

## Eschatology

### An Examination of Matthew 24

1 And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple.

2 And Jesus said unto them, **See ye not all these things? Verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.**

**24:2. There shall not be left here.** Notice that Jesus said, *“Not one stone here shall be left upon another.”* Jesus was not describing events related to a future rebuilt temple but what would happen to the existing temple of his day.

3 And as he sat upon the Mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?

**24:3. Coming.** The disciples equated the destruction of the Temple reconstructed by Herod with the *“coming”* of Jesus in judgment that would result in *“the end of the age”* (literally, not world). The old covenant and thus the old age came to an end and was made obsolete by the work of Christ at Calvary (Heb. 8:13). This resulted in the *“age to come”* of Matthew 12:32 which brought together believing Jews and Gentiles into the

blessings of the *“new covenant”* in the blood of Christ (Luke 22:20; cf. Jer. 31:31; Acts 10; Romans 9-11; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Eph. 2; Heb. 8:8,13). Paul wrote that *“the end of the ages”* had come in his day (1 Cor. 10:11; cf. Heb. 1:1-2). The *“end of the age”* of which Jesus was asked refers to the last days of the old covenant world that were passing away (1 Cor. 2:6). The destruction of the Temple was the visibly manifestation of that reality and that a new covenant was in force.

4 And Jesus answered and said unto them, **Take heed that no man deceive you.**

**24:4. Take heed.** The Jews of Jesus’ day like people today saw signs as a way of predicting the end of an era. Jesus warned them not to be misled by the common signs such as wars and rumors of wars and earthquakes.

5 **For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many.**

**24:5 I am Christ.** Jesus warned about the rise of false messiahs. One such false messiah was Judas of Galilee who *“rose up in the days of the census, and drew away some people after him”* (Acts 5:37). Simon claimed to be called *“the Great Power of God”* (Acts 8:9-11; also see 5:36; 13:6). The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (AD 37-101) wrote about a *“certain imposter named Theudas [who] persuaded a great number to follow him to the river Jordan which he claimed would divide for their passage”* (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.5.1).

6 And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

**24:6. And ye shall hear of wars.** The *Annals of Tacitus* covering the historical period of Rome from AD 14 to the death of Nero in AD 68 lists many disturbances and uprisings in Germany, Africa, Thrace, Gaul, intrigues among the Parthians, the war in Britain, and the war in Armenia. There were wars and rumors of wars from one end of the empire to the other during the apostolic era.

7 For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places.

**24:7. Famines.** Acts 11:27-29 demonstrates the fulfillment of this prophetic utterance. *“And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. 28 And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. 29 Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea.”* The famine was so severe that the church as far away as Corinth was moved to help relieve the suffering (1 Cor. 16:1-5; Rom. 15:25-28).

**24:7. Earthquakes in divers [strange] places.** An earthquake took place at the crucifixion of Christ (Matt. 27:54) and another at His resurrection (Matt. 28:2). There is the record of *“a great earthquake”* that shook *“the foundations of the prison house”* (Acts 16:26). The cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum were almost destroyed by an earthquake in AD 62. Seventeen years later they were buried under lava by a volcanic eruption from Mount Vesuvius.

8 All these are the beginning of sorrows.

9 Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake.

**24:9. Then shall they deliver you.** Jesus told the generation in which He lived and to which He spoke that they would experience great suffering, falling away and betrayal, false prophets and increased violence. Great tribulation and suffering did follow the church soon after Pentecost.

Peter and John were arrested and put in jail (Acts 4:3). They were flogged after their second arrest (Acts 5:4).

Stephen was killed (Acts 7:54-60) and James was beheaded simply because it pleased the Jews (Acts 12:2).

Christians were forced to flee from one another in fear (Acts 8:1).

A crowd gathered to stone Paul (Acts 14:19).

The faith of the saints was severely tested (2 Thess. 1:4).

John wrote, “Do not marvel brethren, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13).

Jesus had warned His disciples, John 15:18 “If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you.”

**10 And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another.**

**24:10. And then shall many be offended.** It is a sad fact that the early church had to contend with betrayal and apostasy from within. Jesus had his Judas (Luke 22:48) and Paul his Alexander the coppersmith (2 Tim. 4:14). Phygelus and Hermogenes are now numbered with the faithless (2 Tim. 1:15). Demas, who was said to have “loved this present world” deserted Paul (2 Tim. 4:10). And then there were the Judaizers who constantly distorted the gospel message and so were found opposing the gospel of Christ (Gal. 1:6-10).

**11 And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.**

**24:11. False prophets.** In addition to false Messiahs there were false prophets. Peter wrote, “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction” (2 Peter. 2:1). Paul described the Judaizers as

“false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ” (2 Cor. 11:13).

The church at Ephesus was warned of savage wolves to hurt the flock (Acts 20:29-30).

John wrote that “many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

Deceivers went out from the midst of the church. 1 John 2:19 “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.” The words of Jesus were fulfilled in the days of the apostles.

**12 And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.**

**24:12. Iniquity shall abound.** With the rise of lawlessness there is the decline of love. Worldliness and sensual living destroyed many relationships within the church of the first century while bringing sorrow and shame to the body of Christ (1 Cor. 5:1-2).

**13 But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.**

**24:13. Shall be saved.** Jesus promised those to whom He spoke that if they endured the social unrest, the spiritual apostasy and the political upheaval they would be saved. They would not be destroyed in Rome’s war with the Jews.

The “end” is not a reference to the end of the world or the end of everything but to the end of the specific tribulation period that was to fall upon Israel (cf. Ezek. 7:2-3, 6).

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

**24:14. In all the world.** The Greek word for “world” is *oikoumene* and is best translated as “inhabited earth” or known world or “Roman Empire” as is inferred in Acts 11:28 “*And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar.*”

Also, Acts 17:6 “*And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also.*”

Did the gospel go throughout the “known earth?” Did the gospel penetrate the Roman Empire? Indeed it did.

- *Colossians 1:6 Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth:*
- *Romans 1:8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.*

- *Romans 15:24 Whensoever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you: for I trust to see you in my journey, and to be brought on my way thitherward by you, if first I be somewhat filled with your company. 28 When therefore I have performed this, and have sealed to them this fruit, I will come by you into Spain.*
- *Romans 10:18 But I say, Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world.*
- *2 Timothy 4:17 Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.*
- *Romans 16:26 But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith:*

Before AD 70 the gospel had gone forth to all nations as Jesus had predicted. Once more prophecy was fulfilled.

15 **When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand :)**

**24:15. The abomination of desolation.**

By comparing this passage with Luke 21:20-21 the time when the abomination of desolation was to happen is determined with precision. *“And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. 21 Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto.”*

Once more the language is to the generation Jesus spoke to for He says, *“And when ye shall see...”*

Prior to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 the disciples did see the Holy City surrounded by Cestius Gallus, the Roman general in charge of the siege. Suddenly, he retreated and Christians who remembered the words of Christ were able to escape.

**16 Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains:**

**24:16.** When the Jewish war broke out with the Romans; the Zealots took control of the temple area. However, instead of keeping it holy they allowed criminals including murderers to move freely in the Holy of Holies. In the winter of AD 67-68 a non-Levite priest was placed as High Priest. The retired priest Ananus lamented that *“It would have been far better for me to have died before I had seen the house of God laden with such abominations and its unapproachable and hallowed places crowded with the feet of murderers”* (Wars. 4:4:10).

More abominations took place when the Roman soldiers finally were able to establish in the holy place their legionary standards, emblazoned with emblems of heathen gods. For three and one half years the temple was desecrated according to prophecy (cf. Rev. 11:2).

**17 Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house:**

**18 Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes.**

**19 And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!**

**20 But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the Sabbath day:**

**24:17-20.**

As the dark and terrible days of tribulation descended upon Israel Jesus said to His disciples they would see the approaching desolation and so they should take cover in the hills. History records that those Jews who did not flee more than the  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile the Jewish law allowed for a Sabbath's journey were slaughtered.

**21 For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.**

**24:21.** Jesus does not have in mind a worldwide tribulation in this verse for the context is Judea, "Then let them which be in Judaea flee"

To escape this tribulation all one had to do was to flee to the mountains. There are no jet planes in this passage and no tanks. This is a now historical tribulation that was "great" because the cause of it was great.

The people of Israel had "killed the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8) and invited His blood to be upon the heads of them and their children (Luke 11:50-51).

That invitation was accepted. Beginning in the summer of AD 66 there were days of vengeance (Luke 21:22). The judgment of God was so severe, the famine was so severe that at least one woman killed, cooked and ate her own child according to Josephus.

**22 And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.**

**24:22. For the elect's sake.** Who are the elect? Initially and for the most part the elect were Jewish Christians for the gospel went first to the house of Israel (Matt. 28:18-20). Had God allowed the Romans permission to slaughter all Jews without mercy even the elect would have been caught up in the massacre.

**23 Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not.**

**24 For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and**

**shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.**

**25 Behold, I have told you before.**

**26 Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not.**

**24:26.** It is instructive that the concept of a secret silent sudden coming of Christ unknown to multitudes is condemned by the Lord. The Rapture theory is predicated upon a secret silent coming of Christ for His saints and then seven years later with His saints. In times of trouble people look for hope. Some look for hope by believing promises that no harm will come to them. Some look for hope in a charismatic leader. The true hope of Israel was to embrace Jesus as their Messiah. Only then would they be saved from "the wrath to come" (Matt. 3:7; 1 Thess. 1:10).

**27 For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.**

**24:27. The coming of the Son of man.**

It is not unusual for some students of the *Bible* to make a transition in this verse from the generation Jesus spoke to a future generation and thus a reference to His second advent. However, such an understanding does not fit the governing time indicator of Matthew 25:34 nor it such a dramatic division necessary.

In the *Old Testament* there are a number of comings by Jehovah that took place in the history of Israel. Jesus borrowed this *Old Testament* language and applied it to Himself in the description of the impending judgment upon Israel before that generation passed away (cf. Gen. 11:5; Ex. 3:8; Isa. 31:4; Micah 1:3-4). In the *New Testament* Jesus threatened to come in judgment to the churches of Asia Minor if they did not repent (Rev. 2:5, 16:3:3). He did not have in mind the Second Advent. In Matthew 16:27-28 cf. John 21:1-3 Jesus stated that His coming in judgment would be before the last apostle died. James stated, “*the coming of the Lord draweth nigh*” (James 5:8). How could he have exhorted his readers to “*be patient*” if the coming judgment he was describing was over 2,000 years in the future? When Jesus spoke of “the coming of the Son of man” He had in mind the avenging of His death in the destruction of Jerusalem of which He had already spoken in Matthew 22:7. “*But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city.*” Historically, the armies of Rome entered from the East and struck like lightning (cf. Luke 10:18). The prophetic word of Christ was fulfilled.

28 **For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.**

**24:28. The carcass.** Because of its dead rituals, Jerusalem was a carcass spiritually. As Jeremiah had stood in the Temple gate and warned the people to repent (Jer. 7:2) so Jesus preached at the front of the temple (Matt. 23:36 and 24:1)

and warned the people of the judgment to come. When the people did not repent over a million were slaughtered during the Roman siege and the Holy City was purified by fire.

29 **Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken:**

**24:29. Immediately after the tribulation.** Once more the temptation comes to divide the events of AD 70 from this next section of Scripture to speak of events in the distant future. Once more it is unnecessary and in fact impossible to make such a dramatic division for Jesus said, “*Immediately after etc.*” Whatever the images Jesus spoke of conveyed they had to be in association with the tribulation described in verses 15-28. In other passages Matthew used the word “*immediately*” to indicate a simple continuation of events with no pause or gap in time (e.g. Matt. 3:16; 4:20, 22; 8:3; 20:34; 26:74). But what about “*the sun be darkened, and the moon*” not giving her light. The first point to notice is that the sun, moon and stars are symbolic of Israel as the following passages indicate (e.g. Gen. 37:9, 10; Rev. 12:1). In Ecclesiastes 12:1-2 we read “*Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; 2 While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain.*”

The sun or light and the moon or stars is used to symbolize good times. In contrast the absence of the light of these elements and the ensuing darkness would indicate days of trouble.

A second point to notice is that the language of Christ was familiar imagery to students of the *Old Testament*. The same apocalyptic language is used in association with the destruction of Babylon by the Medes and Persians (Isa. 13:9-10), the destruction of Egypt (Ezek. 32:7-8, 15) and judgment upon Israel (Amos 5:18; 8:9).

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

**24:30. Coming in clouds.** In many passages in the *Bible*, God showed Himself by the physical presence of clouds (Ex. 13:21; 14:24; 19:9; 20:21; 24:15; 33:9; 34:5; 1 Kings 8:12). Clouds are used in reference to God's judgment. The day of the Lord will be a day of clouds (Ezek. 30:3; Joel 2:1-2 cf. Isa. 19:1; Psa. 104:3-4).

Now what is interesting is that in Matthew 24:30 clouds are used to describe the Lord's coming but where is He coming to? Daniel 7:13 is instructive for Jesus quotes that passage which reads, "*I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.*"

In Daniel 7:13 the "*coming*" of the Son of Man is up not down. The destination is heaven, not earth. The Son of Man came "*to the Ancient of Days*" who is enthroned in heaven, not in the sky (Dan. 7:9).

There is more for Daniel 7:13 is quoted in association with Psalm 110:1. "*A Psalm of David. The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.*" When Caiaphas the high priest asked Jesus if He is "*the Christ, the Son of God*" (Matt. 26:63) Jesus responded by saying, "*Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven*" (Matt. 26:64).

In Matthew 26:30 it becomes apparent that Jesus was speaking of His enthronement in heaven before the Father which took place at His ascension when He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55,56).

As far as the sign of the Son of Man appearing, the sign is simply that Jesus is in heaven. Jesus was telling His disciples to look for the sign of His enthronement in heaven through His ascension in the dark days of the great tribulation for faith would need to be refreshed.

It is because Jesus is enthroned in heaven that Christians are to seek things above for Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1). When God raised Jesus from the dead He exalted Him "*and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, 21 Far above all principality, and power, and might,*

*and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come.” (Eph. 1:20-21).*

A generation would pass before Christians would stop dwelling on the earthly temple and refocus on the New Jerusalem above (Gal. 4:26) where Christ is enthroned. The destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the desolation of the Temple would cause the eyes of Christians to look up by faith and see the ascended Christ.

Other eyes would see Christ as well. Many in the land (lit.) would be caused to mourn at what Israel as a nation had done to the Lord of Glory. This too was according to the will and prophetic word of Christ. Luke 23:28-30 *“But Jesus turning unto them said, Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. 29 For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck. 30 Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us.”* Those who pierced Christ (Zech. 12:10) came under His covenant wrath. They saw Him, not in His person for He had ascended to heaven. But they saw His power bringing judgment to them and making sure His word of prophecy. In other words people finally understood Whom they had killed!

To “see” with “understanding” is a familiar biblical metaphor. Paul prayed for the church of Ephesus and wrote, *“The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the*

*riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints” (Eph. 1:18 cf. Isa. 6:10 and John 12:20).*

In summary, the Disciples of Christ witnesses His ascension (Acts 1:11). Stephen confirmed His ascension at his death (Acts 7:56). But with the destruction of Jerusalem the whole house of Israel came to know with certainty that God had made Jesus Christ whom the nation had crucified both Lord and Savior (Acts 2:36).

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

**24:31. They shall gather together.** Once more Jesus uses familiar language describing how God calls His people to forsake their wicked ways and return to Him (e.g. Isa. 11:12; 27:12-13). During His ministry Jesus taught that His message would reach beyond the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:6; 15:24) to embrace the nations of the world for His sheep would be scattered abroad (John 11:52; Isa. 56:8). Now notice, when the elect are gathered by His messengers or preachers (Rom. 10:15; Rev. 2:12; 3:7) with a gospel trumpet call nothing is said about bringing them back to the land of Palestine for it is the will of the Lord to have disciples in every nation (Matt. 28:18-20).

32 Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh:

33 So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.

**24:33. The fig tree.** Contrary to popular opinion the fig tree is not in this passage a reference to national Israel becoming a nation again. The Lord was making a very simple point by way of an analogy. When leaves begin to sprout on a fig tree or on all trees for that matter (Luke 21:29) it is a sign that summer is near. In like manner when the disciples of Christ in that first century saw certain signs they knew that Jesus was near to fulfilling the promises He had made to come in judgment within a generation to destroy the temple.

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

**24:34. This generation.** The phrase “*this generation*” always refers to the generation to whom Jesus was speaking. Down through the centuries respected conservative Bible scholars have understood the words of Matthew 24 to be a prophecy concerning the events of AD 70. There is no compelling reason to challenge on this point the thinking of John Calvin (1563), Henry Hammond (1653), John Lightfoot (1658), Philip Doddridge (1750), Thomas Newton (1755), John Gill (1766), Thomas Scott (1817), William Lane (1974), D.A.Carson (1984) (*End Times Fiction*, Gary Demar, pp. 112-113).

The two texts that govern the timing of the Olive Discourse are Matthew 23:36 and Matthew 24:64. History records that what Jesus said would happen did happen. Since there have always been wars and rumors of wars, false prophets, famines, lawlessness and periods of persecution failure to recognize the historical context and the time passages will lead individuals astray and give rise to vain imaginations.

35 Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.

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

37 But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

38 For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark,

39 And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

40 Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

41 Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

42 Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.

43 But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up.

44 Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.

45 Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat 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 shall make him ruler over all his goods.

48 But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming;

49 And shall begin to smite his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken;

50 The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of,

51 And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.