

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 17, Matthew 24-25

6-min. Video Overview

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Alright, let's dive right into two of the most intense, most debated, and, let's be honest, most confusing chapters in the entire Bible, Matthew 24 and 25. This is the heart of what's called the Olivet Discourse, where Jesus just lays out all this prophecy about the future. We're going to use some amazing insights from a lecture by Dr. Craig Koehner to help us navigate it.

You know, everything that's about to unfold, every warning, every parable, it all hangs on this one single question from his disciples. They're sitting there, looking out at this magnificent temple, and they ask Jesus, so when is all this going to go down? What's the sign that you're coming back and this whole age is wrapping up? That question is the key that unlocks this entire passage. Now what's so fascinating is how Jesus answers them, because before he even touches on the end of the world, he zooms way in on something incredibly specific and urgent, something that was going to happen in their lifetime: the total destruction of the temple right there in Jerusalem.

This isn't about some far-off future yet. This is a clear and present danger. And his instructions? They are terrifyingly simple.

He says when you see this desecration that leads to destruction, which Dr. Keener suggests was likely when Jewish revolutionaries stormed the temple and slaughtered priests, the command is to flee immediately. And get this. You don't run to the city for safety, which would be normal.

No. You run away from it, to the mountains, which was a known strategy for guerrilla fighters and people on the run. The urgency he's talking about is just absolute.

He gives two really vivid examples to drive it home. If you're on the roof of your house, don't even bother going down inside to grab your stuff. If you're out working in the field, don't even run back to grab your cloak.

That little bit of time it would take, that could be the difference between life and death. Let's just pause on that cloak for a second. In that culture, a cloak wasn't just an accessory.

It was your blanket, your bedroll; it was often the most vital thing you owned. In fact, under Jewish law, if you owed someone money, they couldn't even legally keep your cloak overnight. So when Jesus says to abandon it, he's saying your life matters more than the most essential thing you possess.

Just go. To make this ancient warning feel real, Dr. Keener shares this incredibly powerful story. His wife's family were refugees in Africa, and they had to figure out how to save her father, who was half paralyzed.

So what did they do? In this moment of total desperation, they put him in a wheelbarrow, and they just fled into the forest. It's a modern, gut-wrenching echo of Jesus' command. When crisis hits, you do whatever it takes to survive, and you leave everything else behind.

And look, this wasn't just some hypothetical warning. History tells us it all played out literally, just as Jesus foretold. By 70, the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem.

The revolutionaries sealed the gates, trapping everybody inside. Trying to escape became a death sentence. But early church historians tell us that the Christians, because they remembered Jesus' warning, had already gotten out.

They fled to a town called Pella. They listened, and they were saved from the absolute horror that followed. Okay, so if the destruction of Jerusalem was part one of his answer, what about the second part? You know, the big one, the end of the world.

Well, Jesus gives some very specific instructions on what to watch for, and maybe even more importantly, what not to get all panicked about. So Jesus lists all the things that people in his day, and frankly, in our day, always point to as signs of the end, right? Wars, famines, earthquakes. But then he does something pretty radical.

He says, hey, don't be alarmed. These things, they're just the beginning of birth pangs. They are not the final sign.

They're non-signs. And then he gives the one thing that must happen first. So here's the crucial takeaway.

Amidst all the speculation, all the complex charts people make, Jesus gives only one, just one, absolute prerequisite. He says, this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all peoples, and then the end will come. Just one thing.

Not a list of disasters, but a single global mission. This completely reframes the whole discussion, doesn't it? It moves us from just passively sitting back and watching for signs of destruction to actively participating in a mission of hope. As Dr. Keener puts it, if you want the story to reach its conclusion, well, Jesus has given his followers a specific role to play in the plot.

Make sure everyone gets a chance to hear the good news. Now you really can't talk about the end times without talking about the rapture. It's a huge topic, and people have a lot of different, deeply held views.

But where did all these different ideas even come from? Understanding the history of how people have read these passages, well, it can be incredibly eye-opening. This timeline is pretty fascinating. The very first Christians mostly thought they were living in the Great Tribulation.

Then, after Christianity became the official state religion, the view kind of flipped. They thought, oh, the tribulation must be over. Much, much later, during the Great Awakenings, a lot of folks believed Christians would build God's kingdom on earth before Jesus returned.

And then, around 1830, a guy named John Nelson Darby comes up with a theory that the church would be taken out before a final tribulation. That last view, while super popular today, is actually the most recent interpretation in all of church history. Discovering this history was a huge moment for Dr. Keener, and it led him to this personal resolution that is just so powerful for all of us, no matter what our specific view is.

The point isn't to force you to agree with him, but to adopt his posture, to always go back and check the scriptures for yourself, to really see what they have to say. So after all the prophecy and all the history, Jesus brings everything down to the most important question of all. So what? How are we actually supposed to live in light of all this? And he answers, not with more signs, but with three powerful parables in Matthew 25 that are all about one thing—readiness.

It's like these three parables give us this amazing three-fold instruction manual for how to wait. Number one, be faithful with what you've been given, especially in how you treat other people. Number two, be watchful and alert, like the women who made sure they had enough oil for their lamps.

And number three, be fruitful. Invest the gifts and resources God has given you for his purposes; don't just bury them in the ground because you're scared. Then we come to the final, epic judgment scene, the sheep and the goats.

And a key question here is, who exactly are the least of these? Now, of course, it applies to caring for the poor and vulnerable in general, but Dr. Keener makes a strong case that in Matthew's specific context, Jesus is talking about his own disciples, those traveling messengers sent out with the good news who were often hungry, thirsty, and even thrown in prison for their message. And if that's true, it completely changes how we read this scene. If the least of these are the gospel messengers, then how the world treats them is a direct reflection of how they feel about the one who sent them.

The ultimate standard for judgment then isn't just about general acts of kindness. It's about whether they welcomed the messengers and, by extension, the message they were carrying. Did they receive the good news of the kingdom? This ties everything together so perfectly.

The one prerequisite for the end is the preaching of the gospel to everyone. And the standard for judgment is how people respond to that very message. And so this whole epic discourse, it doesn't end with a calendar or a timetable.

It ends with a question that lands right in our laps. It's the ultimate takeaway. It's not about predicting the future.

It's about preparing for it by how we respond to the message and its messengers today. So the question for all of us is, how will we receive it?