



Jesus' Olivet Discourse

“Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” (Mat 24:34-35)

Introduction to the Olivet Discourse

- Few chapters of the Bible have elicited more disagreement among interpreters than Matthew 24 and its parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21.
- In Matthew 24 (and 25) the Lord presents the last of *five* major discourses around which Matthew structures his Gospel.
- Though we find much of the same material in Mark 13 and Luke 21, Matthew's lengthy version is the best known, so that is the text I will primarily work from as we cover this material.
- Since Jesus presents this material while on the Mount of Olives (Matt 24:3) it is called the **Olivet Discourse**.
- Within this long teaching section Christ speaks of a number of terrifying events that occur during a period of time in which he says there will be "*great tribulation*" (Mat 24:21 cf. 24:9, 29; Rev 7:14).
- Christ's teaching on this period of great tribulation has long intrigued and fascinated Christians.
- This is especially true of the modern evangelical church today.

Introduction to the Olivet Discourse

- What Bible-believing Christian has not been alarmed by Christ's prophetic warning about a time in which men will experience “*wars and rumors of wars*” (Matt 24:6)? “*Famines and earthquakes*” (Matt 24:7)? “*False prophets*” who “*will mislead many*” (Matt 24:10)? The “*abomination of desolation*” (Matt 24:15)? “*False Christs*” (Matt 24:24)?
- Who has not dreaded the time when “*the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light*” (Matt 24:29)?
- Numerous multimillion, best-selling Christian books have been written on this fateful time in human history.
- The big sales really began in earnest in 1970 with Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*.
- This book was one of the largest-selling books of the last century, generating sales of over thirty-five million copies and translation into fifty-four languages.

Introduction to the Olivet Discourse

- Tim LaHaye's multi-volume series *Left Behind*, which began publication in 1995 has sold over eighty million copies – eventually several movies were made based on the book series.
- Clearly the concept of the great tribulation sells!
- Unfortunately, I believe Christ's woeful teaching in this passage has been woefully misunderstood!
- This morning, after providing some necessary background material, I will begin walking us through this passage verse by verse.
- As we do that, I hope to demonstrate to you that in the *first* part of this discourse (24:4-35) Jesus gives his original audience a warning concerning a series of events that would take place in their lifetime, as God judges the first-century Jews living in the land of Israel for rejecting him as their Messiah.
- Specifically, Jesus tells his AD 30 audience:
 - How to know when the time is near
 - How to respond when that time comes

Introduction to the Olivet Discourse

- After his description of those events (which we now know occurred in AD 70), Jesus begins warning of ***another*** judgment (24:36ff) that is yet future to both his audience as well as us – the final judgment that will occur at his Second Coming.
- In ***some*** ways, the judgments that God brings on nations in the course of time (such as the one brought on Jerusalem in AD 70) ***foreshadow*** the final judgment that occurs at the end of time.
- But, as Jesus points out in this discourse, there are some key differences between the judgment that occurred in AD 70 and the final judgment.

The Context Preceding the Olivet Discourse

- The three chapters *preceding* the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 21–23) document the Jewish nation's ongoing rebellion and set the stage for the judgment Jesus will pronounce on them in the Olivet Discourse:
- In **Matthew 21 and 22**, Jesus utilizes a series of targeted acts and parables to prophesy the judgment that is about to come on the Jews:
 - **Jesus Curses the Barren Fig Tree (21:18–22)**: The tree symbolizes the Jewish nation that possesses the outward appearance of religion (leaves) but produces no actual spiritual fruit, resulting in a prophetic curse of destruction.
 - **The Parable of the Two Sons (21:28–32)**: Compares the Jewish leadership to a son who promises obedience but ultimately refuses to obey his father's voice.
 - **The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (21:33–46)**: Indicts the Jews for murdering the prophets and, ultimately, the landowner's son (the Messiah). Jesus explicitly states that because of this, *"the kingdom of God will be taken away from [the Jews] and given to a people producing its fruits [i.e., the Gentiles]"*
 - **The Parable of the Wedding Feast (22:1–14)**: Depicts the king sending his armies to destroy the murderers who rejected his invitation to come to a wedding feast for his son and mistreated his servants who carried the invitation. This parable *directly* symbolizes the future destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies.

The Context Preceding the Olivet Discourse

- In **Matthew 23**, Jesus explains why God's judgment on Israel (as will be described in the Olivet Discourse) has become inevitable:
 - **23:1–12** — Jesus warns the crowds that the scribes and Pharisees are hypocritical leaders: they teach God's Law but fail to practice it, burden the people with legalism, seek honor for themselves, and will ultimately be humbled.
 - **23:13–31** — Jesus pronounces seven woes against the scribes and Pharisees for shutting people out of the kingdom, producing false disciples, distorting God's Law, emphasizing outward religion while neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness, and continuing Israel's long history of rejecting God's prophets.
 - **23:32–36** — Jesus says Israel is about to fill up the measure of its fathers' sins by rejecting Him and persecuting His messengers. Jesus declares that the accumulated guilt of Israel's history will fall upon "*this generation*".
 - **23:37–38** — Jesus laments Jerusalem's repeated rejection of God's prophets. He no longer refers to the temple "*my house*" but as "*your house*," and he tells them it is left to them "*desolate*", signaling God's abandonment of it.
 - **23:39** — Jesus announces that Jerusalem will not truly recognize Him again until it is compelled to acknowledge Him as the Messiah, introducing the judgment described in Matthew 24

The Setup to the Olivet Discourse (24:1-3)

24:1 Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” ³ As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?” (ESV)

The Setup to the Olivet Discourse (24:1-3)

- In Matthew 24:1a, Jesus ceremoniously and permanently leaves the temple after declaring it “*desolate*” (23:38), effectively ending His public ministry (23:39).
- Many commentators view this as a reenactment of God forsaking the *first* temple in Ezekiel 11:23, where the glory of the Lord stood over the mountain east of the city (the Mount of Olives; Zech 14:4).
- Jesus now travels there (Matt 24:3) to deliver His sermon on the temple's destruction (24:2) and desolation (24:15).
- When the disciples point out the temple buildings (Matt 24:1b), they appear surprised by Jesus' rejection of it.
- Mark 13:1 shows that the disciples were *marveling* at its structure: “*Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!*”
- Historically, writings from Tacitus (Hist 5:8), Josephus (Ant 15:11:3, 5; J.W. 5:5:6, 6:4:8), and Philo (Spec. Laws 1:13–14; Embassy 29–30) confirm the first-century Herodian temple was breathtaking and widely considered to be indestructible.

The Setup to the Olivet Discourse (24:1-3)

- In response to the disciples expressed admiration for the temple, Jesus prophesies its total, literal destruction: “*there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down*” (Matt 24:2).
- Undoubtably the disciples were shocked, as were others – Jesus’ predictions of the temple’s demise is later distorted in the false testimony given at his trial and he is later **mocked** for it as he hangs on the cross (Matthew 26:60-61; 27:40).
- Despite Israel's confidence—mirroring the ancient errors warned against in Jeremiah 7:4—the temple was completely destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70, fulfilling Jesus' words.
- Jesus had previously alluded to this coming judgment in Matthew 21:43 (cf. 26:61), giving rise to the chief priests' worst fears: “*If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.*” (John 11:48).

The Setup to the Olivet Discourse (24:1-3)

- The disciples, undoubtedly troubled by this prophecy, ask him in private: *“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?”* (Matt 24:3).
- The disciples are asking two questions: *“Tell us...”*
 1. *“when will these things be”*
 2. *“what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?”*
- The way the second question is phrased (in the Greek) indicates that the disciples (mistakenly) believe that Jesus’ *“coming”* (to bring about the destruction of the temple) and the final judgment at the end of time (*“the close [sunteleia] of the age”*) all occur at the same time.
- They want to know how soon this one big event (as they see it) is going to happen, and what kind of *“sign”* should they be looking for to let them know when it is about to happen.
- This is the spark that ignites Jesus’ explosive discourse in which he addresses their questions.

The Setup to the Olivet Discourse (24:1-3)

- In the process of answering their questions, Jesus will also correct their misconception:
 - For the Jews, the temple was the center of their religious practice.
 - Thus, in the minds of the disciples, and undoubtedly in the minds of most of the Jews in their day, if the temple is about to be destroyed, then it must be the end of the world!
- And in one sense, the destruction of the temple *is* the end of the Old Covenant world.
- What they *didn't* fully realize is that **concurrent** with the temple's destruction comes the dawning of a **new** age where a physical temple on earth is no longer needed.
- As Jesus told the woman at the well: *“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.”* (John 4:21-23)

The Setup to the Olivet Discourse (24:1-3)

- As it turns out, the destruction of the temple and Jesus' Second Coming at the end of the world occur at two *different* times.
- The disciples, thinking they were one and the same event, asked about *both*.
- Therefore Jesus, in answering their question, speaks about *both* events:
 - For *part* of the Olivet Discourse, he describes what will happen as a part of the destruction of the temple
 - And for the *remainder* of the Olivet Discourse, he addresses issues related to the end of the world and the final judgment
- The big interpretive question is this: which verses are referring to the destruction of the temple in AD 70, and which verses are referring to the Jesus' Second Coming at the end of the world and the final judgment?
- I believe Jesus gives us the key to answer this question *within* the text itself.

The Interpretive Key to Jesus' Answer (24:34-35)

- Jesus begins answering the disciples' questions starting in Matthew 24:4 and for the next 30 verses (24:4-33) he covers such topics as:
 - Matthew 24:4–14 — Birth Pains
 - Matthew 24:15–20 — The Call to Flee
 - Matthew 24:21–28 — The Great Tribulation
 - Matthew 24:29–31 — The Coming of the Son of Man
 - Matthew 24:32–33 — The Lesson of the Fig Tree
- After describing all these things, Jesus then makes the following statement concerning the **timing** of **all** these events described in vss.4-33: *“Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”*
- In other words, Jesus is emphatically saying that **all** the things discussed in 24:4-33 would occur within the lifetime of his audience and therefore we know these events are **all** associated with the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

The Interpretive Key to Jesus' Answer (24:34-35)

- Then, starting in the very *next* verse, Jesus says: “*But concerning **that** day and hour **no one knows**, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.*” (Mat 24:36-39)
- At this point Jesus begins speaking about *another* day: His Second Coming of Christ, the end of the world and the final judgment.
- Notice the *difference*: with the destruction of Jerusalem, “*these things*” will take place within their lifetime, but as to when “*that day*” (i.e., the Second Coming) takes place – *No one* knows!
- At the Second Coming, everyone will be going about their life, business as usual until, all of the sudden, the day comes and sweeps them all away without any warning.

The Interpretive Key to Jesus' Answer (24:34-35)

- Notice that as the *destruction of Jerusalem* approaches there will be “*signs*” that let them know that the time is getting close:
 - There will be “*wars and rumors of wars... but the end is not yet*” (Mat 24:6). When they start seeing wars and rumors of wars, it’s not quite time yet, but they know the time is getting close – so be alert!
 - “*So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.*” (Mat 24:15-16).
 - The parallel passage in Luke tells us that the “*abomination of desolation*” occurs at the time when they see “*Jerusalem surrounded by [Roman] armies*”. So when they see this, they will know that it’s time to “*flee*”. (Luke 21:20-21)
- This is what Jesus means when he tells them to learn a lesson from the fig tree: “*as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.*” (Mat 24:32-33)

The Interpretive Key to Jesus' Answer (24:34-35)

- Those who wished to avoid the “*great tribulation*” associated with the destruction of the temple were told by Jesus to watch for the signs so that when the time came, they would know when they needed to flee.
- But with the ***Second Coming***, there are ***no*** signs, ***no*** clues, and ***no*** warnings – it can come at ***any time!***
- “*Therefore you...must [always] be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*” (Mat 24:44)
- So how do we prepare for the Second Coming?
- By ***always*** being “*faithful and wise*” and doing God requires of us:
 - *Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.* (Mat 24:45-46)

The Beginning of Birth Pains (24:4-8)

24:4 And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. (ESV)

The Beginning of Birth Pains (24:4-8)

- Jesus opens his message with pastoral guidance, warning: “*See that no one leads you astray*” (Matt 24:4b).
- In the first century, fervent political and nationalistic expectations surrounding the prophecy of Daniel 9 led to a remarkable outburst of messianic emotionalism.
- Jesus explicitly warns that “*many will come in my name... and they will lead many astray*” (Matt 24:5).
- The historian Josephus and the early church record that there were **numerous** first-century impostors.
- John similarly notes that many “*antichrists*” had already arrived (1 John 2:18).

The Beginning of Birth Pains (24:4-8)

- Next Jesus tells His disciples not to be frightened by “*wars and rumors of wars*,” noting that “*nation will rise against nation*” (Matt 24:6-7a).
- In most periods of history, “*wars and rumors of wars*” would not be much of a sign!
- But starting in 17 BC under the Roman emperor Augustus, there was a long period of virtually *no warfare* that is referred to by historians as the *pax Romana*.
- This period of peace lasted until Nero’s death in AD 68 when the *pax Romana* was severely breached.
- At that time the Roman Civil Wars began to erupt, including the turbulent “Year of Four Emperors” (June AD 68 — June 69).

The Beginning of Birth Pains (24:4-8)

- In fact, the turmoil of this period was so severe that it almost led to the collapse of the Roman Empire.
- This outbreak of wars in such a previously peaceful era would serve as an impressive, unexpected, and unimaginable sign.
- Consequently, as these events begin to occur leading up to the Roman siege of Jerusalem, Christians would be able to think back on Christ's prophecy about "*wars and rumors of wars*" and recognize that the time Jesus had spoken of was near.

The Beginning of Birth Pains (24:4-8)

- Next Jesus tells his audience that there will be “*famines and earthquakes in various places*” (Matt 24:7b).
- In the first-century historical records we read that there were indeed:
 - **Famines:**
 - Acts 11:28 records an empire-wide famine during the reign of Claudius, which Josephus notes severely impacted Jerusalem.
 - A horrific famine also plagued Jerusalem during the Roman siege (Deut 28:55-57; Lam 2:20; Luke 19:44).
 - **Earthquakes:**
 - Classical writers document severe earthquakes across the empire, including a massive quake in Jerusalem in AD 67.

The Beginning of Birth Pains (24:4-8)

- Jesus labels these events “*the beginning of the birth pains*” (Matt 24:8).
- This is a very appropriate analogy.
- As any woman who has given birth can testify, the process of giving birth is a painful and difficult process.
- But there is optimism in this kind of pain, because it lasts for a limited period of time and then there is the expectation of seeing a new born baby at the end of it.
- Likewise, the “tribulation” associated with the destruction of the temple was difficult while it lasted.
- But it was a necessary process, not only for God to serve justice on the disobedient Jews, but to put an end to the old system associated with the Old Covenant, in order to make way for a new and better system associated with the New Covenant.

Persecution Predicted (24:9-14)

24:9 "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (ESV)

Persecution Predicted (24:9-14)

- Jesus warns that disciples will be delivered “*to tribulation and put you to death*”, and “*will be hated by all nations*”
- This persecution initially came from Jewish opposition—documented throughout the Book of Acts (4:3; 5:18-33; 6:12; 7:54-60; 8:1ff; 9:1-4,13,23; 11:19; 12:1-3; 13:45-50; 14:2-5,19; 16:23; 17:5-13; 18:12; 20:3,19; 21:11,27; 22:30; 23:12,20,27,30; 24:5-9; 25:2-15,24; 26:21), as well as in 2 Corinthians 11:24, 2 Thessalonians 2:14-15, Hebrews 10:32-34, and Revelation 2:9 and 3:9
- This was followed by hatred from “*all nations*” through the first Roman imperial persecution under Nero between AD 64 and 68.
- This intense persecution caused a sad consequence: many professed believers would “*fall away*” into apostasy and “*betray one another and hate one another*”
- We see this fulfilled in Paul's laments that everyone in Asia abandoned him (2 Tim 1:15), that Demas deserted him (2 Tim 4:10), and that no one supported him at his first defense (2 Tim 4:16; cp. Gal 3:1-4; 2 Thess 3:1).
- John also describes this apostasy in 1 John 2:19, and Hebrews warns of a similar falling away among Jewish converts (Heb 2:1-4; 6:1-6; 10:26-31).

Persecution Predicted (24:9-14)

- Concurrently, Jesus says, “*false prophets will arise and lead many astray*”, “*lawlessness will be increased*”, and Christian love would “*grow cold*” (Matt 24:12).
- First-century “*false prophets*” emerged to endanger the church, as seen with Bar-Jesus in Acts 13:6.
- Peter, Paul, and John all warned against them as well (Acts 20:29; Rom 16:17-18; 2 Cor 11:13,26; 1 Tim 4:1; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 4:1; cf. Gal 2:4).
- The “*lawlessness*” spoken of here is probably a reference to apostasy within the Christian community rather than merely moral decline in society.
- As persecution intensified, many who once professed faith abandoned Christ, betrayed fellow believers, and lost the mutual love that Jesus had identified as the defining mark of His disciples.
- Finally, in Matthew 24:13, Jesus calls His followers to persevere.
- Those who endure “*to the end*”—that is, through the crisis culminating in Jerusalem's destruction—will be saved, both by remaining faithful to Christ and, in many cases, by escaping the catastrophe itself.

Persecution Predicted (24:9-14)

- Matthew 24:14 states the “*gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world*” (oikoumene = the Roman Empire; cf. Luke 2:1, Acts 11:28) to “*all nations*”, meaning that missionary activity was no longer restricted to just Jews.
- Scripture itself claims this global proclamation occurred in the first century:
 - Acts 2:5 records that the crowd at Pentecost represented “*every nation under heaven*.”
 - In Romans 10:18, Paul states the gospel words had already gone “*to the ends of the world* (oikoumenes).”
 - In Romans 1:8, Paul declares that the Roman Christians' faith was “*spoken of throughout the whole world* (kosmos).”
- Thus, we see that Matthew 24:4-14 was entirely fulfilled within “*this generation*”.

Class Discussion Time

- In my introductory material I asserted that while the disciple's question to Jesus (Mat 24:3) indicates they thought the destruction of the temple would occur at the end of the world, Jesus, in his answer to their questions, indicates that those are ***two separate events***:
 - The siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple by the Romans, which occurred in AD 70
 - The Second Coming, end of the world, and final judgement which is yet future even to us.
- After seeing this material, is that how you see it?
- Do you have any questions about this/

Class Discussion Time

- If we accept as a given that Jesus is speaking of **two** different events, the question becomes which event is he speaking of at any given point in the text.
- In my lesson, I presented what I believe is an interpretive key ***within the text itself*** when Jesus says:
 - *Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until **all these things** [the things he spoke on in the previous 30 verses] **take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.** (Mat 24:34-35) = The siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in AD 70*
 - ***But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.** (Mat 24:36) = the Second Coming, end of the world and final judgement*
- Thus, in summary, by using this interpretive key we see that:
 - Matthew 24:4-35 is talking about the siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in AD 70
 - Matthew 24:36 ff is talking about the Second Coming, end of the world and final judgement
- Do you agree with this? Or do you see it another way?

Class Discussion Time

- Do you have any questions on anything I covered in the text so far?
 - *See that no one leads you astray* (Mat 24:4)
 - *wars and rumors of wars* (Mat 24:6)
 - *famines and earthquakes in various places* (Mat 24:7)
 - *they will deliver you up to tribulation... and you will be hated by all nations* (Mat 24:9)
 - *this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.* (Mat 24:44)