

## STORM ALERT: DARK DAYS AHEAD MATTHEW 24:15-28

In our exposition of Matthew's Gospel, we are currently studying a passage in which Jesus is instructing His disciples about what will happen in the future. The theological name for the subject of future things is *eschatology*, and it was a subject in which the disciples (and all Jews for that matter) had great interest, for the Old Testament is replete with prophecies and predictions about future happenings, particularly the coming of Messiah and the establishment of the kingdom of God.

But eschatological passages in the Old Testament, especially in the Books of Daniel and Ezekiel, did not always portend blessing and salvation. They often foretold the desecration of sacred things and the destruction of things that were precious to God's people.

For example, during the Babylonian exile, Daniel was reading the words of the prophet Jeremiah that predicted the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem, which was God's judgment on Israel for their persistent disobedience to Him. After reading Jeremiah's words, Daniel was so troubled by the sin of his countrymen that he put on sackcloth and covered himself in ashes and fasted and began confessing Israel's sins and pleading to God for mercy and restoration.

In a portion of his prayer, which is recorded in Daniel 9, he says, <sup>16</sup> *O Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our fathers have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us...For your sake, O Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary.* <sup>18</sup> *Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy" (9:16-18).*

As Daniel was praying, the angel Gabriel appeared to him saying, *"Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding.* <sup>23</sup> *As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the message and understand the vision:* <sup>24</sup> *"Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy.*

<sup>25</sup> *"Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble.* <sup>26</sup> *After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed.* <sup>27</sup> *He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven.' In the middle of the 'seven' he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple, he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him" (9:22-27).*

This is *eschatology*—it is describing future events. And more than five centuries after Gabriel spoke these words to Daniel, these prophecies were still being discussed and debated in the Jewish community. After all, there are a number of things in Gabriel's message that arouse one's curiosity. What is the meaning of 'sevens'? Who is the Anointed One and what does it mean that he will be cut off and have nothing? Who is the invading ruler who will destroy Jerusalem and the Temple, put an end to temple sacrifices and offerings? What

is *the abomination that causes desolation*. What does “the end” refer to, and what, if anything, comes after that?

But the question that always tops the list when reading such passages is “*when* will these things happen?” Which is exactly what the disciples asked Jesus when He prophesied about future events. In the first part of Matthew 24, as Jesus and His disciples were leaving the temple, Jesus informed them that not one stone would be left upon another, but that whole temple would be destroyed (24:2). When the disciples heard this, I’m almost certain that Gabriel’s prophecy to Daniel immediately came to mind. Which prompted them to ask the burning question: “*Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*” (24:3).

Jesus answers these questions in chapters 24-25, and in so doing gives several clues as to how future events will unfold in relation to Daniel’s prophecy and the end of the age. For the last two weeks, we have looked at verses 4-14, which describes some general events and circumstances that will occur during the time between Jesus’ first and second comings. In the passage we will look at this morning, Jesus will go from the general to the specific. He is going to directly answer the disciples’ first question, “when will this happen?” More specifically, when will the Temple in Jerusalem be demolished?

He says in **verses 15-20**. <sup>15</sup> “*So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand),* <sup>16</sup> *then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.* <sup>17</sup> *Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house,* <sup>18</sup> *and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.* <sup>19</sup> *And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days!* <sup>20</sup> *Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath.*

Whereas in verses 4-14 Jesus talked about what would happen in the world at large over a span of many years, in this passage Jesus talks about what would specifically happen in Judea and Jerusalem in the course of just a few years. Notice, Jesus begins verse 15 with “when you see...” which suggests that at least some of the disciples would see these catastrophic events in Jerusalem in their lifetime.

According to Jesus, they would see the fulfillment of Gabriel’s prophecy to Daniel in 9:27 that a foreign ruler would set up in the Temple the “abomination that causes desolation” (cf. Dan. 11:31; 12:11). This refers to the desecration of the temple in Jerusalem, when a ruler would set himself (or an image of himself) up in the Holy of holies and demand that people worship him as God, causing the Jews to desert the temple. Indeed, in 167 B.C. during the time of the Maccabees, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the ruler of the Seleucid empire, built a monument to Zeus in the Jerusalem temple and sacrificed pigs on the altar. Some interpreted this as a fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy. But, according to Jesus, it was only a foreshadow of what was to come.

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus believed that Daniel’s prophecy was fulfilled when Zealots slaughtered the priests in the temple in A.D. 66. But that was only the beginning. Four years later the temple was desecrated and then abandoned by the Jews when the Romans destroyed it with fire and then erected their own standards or ensigns on the site. These standards bore the insignia of the Roman emperor, who was worshiped as a divine being.

I’d like to point out that when Jesus refers to the abomination of desolation, it is notable to me that He does not so much express concern for the temple, nor does He lament the end of temple sacrifices and offerings as though this was the worst thing that happened during this siege. Rather, He expresses concern for the inhabitants in and around Jerusalem whose

physical lives would be threatened. Indeed, He predicted that the situation at this time would be so dangerous and so desperate and would occur so suddenly that the residents of Jerusalem would be forced to flee immediately and seek refuge in the hills where there were caves and other hiding places. So perilous would the situation be that Jesus said people would not have the few minutes needed to retrieve items from their homes or lying on the edge of a field.

He also said it would be especially challenging for pregnant women and nursing mothers, not only because their physical condition or having to carry an infant would slow them down and enable them to be more easily captured, but because they would also have to deal with the horrors of protecting their precious babies from a ruthless, marauding army.

And then Jesus says, *“Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath” (v.20)*. In the winter, the otherwise dry creek beds were flooded and became difficult to cross, making some of the roads into the hills impassable. History reveals that some fugitives from Jerusalem did try to escape the Roman siege in winter and delayed by these flooded creek beds, were massacred (Keener).

Concerning the Sabbath, Jewish law prohibited riding horses, mules and other means of transportation on the Sabbath; even one’s walking distance was regulated. Transportation and passage would thus be difficult to obtain on the Sabbath, especially if residents of Jerusalem wished to flee secretly (Keener).

The question concerning *when* these things would occur continues to be the subject of debate among Bible scholars. There are some who interpret the events Jesus describes in verses 15-20 as yet in the future, including the abomination that causes desolation. Therefore, they envision that the temple in Jerusalem must be rebuilt, and that this future temple will be desecrated and destroyed immediately prior to Jesus’ Second Coming.

But I think the language of the text suggests otherwise. Though eschatological passages like this commonly use figurative language to describe future events, it’s difficult to interpret Jesus’ descriptions of these circumstances as figurative. It seems natural and reasonable to interpret them as the actual challenges people will face who live in and around Jerusalem during this time.

Don’t forget, in the first century Jerusalem was a contained, walled city, not a sprawling metropolis as it is today. In the first century there were hills and caves outside the city walls where people could flee and in which they could hide. Not today. In the first century, people fled danger on foot. Not so much today. In the first century pregnant and nursing moms were much more vulnerable than they are today. In the first century Sabbath laws were much more restrictive than they are today.

It is difficult to see how Jesus’ warnings could be relevant to those who have access to modern transportation, and who would not be able to escape the scrutiny of a modern-day enemy with aircraft and infrared technology.

Thus, I believe Jesus was describing the destruction of Jerusalem and the desecration of the Temple in AD 70, and that His warnings were primarily for Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem during that time.

Jesus goes on in **verses 21-22**. ***21 For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. 22 And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.***

The key word in verse 21 is “then.” For *then* there will be great tribulation...” When? Does the then refer to the days following the invasion of Jerusalem in AD 70? Or is it a

reference to a future period of time? Some Bible scholars have linked this reference to “great tribulation” with a seven-year period of time that was referenced in Daniel 9. So, is Jesus making reference a seven-year period that theologians call, “The Great Tribulation,” or is the word, “great,” in verse 21 merely an adjective that describes a period of intensive suffering for the people in and around Jerusalem after it was invaded?

Again, I think it is most reasonable to conclude that it is the latter, especially in light of Luke’s account of this same conversation, where Jesus says, *“When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains...”* (Lk. 21:20-21). It seems that Jesus is describing a time of great tribulation that is localized in Judea, not global tribulation.

Indeed, history records that, due to the siege, there was such terrible famine in Jerusalem that people resorted to eating their own children. I submit to you that it does not get any worse than that. Furthermore, during this time, those who tried to escape, were caught, killed, and often cut open in search of gold that was being smuggled out by swallowing. This was the greatest tribulation Jerusalem had ever experienced (Sherman).

But for reasons that are not clear, just before Jerusalem was completely obliterated, the Romans withdrew their siege. And when they retreated, those who knew Jesus’ warning saw their chance and left. The tribulation was shortened for the sake of the elect, just as Jesus had said. The elect are those who are chosen by God and truly belong to God, and here we are reminded that they are under His watchful eye.

**Verses 23-25.** *<sup>23</sup> Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. <sup>24</sup> For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. <sup>25</sup> See, I have told you beforehand.*

Of the three questions the disciples asked Jesus, the one they were most interested in was *when* He would come in power and glory and take His place on the throne. They wanted a sign that would immediately precede that coming. But thus far all He has done is tell them when He will *not* come. He’s not going to come before the siege in Jerusalem, neither will the destruction of the Temple be a “sign” of His immediate coming or “the end of the age”, for when this all unfolds Jesus said, “If anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘There He is!’ do not believe it” (24:23).

So, what is Jesus saying? He was emphasizing that things were *not* going to unfold as they had expected, and they needed to be prepared to respond to things that would take them by surprise. And one of those things is the appearance of very skilled liars who claimed to be the Messiah and attempted to validate their claims by performing spectacular signs and wonders. And Jesus says that these false christs and prophets are going to deceive many people which, of course, will prevent those people from discovering and putting their trust in the true Messiah, Jesus, the only One who is able to truly save them.

Any time there is intense tribulation, any time people feel really desperate, they become vulnerable to putting their faith in those who offer the hope of immediate relief or deliverance, particularly if those who offer it are winsome and persuasive. The enemy knows this human tendency and uses it to his advantage. He exploits that sense of desperation by raising up leaders who will turn people’s attention away from Jesus as God’s Savior and tries to convince them to follow an imposter—a fake messiah. And he can even empower these imposters to perform miracles that seem to authenticate their claims and credentials.

Jesus warns His people to beware. These false christs and prophets *will* appear. You *will* encounter them. You *will* either see or hear about the miracles they perform. Be very

careful that you are not deceived by them, for that would be a terrible mistake with enormous consequences. You must be discerning, because these imposters will be so convincing that they will even deceive the elect, if that were possible.

Again, the elect are those who are chosen by God—those who belong to God. It raises the question, “Is it possible to deceive those who truly belong to God?” On another occasion, when Jesus identified Himself as the good Shepherd and His followers as sheep, He said, “...*The sheep listen to His voice. He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. When He has brought out all His own, He goes on ahead of them, and His sheep follow Him because they know His voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from Him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice*” (John 10:3-5).

So, one of the ways we can know that a person is a true follower of Jesus is if He is not deceived by false christs or prophets. No doubt many *professing* Christians will be deceived, but not true followers of Jesus. True followers know Him, and they won’t believe the rumors that He has arrived and is in some hidden or secret place. The fact is, says Jesus, when He comes, He will *not* be hidden; He will be obvious to all.

**Verses 26-28.** <sup>26</sup> “*So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the desert,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it.* <sup>27</sup> *For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.* <sup>28</sup> *Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.*”

Jesus’ coming, when it happens, will not be secretive but will be as obvious as a flash of lightning. As the presence of vultures indicates clearly where there is a carcass, so there will be nothing secret about the coming of the Son of Man (Kroll). Therefore, Jesus wants His disciples to know that if His coming is not obvious to everyone, it’s not really Him who has appeared, but an imposter.

So, how should we respond to Jesus’ teaching in these verses? Let me mention three things:

First, *in eschatological passages (like this one) nailing down the precise timing of future events is difficult, so it is wise to hold our interpretations of such things loosely.* As we have studied this passage, I have told you how I interpret Jesus’ words and why. I have arrived at my interpretations from exploring the language in the text itself and looking at Luke and Mark’s account of the same conversation—the Olivet Discourse. But I am not dogmatic about my position. I recognize that the genre of Scripture we call Apocalyptic literature is the most difficult of all to interpret precisely and correctly. In fact, I believe that Jesus and other writers of prophecy were vague on purpose. And I’m pretty sure that part of the reason for this is so that we would not get sidetracked from our real mission on earth by speculating about the timing of future events or trying to solve eschatological mysteries. There are a lot more urgent matters at hand, especially the salvation of those who do not yet believe in Jesus.

That brings me to the second point of application: *We need to be prepared for intense difficulties in the days ahead.* Many of us have been raised in a particular system of theology which asserts that the Church will be rescued *prior* to an intense period of great tribulation. But our Lord and Savior, Jesus, never said such a thing. He said that His followers most certainly *will* experience tribulation. So, if you hold the view that Christians will not experience intense tribulation in the last days, I recommend that you hold it loosely. Because if we *do* go through great tribulation, you might become disillusioned. It is best to be prepared for it.

Third, *we must be watchful, prayerful, and discerning as we await the return of our Lord and Savior.* This is the purpose of prophecy—this is the reason we are given a glimpse

of what is going to happen in the future. It is not so we can speculate. It is not so we can develop detailed timetables about how and when things are going to unfold. It is so we can be faithful to Jesus and endure to the end. And Jesus has given several warnings thus far that before he comes again there will be a lot of things going on in the world that could trip us up. We are vulnerable to discouragement. We are vulnerable to deception. We are vulnerable to disillusionment.

Which is why Jesus and the other New Testament writers spoke so often about the need to be watchful, prayerful, and discerning. Peter, for example, exhorts us, *“Prepare your minds for action...set your hope fully (or, fix your hope completely) on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ”* (1 Pet. 1:13). Likewise, the Apostle Paul said, *“And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. <sup>12</sup> The night is nearly over; the day is almost here”* (Rom. 13:11-12).

## **Storm Alert: Dark Days Ahead**

### **Matthew 24:15-28**

**Main Idea:** *Signs of the end include a devastating assault on Jerusalem, the Temple’s destruction, unparalleled tribulation, and the emergence of fake messiahs, all of which necessitate vigilance, prayerfulness, and discernment.*

Jerusalem will come under attack (15-20)

The temple will be desecrated, as per Daniel’s prophecy (15)

Inhabitants must be ready to run for their lives (16-18)

It will be especially difficult for young moms (19)

Seasonal challenges and Sabbath restrictions (20)

There will be tribulation (21-22)

It will be unparalleled (21)

It will be cut short for the sake of the elect (22)

False christs and prophets will appear (23-26)

They will have enthusiastic followers (23, 26)

They will perform great signs and wonders (24a)

They will be slick (24b)

Jesus' Second Coming will be unmistakable (27-28)

#### Application

In eschatological passages (like this one) nailing down the precise timing of future events is difficult if not impossible, so it is wise to hold our interpretations of such things loosely

We must be prepared for intense difficulties in the days ahead

We must be watchful, prayerful, and discerning as we await the return of our Lord