

The Great Tribulation

Matthew 24:15-28

Remember what we studied last week, the two questions asked of Jesus after he lamented the coming judgment upon the nation of Israel.

Mat. 23:37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”

Then comes his warning of impending judgment,

Mat. 23:38 “See! Your house is left to you desolate; 39 for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!”

The desolation of that judgment is made plain, in words with unmistakable meaning to a first century Jewish believer, namely that the destruction of the nation of Israel is represented by the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem—the physical destruction.

Mat. 24:1 “Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. 2 And Jesus said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.”

You have to recognize just how dramatic and unsettling those words must have been to Jesus’ disciples. The disciples have a very easy-to-understand question in response:

v.3 “Tell us, when will these things be?”

Explain yourself? What do you mean? How can that be? Those questions have that sense of incredulity, of disbelief, of such astonishment as to otherwise think that such a thing would

be absolutely impossible. “When will these things be?”

They then ask a further question, asking for a sign, presumably so that they could be prepared.

v.3 “And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”

We studied Jesus’ answer to those questions last week, and if you remember, I noted with reference to the question of “when” that the answer seems clearly implied by the summary conclusion in,

v.34 “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.”

When will these things be? Within this generation. When will Israel as a nation be judged, and destroyed? Within this generation. And so it was, with the total destruction and annihilation of the city, the nation, and the temple. The age of the Old Covenant was ended.

In other words, I believe Jesus is answering his disciples questions with reference to the destruction of Jerusalem that did, in fact, take place within that generation, in AD 70. So the focus of this Olivet Discourse is upon that destruction. That perspective gives me significant understanding of the book of Revelation as well, where we read too a similar perspective, beginning with,

Rev. 1:1 “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place.”

In the last chapter of Revelation we read this,

Rev. 22:6. “These words are faithful and true.” And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place. 7 “Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of

this book.”

So my perspective on this is that much of the prophetic language of the book of Revelation, tied in with this Olivet discourse in Matthew 24, are prophesying with regard to the destruction of Jerusalem. If you have studied these things and want a label, it is the partial preterist view, but I’m not wanting to start with a label and then use that to explain the Scripture. I want to expound the Scripture faithfully. So this “coming” of Jesus, to which we have these signs here in Matthew 24, is the “coming” associated with the completion of his first coming to earth, a series of events beginning with his conception and birth and ending with his resurrection, ascension and judgment upon Jerusalem. Thus the “coming” which Jesus explains to us in our text is the completion of his first coming, since “this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.”

And the sign which Jesus identifies can well be labelled the great tribulation. So it is, prior to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the armies of Rome, we have,

I. THE SIGN OF THE ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION. v.15

Let’s look at that prophecy, as Jesus specifically tells us to do, with those words, “whoever reads, let him understand.” You might that that is quite the challenge, but let’s attempt to understand what Daniel prophecies, that to which Jesus refers.

A. Daniel’s prophecy.

Dan. 9:20 Now while I was speaking, praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the LORD my God for the holy mountain of my God, 21 yes, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel,

whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, reached me about the time of the evening offering. 22 And he informed me, and talked with me, and said, “O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you skill to understand. 23 At the beginning of your supplications the command went out, and I have come to tell you, for you are greatly beloved; therefore consider the matter, and understand the vision: 24 “Seventy weeks are determined For your people and for your holy city, To finish the transgression, To make an end of sins, To make reconciliation for iniquity, To bring in everlasting righteousness, To seal up vision and prophecy, And to anoint the Most Holy. 25 “Know therefore and understand, That from the going forth of the command To restore and build Jerusalem Until Messiah the Prince, There shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; The street shall be built again, and the wall, Even in troublesome times. 26 “And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; And the people of the prince who is to come Shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall be with a flood, And till the end of the war desolations are determined. 27 Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; But in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate, Even until the consummation, which is determined, Is poured out on the desolate.”

Seventy weeks can be applied to this time of Jesus, the time of Jesus’ life death and resurrection, his death being the reference to those words, “And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off.” Indeed, Jesus does “bring an end to sacrifice and offering.” He ends the sacrifices of the Old Testament with the sacrifice of himself, once for all.

And that final destruction of the temple was anticipated, prophesied by the life and actions of Antiochus Euphron, that

horrible Greek king of the Seleucid Empire who reigned over Syria in the second century BC. He is known for his brutal persecution of the Jews in Israel during the period between the Old and New Testaments, and he is especially known for his invasion of the temple, which brought about the Maccabean revolt. “In an act of brazen disrespect, Antiochus raided the temple in Jerusalem, stealing its treasures, setting up an altar to Zeus, and sacrificing swine on the altar. When the Jews expressed their outrage over the profaning of the temple, Antiochus responded by slaughtering a great number of the Jews and selling others into slavery. He issued even more draconian decrees: performing the rite of circumcision was punishable by death, and Jews everywhere were ordered to sacrifice to pagan gods and eat pig flesh.”

Daniel prophecies further about that great abomination of Antiochus,

Dan. 11:29 “At the appointed time he shall return and go toward the south; but it shall not be like the former or the latter. 30 For ships from Cyprus shall come against him; therefore he shall be grieved, and return in rage against the holy covenant, and do damage. “So he shall return and show regard for those who forsake the holy covenant. 31 And forces shall be mustered by him, and they shall defile the sanctuary fortress; then they shall take away the daily sacrifices, and place there the abomination of desolation. 32 Those who do wickedly against the covenant he shall corrupt with flattery; but the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits. 33 And those of the people who understand shall instruct many; yet for many days they shall fall by sword and flame, by captivity and plundering. 34 Now when they fall, they shall be aided with a little help; but many shall join with them by intrigue. 35 And some of those of understanding shall fall, to refine them, purify them, and make them white, until the time of the end; because it is still for the

appointed time. 36 “Then the king shall do according to his own will: he shall exalt and magnify himself above every god, shall speak blasphemies against the God of gods, and shall prosper till the wrath has been accomplished; for what has been determined shall be done. 37 He shall regard neither the God of his fathers nor the desire of women, nor regard any god; for he shall exalt himself above them all. 38 But in their place he shall honor a god of fortresses; and a god which his fathers did not know he shall honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and pleasant things. 39 Thus he shall act against the strongest fortresses with a foreign god, which he shall acknowledge, and advance its glory; and he shall cause them to rule over many, and divide the land for gain.”

Commentators agree that is a prophetic vision fulfilled by Antiochus, along with,

Dan. 12:4 “But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.” 5 Then I, Daniel, looked; and there stood two others, one on this riverbank and the other on that riverbank. 6 And one said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, “How long shall the fulfillment of these wonders be?” 7 Then I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, when he held up his right hand and his left hand to heaven, and swore by Him who lives forever, that it shall be for a time, times, and half a time; and when the power of the holy people has been completely shattered, all these things shall be finished. 8 Although I heard, I did not understand. Then I said, “My lord, what shall be the end of these things?” 9 And he said, “Go your way, Daniel, for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end. 10 Many shall be purified, made white, and refined, but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand, but the wise shall understand. 11 “And from the time that the daily sacrifice is taken

away, and the abomination of desolation is set up, there shall be one thousand two hundred and ninety days. 12 Blessed is he who waits, and comes to the one thousand three hundred and thirty-five days. 13 “But you, go your way till the end; for you shall rest, and will arise to your inheritance at the end of the days.”

The abomination of desolation came to the temple in those days, in the person of Antiochus, but something even worse would happen. The whole temple would be destroyed. And that is the point of Jesus reference in our text, the sign of the coming destruction of Jerusalem.

v.15-16

There is the beginning of Jesus’ reference to,

B. Personal dangers.

And the dangers are indeed great. They are real dangers, real examples of life-threatening dangers that the people of God in Jerusalem would experience. The temple would be violated, even destroyed. And the only option for the people of God will be to flee! Immediately!

v.16

The urgency is clearly stressed.

v.17-18

There is even sympathy given to those in distress, including women in the immediate labors of pregnancy and nursing newborns, for their hardship is even greater!

v.19

Likewise, there will be other obstacles.

v.20

Personal dangers will come to the people of Israel, to God’s people, as God brings an end to the Old Covenant itself with the end of the nation of Israel. Thus with this sign of the abomination of desolation comes,

II. THE HORROR OF TRIBULATION.

There is no doubt to the meaning and significance of these words. It will be...

A. The greatest tribulation ever.

v.21

Needless to say, that is saying a lot. It is the worst tribulation there has ever been, and even a cursory review of history demonstrates the severity of that. You can look at all the suffering of the people of Israel in the Old Testament, and Jesus says, the suffering then will be worse than that. You can look at all the suffering of the church in the centuries following Jesus, and he says this particular suffering is even worse than that too!

v.21 “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.”

Christians today continue to be killed for their faith, martyred because of their loyalty to Jesus. There have been gruesome and horrific times of persecution throughout history, with unspeakable offenses committed against many of God’s people—many burned at the stake, others beheaded or crucified as was Jesus. And tortured before death. My point isn’t to emphasize the gruesome details of all that but to emphasize the horror of what Jesus says lies in wait when Israel is destroyed. In fact, the tribulation will be so great that we read of,

B. God’s protection for his people.

It was a necessary protection.

v.22

That's such a fascinating verse. First, it so clearly identifies God's people as the elect, those chosen by God. That term is a rather frequent identification for Christians, demonstrating just how fundamental this idea is of our choosing, being chosen by God, called the elect of God. Peter says that we are,

1 Peter 1:2 "...elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.

Paul addresses Christians this way,

Col. 3:12 "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering."

Our identity as the elect of God also means that our salvation is secure,

Rom. 11:29 For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."

It is to be the source of our great praise to God, as Paul writes in,

Eph. 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved."

So its permanent, this election of God. Thus Jesus' words are

so striking.

v.22 "And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened."

So this great tribulation will be short, yet all the more dangerous because of the great spiritual battle taking place with the New Covenant being fully inaugurated. Jesus is fully established as the head and king of his church, ascended to the right hand of God where he now rules with all authority and power. Paul describes the exceeding greatness of God's power to exalt Jesus in,

Eph. 1:19 "...according to the working of His mighty power 20 which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His 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 age but also in that which is to come."

Thus this time of transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant will bring forth greater evidences of the spiritual powers of evil, most especially,

III. THE PRESENCE OF ANT-CHRIST.

So again, Jesus gives a warning.

v.23

The warning is simple. It's a warning for all God's people all of the time, but it is especially timely at this time of which Jesus speaks.

A. Beware the danger of deception.

v.23

It is worth emphasizing what John writes in,

1 John 2:18 “Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour.”

Also,

2 Thess. 2:3 “Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, 4 who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.”

Jesus warns his disciples of that awful day that will come within that very generation. The warning continues,
v.26-27

With that warning comes a specific warning to,

B. Beware the power of evil.

Spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. They are being judged and condemned by the victorious work of Jesus upon the cross. He is making a public spectacle of them. And because of that, they are fighting back. It may be a futile effort, but it is still dangerous.v
v.24-25

Again the idea is emphasized that this danger is so great, that if the elect were vulnerable apart from God’s protecting power and grace, they, too would be deceived. Even God’s people, Christians, would be deceived unless God specifically protected them. And then, finally, Jesus warns his people to,

C. Beware the judgment of death.

That’s the idea of,

v.28

The carcass would be the fallen people of Israel, those who gave in to the deception and turned away from Jesus. And the great birds of prey will swoop in to destroy them. “Wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.”

God will protect his people, but the warning is real. It is personal. And it is urgent.

I should note at this point, as we end today, that this warning of the great tribulation is timely and useful for us. I do believe Jesus’ immediate focus was the destruction of the temple, but that event itself serves as a helpful and useful warning for us, as we anticipate the final judgment which is prefigured by those terrible events of 70 AD.

So we should read these words and seek to be on guard ourselves, in our day. Peter, in his second epistle, talks about the judgement of the world that is still future for us, and urges us to pay attention to our own lives and personal godliness. His letter ends with such an appropriate warning for us, an exhortation I proclaim to you today,

2 Peter 3:17 “You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; 18 but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”