fundamentalists" or "literalists"! Surely, men who don't believe Jesus' prophecies any more than they do are anything but literalists or fundamentalists! Likewise, how preposterous that they call themselves "evangelical" (the word from which "gospel" comes) if the good news is that Jesus and all his apostles were mistaken! How arrogant to assert that Jesus was mistaken, and then claim to be a fundamentalist! What conceit and egotism that would be!

How much are you and I willing to study the writings of anyone we know is a false prophet? These men pretend to be scholars of the teaching of Christ; when in reality, they think his teachings are mythological! Dare we place our confidence in the attempts of modernist scholars to help Jesus overcome the Jews thwarting his plan to establish his kingdom?

Background of Matthew 24

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24 took place in the last two to three days of his life. He had returned to Jerusalem for the last time before his death and, in chapter 23, Jesus had just completely denounced the religious leadership of the Jewish nation. In verses 13-16, 23, 25, 27, 29, Jesus pronounced various woes upon these hypocritical Jewish teachers. He called them fools, blind guides, offspring of vipers, etc. In verses 38-39, Jesus stood in the temple in Jerusalem and made the statement, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate, For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that

cometh in the name of the Lord.” With those words, he walked from the temple, having pronounced it not God’s house, but strictly as the religious operation of those tradition-bound Jewish leaders. In chapter 24, as Jesus and his apostles walked out of the temple, the conversation of interest in this study occurs.

A Review of Views of Matthew 24

Before we study the chapter itself, it would be well to look at the various views taken by those in the religious world about this controversial chapter. Most view it as composed of two subjects, the destruction of Jerusalem and an end-of-time return of Christ. The most popular position is the “verse 36 position,” which applies everything in the first thirty-five verses of Matthew 24 to the destruction of Jerusalem. Then, verses 36 through 44 apply to a final end-of-time return of Christ.

The second most popular view is the “verse 29 position.” Many read verse 29 and 30 (where Jesus spoke of the sun darkened, the moon with no light, and the stars fallen from heaven), and feel those verses can’t possibly have been fulfilled. Thus, they think the break between the two subjects takes place at that point.

Another popular position is the “oscillating position.” Those who hold it believe that Jesus switched back and forth between the subjects of the destruction of Jerusalem and his final return. Louis Berkhof, in his *Systematic Theology*, referred to Mt. 24.5-14, 21-22, 29-31 as a description of events that must take place shortly before a final return of Christ. Thus, the interceding verses refer to the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Position Which Will Be Set Forth Here

The position which will be set forth herein is that Matthew 24 does *not* deal with two subjects at all, but is in its entirety, concerned with the destruction of Jerusalem. Thus, no transition occurred anywhere in the chapter where Jesus began to speak about an end-of-time coming. It is our responsibility in the remainder of this study to present those evidences from the Bible that show that the apostles did not ask Jesus about a end-of-time return at that time, and that Jesus didn’t deal with that subject.

Analysis of the Apostles' Questions

Matthew 24.1-3 gives the most complete account of the questions of the apostles as they walked with Jesus out of the temple after his denunciation of the religious leadership of the Jews:

And Jesus went out from the temple, and was going on his way; and his disciples came to him to show him the buildings of the temple. But he answered and 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 on 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.

Of course, understanding the apostles' questions is important to discerning Jesus' answer. It's easy for some to assume from the words "end of the world" that the disciples were asking about the destruction of the planet, since plainly, any destruction of the temple with its huge stones, could only take place in the context of universal destruction. Calvin stated that the disciples: "did not suppose that while the building of this world stood, the temple could fall to ruins." (John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, (Grand Rapids; AP and A, vol. 7), 462). That is too easy an assumption since the Jews knew the temple had been destroyed before (586 BC) by the Babylonians, and that destruction hadn't required the destruction of the planet. The teaching of Matthew 24 is plainly in response to their questions. A comparison of the three gospel accounts aids this understanding:

Mk. 13.4

...Tell us, *when* shall these things be...?

Lk. 21.7

...Teacher, *when* therefore shall these things be?

Mt. 24.3

...Tell us, *when* shall these things be...?

In the first question that the apostles asked in all three accounts, “these things” referred to the same things Jesus had just told the apostles. This was the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem (See Mt. 24.2, “See ye not all these things?” and Mt. 24.34, “This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished.”).

As we compare the second part of their questions, we find:

Mk. 13.4

...and what shall be *the sign* when these things are all about to be accomplished?

Lk. 21.7

...and what shall be *the sign* when these things are about to come to pass?

Mt. 24.3

...and what shall be *the sign* of thy coming, and of the end of the world?

Notice carefully two facts about the apostles’ questions. First, in all three accounts, the apostles asked for two things, (1) a time, and (2) a sign. Now see the five-fold use of the expression “these things” in the three accounts. All agree that in the first question, this expression referred to the destruction of Jerusalem. Grammar demands that the same expression referred to the same things in the second part of their questions. Observe also that in Mark’s and Luke’s accounts, the second part of their question concerned “the sign when these things” were about to be fulfilled. Obviously, the sign when Christ would fulfill these things had to refer to the same things alluded to in the earlier question, the destruction of Jerusalem. Thus, the sign that concerned the apostles was about the destruction of Jerusalem. Since the apostles asked for one sign, the sign about which they asked in Mt. 24.3 must be the same sign as recorded in Mark and Luke. Our contention is that Jesus used “these things” consistently five times to denote the destruction of Jerusalem and that the sign they asked about was about these same things.

First, most folks, hearing the words “end of the world,” think immediately of the end of the planet or an end of time. The word for world here is *aionios*, from which our word “aeon” or era comes. It denotes a period of time, not the planet.

Second, the disciples most certainly did not ask Jesus about the end of time, for the Bible nowhere in the entire Bible uses that expression.

The closest passage might be Dan. 12.4, which the NASV mistakenly translates as “the end of time.” The ASV translates it as “the time of the end,” as do the KJV, NIV, and the NKJV, among others. The expressions “time of the end” and “the end of time” reflect two vastly different concepts. One supposes the end of time itself (on which the popular view of the resurrection is based), and the other speaks of the time of “the end,” the end of the age. In Daniel’s context, the age ends with the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple.

Third, when his disciples asked Jesus about the end of the age, of what age were they speaking? The disciples, including even modern Jews, recognized two ages, the Mosaic age, and the age to come, i.e., the age of the Messiah. Jesus even spoke of “this age” and “the age to come” (Mt. 12.31-32, Mk. 10.29-31, Lk. 20.34-35). At the time Matthew 24 was given, “this age” was the Mosaic age. The end of the age here must refer to the end of the Mosaic age, the age in which Jesus and his disciples lived, as the Messiah’s age has no end, nor any last days.

Thus, the term “last days” in the gospels refers to the last days of the Mosaic age, not the last days of the Christian age, nor the end of time. There are a few modern translations that give “end of time” for “time of the end,” but as we’ll see later, those are entirely different concepts.

Further, on the use of the term “last days,” failure to recognize that it refers to the last days of the Mosaic age leads many to think that the last days stretch from Pentecost till the end of time, or that there are two sets of last days, one at Pentecost, and another at the end of time. This presumption leads to doctrines of two sets of last days, two days of the Lord, two comings of the Lord in the clouds, two gatherings together of the faithful, two great tribulations, two ends, two comings as a thief, and all sorts of doctrines attempting to deal with dual fulfillments of all these concepts. We’ve not had 2000 years of last days of the Mosaic age, nor a 2000-year gap between the last days of Pentecost and some end of time. The last days referred to the time from the coming of John the Baptist until Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

The End of the Christian Age?

Though we many times think “the end” Jesus spoke of refers to the end of the Christian age; in reality, *the Christian age has no end*. For example, in Isa. 9.6-7, Isaiah prophesied the endlessness of the Messiah’s rule:

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be *no end to the increase of His government* [accomplished by evangelization—SGD] or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.

Likewise, in Lk. 1.31-33, Gabriel told Mary of the endlessness of the Messiah’s reign:

And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and *he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.*

Thus, the term “end of the age” in Jesus’ teaching never referred to the end of the Christian age, which has no end. Instead, it foretold the end of the Mosaic age. Similarly, the term “last days” never refers to the last days of the Christian age; again, because the Christian age has no end, hence no last days, last day, nor last hour. However, the Mosaic age had all of those, because it had an end. Jesus spoke of it here, and all the Jews understood, that it was the end of the Mosaic age.

Notice, were it not for Matthew’s account of the apostles’ questions, no idea of a final return of Christ nor the end of time would enter our minds. However, Matthew’s account used the expressions “coming” and “end of the world” which may suggest such a final end-of-time return to some. An examination of other passages where Bible

writers use these same expressions will lead us to perhaps a different conclusion.

For example, Heb. 9.26 used the same expression, when the writer of Hebrews said:

...else must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once at the *end of the ages* [emphasis mine—SGD] hath he been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

The expression “at the end of the ages,” which referred to the incarnation of Christ, comes from the same Greek expression used in Mt. 24.3. It means, literally, “the consummation of the age.” Christ was offered at his first coming as the completion or consummation of the plan of God through all the ages to redeem humanity.

Second, Paul used the same expression in I Cor. 10.11, where he spoke of the value of the Old Testament scriptures to New Testament Christians:

Now these things happened unto them by way of example; and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the *ends of the ages* are come.

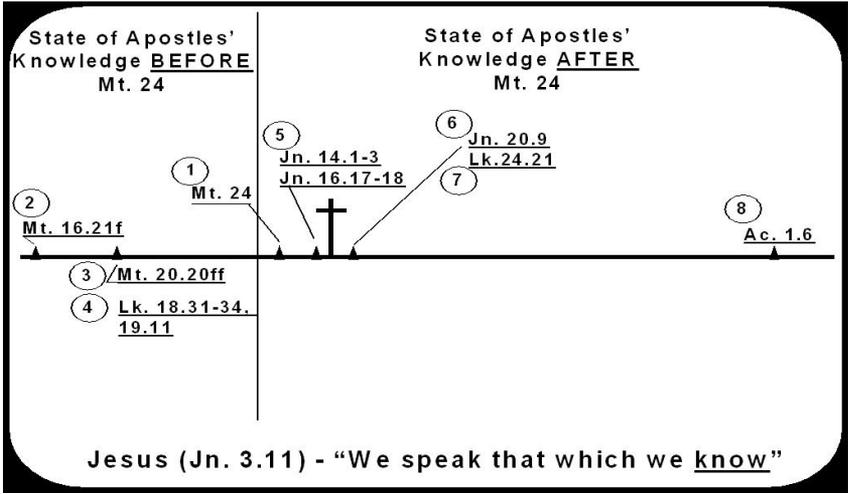
Again, the expression referred not to a final end-of-time return of Christ, but to the Messianic age in which we now live. Thus, the age they asked about in Mt. 24.3 was the age when “these things” would occur. Later in the discourse, we’ll see that Jesus said, “this generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished” (Mt. 24.34). He gave these warnings, “that ye may prevail to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man” (Lk. 21.36).

Since the language of the apostles’ questions didn’t demand that they asked about a final end-of-time return of Christ, we now want to see that *the apostles wouldn’t have asked about a such a return of Christ from heaven because, at that time, they didn’t believe Jesus planned to go away.*

As we noted earlier, the apostles asked these questions in the last week of Jesus’ life. At that time, they didn’t have all the truth. In Jn. 16.12, spoken only a few days after Matthew 24, Jesus told the apostles: “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now.” As we are about to show in detail, the apostles could not have

asked about a final return because, at that time, they didn't even believe in the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

From Figure 1, we want to discuss in chronological order several passages, which show the improbability that the apostles asked Jesus about a final return in Mt. 24.3:



Matthew 24:

As noticed earlier in this material, this discussion between Jesus and his apostles occurred two or three days before his death.

Passages Which Occur Chronologically Before Matthew 24

2. Mt. 16.21, 22:

From that time began Jesus to show unto his disciples that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall never be unto thee.

In this passage, spoken at least six months before Jesus died, Jesus plainly told his disciples he would die and be resurrected. As Peter's response shows, they did not realize the significance of Jesus' teach-

ing, and weren't aware he was returning to heaven at that time. They did not expect Jesus to go away. At that time, they still expected Jesus to set up a nationalistic, militaristic kingdom, as the following passage shows:

3. Mt. 20.20-22:

Then came to him the mother of the sons of Zebedee with her sons, worshiping him, and asking a certain thing of him. And he said unto her, What wouldest thou? She saith unto him, Command that these my two sons may sit, one on thy right hand, and one on thy left hand, in thy kingdom. But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask.

This passage illustrates again that the apostles and the other disciples didn't realize Jesus wouldn't set up a physical kingdom on the earth. Nor did they realize he would die, be resurrected, and go back to heaven. This shows they would not have asked about a return from heaven at this interval shortly before Matthew 24.

4. Lk. 18.31-34, 19.11:

And he took unto him the twelve; and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all the things that are written through the prophets shall be accomplished unto the Son of man, for he shall be delivered up unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and shamefully treated, and spit upon: and they shall scourge and kill him: and the third day he shall rise again. And they understood none of these things; and this saying was hid from them, and they perceived not the things that were said.

As Jesus and the apostles approached the city of Jerusalem in this same context (Lk. 19.11):

And as they heard these things, he added and spake a parable, because he was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was immediately to appear.

Both these passages show that within one week of the time of the Matthew 24 discourse, the apostles still believed Jesus would set up a theocracy with its headquarters in Jerusalem. They did not believe he would go away. They did not believe in a final end-of-time return just a few days before they questioned Jesus in Mt. 24.3.

Passages Which Occur Chronologically After Matthew 24

5. Jn. 14.1-3; 16.16-18: In the first of these passages, spoken the night before Jesus was put to death, Jesus told the apostles:

Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you: for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

Here, Jesus plainly told the apostles that it was necessary for him to go away. They resolutely refused to believe it, because this teaching did not fit with their idea of the kingdom. This is especially evident in the following passage, which was spoken on the same night, the night before Jesus was crucified:

Jn. 16.16-18: Jesus said to the apostles:

...A little while, and ye behold me no more; and again a little while, and ye shall see me. Some of his disciples therefore said one to another, What is this that he saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall see me; and, Because I go to the Father? They said therefore, What is this that he saith, A little while? We know not what he saith.

Thus, Jesus plainly told them the absolute necessity of his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. We have the testimony of the apostles themselves that they didn't know what he was talking about. They didn't expect Jesus to go away the night before he died. They would not have asked about a return from heaven, which they, at that time, didn't believe in.

These passages of scripture show conclusively that both shortly *before* Matthew 24 took place and shortly *after* Matthew 24 took place,

the apostles didn't expect Jesus to go away. Therefore, they didn't understand anything about a return from heaven. Because of this, they would not have asked about a final return *in* Matthew 24.

Three other passages show this even further:

6. Jn. 20.9: This passage relates the discovery of the empty tomb by Peter and John on the day of Jesus' resurrection:

For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must arise again from the dead.

Though Jesus had taught the apostles that he would die, be resurrected, and go back to the father, they still didn't believe it. This was the very day of his resurrection.

7. Lk. 24.21: On the day Jesus was raised from the dead, the two disciples who didn't recognize Jesus on the road to Emmaus talked with him, and said:

But we hoped that it was he who should redeem Israel. Yea and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things came to pass.

These two had lost hope that Jesus was the Messiah and now looked elsewhere for their Messiah. Jesus reproved them in vv25-27:

...O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Behooved it not the Christ to suffer these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning from Moses and from all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

Because of these considerations, the statement of Hal Lindsey in his popular *The Late Great Planet Earth*, a shallow presentation of premillennial doctrines and a perversion based upon Matthew 24, appears absurd in the extreme. Of the questions asked by the apostles, Lindsey said:

The "coming" referred to in the question above is commonly referred to as the second advent of Christ. *It was only natural that they wanted to know what signs would indicate his return to set up God's prom-*

ised kingdom [emphasis mine—SGD]. (Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970], p. 52.)

Thus, we not only see that the language of the questions doesn't demand that they asked about a final end-of-time return, but the apostles' knowledge at that time demands that they did not ask about one. They simply didn't believe Jesus was about to go away! They simply asked about the close of the age in which they lived. Since they weren't asking about a return from heaven, I believe they referred to the coming of Mal. 3-4 and Mt. 16.27-28, as we discussed in the previous chapter.

We now want to see that Jesus' answer cannot be in reference to a return from heaven. This supports the position that the entire chapter of Matthew 24 deals with the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman general Titus in A.D. 70.

A Brief Commentary on Matthew 24.4-44

Verses 4-5: And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man lead you astray. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am the Christ; and shall lead many astray.

First, notice that when Jesus warns "let no lead you astray," who was the "you"? It was the disciples who had questioned him, wasn't it? It was the ones he had said in Mt. 16.27-28 would still be alive when he returned, not people living in the 21st century. These "you"s will occur many times in Matthew 24-25, and while we won't comment on each of them, not a one of them refers to people living in modern times. It behooves us to establish the relation of these words to the people to whom these words were spoken.

These verses were abundantly fulfilled at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. The Jewish historian Josephus (*Wars*, VI, 5, 2) testified that the land was overrun with magicians, seducers, and impostors, who drew the people after them in multitudes into solitudes and deserts, to see the signs and miracles which they promised to show by the power of God. Note that Jesus begins to predict a first-century apostasy among his disciples: many shall be led astray. He'll have much more to say about this later on (vv10-12), and both Peter (II Peter 3) and Paul (I Thes. 5.3, II Thes. 2.3-12) will have more to say about it in their epistles.

Verses 6-8: And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for these things must needs come to pass; but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; and there shall be famines, and earthquakes in divers places. But all these things are the beginning of travail.

Jesus affirms that wars and rumors of wars weren't the sign of his coming. Actually, they couldn't serve as such a sign because there were so many of them. There were wars between Rome and her enemies. There were wars between Rome and the Jews. There were wars among the Jews. In addition, wars involving neither Rome nor the Jews often affected the Jews as they lived in the crossroads of the Mediterranean world.

In particular, the history of Rome records the most violent agitations prevailed in the Roman Empire previous to the destruction of Jerusalem. Four emperors: Nero, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius suffered violent deaths, in the short space of eighteen months. Can you imagine the instability of our society if we had four Presidents assassinated in a year and a half? Josephus (*Wars*, IV, 9, 2) said that Bardanes, and after him Volageses, declared war against the Jews, but it was not executed. He also said that Vitellius, governor of Syria, declared war against Aretas, king of Arabia, and wished to lead his army through Palestine, but the death of Tiberius prevented the war.

With cable television reporting everything that happens from car chases in Los Angeles to floods and earthquakes around the world, folks often think more catastrophes than ever before are hitting us. We frequently hear, "There sure have been a lot of earthquakes lately. Don't you think that's a sign of the end in our time?" Michael Crichton, writer and filmmaker, addressed the issue of whether we are experiencing more earthquakes:

Is this really the end of the world? Earthquakes, hurricanes, floods?

No, we simply live on an active planet. Earthquakes are continuous, a million and a half of them every year, or three every minute. A Richter 5 quake every six hours, a major quake every 3 weeks. A quake as destructive as the one in Pakistan every 8 months. It's nothing new, it's right on schedule.

At any moment there are 1,500 electrical storms on the planet. A tornado touches down every six hours. We have ninety hurricanes a year, or one every four days. Again, right on schedule. Violent, disruptive, chaotic activity is a constant feature of our globe.

Is this the end of the world? No: this is the world. (Michael Chricton, “Earthquakes: Fear and Complexity” [San Francisco, CA: The Independent Institute, November 15, 2005].)

It’s time we knew it. Perhaps this realization will help us not sensationalize the great number of earthquakes occurring at all times on our planet. Obviously, earthquakes were so prevalent that Jesus points out that they couldn’t be a sign of his coming.

Verses 9-10: Then shall they deliver you up into tribulation, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all the nations for my name’s sake. And then shall many stumble, and shall deliver up one another, and shall hate one another.

This tribulation took place before the end of the age, the Mosaic age. Nowadays, when people ask, “Don’t you think the tribulation is about here?” We say, “Jesus said the tribulation would occur before the end of the Mosaic age, in his generation.” This teaching parallels that of Jesus in Jn. 15.20, 21 when he said to the apostles: “Remember the word that I said unto you, A servant is not greater than his lord. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for my name’s sake, because they know not him that sent me.”

Many stumbling, delivering up and hating one another indicates apostasy on the part of many of the faithful. Persecution will turn them against each other. In a few verses, Jesus will make the magnitude of that apostasy clear.

Verse 11: And many false prophets shall arise, and shall lead many astray.

Note that Jesus again foretells many of his believers will be led astray, a further warning of apostasy in the first century. Josephus, in his history of the destruction of Jerusalem, gave this account:

Now, there was then a great number of false prophets suborned by the tyrants to impose upon the people, who denounced this to them, that they should wait for deliverance from God; and this was in order to keep them from deserting, and that they might be buoyed up above fear and care by such hopes. (Flavius Josephus, *Complete Works*, VI, 5, 2, translated by William Whiston [Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1960], p. 582.)

This direct historical account shows the fulfillment of Jesus' statement about the destruction of Jerusalem.

Verses 12-14: And because iniquity shall be multiplied, the love of the many shall wax cold. But he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come.

In vv 10-11, Jesus has said that many will stumble, turn against each other, hate each other, and be led astray by false prophets. He now says that because of iniquity being multiplied, the love of “the many” shall wax cold. “The many” is literally, the majority. Jesus affirms that the majority of Christians will go into apostasy! The NASB and NIV (along with *Pulpit Commentary* and *Vincent's Word Studies*) say “most”! Realizing this makes us recall Lk. 18.8, where Jesus, speaking of the upcoming judgment on Jerusalem in the parable of the nagging widow, says:

And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? 8 I tell you that He will avenge them *speedily*. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He *really* find faith on the earth? (NKJV)

Thus Jesus wondered, if most Christians would fall away, if when he returned, he would even find faith in the land of Palestine!

This statement of Jesus about the preaching of the gospel is sometimes controversial, but whatever Jesus included in this prophecy is seen to be abundantly fulfilled in Ac. 2.5:

Now there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven.

Also, in Rom. 1.8, Paul used similar language to speak of the faith of the Romans:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is proclaimed throughout the whole world.

As he spoke specifically of the preaching of the gospel, Paul said in Col. 1.5, 6, 23: "...the truth of the gospel, which is come unto you; even as it is also in all the world, bearing fruit and increasing...continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel which ye heard, which was preached in all creation under heaven..."

Paul wrote the Colossian letter in 62 A.D., a full eight years before the destruction of Jerusalem, in obvious fulfillment of the statement of Jesus in Mt. 24.14.

Verses 15-16: When therefore ye see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (Let him that readeth understand), then let them that are in Judea flee unto the mountains.

Here's the sign Jesus' disciples asked for—the abomination of desolation. This was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem. Josephus says that when the Romans entered the city of Jerusalem, their pagan soldiers entered into the temple (which defiled it according to the Old Testament law) and hauled down the Jewish ornaments and temple accoutrements. Josephus (*Wars*, VI, 6, 1, p. 583.) relates how they raised in their place the pagan symbols and Roman standards. The abomination of desolation took place when the Romans placed their standards and pagan symbols in the holy place.

In Luke's account of the Olivet Discourse, since he's writing to a Gentile (Theophilus), he doesn't relate the Old Testament term "abomination of desolation," which wouldn't be familiar to his Gentile reader. Instead, he says, in Lk. 21.20-22:

20 But when ye see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that her desolation is at hand. 21 Then let them that are in Judaea flee unto the mountains; and

let them that are in the midst of her depart out; and let not them that are in the country enter therein. 22 For these are days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.

“Fleeing to the mountains” tells us that Jesus wasn’t speaking of a planet-burning judgment at the end of time, as such flight wouldn’t avail anything at such a time.

Verses 17-20: Let him that is on the housetop not go down to take out the things that are in his house: and let him that is in the field not return back to take his cloak. But woe unto them that are with child and to them that give suck in those days! And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on a sabbath.

Jesus continued his warnings to flee the physical destruction, and this would have no application to a final return of Christ. Christians were to watch for these signs so they would know when to “flee to the mountains.” They were to pray that they wouldn’t have to flee on the sabbath or in the winter. Winter’s extremes would hinder their flight, as also would a sabbath day, because of the locked gates of all the walled cities in Judea on the sabbath (See Neh. 13.19 for an example).

Verses 21-22: For then shall be great tribulation, such as hath not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been saved: but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened.

We also find historic testimony of the fulfillment of this prophecy in Josephus, who was present at the time, and who uses nearly the exact words of Jesus:

Accordingly it appears to me, that the misfortunes of all men, from the beginning of the world, if they be compared to these of the Jews, are not so considerable as they were...(Josephus, *Wars*, Preface, 4, p. 428.)

Further, Josephus said that during the siege’s grip, when no grain was left, wholesale destruction took place within the walls of Jerusalem. Food was so short that any locked door meant someone had food inside. Marauders would break down the doors, rush in, and grab the throats of those inside, hoping to squeeze a morsel of food from their

throats. Whole families perished during the siege. Tomb robbing was rampant. Josephus mentioned he saw 600,000 bodies thrown out the gates of the city. The Romans caught one deserter with gold he swallowed to smuggle out of the city. They suspected that many Jews attempted this. In one night the Romans killed 2000 Jews and ripped open their stomachs. Josephus told of one mother who was so hungry she roasted her infant son and ate half of him, and offered the other half to her neighbor.

In short, nothing in history matches the violence, savageness, famine, pestilence, and despair present in the siege of Jerusalem. It was the blackest and cruelest war in the annals of humanity, yet for those who were watchful, a way of escape existed. The Roman general Vespasian, who began the siege of Jerusalem, heard of the political tumult in Rome and returned to Rome to become the new emperor. He then sent his son, Titus, back to Jerusalem to finish the siege. During the lull in the siege, Christians alert to the warnings of Christ fled the city. Truly, as Jesus said, except those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been saved; but for the elect's sake those days were shortened.

Verses 23-26: Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is the Christ, or, Here; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you before hand. If therefore they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the wilderness; go not forth: Behold, he is in the inner chambers; believe it not.

These are repetitions of earlier warnings against false Christs. See the reference to verse 11 for the historical fulfillment of these statements during the siege of Jerusalem.

Verses 27-28: For as the lightning cometh forth from the east, and is seen even unto the west; so shall be the coming of the Son of man. Wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.

Taken by itself, some might use this verse to refer to a final return of Christ. Since the apostles did not ask him about it and the entire context speaks of the physical judgment Christ would bring upon the city of Jerusalem, "coming" refers to his presence in the form of the Roman army. The Jewish nation was the carcass, which Christ sent the Roman eagles to devour.

“As lightning cometh” is quickly, visibly, and it’s unstoppable. Christ’s coming in the presence of the Roman vultures would occur in the same way.

Verse 29: But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun shall 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.

Let’s consider just one star falling from heaven to earth. Our sun, which is a rather mediocre star, will hold the equivalent of 1.3 million earths. There are other stars which dwarf our own sun. Now, just imagine one such star falling to earth—the entire planet would be completely destroyed. There would be nothing left for other stars to fall from heaven. This language was never intended to be taken literally.

Many times when we read this verse, someone says, “Surely the world has never seen anything like this,” to which we answer, “Certainly we have!” In many cases in the Bible, speakers of inspiration have used these same phrases to describe a physical judgment God would bring against a city or nation.

For example, in Isa. 13.10, God said of Babylon:

For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light; the sun shall be darkened in its going forth, and the moon shall not cause its light to shine.

Has this prophecy of punishment been fulfilled against Babylon? It has, for that nation no longer even exists. This example illustrates God’s use of “judgment language” to describe Babylon’s dark day. In the same chapter, in verse 13, God said:

Therefore I will make the heavens to tremble, and the earth shall be shaken out of its place, in the wrath of Jehovah of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger.

In verses 19-20, he said:

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldeans’ pride, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation:

neither shall the Arabian pitch his tent there; neither shall shepherds make their flocks to lie down there.

In Babylon's case, the stars have ceased to give their light, the sun has been darkened, the moon is not causing its light to shine. The heavens have trembled, because God has carried out the judgment he spoke against them.

In Isa. 34.4, 5, God spoke of the destruction of Edom in similar language:

And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll; and all their host shall fade away, as the leaf fadeth from off the vine, and as a fading leaf from the fig-tree. For my sword hath drunk its fill in heaven: behold, it shall come down upon Edom, and upon the people of my curse, to judgment.

Has this statement been fulfilled? God carried out this judgment of Edom. It is no more!

A similar example of this type of language which has been fulfilled is Amos 8.9, where Amos prophesied the destruction of Samaria. See also Ezek. 32.7, 8, where Ezekiel foretold judgment against Egypt, and Jer. 4.23, 24, 27, 28, where Jeremiah revealed Judah's punishment at the hand of the Babylonians.

These passages illustrate the meaning of the same type of language Jesus used in Mt. 24.29. When some say, "Surely the world has never seen such," they simply are not aware of the way the Bible uses this type of language in reference to physical judgments which God carried out in the past, with no reference to a future end-of-time return of Christ at all.

Verses 30-31: 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 on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send forth 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.

Before we consider the meaning of these words in detail, let us make this observation. Even if we did not understand their meaning, another consideration arises which would lead us to the conclusion that

Christ fulfilled them in the destruction of Jerusalem. In verse 34, only seconds later, Jesus made the statement:

Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished.

This is a most important consideration. If Jesus didn't fulfill all these prophecies during the generation to whom he was speaking, then Jesus himself was mistaken on the subject and doesn't deserve to be believed.

Some object that the word "generation" doesn't refer to the group of people who lived just at the time Jesus spoke these words. They suggest the idea that "race," "nation," or "Israel," replaces that of a contemporary generation. It is a belief without warrant. The word "generation" in the Bible doesn't mean "nation," "race," or "mankind," but always means a group of people who live contemporaneously.

To show this, Matthew used the word "generation" 10 other times in the book of Matthew (1.17, 3.7, 11.16, 12.39, 12.41, 42, 45, 16.4, 17.17, and 23.36). The word always referred to a group of people who lived at the same time. Notice especially the following:

Mt. 1.17:

So all the *generations* from Abraham unto David are fourteen *generations*...

Mt. 11.16:

But whereunto shall I liken this *generation*?...

Mt. 12.41:

The men of Nineveh shall rise up in the judgment with this *generation*...

Mt. 12.42:

The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this *generation*...

Mt. 23.36:

Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come up-
on this *generation*.

In all these examples, as in all the rest, Jesus did not speak of anything other than what we mean when we use the term “generation.” The term “generation,” or “this generation” means *the same thing in Mt. 24.34* as it does in *every other occurrence in Matthew’s gospel. This includes the word “generation” Jesus used earlier in this same conversation in Mt. 23.36 which has the same meaning as “generation” in Mt. 24.34.* All the things Jesus foretold would occur during the lifetime of his contemporaries. Thus, whether we or anyone else understand the teaching of verses 29-31, we can agree that whatever Jesus talked about, he fulfilled it in the generation he spoke to.

Now, in verse 30, when Jesus spoke about the appearance of the sign of the Son of man in heaven, he spoke about a *sign which would show that the Son of man was in heaven.* For instance, Jesus gave the apostles a similar sign in John 14. There he promised the apostles he would go back to heaven, and would send the Holy Spirit to guide them into all the truth. When the apostles received all the truth, it was a sign that Jesus was in heaven. Even though the apostles hadn’t seen him sit down at the right hand of God, Peter stated in Ac. 2.33:

Being therefore by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he hath poured forth this, which ye see and hear.

Peter argued that since the Holy Spirit had come as promised to the apostles, they knew Jesus had been exalted to the right hand of God. To further illustrate, suppose a local politician campaigned to you that if you elected him, he would see that your local water tower got painted bright orange. Suppose, further, that the next time you saw the water tower, it was bright orange. What do you know has happened even if you don’t know the outcome of the election directly? You know the orange water tower is a sign of his election.

Similarly, when Jesus came in judgment on the city of Jerusalem, it was another sign that he was in heaven. Jesus told Caiaphas, the High Priest, and the Sanhedrin the same thing in Mt. 26.64, the night of the betrayal:

...Henceforth ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.

Did they see this or not? Certainly they did, when Jesus sent the Roman armies to destroy the city of Jerusalem! At that time, they, being familiar with the judgment language of the Old Testament, would have to realize that it had come to pass just as Jesus warned it would.

We're Not as Familiar with the Language of the Old Testament as We Should Be

A major problem in interpreting Jesus' teaching in this chapter is that most of us are modern Western readers, whereas Jesus and the Jews he taught were Easterners who spoke in terms of the Old Testament. Robert Brinsmead discussed our problem in these terms:

For various reasons we Christians have neglected or discarded the art of preaching Christ out of the Old Testament as the apostles did. Marcion, the great heretic of the second century, wanted to discard the Old Testament entirely. Although the church rejected Marcion, the Marcionian tendency has persisted. The church has not always been comfortable with the Old Testament. Christians often have not known what to do with it. And to the extent that we have neglected the God-given framework of the gospel, we have had to invent frameworks of our own. (Robert D. Brinsmead, *The Pattern of Redemptive History* [Falbrook, CA: Verdict Publications, 1979], p. 8.)

As a result of our shortcoming with the Old Testament, we are sorely tempted to interpret its use in the New Testament in an inappropriate way. Notice Paul Minear's comment relative to this:

As one recalls Old Testament passages like these [e.g., Mt. 24.29, etc.—SGD], one is forced to conclude that every constituent essential feature in the New Testament prophecies was an echo of these. No Christian prophet tried to explain the meaning of these references to solar disasters, a fact that suggests that the audience was expected to understand the language.

Modern readers, therefore, must compare this idiom not with modern views of the cosmos, but with an ancient outlook within which an intelligible message was conveyed without undue difficulty. (Paul Minear, *New Testament Apocalyptic* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1981], cited by Don K. Preston, *The Elements Shall Melt with Fervent Heat: A Study of II Peter 3* [Ardmore, OK: JaDon ProductionsLLC, 2006].)

On this same topic, R. T. France said:

The unwary reader is in danger of assuming a note of finality in the future hope of the Old Testament that is in fact foreign to it. The “eschatology” of the Old Testament prophets was not concerned with the end of the world, but with the decisive act of God which will bring to an end the existing order of things in the world, and inaugurate a new era of blessing, of a totally different order.”(R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982], cited *ibid.*)

A failure to interpret such language according to its Old Testament usage has always led to fanciful interpretations of contemporary earthquakes, wars, rumors of wars, famine, pestilence, etc., as indicative that “the end” is near in our time. For example, Martin Luther was subject to such speculation four centuries ago, as his statement shows:

I am satisfied that the last day must be before the door; for the signs predicted by Christ and the Apostles Peter and Paul have now all been fulfilled, the trees put forth, the Scriptures are green and flourishing...We certainly have nothing now to wait for but the end of all things. (Martin Luther, cited by Don K. Preston, *The Last Days Identified* [Ardmore, OK: JaDon ProductionsLLC, 2004], p. 79.)

The passing of four centuries without realization of his expectations shows the weakness of Luther’s analysis of these passages. Long before (and after) Luther, others were misinterpreting in the same fashion. Listen to a scholar named Ephraem:

We ought to understand thoroughly therefore, my brothers what is imminent or overhanging. Already there have been hunger and plagues, violent movements of nations and signs, which have already been fulfilled, and there is no other which remains, except the advent of the wicked one in the completion of the Roman kingdom. Brothers, the end of the world is at hand, believe me because it is the very last time. (cited by Don K. Preston, *ibid.*)

We have to admit that Ephraem sounds like Martin Luther, who in turn sounds like the Hal Lindsey's of our time, don't we? However, Ephraem wrote in the fourth century! Such prophetic speculation has been going on for a long time.

The Significance of Coming on the Clouds of Heaven

Some may object that Jesus never came on the clouds of heaven, and that this language can apply only to a final return. Yet, the Bible speaks many times of divine beings "coming on the clouds of heaven," in passages which speak of unusual events that have already occurred. To be specific, at the time Jesus used these words, God's people had heard this language used only about national judgments.

For example, in Isa. 19.1-4, Isaiah said of the forthcoming destruction of Egypt:

Behold, Jehovah rideth upon a swift cloud, and cometh unto Egypt...And the spirit of Egypt shall fall in the midst of it; and I will destroy the counsel thereof;...And I will give over the Egyptians into the hand of a cruel lord; and a fierce king shall rule over them, saith the Lord, Jehovah of hosts.

This language is similar to what Jesus used of his coming on the clouds. It was fulfilled by the captivity of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar in the sixth century B.C.

Similarly, in Jer. 4.13, God used the same type of language to threaten Judah with invasion:

Behold, he shall come up as clouds, and his chariots shall be as the whirlwind: His horses are swifter than eagles.

In this way, God spoke of his coming on the clouds in the form of the Babylonian army. The Babylonians fulfilled this passage when they captured Judah and took the Jews away into captivity.

Thus, Jesus' language in Mt. 24.29, 30 is used other times in the Bible to speak of a purely physical judgment brought upon a city or nation. When we consider that Jesus said, "*This generation shall not pass away* till all these things be accomplished," surely Jesus spoke of the destruction which took place about forty years after he uttered this prophecy.

Verse 31: And he shall send forth 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.

First, we need to realize that the word "angel," which simply means "messenger," may refer to human messengers. It is so used of John the Baptist in Mt. 11.10, the messengers of John the Baptist, in Lk. 7.24, the apostles of Christ, Lk. 9.52, and the Jewish spies in Jas. 2.25.

The "gathering" of Jews who had been scattered through their various captivities is a major prophetic theme in the Old Covenant. It was foreseen in Dt. 30.1-5 to take place in Old Covenant Israel's last days. This gathering of the elect was foretold in Isa. 11.12 (quoted as fulfilled in the first century by Paul in Rom. 15.12), 27.12-13, 43.5-7, 56.6-8 as well as other Old Testament prophets.

We understand the significance of "the four winds of heaven" when we consider Lk. 13.29, where Jesus said of his kingdom:

And they shall come from the east and west, and from the north and south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God.

The significance of "trumpets" is that they were always instruments of warning or deliverance. Thus, Jesus may well have spoken of the declaration of the gospel by his apostles. The apostles warned their perverse generation of Jews of the judgment to come upon them because of their rejection of the Messiah. This is exactly the thought of verse Mt. 24.14:

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come.

Verses 32-34: Now from the fig tree learn her parable: when her branch is now become tender, and putteth forth its leaves, ye know that summer is nigh; even so ye also, when ye see all these things, know ye that he is nigh, even at the doors. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished.

We have already commented on the “This generation shall not pass away” statement. Here Jesus exhorted the apostles that he had given them signs whereby they could know that the physical judgment he spoke of, the destruction of Jerusalem, was nigh. Then they could flee to the mountains (v16).

Our dispensational friends assume this fig tree represents the restoration of Israel in May 1948, and Jesus used it only to illustrate how people of his own generation should be watchful to escape the destruction coming upon Jerusalem. However, such an assumption flies in the face of Jesus’ statements about the fig tree in Mk. 11.13, 20:

And seeing a fig tree by the way side, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only; and he saith unto it, Let there be no fruit from thee henceforward for ever. And immediately the fig tree withered away.

If this were talking about Israel, this hardly sounds like a restoration, but rather a curse or a withering away. However, it gets worse in verse 20:

And as they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away from the roots.

In Luke’s account (Lk. 21.29-32), Jesus said:

And he spake to them a parable: Behold the fig tree, *and all the trees* [emphasis mine—SGD]: when they now shoot forth, ye see it and know of your own selves that the summer is now nigh. Even so ye also, when ye see these things coming to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all things be accomplished.

If dispensationalists are free to assume that the fig tree represents the modern political state of Israel, we wonder what *all the other trees* might represent! Again, even if we grant the pure assumption that the fig tree represents the modern state of Israel, it hardly sounds like a prosperous restoration! Actually, we learn the same lesson from all the trees—when they’re shooting forth in the spring, we know that summer and the season of harvest is nigh. So with Old Covenant—they’re about to be harvested, as per Malachi, John the Baptist, and Jesus.

Before leaving verse 34, we want to comment further on Jesus’ statement that “This generation shall not pass away, till all things be accomplished.” Our dispensational friends not only fiddle with the meaning of the word “generation,” suggesting it might mean something other than the way it’s used in the gospels, but they also argue with the meaning of the word “this.” They claim it wasn’t Jesus’ generation, but one much later, even two thousand years later, in our time. They also insist “all” doesn’t mean “all,” since they don’t believe that “all” of what Jesus talked about was fulfilled in his generation. Likewise, they assert “these things” might mean “some of these things,” as they don’t believe the judgment pronounced upon Israel occurred in his generation. In fact, there’s an apparent willingness to fiddle with every word in the clause so that it means *anything but what Jesus said!*

Verses 35-36: Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour knoweth no one, not even the angels of heaven, neither the Son, but the Father only.

The language, “heaven and earth shall pass away,” causes some to think that Jesus here began to speak of a final end-of-time return. However, Jesus taught on this subject earlier in Mt. 5.17-18, where he said:

For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished.

Does this statement not teach that none of the law and the prophets would pass away before heaven and earth passed away? Yet we all believe that the Mosaic Law has passed away. All futurist eschatologies (premillennial, postmillennial, and amillennial) believe at least some of the Mosaic Law has passed away. If we believe that any of the Mosaic Law has passed away, mustn’t we then believe that

heaven and earth have passed away? Let's examine that conclusion more closely.

If heaven and earth have passed away, this phrase cannot mean that the planet earth and the stars have passed away, because we still see them almost daily!

However, there is another sense in which heaven and earth is used. Remember that the Bible is essentially of oriental or Hebrew origin. As such, the Hebrew language contained idioms that cannot be interpreted correctly from a western or Greek point of view. The expression "heavens and earth" is such an idiom. To see how it's used idiomatically, let's notice Isa. 51.16. In this chapter, God rehearses with Israel the history of his dealings with them, beginning with Abraham. He reviews his bringing them out of Egyptian captivity through the Red Sea. In verse 16, he reviews his bringing them to Sinai and giving them his covenant there:

And I have put My words in your mouth, and have covered you with the shadow of My hand, to establish the heavens, to found the earth, and to say to Zion, You are My people.

When God gave Israel his covenant, the Mosaic Law, he says that he created the heavens and the earth. Of course, he didn't create a new planet earth with new sun, moon, and stars at Sinai, but he did create a new world order, a new covenant people, law, and land. The term heavens and earth is often used in this way. In II Peter 3, Peter uses this term to speak of the heavens and earth of Noah's day, when the corrupt order was destroyed by the flood. The planet and stars weren't destroyed, but the pre-flood world order certainly was.

Later in the chapter, Peter speaks of the passing away of the corrupt Mosaic heavens and earth (the same order spoken of in Isa. 51) and the coming of a new order under the Messiah, a new heavens and earth. Peter uses the term "heavens and earth" to talk about three world orders: the pre-flood order, the Mosaic order, and the Messiah's new order after the passing of Old Covenant Israel. It is impossible that any of these usages refers to a literal planet and stars, as we in the Messiah's age live on exactly the same planet and under exactly the same stars as did Adam and Eve, and, Old Covenant Israel!

We'll discuss this concept more fully in the chapter on II Peter 3: "Destruction of the Universe or Destruction of Jerusalem?" For the present, we summarize our comments on this expression thusly. When

Peter said the heavens would pass away, he used language common in the Old Testament to speak of the overthrow of political powers. In Isa. 14.12f, the fall of the ruler of Babylon was spoken of as a falling star. In Isa. 13.10, 13, 19, Isaiah used such language to describe the fall of Babylon; in Isa. 34.4, the fall of Edom. In Isa. 51.6, the nation of Israel would so fall. In Joel 3.16, the fall of Jerusalem after the Messiah was foretold in such words. Peter said it would be so with the destruction of Jerusalem. Peter had said the same thing in Ac. 2.19ff, when he quoted Joel 2.28-32 in the first gospel sermon. Haggai used the same language in Hag. 2.6, *quoted in Heb. 12.26-28 to speak of the imminent destruction of Jerusalem*. Jesus used the same language in Mt. 24.39-42 and Lk. 21.26, 11.

In conclusion, when Jesus says that heaven and earth will pass away, the Mosaic order certainly would, but here is some truth that will always stand: The city of Jerusalem is going to be destroyed! Taking these verses in their proper context, the subject matter here was still the destruction of Jerusalem rather than a final end-of-time return of Christ.

Some say Jesus spoke of two events in this chapter because he said the time of one event (the destruction of Jerusalem) was given (i.e., in this generation), but the time of the second event (a final end-of-time return of Christ) was not given. Note carefully that Jesus did *not* say the time of one event could be known in advance and the time of the other could not be known in advance. Jesus said the judgment would occur in “this generation,” but “of that day and hour knoweth no one.” I expect to die *in this generation*, but I know not *the day and the hour*. Does that imply that my death will take place at two different times? I expect my hair to turn completely gray *in this generation*, but I don’t know *the day and hour* it will happen. Does that imply it will completely turn gray twice? Neither does Jesus’ language imply that he spoke of two events to be fulfilled at two different times.

An Argument Which Shows No Transition Occurs in Matthew 24

At this point we want to show that, from a consideration of Jesus’ answer, no transition from one subject to another occurred in Matthew 24. As mentioned earlier, verse 29 is a popular choice for a transition point from the destruction of Jerusalem to a final end-of-time return. Verse 36 is another popular choice. Consider carefully that the lan-

guage of Jesus' answer implied no transition at either verse 29 or verse 36.

In Lk. 17.22-37, Jesus used much the same language as in Matthew 24 in a similar discourse several days before the Matthew 24 discourse. This took place as Jesus and the apostles traveled to Jerusalem for the final week of his life. Notice that several times Jesus interweaves language generally taken to be about a final end-of-time return in Matthew 24 with language taken to be about the destruction of Jerusalem in Matthew 24. For example, in Lk. 17.26, 27, Jesus said:

And as it came to pass in the days of Noah, even so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man. They ate, they drank,...

This language is identical to Mt. 24.37ff, generally taken to be about a final end-of-time return. It is also *after* the supposed transition in earlier verses.

However, in Lk. 17.31, (the next verse), Jesus said:

In that day, he that shall be on the housetop, and his goods in the house, let him not go down to take them away...

This is language identical to Mt. 24.17ff, which is generally applied to the destruction of Jerusalem, and occurs *before* the supposed transition in Matthew 24. In other words, Jesus' reversal of these matters without regard to the supposed transition of Matthew 24 shows no transition took place. Further, no transition occurs between verses 30-31 in Luke 17. When Jesus said, "in that day" in Lk. 17.31, he must have referred to the day when the Son of man was revealed in verse 30.

Also, we find another comparable example in Luke 17. In verses 35-36, Jesus spoke of "two women grinding together; the one shall be taken and the other shall be left." This is the same type of language as in Mt. 24.41, *after* the supposed transition. In the next verse of Luke 17 we find: "And they *answering* say unto him, Where, Lord? And he said unto them, Where the body is, thither will the eagles also be gathered together." Again, this is the same language of Mt. 24.28, generally regarded as fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem because it occurs *before* the supposed transition.

In addition, no transition occurs between Lk. 17.36-37 because, in verse 37, the disciples referred to the things Jesus had just said in verse

35: “And they answering say unto him, Where, Lord?” Jesus’ language simply will not allow for a transition as supposed in Mt. 24.29 or 36.

If Jesus’ language implied a change of subject in Matthew 24, then the same language would have Jesus, in Luke 17, jumping back and forth between these two major Bible subjects as follows:

Did Jesus Make All These Transitions in Luke 17?

vv23-25:	Destruction of Jerusalem
vv26-30:	End-of-time return
vv31-33:	Destruction of Jerusalem
vv34-36:	End-of-time return
vs37:	Destruction of Jerusalem

Who do we know that teaches or interprets passages in this fashion other than Jehovah’s Witnesses? Who can believe that Jesus hopped back and forth from verse to verse to talk about two of the major events of all Bible times? Where else does he do it in all the gospels?

Several years ago, *Reader’s Digest* related an incident that occurred when the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) tested the comprehension of the astronauts in a distinctive speed-reading program. NASA composed a special text with every other sentence taken from two entirely different sources about two entirely different subjects. They gave this material to two different groups of astronauts, one which had completed the speed-reading course and one which had not. They were told to read the material as fast as possible and then they would be given a test to determine their level of comprehension.

When the race began, the astronauts who had completed the speed-reading course flashed through the material very rapidly, with no notice that the material dealt with two entirely different subjects line-by-line. The other group read just a few lines, stopped, and exclaimed, “This is nonsense material!” They realized people don’t discuss two important subjects simultaneously and switch subjects with every other sentence.

Neither did Jesus in Matthew 24. His language in neither Luke 17 nor Matthew 24 demands that he spoke about an end-of-time return. More than that, it means that Jesus did not make such a transition.

The Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants

Verses 37-51: “And as were the days of Noah, so shall be the coming of the Son of man. 38 For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, 39 and they knew not until the flood came, and *took* them all away; so shall be the coming of the Son of man. 40 Then shall two man be in the field; one is *taken*, and one is left: 41 two women shall be grinding at the mill; one is *taken*, and one is left. 42 Watch therefore: for ye know not on what day your Lord cometh. 43 But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what watch the thief was coming, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken through. 44 Therefore be ye also ready; for in an hour that ye think not the Son of man cometh. 45 Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath set over his household, to give them their food in due season? 46 Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. 47 Verily I say unto you, that he will set him over all that he hath. 48 But if that *evil servant* shall say in his heart, My lord *tarrieth*; 49 and shall begin to beat his fellow-servants, and shall eat and drink with the drunken; 50 the lord of that servant shall come in a day when he expecteth not, and in an hour when he knoweth not, 51 and shall cut him asunder, and appoint his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.”

In these verses, Jesus gave some exhortations to watchfulness. He warned the apostles that, during the physical judgment that came upon Noah’s generation, most of the people were not watchful, therefore they perished. So, the ones to whom Jesus spoke were to be watchful so that they could escape and not be consumed in the tragedy which was to befall Jerusalem.

Note in particular that in v48, that Jesus characterizes as *evil* the servant who said his lord tarried. In v51, Jesus says that servant is a hypocrite. What do you think of a servant of Christ who doesn’t think Jesus returned in his generation as he promised, but tarried when he said in no uncertain terms that he would not in Heb. 10.37:

For yet a very little while, He that cometh shall come,
and shall not tarry.

Jesus rightly calls such an evil servant a hypocrite, i.e., a play-actor, because he acts like a Christian who trusts in the teaching of Christ, yet he denies Jesus’ guarantee he wouldn’t tarry. If Jesus

thought the servants who scoffed at his not coming in II Pet. 3 was evil, what in the world do you think he thinks of people claiming to be servants of his in the 21st century who think he still hasn't returned when he promised to in his own generation?

In vv39, Jesus speaks of the wicked being taken away in the flood. Then in vv40-41, where he speaks of one person being taken and another left, our dispensational friends see evidence of their "rapture" doctrine, where they assert that at Jesus' coming, he would come back to earth to take his saints off the earth and rescue them from the great tribulation coming. After all, some are "taken" and others are left. In their view, the ones taken are the righteous. However, they've got it just backwards. In Jesus' view, the wicked are the ones that are taken, not the righteous who are left behind. The dispensational authors of the *Left Behind* books and movies should take note! They should also note that Jesus prayed the night before he died, "I pray not that thou shouldest take them from the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil one" (Jn. 17.15). Did not Jesus get the word on the rapture?

The Judgment Jesus Spoke of in Matthew 24 Is an Escapable Judgment

Jesus spoke of an escapable judgment in Matthew 24, not an inescapable end-of-time judgment. Notice Jesus' conclusion in each of the gospel accounts: Jesus' Conclusion in Mark

Watch therefore: for ye know not when the Lord of the house cometh, whether at midnight or at cockcrowing or in the morning; lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch. (13.35-37)

Jesus' Conclusion in Matthew

Watch therefore: for ye know not on what day your Lord cometh. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what watch the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have suffered his house to be broken through. Therefore be ye also ready, for in an hour that yet think not the Son of man cometh. (24.42-44)

Jesus' Conclusion in Luke

But watch ye at every season, making supplication, *that ye may prevail to escape all these things that shall come to pass*, and to stand before the Son of man.
(21.36)

Notice in Mark's and Matthew's accounts, they both gave the same exhortations to watchfulness. Yet, Luke added something in his account which is nowhere present in the other accounts: "But watch ye at every season, making supplication, *that ye may prevail to escape all these things that shall come to pass*, and to stand before the Son of man."

From these words, Jesus obviously spoke not of an earth-burning end-of-time judgment, from which no man would escape, but the destruction of Jerusalem, from which he desired that the faithful escape. The judgment Jesus spoke about in this chapter was an escapable judgment that was to take place in the lifetime of the generation he spoke to.

Recall now Jesus' words in Mt. 24.15-16:

When therefore ye see the abomination of desolation...then let them that are in Judea flee unto the mountains...

Why did he give these signs that were to precede his coming on the clouds? "...that ye may prevail to escape all these things that shall come to pass."

History Records This Happened

As we've seen, the purpose of Jesus' words in this chapter was to warn faithful people who would see the signs of the approaching physical judgment and escape it. Eusebius, a third century historian, wrote of the early Jerusalem church:

The whole body, however, of the church at Jerusalem, having been commanded by a divine revelation given to men of approved piety there before the war removed from the city and dwelt at a certain town beyond the Jordan, called Pella. (Pamphilus Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, translated by C. F. Cruse

[Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Company, 1869], lib. 3, chapter 6.)

Historian George P. Holford wrote:

After the destruction of Jerusalem seventeen hundred Jews who surrendered at Macherus were slain, and of fugitives not less than three thousand in the wood of Jardes. Titus having marched his army to Caesarea, he (Titus) there, with great splendor, celebrated the birthday of his brother Domitian; and according to the barbarous manner of those times, punished many Jews in honor of it. The number who was burnt, and who fell by fighting with wild beasts, and in mutual combats, exceeded two thousand five hundred.” George P. Holford, *The Destruction of Jerusalem*, 1805, cited by William Robert West, *The Resurrection and Immortality*, Third Edition, available at robertwr.com, p. 223)

The British Methodist commentator Adam Clarke lists some that were killed at other places.

By the inhabitants of Caesarea, above 20,000. At Scythopolis, above 13,000. At Ascalon, 2,500. At Ptolemais, 2,000. At Alexandria, 50,000. At Joppa, when taken by Cestius Gallus, 8,400. In a mountain called Asamon, near Sepporis, above 2,000. At Damascus, 10,000. In a battle with the Romans at Ascalon, 10,000. In an ambush near the same place, 8,000. At Japha, 15,000. Of the Samaritans, on Mount Gerizim, 11,600. At Jotapa, 40,000. At Joppa, when taken by Vespasian, 4,200. At Tarichea, 6,500. And after the city was taken, 1,200. At Gamala, 4,000, besides 5,000 who threw themselves down a precipice. Of those who fled with John, of Gischala, 6,000. Of the Gadarenes, 15,000 slain, besides countless multitudes drowned. In the village of Idumea, above 10,000 slain. At Gerasa, 1,000. At Machaerus, 1,700. In the wood of Jardes, 3,000. In the castle of Masada, 960. In Cyrene, by Catullus the governor, 3,000. Besides these, many of every age, sex, and condition, were slain in the war, who are not reckoned; but, of those who

are reckoned, the number amounts to upwards of 1,357,660, which would have appeared incredible, if their own historian had not so particularly enumerated them.” (*Commentary on Matthew*, cited by Robert West, *Ibid.*, p. 224.)

So, in a siege of Jerusalem where 1,100,000 Jews perished and another two and one half million were taken into slavery, not one faithful individual who heeded the warnings of Jesus given in this chapter perished. Christians fled as Jesus had commanded them to do.

Two Final Points on the Words “End” and “Coming”

We have already noticed the words “end” and “coming” in our analysis of the questions the apostles asked Jesus, which provoked the teaching of Matthew 24. In conclusion, we want to notice two interesting facts about the use of these words. If “end” refers to an end-of-time return of Christ, and a transition or change of subjects occurs somewhere in the chapter, we would expect Jesus’ use of “end” to be in the *latter* part of the chapter. This is *exactly the opposite* of how Jesus used it:

vs 6: “...for these things must needs come to pass, but *the end* is not yet.”

vs 13: “But he that endureth to *the end*, the same shall be saved.”

vs 14: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world,...and then shall *the end* come.”

As we have already noticed, these occurrences of “the end” are all *before* verse 34, where Jesus said, “This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished.” Hence, the end spoken of is not the end of the planet, but the end or consummation of the Mosaic age.

Likewise, when we notice the use of the word “coming” in this chapter (if Jesus used it of a final end-of-time return), we would find its use in the *latter* part of the chapter; yet, it occurs *throughout* the chapter without regard to any supposed transition in verses 29 or 36. Thus, Jesus spoke of his “coming” both *before and after* any supposed transition.

Summary on Matthew 24

In conclusion, let's briefly summarize the major points of this study. According to the material we've presented here, Jesus did not speak of a final return in Matthew 24 for the following reasons:

The apostles did not ask Jesus about an end-of-time return from heaven.

The language of their questions didn't permit it.

They wouldn't have asked about an end-of-time return because they admittedly didn't expect Jesus to leave.

Jesus' answer didn't permit that he spoke of anything other than a physical judgment against the city of Jerusalem.

The judgment of which Jesus spoke was an escapable judgment.

We now notice Jesus' next parable, given to exhort his disciples to watchfulness for his coming and the end of the age. In all these parables, it's important to notice that the bridegroom or the master of the house who goes away, returns to the same servants that he left, not their descendants twenty generations later. Likewise, Jesus' coming and judgment was going to be in his generation, not people in our time. The Parable of the Ten Virgins

25:1 “Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. **2** And five of them were foolish, and five were wise. **3** For the foolish, when they took their lamps, took no oil with them: **4** but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. **5** Now while the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. **6** But at midnight there is a cry, Behold, the bridegroom! Come ye forth to meet him. **7** Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. **8** And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are going out. **9** But the wise answered, saying, Peradventure there will not be enough for us and you: go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. **10** And while they went away to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that *were ready* went in with

him to the marriage feast: and the door was shut. 11 Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. 12 But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. 13 *Watch* therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour.”

This parable turns on those servants were ready for their master’s return vs. the ones that weren’t prepared. Of course, they didn’t know the day nor the hour of his coming, but they did know the generation, didn’t they?

The Parable of the Talents

“14 For it is as when a man, going into another country, called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. 15 And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one; to each according to his several ability; and he went on his journey. 16 Straightway he that received the five talents went and traded with them, and made other five talents. 17 In like manner he also that received the two gained other two. 18 But he that received the one went away and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money. 19 Now after a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and maketh a reckoning with them. 20 And he that received the five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: lo, I have gained other five talents. 21 His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy lord. 22 And he also that received the two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: lo, I have gained other two talents. 23 His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy lord. 24 And he also that had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art a hard man, reaping where thou didst not sow, and gathering where thou didst not scatter; 25 and I was afraid, and went away and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, thou hast thine own. 26 But his lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I did not scatter; 27 thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the bankers, and at my coming I should have received back mine own with interest. 28 Take ye away therefore the talent from him, and

give it unto him that hath the ten talents. 29 For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away. 30 And cast ye out the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.”

Again, this parable turns on the servants that were ready and prepared for their master’s return vs. those who were not.

What About The Judgment of Matthew 25?

The question arises, if Matthew 24 does not speak of a final end-of-time coming of Christ, what about Matthew 25? If the apostles didn’t ask Jesus about such a coming and he didn’t teach about it, what about the judgment scene described in Mt. 25.31-46?

For years after I reached my present understanding about Matthew 24, I was asked this question, and I fielded it this way: Jesus concluded his Matthew 24 discourse with three parables: (1) The Faithful and Unfaithful Servants (Mt. 24.45-51), (2) The Ten Virgins (Mt. 25.1-13), and (3) The Talents (Mt. 25.14-30). The main point of two of these parables turned on “watchfulness,” whether for the judgment on Jerusalem, or any other judgment, even a final judgment of all men. Thus, Jesus concluded Matthew 24 with these three parables, which illustrated his exhortations to watchfulness. I then reasoned that, if Jesus spoke of his final judgment in Mt. 25.31ff, then it was during those three parables that he made a transition to his teaching about a final judgment. It would be as though while he spoke on watchfulness that he said, “Here is another judgment you need to be watchful for.” Then he gave instruction about an end-of-time final judgment, even though the apostles didn’t ask him about it.

I also made a distinction at Mt. 25.31, where Jesus spoke of his coming in glory, and contrasted that with his coming in judgment in Matthew 24. I now realize that the judgment in Matthew 24 was also a coming in glory. First, notice in Mt. 16.27-28, Jesus spoke of a coming in glory in his generation:

For the Son of man shall come in the *glory* of his Father with his angels; and then shall he render unto every man according to his deeds. Verily I say unto you, *There are some of them that stand here, who shall in*

no wise taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

Thus, Jesus spoke of a coming in glory, where every man will be judged according to his deeds, and these events would take place because of the Christ's rule. His rule was to commence during the lifetime of those who heard him.

Likewise, notice also in Lk. 9.26-27, where Jesus foretold a coming in glory in that generation:

For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in his own glory, and the glory of the Father, and of the holy angels. But I tell you of a truth, There are some of them that stand here, who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God.

These passages teach the same thing as Matthew 24. The destruction of Jerusalem was also a coming in glory. Hear him in Mt. 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 on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

As Jesus taught in Mt. 24.34, his coming in glory was to occur in that generation. Thus, the coming in glory in Mt. 25.32 is not a new subject. Jesus had long prophesied a like coming during the lifetime of his listeners.

One last introductory observation on the judgment of Matthew 25: Recall in our introduction to this essay that we noticed Jesus' pronouncements in Matthew 12 and 23 on his generation in his generation:

The men of Nineveh shall rise up in the judgment with this *generation*...

Mt. 12.42:

The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this *generation*...

Mt. 23.36:

Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come up-
on this *generation*.

After Jesus teaching on the time and sign of fulfillment of “all these things” in Matthew 24, then he comes back to the subject of the judgment again in Matthew 25, with Matthew 24 nestled between his teaching on the judgment in Matthew 23 and 25. Isn’t it more reasonable to take Matthew 25 as part of the same context as Matthew 24-25? It was given in the same conversation, with the same listeners, and on the same subject, rather than an entirely different judgment more than 2000 years later!

As a matter of fact, consider the time statements in Mt. 25.31:

But *when* the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the angels with him, *then* shall he sit on the throne of his glory:

Consider the time terms “when” and “then.” As we’ve just seen, the last times Jesus spoke of his coming in glory, he said that it would be in his generation (Mt. 24.30, 34), and during the lifetime of some of his disciples (Mt. 16.27-28). His coming in glory is at the same time in Mt. 25.31. He then says, “then” shall he sit on the throne of his glory, as we see, for the judgment of Matthew 25. The “then” of the judgment is at the same time of his coming in glory, i.e., during his generation and during the lifetime of some of his disciples.

The Old Testament Background of Matthew 25 in Joel 2-3

In Joel 2.1-17, God used Joel to warn Israel of its upcoming destruction at the hands of the Assyrians. However, after they’d gone into captivity and repented, in vv18-27, God promised he would again show mercy to them, and restore them. In vv28-32, Joel uttered these familiar words:

And it will come about after this That I will pour out
My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and daughters
will prophesy, Your old men will dream dreams,
Your young men will see visions. And even on the
male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in

those days. And I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth Blood, fire, and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the LORD Will be delivered; For on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem *There will be those who escape*, As the LORD has said, Even among the survivors whom the LORD calls.

Of course, they're familiar since Peter quoted them only weeks after the resurrection of Christ in Ac. 2.15-21 and said, "this is that" which Joel talked about, speaking of his own time.

Many will instantly recognize that Joel spoke of another destruction coming upon Israel in the Christian age, using the same language Jesus used of Jerusalem's destruction in the Olivet Discourse. When Peter affirmed, "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel," he applied Joel's teaching to the imminent judgment of Israel in his day, the one Jesus said was coming "in this generation."

Beginning in Joel 3.1-2 Joel foretold what would happen after Israel's restoration in the time of Jesus and Peter:

For behold, in those days and at that time, When I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all the nations, And bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat. Then I will enter into judgment with them there On behalf of My people and My inheritance, Israel.

Now notice what Joel further said about the judgment of "all the nations" in vv11-13:

Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, And gather yourselves there. Bring down, O LORD, Thy mighty ones. Let the nations be aroused And come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat, For there I will sit to judge All the surrounding nations. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, tread, for the wine press is full; The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great.

Observe that Joel spoke of God judging all the surrounding nations "in those days and at that time," the time Peter spoke of as the last days

when he said, “This is that which was spoken of by the prophet Joel.” What were these nations? All the nations on the planet, as we popularly take it? Not at all, for if we keep reading in Joel 3, he identified the nations: Tyre, Sidon, and the regions of Philistia. In other words, the nations or tribes of Judea, precisely the nations or tribes spoken of by Jesus in Matthew 24 (and identified by Josephus as the nation of the Samaritans), the nation of the Galileans, and the nations of Idumea, Perea, Trachonitis, Iturea, and Abilene.

Notice also that this judgment would take place at the harvest, which in Mt. 13.39, Jesus said was the end of the age, the Mosaic age. John also spoke of “putting in the sickle” in the harvest of the great city (Babylon, Rev. 18.10, which is where the Lord was crucified, Rev. 11.8) in Rev. 14.15:

And another angel came out from the temple, crying with a great voice to him that sat on the cloud, Send forth thy sickle, and reap: for the hour to reap is come; for the harvest of the earth is ripe.

Of course, John said the things of which he wrote were at hand, shortly to come to pass, which Jesus would accomplish as he was to come quickly. (Rev. 1.1, 3, 22.12),

So Joel foretold the judgment of Israel in Matthew 25, used the language Jesus used in Matthew 24 to speak of the same judgment of Israel in his own generation, and which Peter identified as the very thing Joel was talking about in his own generation.

One last thing to notice from Joel 2.32:

And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the LORD Will be delivered; For on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem *There will be those who escape*, As the LORD has said, Even among the survivors whom the LORD calls.

Joel said the faithful would escape the destruction of Jerusalem. Likewise, Jesus urged his followers to escape the same destruction in Mt. 24.15-20:

When therefore ye see the abomination of desolation, which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let him that readeth understand), then let them that are in Judaea flee unto the

mountains: let him that is on the housetop not go down to take out things that are in his house: and let him that is in the field not return back to take his cloak. But woe unto them that are with child and to them that give suck in those days! And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on a sabbath:

In addition, we've seen in Lk. 21.36 that Jesus said:

But watch ye at every season, making supplication, *That ye may prevail to escape* all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.

Thus, (1) Joel foretold a time when God would judge the nations around Israel, yet the faithful would be able to escape. (2) Jesus prophesied the same thing for his generation. (3) Peter said the judgment coming on Israel was what Joel foretold for the last days, the last days of Old Covenant Israel. Only by ignoring the prophetic background of Matthew 25 would we apply the judgment scene there to anything other than the judgment that took place at the destruction of Jerusalem.

With these comments in mind, let's look at Mt. 25.31-46:

Verse 31-32: But when the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the angels with him; then shall he sit on the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all the nations and he shall separate them one from another, as the shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats.

As we have already noticed, Mt. 16.27-28 spoke of a like judgment in that generation. This judgment would "render unto every man according to his deeds." Surely, he didn't speak of men in America (in that generation), but men in that generation of Jews.

"But," someone says, "Mt. 25.32 says 'nations.' How can a judgment which involves nations speak of just a national judgment on Israel?" This is a notable objection until we realize that the land of Israel comprised many nations. We normally think of Israel of Jesus' time as one nation, but not so. For example, the Jewish historian Josephus referred to the nation of the Samaritans, the nation of the Galileans, and the nations of Idumea, Perea, Trachonitis, Iturea, and Abilene. Judea was spoken of as a distinct nation, with a king of its own. The Greek term *ethnarch* (literally, "ruler of a nation") described the rulers of these nations.

This agrees with Jesus' own usage in Mt. 24.7, where he said:

For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom
against kingdom...

Jesus spoke of many nations in that region, with Jews in all, which would be affected by the Roman invasion of the land. In Lk. 21.25-32, Luke quoted Jesus:

And there shall be signs in sun and moon and stars;
and upon the earth distress of nations, in perplexity for
the roaring of the sea and the billows...This generation
shall not pass away, till all things be accomplished.

Accordingly, "all the nations" speaks of the nations of Palestine. As we've seen, these are the very nations in Matthew 24.

Verse 33: ...and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

Again, this agrees with Mt. 16.27-28, which says he would "render to every man according to his deeds...some of them that stand here, who shall in no wise taste of death."

Verses 34-40: Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry, and ye gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked, and ye clothed me; I was sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry, and fed thee? or athirst, and gave thee drink? And when saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? And when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto me.

Notice what the destiny of the righteous and wicked hangs on in this judgment. On faith in Christ? No. On whether they've been baptized? No. On benevolence toward Christians? Not at all. On whether they observed the Lord's Supper? He did not mention it. On whether they were faithful in church discipline? No. Assembling? No, nor on

personal evangelism, nor any of the other things Christians concern themselves about at a final judgment.

However, it sounds exactly like a judgment on the Jews of Jesus' time, many of whom weren't merciful or benevolent. For example, in Mt. 9.13 Jesus condemned many of the Jews for their emphasis on religious ritual rather than their treatment of their fellowman:

But go ye and learn what this meaneth, I desire mercy,
and not sacrifice.

Likewise, in Mt. 23.23, 24, Jesus finally condemned them in a similar manner:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye tithe mint and anise and cummin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy, and faith: but these ye ought to have done, and not to have left the other undone. Ye blind guides, that strain out the gnat, and swallow the camel!

Likewise, in Luke 10, Jesus showed in the parable of the Good Samaritan that the Samaritans (who were mixed Israelites and Assyrians, who the Jews regarded as dogs) knew more about how to treat their fellowman than did many of the Jews. Thus, for their lack of mercy, Jesus affirmed that they would not receive mercy, not at the final judgment, but in his destruction of Jerusalem.

Verse 41: Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels.

“Eternal fire” without doubt makes us think of the final judgment, but should it necessarily do so? Can this language apply to a national judgment? Many would insist not, but look carefully at Jude 7. In a context where Jude showed that God knows how to punish false teachers, he used the example of what God did to the unbelieving Jews he brought out of Egypt, sinful angels, and Sodom and Gomorrah. About these two cities, Jude wrote:

Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them, having in like manner with these given themselves over to fornication and gone after strange flesh,

are set forth as an example, suffering the punishment of eternal fire.

This language is identical to that used by Jesus, “eternal fire,” yet Jude used it of a national judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah. It is not a judgment that Sodom and Gomorrah will suffer in the future, but one they have already suffered. If they haven’t yet suffered this judgment, they cannot be set forth as an example that God knows how to render judgment on the wicked.

Jesus used *eternal fire* the same way in Matthew 25. If so, this could be the same baptism of fire John the Baptist promised disobedient Jews in Mt. 3.10-12:

And even now the axe lieth at the root of the trees: every tree therefore that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you in water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire: whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly cleanse his threshing floor; and he will gather his wheat into the garner, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire.

While many view “baptism in fire” as a blessing, Jesus’ use of fire three times in this passage shows he didn’t intend it so. “Fire” in Mt. 3.10 represented destruction and punishment, as it was in Mt. 3.12. It takes great violence to the context to make “fire” in verse 11 to be anything except destruction and punishment. The punishment John spoke about was as imminent as the axe at the root of the tree. He spoke of the imminent national judgment upon the nations of the region by the Romans in 70 A.D.

Verses 42-46: for I was hungry, and ye did not give me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me not in; naked, and ye clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not unto

one of these least, ye did it not unto me. And these shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life.

Thus, Jesus concluded with language similar to verse 41: national condemnation upon disobedient Jews for their shallow adherence to the Law of Moses.

The term “eternal” in this passage is literally “age-lasting,” and has no inherent concept of endlessness. It is correctly translated as everlasting, forever, and eternal. In the Greek Old Testament, Jonah used *aionion* when he said in 2.6:

I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth
with its bars was around me *forever*,

and yet forever in Jonah’s case was three days and nights. In the case of the Aaronic priesthood (Ex. 28.43), the priestly trumpets (Num. 10.8), the feast of firstfruits (Lev. 23.4), and sabbath commandment (Ex. 31.16), all these element of the Mosaic law were to observed *aionion*, everlasting, eternal, or forever, yet we know that they only lasted throughout the Mosaic age.

Thus when we come to Mt. 25.41, 46, eternal or “age-lasting” fire in this Jewish judgment on those who rejected Christ was throughout the Mosaic age, while “age-lasting” life for the obedient was throughout the Messianic age, which, as we’ve seen has no end (Isa. 9.6, Lk. 1.33).

We conclude with a quotation from Franklin Camp on the significance of the destruction of Jerusalem:

The fall of Jerusalem separated Judaism from Christianity. Judaism was a God-ordained religion. This made it possible for Judaizing teachers to deceive and confuse people as long as the temple existed. It was one thing to appeal to people to give up paganism with its religion as it was never approved by God. It was still another thing to call on the Jews to lay aside Judaism which was given by God and at one time acceptable to God. It is easy to see how Judaizing teachers used this in opposing the church. But when Jerusalem fell, the temple was destroyed, and they could no longer use this as a means of trying to confuse people. (Franklin Camp, *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Redemption* (Birmingham, AL: Roberts and Sons, 1974,

cited by Don K. Preston, *Like Father, Like Son, on Clouds of Glory* [Ardmore, OK: JaDon ProductionsLLC, 2006]

Conclusion

Jesus provided a way of escape for faithful Jews (who became Christians) to know when Rome was about to destroy Jerusalem and the practice of the Mosaic Law. This should be a real faith-builder for Christians today. It was a logical extension because God had always provided a way of escape for his people in trying circumstances. In Ezekiel 9, God marked his people so the Babylonians wouldn't destroy them in the destruction of Jerusalem. In Ac. 18.9-10, Jesus told Paul in Corinth not to be afraid, for "no man shall set on thee to harm thee." In Jn. 18.8, at his own arrest, Jesus expressed concern for the safety of his apostles. Likewise, in Matthew 24, Jesus provided protection for the faithful. As Paul said in I Cor. 10.13:

There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it.

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