

Dr. David Turner, Matthew

Lecture 10B – Matthew 24:1-31: The Eschatological Discourse I: Introduction and Prophecy

Hello again, this is David Turner, and this is lecture 10b on the Matthew class. This is the first of two lectures on Matthew 24 and 25, the Olivet or Eschatological Discourse of Our Lord. First of all, we want to introduce the discourse as a whole, and then we'll cover the first 31 verses of Matthew 24 in this lecture, and in our next lecture, we'll pick up at Matthew 24:32 and discuss the rest of Matthew 24 and Matthew 25.

So many crucial issues are going on in the passage, and we're just trying to scratch the surface and make you aware of some of the issues so that you can go on in your own study to iron them out in ways that seem best to you. So, introduction to the Olivet Discourse. We need first to discuss the various interpretations overall that are found when this discourse is studied.

The crucial question in interpreting the discourse concerns the relation of the Seventy Common Era destruction of the temple to the eschatological judgment of God at Christ's second coming. There are essentially three views of this relationship between Seventy and the eschatological coming of Jesus, although there are shades of difference within each of the three views. According to the Preterist view, most or all of the predictions of the discourse were fulfilled in AD 70, when the Romans destroyed the temple.

Now, please notice that along with your outline of the lecture on page 40 of your supplemental materials, there is also a chart on page 41, which attempts to sort of lay these matters out for you in a way that helps you grasp it more fully. So, you can compare what I'm saying to that chart, study that chart out a little bit on page 41 to help you follow the lecture as we go on here. So, the Preterist view takes everything as having been fulfilled in AD 70, when the Romans destroyed the temple.

There are various stripes of Preterists, however. In view of the partial Preterist view, 24:1-35 describes the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, and only 24:36 and following refer to the eschatological return of Jesus. However, full or comprehensive Preterists attempt to explain the entire discourse as fulfilled in 70 CE.

That, to me, is very difficult. According to the opposite approach, the Futurist view, the discourse concerns only the return of Christ to the earth. Many of the dispensationally oriented scholars, such as Walvoord and Toussaint in their commentaries, and even Barbieri in the Bible Knowledge Commentary, take that view.

In this view, Jesus does not really answer the first part of the disciples' question in 24:3, When will these things be? That is to say, when will the temple be destroyed? The Futurist view basically says Jesus ignores that question and thinks only about the coming of the end of the age. For several reasons, it seems best to conclude that both of the above views, both the strict Preterist and the strict Futurist views, are one-sided, and they are therefore inadequate to handle the complexities of this passage. After all, the disciples ask not only about the destruction of Jerusalem, but also about the end of the world.

Only an approach that deals carefully with both of these matters seems to be acceptable. For that matter, I would argue for what I might call a Preterist-Futurist view. According to this Preterist-Futurist view, and again there are stripes of difference between adherents to it, the predictions of Jesus' discourse intertwine both the historical destruction of Jerusalem in 70 and the yet future return of Jesus.

Some advocates of this view distinguish between portions of the discourse having to do with 70 from other portions having to do with the end times, and others view the events of 70 as a partial or anticipatory fulfillment of what is consummated at Christ's return. You can consult Blomberg, Carson, Hagner, and their various commentaries on Matthew to get various aspects of this view. Involved in this view is the concept of prophetic perspective, or foreshortening, or double near and far fulfillment.

This is the approach followed here in this lecture. Jesus' eschatological discourse answers both parts of the disciples' question. His words about the fall of the temple provide the reader with a preliminary picture which anticipates as a token the ultimate end of the world when Jesus Christ returns, which of course is yet future.

Now with just those general comments in mind, keep those different views in the back of your mind as we, in the future, look into the rest of this discourse. Now, in terms of the contextual overview of the Olivet Discourse, in 24:1, Jesus leaves the temple after an extended conflict with various groups of Jewish leaders, which began in 21:17. His authority has been clearly demonstrated in the temple in numerous confrontations with these leaders. However, as he puts it in 23:38, they will not believe in him.

The disciples' preoccupation with the grandeur of the temple is in contrast to Jesus' words of judgment upon Israel. As Jesus leaves the temple, the disciples call Jesus' attention to the glorious temple precinct architecture, but Jesus speaks only of its demolition. The disciples' question about the time of this demolition and, as they assumed, Jesus' return in 24:1-3 leads into the body of the discourse.

Evidently, when the disciples ask the question about these things, namely the temple being destroyed and the coming of Christ, they saw those two events as happening at the same time, difficult for them to conceive of what we now take for granted, that there was a 70 destruction of Jerusalem and the future of Jesus' return not yet having occurred. To them, the two events would occur at the same time, evidently. Jesus' Olivet Discourse then consists of an initial section which is didactic in nature, 24:4-31. It seems best to view this 24:4-14 as the first pains of childbirth, the term used there as preliminaries which characterize the entire period between the comings of Jesus.

The preterists, of course, would think that it occurs only before A.D. 70, and the futurists think that it hasn't even begun yet. But it would seem to me that these words describe the type of afflictions which the church has faced throughout its history. The next section, 24:15-28, has language which is more intense and ominous with descriptions of the desecration of the temple, 24:15, as well as unparalleled great tribulation, 24:21. It seems best to see this section as envisioning the A.D. 70 destruction of the temple, which then becomes a token of the ultimate judgment which ends the present world.

The coming of Jesus to judge humankind after that tribulation is described with standard Old Testament apocalyptic imagery in 24:29-31. At 24:32, the tone becomes more parnetic or, shall we say, practical exhortation, as the stress shifts from the what to the so what. Jesus speaks in parabolic imagery from 24:32 on to stress the urgency and unknown time of His coming, 24:32-36. This leads to an emphasis upon alertness in the reference to Noah, 24:37-44, and in the parables of the wise servant, 24:45-51, and the wise and foolish virgins, 25:1-13. The parable of the talents emphasizes the faithful use of God's gift, 25:14-30, and the picture of the last judgment in 25:31-46 indicates that Jesus is still concerned for the little ones. As a whole, then, the Olivet Discourse makes it clear that biblical prophecy includes more than mere prediction.

The knowledge of what God will do in the future, 24:1-31, must have a profound effect upon God's people in the present, 24.32-25:46. In other words, if we have properly understood this prophetic Scripture, we will avoid date-setting and will be characterized by alertness, faithfulness, fruitfulness, and service to the little brothers of Christ. The question does not elicit a date, but helps to maintain the disciples' faith, as Davies and Allison put it. Now, a couple of comments about the relationship of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew to the other synoptic Gospels, Mark and Luke, and notice here the chart at the top of page 42 of your supplemental materials.

In any solution to the synoptic problem, it is clear that Matthew's version of this discourse is much longer than that of Mark and Luke. The three treatments of the setting and the beginning of birth pains are very similar. So, if you look at the chart at

the top of page 42, notice that there is a great similarity in setting number one and the beginning of birth pains number two in all three of the Gospels.

Matthew's version of the abomination of desolation is slightly longer than Mark's, and Luke's section on the armies around Jerusalem is much shorter than either Matthew's or Mark's. That's number three on the chart on page 42, the abomination of desolation. There are some differences there.

Matthew's treatment of the coming of the Son of Man, which is number four on the chart on page 42, is slightly longer than Mark's or Luke's. The three versions of the lesson of the fig tree, that's number five on the chart on page 42, are very similar, but Matthew also has material at this point on the way things were in the days of Noah. As far as number six, the necessity of alertness, goes, the treatments of it in the three synoptic Gospels are very different, although they are of similar length.

The major difference, of course, is that numbers seven, eight, nine, and ten, the parables of the servant, the ten versions, and the talents, as well as the picturesque version of the judgment of the nations, in other words, 2445 through 2546, have no parallel in the other Gospels. That makes Matthew's version of it quite unique. Now let's look at the first panes of childbirth, our title for Matthew 24, 1 through 14, which we interpret as life in the present age for those who believe in Jesus.

After Jesus' blunt comments on the coming destruction of the temple in 24:2, his disciples ask him when it will happen in 24:3. They link the destruction of the temple with the return of Jesus at the end of the age, so they wish to know about the sign which will indicate that these things are about to happen. Their question is primarily concerned with timing, since they want to know when, and they want to know how to know when, by discerning the preliminary sign. But Jesus does not answer their question precisely in 24:4 to 14.

He does indeed mention several matters, such as false messiahs and prophets, wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, apostasy, betrayal, and lawlessness. But all of these things that he mentioned are rather general, and they occur so frequently in the history of the church that they would be of no real help if one intended to precisely calculate when the temple would be destroyed. Jesus also warns the disciples against assuming that the turmoil he mentions is an indicator that the end is imminent.

In 24:6, he says all these things do not mean that the end is here. In 24:8 he says these things are just the first pains of childbirth, which hints that there may be an extended time of labor before the end. According to 24:14, there will be enough time for the kingdom message to be preached throughout the world before the end comes.

Therefore, the disciples need to ponder not the chronology of the end times, but their own ethical responsibility to persevere in faithful discipleship and kingdom ministry. 24:13, they that endure to the end will be saved. The disciples have asked the wrong question, but Jesus has just the same given them the right answer.

Paul himself warned about the danger of coming to premature false conclusions that the church's present woes are to be identified with the onset of the end of the world in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 and 3. Matthew 24:4 to 14 should be viewed as a summary of the difficulties the church will face in its early days before 70 and indeed throughout its existence until Jesus returns. Expositors frequently note the similarities between Matthew 24:4 to 14 and Revelation 6:1 and following, which speaks in terms of the breaking of seals. Now of the seven sealed books, the first four are, of course, the famous four horsemen of the apocalypse.

If the view here is correct, these four horsemen also portray events which typify the church's present experience in the world, not the final days of tribulation at the end of the age. It seems to me that when we come to the book of Revelation that we don't really have anything about events which are truly yet predictive of the future until we come to the time of the sixth seal. That's just my opinion.

This, of course, is a course in Matthew. We won't charge you any extra for that comment on Revelation 6. Now, let's go on to notice the matter of the desecration of the holy place in Matthew 24:15-28. Matthew 24:15-28 is a warning of intense, unparalleled persecution and false prophecy which will arise in connection with the desecration of the Jerusalem temple, 24:15.

This warning involves instructions for flight in 24:16-20, a promise that God will shorten those days for the sake of his elect in 24:21, and 22, and a renewed warning against false messiahs and false prophets in 24:23-28. In the view taken here, this warning relates primarily to the destruction of the temple in 70, but there is good reason, especially when you look at 24:21, and 22, to see this warning as ultimately intended for God's people in the end times who will face the ultimate Antichrist. Certainly, the disciples of Jesus throughout history have realized the constant relevance of his warning against false prophets and false messiahs.

The suffering which confronts disciples inevitably causes them to long for the messiah's appearance, but they must not allow that longing to lead them to be deceived by messianic pretenders. Despite the space given to discussing it, the most profound question in this section is not the chronological reference of the prophecy according to the various preterist and futurist views. The real question here is an existential one, and it concerns the need for wisdom in grasping the providence of God.

Somehow, one must reconcile God's permitting his elect to suffer with his concern that their suffering not result in their spiritual ruin. Suffering, according to Jesus, is a way of life for his disciples throughout the whole period between his comings. Notice such passages as Matthew 5:10, 10:16 and following, John 16:33, Acts 14:22, 2 Timothy 3:12. Evidently, this suffering will intensify as the age comes to an end.

But God, for the sake of the elect, will somehow wisely permit that suffering to accomplish his own goals rather than those of the persecutors. Notice Acts 4:27 and 28 and Romans 8:28-39. Although the disciples of Jesus may never fully grasp why their suffering is necessary, they may be assured from the example of Jesus himself that God will enable them to endure it and, in the end, reign victoriously with Jesus. Matthew 4:1-11, 10:24-33, 1 Corinthians 10:14, 2 Peter 2:9, Revelation 2:26-28, 3:21-22, and 17:17. Now let's think about the theology of the matter of the desecration of the holy place, the abomination of desolation.

Jesus' reference to this sacrilegious desecration of the temple in 24:15 calls up a complex typology of prophecy and fulfillment reaching all the way from Nebuchadnezzar in the Hebrew Bible to the ultimate eschatological Antichrist. Several historical events comprise a sort of continuum of fulfillment of this prophecy, including first Nebuchadnezzar's conquest in 605 BCE, that is alluded to in Daniel 1:1 and 2, Daniel 5:1-4, and 5:22-23. A second event would be the outrageous sacrilege against the temple committed by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV, generally known as Epiphanes, which led to the Hasmonean revolt during the intertestamental period, 167 BCE. A third historical event that fits into this matter of abominations that desolate the temple would be the Roman conquest of the Hasmonean kingdom in 63 BCE, when the Hasmonean dynasty came to an end for all practical purposes and the Romans began their time of ruling over the Jews in Palestine.

Another event which fits into this continuum would be the plan of the rather unbalanced emperor Caligula to set up his bust in the temple, a bust of his head. This he planned to do but was not able to accomplish it before he died, and this occurred around 40-41 of the Common Era. Yet another sacrilege in the temple was accomplished by the Jews themselves, in the way the Zealots misused the temple precincts in the days before the Romans destroyed the city in AD 70.

This turned the temple into a place of warfare and was just as desolating, really, to the holiness of the site as these persecutions by the Gentiles. Yet a sixth desecration of the temple was indeed the Roman destruction of the temple in 70, and there was a further desolation of the temple by the Romans in 135 CE of the Common Era due to the Bar Kokhba revolt. And, of course, if our understanding of biblical prophecy is correct, there is yet a future ultimate sacrilege of the Antichrist against the temple.

So, if this is all correct, then there are eight events in all and perhaps even more where there was a desecration of the holy temple by its enemies. What Jesus was

speaking about then is part of a complex typology of fulfillment, as I had mentioned before. In light of these things, there is no warrant for supposing that the desecration mentioned in 24:15, which echoes Daniel, is a narrow prediction which is fulfilled solely by either the past 70 destruction of Jerusalem or by the future Antichrist.

Rather, there is good reason to believe that the various historical desolations of Jerusalem and its temple all provide anticipatory fulfillments which lead up to the ultimate desolation in the end times. If it be objected that this scenario involves an implausible future rebuilding of the temple, such a rebuilding was indeed envisioned in ancient Jewish and Christian sources. Now, the final section that we wish to look at in this lecture is the coming of the Son of Man in Matthew 24, verses 29-31.

First of all, the Old Testament allusions. Notice also that as we speak of these, the chart on the bottom of page 42 of your supplemental handouts lays out the most important of the Old Testament allusions in Matthew 24, 29-31. Matthew 24:29-31 is permeated with imagery drawn from the Old Testament.

The chart below lays out some of the significant citations and allusions. Although several Old Testament passages are clearly alluded to here, it seems clear that Daniel 7 is the crucial text. In this passage, God is pictured as an awesome judge, the Ancient of Days, Daniel 7, verse 9, who passes sentence in favor of the Son of Man, giving universal dominion to him and to his people, Daniel 7:14, 22, and 27.

All this is in the context of reversal, in which the eschatological enemy of God and of Israel, the little horn, so called in Daniel 7:8, Daniel 7:20, 24, 25, is judged and defeated. As in Daniel chapter 7, so in Matthew 24, the coming of the Son of Man ends the persecution and suffering of God's saints and begins their glorious rule with Jesus. As you can see from the chart on page 42, many other Old Testament texts are involved in the imagery of the darkening of the sun and moon, the falling of the stars, the various cosmic signs, the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds seems to go directly back to Daniel 7, verses 13 and 14, the mourning of the earthly tribes, Zechariah 12, the blowing of the trumpet, Isaiah 27, the gathering of the elect, etc.

All these notions have Old Testament antecedents. We don't have time really to go into these in any more depth. Now, by way of exposition about what's going on in Matthew 24:29 to 31.

This passage describes the climactic heavenly signs which immediately precede the coming of Jesus, then that glorious coming itself, and the purpose of that coming, to gather God's elect for their reward. Thus, the coming of Jesus amounts to a reversal of the business as usual that has characterized the period between the two comings of Jesus. During this time in between the comings, the disciples have been mourning over their many persecutions.

Compare 9:15. But now it is their persecutors who will be mourning, 13:41, and 42, as the disciples experience the joyful reward of their master, 25:21, and 23. The reversal motif then seems to be crucial in this passage.

Now, as far as the theological point of the passage goes, the glorious coming of Jesus has been mentioned several times in Matthew. Many passages here, let me list them for you just to see if you remember them. 10:23, 16:27, and 28:23, 39, several verses in chapter 24, such as verse 3, 27, 37, 39, 42, 44, 46, 48, and 50, as well as several passages in chapter 25, that would be verses 6, 13, 19, and 31.

And not to be content with that, we'd also want to toss in here 26:64. So the glorious coming of Jesus is a notion that permeates Matthew's view of the future. Of all the places where it is mentioned, however, it is probably placed most clearly here in its eschatological context.

While the date of this coming is unknown, Jesus' disciples must not assume that it's in the distant future. Rather, they must alertly expect Jesus' return and faithfully serve him until that day. The coming of Jesus is placed after the tribulation of those days in 24, 29, which may give advocates of the pre-tribulational rapture theory some pause.

The coming reverses business as usual, resulting in mourning among all the nations who caused the disciples to mourn, but joy among all the formerly mourning disciples. Notice another place where the reversal occurs like this, in 2 Thessalonians 1, verses 6 through 10. At this time, the reign of heaven will come to earth more fully, as Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew 6:9 and 10, as well as 25:34.

All nations will be judged, and the disciples of Jesus will be rewarded. Here is where the fulfillment will be of all those promises in the Beatitudes in 5, 4 through 9, also 13, 40 to 43, 16, 27 and 28, 19, 27 to 30, and 25, 46. All this is true if Matthew 24:29 through 31 is understood in a futurist way, but a very different scenario is presented by the preterist understanding of 24:29 to 31.

Preterists interpret these verses as speaking symbolically of the theological significance of the destruction of the temple. Look at France and Tasker's commentaries on Matthew for this. The coming of Jesus is viewed not as his coming to earth, but as his coming to heaven to be exalted after his resurrection.

The significance of this exaltation is played out in the judgment on Israel demonstrated by the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70. The tribulation or anguish mentioned in this passage, then, is taken to be the horrific conditions experienced by the zealots in Jerusalem during the days prior to the Roman attack. The heavenly disturbances are interpreted symbolically as fulfilled by phenomena observed during those days.

Josephus refers to strange signs in the sky during the Roman siege of Jerusalem. The sending of the angels to gather the elect is viewed as the mission of the church in discipling all the nations. Thus, this is understood to be nothing more than what is spoken of in 24:14 and 28:19.

Preterists are motivated by their understanding of 24:34, which they take as Jesus' promise that everything he has spoken of will be accomplished during the lives of his contemporaries. Since he did not literally return during their lifetimes, a different solution is sought, and the entire passage is viewed as a prediction of 70, destruction of the temple, which did, of course, occur during the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries. Additional difficulties with Preterism are due to its truncation of Christ's eschatological program, which is to bring the reign of heaven to the earth.

Since that program is viewed by Preterists as already fulfilled, one is tempted to ask, is that all there is? It seems very doubtful that the global language of Matthew 24, for example, in Matthew 24, verse 3, where the end of the age is spoken of, also the global language in verse 7 about nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom in various places, also verse 14 where the gospel goes to the whole world, also verses 21 and 22 about unparalleled tribulation, which never had occurred before nor will ever occur again, also verse 27 where you have the clear coming of the Son of Man just as clear as lightning in the sky, all this type of language seems to be able to be satisfactorily explained only by something yet future, not by a local event which occurred in 70 in Jerusalem, as significant even as that event was.