

## Introduction

Matthew 24 and 25 make up the end of the last speech of Jesus that this Gospel records (cf. the reading cue in 26.1 with 7.28; 11.1; 13.53; 19.1). It has the title, the Olivet Discourse, because Jesus spoke these words on the Mount of Olives overlooking the city of Jerusalem: **As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately** (24.3; cf. Zech. 14.4). Clearly, Jesus gave this speech to His disciples in private. In light of the events that recently occurred (from the triumphal entry to the lament over Jerusalem), it is easy to conclude that this speech has the goal of preparing His disciples (them and us) for the future that will unfold when the rejection of Christ reaches its apex in His crucifixion. In this account, Jesus looks with prophetic vision beyond His death and resurrection to the severe judgment coming on the city and nation, in connection with His “second” coming.

There are some challenging things for us to cover in this text. Therefore, before we can begin an exposition of the paragraphs, we need a framework that will give us a grid to limit alternatives and guide our understanding. There are three points to this framework. First, the occasion of the discourse is part of the framework (think of it as the base of a frame for a painting; you set the painting on the base so you can see it). Second, an outline of the entire discourse helps us focus smaller units and stay on track. It helps us frame things. Third, the prophetic perspective of the Olivet Discourse gives us a model by which to connect the now of the disciples’ experience with the not yet of Jesus’ coming.

### 1A. The occasion of the Olivet Discourse

The occasion of the Olivet Discourse is a comment of the disciples regarding the buildings of the temple: **Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple** (24.1). They are no doubt looking at the beautiful structures in awe of their magnificence and all that they represent (cf. Lk. 21.5, **some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings**; they are thinking about the structures, but also the rituals that take place there). However, Jesus responds in a manner that contrasts with their sense of wonder. In an abrupt contrast of mood, Jesus tells His disciples that all that they see stands under the desolation He pronounced at the end of His lament when He said, **See, your house is left to you desolate** (23.38). Thus, in Matthew 24, the contrast (“but”) stands out boldly: **Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple.** <sup>2</sup> **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”** (24.1-2). Jesus tells them in vivid terms that the destruction of the buildings of the temple will be complete, so complete that not a single stone will remain in place. Enemies will throw every stone of the temple, every brick and block, into a pile of worthless rubble. This took place in 70 AD and Luke records some details about it that Matthew omits (Lk. 21.20-24).

What happens to the temple is a foreboding of what happens to the city, the land, and the nation as a whole. The special place of Israel as the covenant people in distinction from all other nations is ending. God is about to take the kingdom from Israel and give it to another nation bringing forth the fruits of it (Mat. 21.43).

The shift in mood from awe to foreboding causes the disciples to ask Jesus a twofold question about His coming. The entire Olivet Discourse (chapters 24-25) is His answer to their question. Of course, it should not surprise us to find that the Lord gives answers that are unexpected and that go beyond the question. Thus, the occasion (comments, contrast, Q) is the base of the frame that helps us see the picture.

## 2A. An Outline of the Olivet Discourse (chapters 24-25)

A bird's eye view of the big picture is easy to outline in a Q & A pattern because the discourse itself is an answer of Jesus to a question presented to Him by the disciples. The question comes up in one verse; the answer covers two chapters.

### 1) Question, 24.3

**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?"**

### 2) Answer, 24.4-25.46 (v. 4, **And Jesus answered them**)

If your Bible is a red-letter edition, you will see that 24.4b to the end of 25 is all in red. The entire section records His speech and there are no breaks in the flow of thought (cf. chapter 25 *continues* the discourse by a shift to teaching in parables: v. 1, **Then the kingdom of heaven will be like; v. 14, For it will be like a man going on a journey**).

Jesus takes on the role of a prophet in the strict sense as a seer of the future, as one who predicts things to come. In a basic sense, a prophet is a teacher. Thus, we may think of a prophet as a foreteller or as a forth teller. Prophecy, of course, is teaching and it may have other teachings associated with it.

There are three sections to the answer; the first two speak directly to the question; the last one is where Jesus goes beyond the question to set forth implications and applications. Here is a rough and ready outline that we can survey together to see the whole picture. The outline reveals three broad units of thought: the signs, time, and implications of His coming.

I. The signs of His coming, 24.4-31

II. The time of His coming, 24.32-36

III. The implications of His coming, 24.37-25.46

We can "think through" each section a little more closely.

### I. The signs of His coming, 24.4-31

A. Wars, rumors of wars, and gospel proclamation, 4-14 ("**then will the end come,**" 14)

B. Desolation & tribulation, 15-31 (then the Son of Man will come for His elect, 30-31)

### II. The time of His coming, 24.32-36

A. After a season of growth (for fruit bearing): Fig tree, 32-33

Cf. the nation that brings forth the fruits of the kingdom (Mat. 21.43)

B. While this generation abides, 34-35

**Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place** (v. 34).

C. With the precise time unknown, 36

**Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only**

### III. Implications of His coming, 24.37-25.46 (exhortations to godliness; warnings & promises)

A. Stay awake (general exhortation to vigilance), 24.37-42

B. Stay alert (always ready) in light of the unexpectancy, 24.43-25.46

1. As faithful vs. unfaithful servants in a household, 24.45-51

2. As faithful vs. unfaithful virgins, 25.1-13

3. As faithful vs. unfaithful servants with gifts, 25.14-30

4. As sheep vs. goats, 25.31-46

Now we have the frame for the painting that sets on the base or stand, but we also need one more thing if we are going to see the picture clearly: we need to see it in the right light; we need perspective.

## 3A. The prophetic perspective of the Olivet Discourse

This third major "framing" point may be the most difficult to appreciate. However, things we have already covered in the book of Matthew prepare us to tighten our belts and roll up our sleeves for some good old fashion study with great hope of benefit. For example, the nature of

prophetic seeing that we call “prophetic perspective” is present in Matthew’s record as early as chapter three where he presents John’s way of seeing; he sees future events compressed together as a unit without temporal differentiation. In the seer’s vision, events from different times in the future come before our eyes as events that take place at the same time. This way of seeing becomes evident when we focus on three things: the disciples back then, the disciples then and now, and the disciples then, now, and not yet.

#### 1B. Disciples back then

The disciples associate the destruction of the temple with the coming of Christ and the end of the age (24.3, **Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?**). Therefore, though they seem to have some understanding of a delay in the establishment of His kingdom, they are in the dark regarding the extent and nature of that delay. They do not know that the casting down of every stone of the temple buildings by the Romans in 70 AD will part of a long interval between His comings. As Jesus says, the kingdom is “like a man going on a journey” (25.14), only to return “after a long time” (25.19). The nature of this delay was difficult for the disciples to grasp. Even after the resurrection, they still look for an immediate restoration of the kingdom, and they still think that Israel has a special place as a nation in distinction from the other nations (Acts 1.6, **So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"**).

In summary, when the disciples speak of the sign of His coming and the end of the age, they are *not* looking ahead toward something *far off* in future. Instead, they are looking for something to happen in the near future with no clear focus on the death or resurrection of Christ. It is evident to them that there is some kind of delay and their vision is foggy; what they mean by the coming of Christ is His appearing in judgment to end the existing state of things and to bring in the new messianic age of glory. Thus, they have a telescoped and compressed prophetic perspective with minimal understanding and foggy vision.

#### 2B. Disciples then and now

Clearly, the disciples had a very cloudy vision of the future (but it had the dimensions of “now and not yet”). In His teaching, Jesus fills out their perspective beyond what they are able to grasp. He did this for them regarding what they would eventually grasp, and He did it for us in the church after the foundation-laying time came to an end, for us in the time between (for disciples then and now). Therefore, we can shift in thought easily from how they see the future (the now/not yet) to how we should see it. Lovingly, the Lord prepares the disciples for the time between His resurrection and second coming in a way that informs *us* (His disciples down through the ages) about the interval. His teaching here is for them and us in anticipation of His sacrifice. He is still at work putting more things in place in the foundation of the church. This fact goes hand in hand with the idea that the perspective here is one that merges the experience of the disciples and their contemporaries with the experience of people down through the ages to the end of the age. This merging of things locks us into the fact of prophetic perspective and defines some of what it means.

#### 3B. Disciples then, now, and not yet (24.34)

**Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place**

“This generation” refers to our Lord’s contemporaries and “these things” refer to the signs of His coming. “Signs” include the sign of His coming in power and glory (v. 30, **Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory**).

Thus, we have the conjunction of things that seem impossible, namely, contemporaries of Jesus will live until His return; when He returns they will see Him and mourn. This sounds impossible. How can we find our way through this difficulty? How can we make sense of the impossibility put before us? Presumably, the solution must have a clarity and simplicity to it that

bonds it to the gospel-good-news. Prophetic studies are often very complicated. Granted, the field of study is ripe with complications or complexities. How much of it is our own doing and how much of it comes from the way Scripture presents prophecy to us? Without minimizing the difficult task before us, it is reasonable to conclude that we can find God-given clues to guide our interpretation. Here are some clues.

1) The clear connection of first century people with the coming of Christ in glory should cause us to think prophetic metaphor and prophetic perspective. The apparent impossibility is actually the key that unlocks the text for our profit. It is parallel with Matthew 10.23 where Jesus tells the apostles to preach in the cities of Israel to the Gentiles until the return of Christ (this envisions the time between with the land as the earth and Israel as the nations).

2) We must harmonize similar passages, especially in Matthew, in a logically consistent way. These passages must inform each other and guide our handling of the prophetic metaphor that is present. Some relevant passages in this regard are Matthew 10.23, 23.38 and Luke 21.20-24.

3) Per Luke, we can define the desolation Jesus speaks of in Matthew 23.38 (**See, your house is left to you desolate**). Luke tells us that the desolation of the “house” of Israel (Mat. 23.38) means that armies (Roman armies) will surround the capital city for a day of vengeance.

**But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. <sup>21</sup> Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, <sup>22</sup> for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. <sup>23</sup> Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. <sup>24</sup> They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (Lk. 21.20-24).**

Many Israelites will fall by the edge of the sword and become captives dispersed among the nations. The destruction of the city in 70 AD is a reality that symbolizes God’s judgment on Israel by which she became one with the nations as “**not my people**,” in accord with Hosea’s prediction (Hosea 2.23). In Romans 9.24-26, Paul applies Hosea’s words to Israel *to the Gentiles* and He presents the calling of Gentiles *and* the saving of Jews in remnant as the fulfillment of Hosea’s prophecy; the remnant theme is in 27f).

<sup>22</sup> What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, <sup>23</sup> in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory- <sup>24</sup> even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? <sup>25</sup> As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'" <sup>26</sup> "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"

There is therefore a figurative blending of Israel with the nations as “not my people” when the Gentiles trample Jerusalem “underfoot” and the “times of the *Gentiles*” begin (Lk. 21.24).

Therefore, we can safely conclude that “this generation” (Mat. 24.34) refers to the Jewish nation blended with the nations in unbelief. Jesus gives us a metaphorical/prophetic vision in which His contemporaries come under the judgment to no longer exist as the people of God for the rest of history to the end of the age. Both Jews and Gentiles are “not my people.”

The point Jesus makes is that it is certain that these things will come upon all covenant breakers in the time that flows from His resurrection to His return, with Israelites on the same level as the nations. The new status is evident from the fact that “your house” (temple, city, land, and thus people) is become a desolation (**Mat. 23:38, See, your house is left to you desolate**). In other words, the glory of the Lord departed and the name of this people is Ichabod (1 Sam. 4.21). In the picture the seer paints, the contemporaries of Jesus live on in unbelief until the second coming of Christ to receive judgment. Israel becomes “not my people” because this time between is the time of the Gentiles. God mashes Israel into the nations so that Jew and Gentile become one pot of mashed potatoes until the end of the world.

4) However, Matthew 10.23 teaches that the cities of Israel become the cities of the earth where the apostles preach until the Son of Man comes. Therefore, when the Lord draws out scoops of mashed potatoes from the single international pot, He saves both Jews and Gentiles, both who are not my people, and both who are in effect (metaphorically) Gentiles or undifferentiated nations. All nations are on an equal plane in condemnation and all receive salvation in the same way, by faith (cf. Rom. 11.32).

### Concluding Implications and Applications

#### 1) Purpose of *Prophecy*

The purpose (a central purpose) is to assure us of the *certainty* of things to come and not to satisfy our curiosity about what will be. It is not prewritten history.

Consider the way Jesus answers the question about signs and timing. The language here and insights they give us do not allow us to write history ahead of time. That is a major misconception about biblical prophecy. It does not furnish us with information for charts and time lines. It is not there for us to satisfy our curiosity about the future as if the Bible is a sanctified form of occult fortune telling. Prophecy is not present in Scripture to help us read the newspaper regarding current events in the Middle East, nor is it there as a guide to help us negotiate those troubled waters. Instead, it is present in Scripture to assure us of the certainty of God's plan.

#### 2) The lesson about *Providence*

Wars and rumors of wars must come to pass; they are within God's plan and therefore bound to occur, but they happen within the providential control of God by which He works all things together for the good of His people. He works all things together for your good as it serves His glory and your blessing. The teaching on providence that underlies biblical prophecy is a great comfort and encouragement. We know that nothing occurs by chance; nothing is out of control. Your Father is at work and He cares for you in all the happenings of life however difficult some of them may be.

#### 3) The focus of *Hope*

Gospel preaching will go forward throughout the earth and, despite great opposition to the church, and extreme wickedness in the world; the Lord will use the gospel to save and sanctify His elect. Before the end comes, through much tribulation, and by means of gospel proclamation, Jesus will exercise His rule over the nations by the word that goes forth out of His mouth.

#### 4) The call to *Godliness*

Notably, most of the prophetic discourse (most of the eschatological speech) covers practical obligations that disciples have in the time between. An emphasis on sensationalism regarding the future is far away as can be from the true nature of prophecy. Contemporary prophetic writings that do not ground Christian duty, godliness, and holiness are not worth the toner it takes to compose a single page. Prophetic seeing is a call to holiness before a holy God.

**Let us fall down before the majesty of God in humble recognition of His sovereign control of all the events of history; may our risen Lord by His Spirit drive the truth of His coming deep into our hearts so that we may live each day in the guiding light of the future, with a spring in our step, and strong hope in our hearts. May He enable us to look unto Jesus and fix our eyes on Him because He holds the key to the scroll of history in His hand. To Him be glory, now and forevermore, amen.**