

A Commentary on Matthew Chapter 24

by Brad Sherman

Matthew, Chapter 24 is often looked to as a definitive passage regarding the last days and the return of Jesus. Jesus' words here were in response to a question that many of us have as well, "When will these things be?"

Since Jesus has not yet returned, it is common to read this chapter and assume its contents refer to the future. For the disciples, Jesus' answer did indeed refer completely to future events. But as we break this chapter down and compare it to history, we will see that some of the events Jesus described happened just a few decades after He spoke to them, while other events would take place at least 2000 years later. Therefore, for us, some of the chapter is fulfilled and other parts are not.

At the time, the disciples would have had a hard time understanding that Jesus was talking about a long period of time. After all, when Jesus said these things, they did not even understand that He would be crucified. They expected Him to immediately establish His throne in Jerusalem and restore the kingdom to Israel (see Luke 19:11).

Shortly following the resurrection, they again thought the time had come for the kingdom to appear (see Acts 1:6). But Jesus told them not to worry about the timing, but to be witnesses for Him to the ends of the earth (see Acts 1:7-8). Only after they had received the Holy Spirit and events continued to unfold did they begin to understand Jesus' perspective on time. This is seen in Peter's epistle when concerning the end of the age he wrote, "But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter 3:8 NKJV). Now let's look at Matthew 24 (NKJV) with these things in mind.

Matthew Chapter 24

Verses 1-2

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."

This provides a context for the discussion, the destruction of the temple. This prediction is clearly speaking of something to happen very quickly, because history records that the temple was dismantled in 70 AD by the Roman General Titus, just as Jesus said. For us this is a past event.

Verse 3

3 Now 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 end of the age?"

Here we see that the Disciples asked a very broad question which had to do with events that would come to pass very soon (the destruction of the temple) and an event that we *now* know would not take place for at least 2000 years (the end of the age). Therefore, the very nature of the question requires that Jesus' response would cover a time span of two millennia. Only by keeping this in mind can we understand Jesus' comments that follow.

Verses 4-13

4 And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. 5 "For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. 6 "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. 7 "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. 8 "All these are the beginning of sorrows. 9 "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. 10 "And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. 11 "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. 12 "And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. 13 "But he who endures to the end shall be saved.

In these verses, Jesus relates the general way in which the future would unfold, from that time to the end. In fact, contrary to many modern teachings, He says that wars and rumors of war are *not* a sign of the end (vs. 6) and that we should not be troubled by these things; they must come to pass (they will pass). He warns of the persecution that His disciples would experience in their own lives (events that would happen soon) and of various natural disasters. He also says that many false prophets will arise and says that those who endure to the end will be saved.

Therefore, remembering that these comments are meant to answer a very broad question, we see that this passage can easily be interpreted as an overview of the next two thousand years. Now let's look at the next verse.

Verse 14

14 "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come."

The destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. is considered by many to be a sign that the Old Covenant had ended, and because of the New Covenant, the temple of God was in men. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1Cor 3:16). I tend to agree and there is more about that below. But the end of the Old Covenant is not "the end" that Jesus was addressing here. In verse 14,

Jesus is specifically talking about the coming kingdom and therefore the end He is referring to here is the end of the age.

It is our job to take the good news of the kingdom to all nations as preparation for His coming. After Jesus resurrection the disciples asked again about when the kingdom would appear (see Acts 1:6) and Jesus gave them essentially the same answer. He answered and said, "... you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (see Acts 1:8).

Verses 15-20

15 "Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand), 16 "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 17 "Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. 18 "And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. 19 "But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! 20 "And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath.

Many modern interpreters of prophecy have said that the abomination of desolation spoken of here refers to the Antichrist who, at a time near the end of the age, will sit in a rebuilt temple proclaiming himself to be Christ or taking the place of Christ (see Daniel 11:31). They also believe that The Great Tribulation is yet to come and say that this will be the sign that it has begun. However, this prophecy about the abomination of desolation appears in three of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and a simple comparison of these passages reveals that this is simply not the case. Mark tells us basically the same thing as Matthew. But a look at the parallel passage in Luke gives us a clear interpretation of what this abomination of desolation really is.

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. 21 "Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. — Luke 21:20-21 NKJV)

What was considered an abomination to the Hebrews? Gentiles. What would bring desolation to the temple (and to Jerusalem)? The army of an enemy. What then was an abomination that would bring desolation to Jerusalem? A Gentile army. This is exactly what Luke described and this is exactly what happened in 70 AD. The Roman army surrounded Jerusalem and placed it under siege. Therefore, we see that the "abomination of desolation standing in the holy place" is not the antichrist sitting in a rebuilt temple. Jerusalem is the holy place and the abomination is the Roman army that would bring desolation. This was the sign that Jesus spoke of as a warning to His followers to leave town quickly!

Verses 21-22

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

For *then* there will be great tribulation..." When? When you see armies surrounding Jerusalem. History records that, due to the siege, the famine was so bad in Jerusalem, that people resorted to cannibalism, some even eating their own children! Those who tried to escape, were caught and killed by the Romans. Some were gutted to see if they had swallowed gold coins in an attempt to hide them for later use. This was the greatest tribulation Jerusalem had ever experienced and there would never be anything like it again.

Jesus had warned His followers that there was going to be great trouble and they should get out of Jerusalem when they saw what He was describing. They knew, when they saw the abomination of desolation in the holy place (signs of eminent war—armies surrounding Jerusalem), it was time to leave and flee to the mountains. Therefore, we can conclude that "The Great Tribulation" of which Jesus spoke happened in 70 A.D. and it is a past event.

Verses 23-28

23 "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it. 24 "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. 25 "See, I have told you beforehand. 26 "Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it. 27 "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. 28 "For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.

Any time there is tribulation, people tend to become fearful and very vulnerable. It would be easy to follow any self-appointed prophet or false christ that may arise. I am sure it was no different during the siege of Jerusalem. Some false leaders may have promised deliverance and tried to gather groups to go out and fight or escape claiming the Messiah would meet them in the desert. But Jesus had warned His followers, "...don't go out..." Others may have said, "Barricade yourselves in inner rooms and wait." But Jesus had said, "...do not believe them." Either of these choices would have been a fatal mistake. Here is why.

For reasons that are not clear, when things were looking quite bad for Jerusalem, the Romans withdrew their siege. The more militant-minded Jews thought the Romans may have grown weak and wanted to pursue them. Others just wanted to stay in Jerusalem and try to get things back to normal.

But when the siege began, the believers who remembered Jesus' instructions surely began to look for their chance to escape. But they had no chance until the Romans retreated and that was their chance to leave. For them (the elect) the tribulation was shortened, just as Jesus had said and they escaped. However, the Roman army soon returned under the Roman General Titus and a terrible slaughter began. This is when the temple was destroyed so that not one stone was left on another.

We can see that the great tribulation Jesus warned of was referring to what would happen to Jerusalem, and it happened in 70 A.D. However, this is not to suggest that Christians have not and will not encounter persecutions and other difficult times.

Verse 29

29 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

If taken literally, this means the end of our galaxy, our solar system and the total destruction of planet earth. This obviously is not the case. So we must look for the symbolic meaning of this passage.

The early symbolic references to stars in Genesis refers to the descendants of Abraham. God promised that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of the heavens (Gen 15:5; 22:17). This is confirmed again by Joseph's dream when he saw the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bow down to him (Gen 37:9-10). Here we see Jacob (Israel) and Rachel represented by the sun and moon, and Joseph's eleven brothers (tribes of Israel) represented by eleven stars.

Since Sun, moon, and stars are sources of light and since the entrance of His words giveth light (Ps 119:30) we can see that the sun, moon and stars ceasing to give light is a reference to the nation of Israel ceasing to be the channel through which God brings His light into the earth.

The destruction of the temple at this time, which had represented God's contact point with man for centuries, was an appropriate demonstration that God's original covenant with Israel (Old Covenant) was at an end and that He was now bringing light to the world through a New Covenant which was established by the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus established His Ekklesia and He said the gates of hell would not prevail against it. It is this empowered Ekklesia, which operates under a new and better covenant that brings light into the world. Jesus said to us, "You are the light of the world" (Matt 5:14).

Also in verse 29 we read, "...and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." Though God had given them over to their enemies at times for discipline, His promise to Israel was...

...blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven ... and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. – Genesis 22:17 NKJV

Yet, with the destruction of the temple, the stars (descendants of Jacob) no longer gave their light (held power over their enemies) through the Old Covenant. The powers of the heavens had been shaken and a realignment of powers had taken place. The powers of the heavens now flow to earth through the New Covenant. The promises to Israel are still valid, but they come through different temple/building which is the Ekklesia of Christ (see Eph 1:17-21). As Paul said, referring to the congregation of believers in Corinth, "...you are the temple of God" (1 Cor. 3:16).

Verses 30-31

30 "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, 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. 31 "And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Remembering that Jesus is answering a broad question, we can see that verses 30-31 speak to the latter part of the disciples' question, the end of the age, not the immediate part, the destruction of the temple, which happened in 70 A.D. After Jesus purged our sins and established the New Covenant, He sat down at the right hand of God (see Mark 16:19; Heb 1:2-3; and Heb 10:12). Now we look forward to His coming on the clouds in great power and glory. At that time the elect will be gathered from all over the earth to receive their kingdom assignments (see Luke 19:17).

But has our love grown cold? Do we mourn and long for His return and the establishment of His kingdom on earth? We should, but because many have a defeated view of the future, they fear the future instead of longing for it.

Verses 32-35

32 "Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. 33 "So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near; at the doors! 34 "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. 35 "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. 36 "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.

Remember that the question Jesus was answering in this chapter was a broad one and likely jumped back and forth in reference to time. Verses 32-35 sound like the beginning of a summary or recap to what had been said thus far and is almost certainly speaking again of the armies surrounding Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. We do not know, but maybe Jesus was pointing to the temple when He said, "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place." But since He was speaking of that generation, it stands to reason that He was saying to watch the politics begin to play out between Rome and Israel, and you would know that the time is near for the abomination of desolation (the destruction of the temple by Gentile armies). This was the context of this entire discussion.

Verses 37-39

37 "But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. 38 "For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, 39 "and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.

Here, Jesus is quite clearly referring to that portion of the disciples' question which said: "...*what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?*" We also see from this that Jesus' return will *not* be in a time of global catastrophe, but at a time when people are carrying on with life in a somewhat normal fashion. It will be like the days of Noah with eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. This is not to say that everything will be peaceful. We

have had wars and persecution all through history and they will continue till the end of this age. However, we can see that this does not paint a picture of Jesus coming at a time of world-wide catastrophic events.

Again, it is a popular view that the righteous will be removed from the earth in the rapture and will escape the great tribulation that is supposed happen at the end of the age. But as we have seen, this is not the case. We can see from this passage that, as in the days of Noah, the wicked were the ones removed from the earth while Noah and his family remained and inherited the earth. Proverbs says: "The righteous will never be removed, but the wicked will not inhabit the earth" (Pr 10:30). Jesus actually prayed that for the exact opposite of the escape rapture view, "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one" (Matt 17:15).

At the coming of Christ, it will be a time of judgment that comes quickly on the wicked as Christ and His army of saints bring the whole earth under submission to His kingdom (see Rev 19). This is confirmed by the parable of the tares (see Matt 13:24-30; 37-43). The tares (those who offend and are lawless) were gathered *first* to be burned. Then the wheat (the sons of the kingdom) will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom.

Many use 1 Thessalonians 4:17, which says we will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, as a proof text for the rapture. Let's read it in context.

¹³ But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.

¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive *and* remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.

¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

¹⁷ Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

- 1 Thess 4:13-17

First, notice that the context is Jesus returning to earth and the resurrection of those who have died. Then we are told that those who are alive at that time will not follow the same pattern of death and resurrection. They get to skip the death part!

However, those who are living will not experience this before those who have died, but afterwards. How long after? The Lord will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God and the dead will rise first; then those who are alive get their turn. They will meet the Lord in the air and be with Him forever. Notice that the Lord is descending at this time and there is nothing to indicate that Jesus turns around and goes back into heaven after the living meet Him in the air. As we can see, there is nothing in this passage to support an escape rapture.

Verses 40-41

40 "Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left."

This passage is actually discussing something a bit different. It is not about who is taken (as those who were taken in Noah's flood) or who remains on the earth. The word "took" in verse 39, referring to the flood that took away the wicked, is the Greek word *airo* which, in this context simply means what we would expect: *to remove or take away*. One would therefore assume that the word "taken" used in verses 40 and 41 would be a form of the same word, but it is not. The word "taken" here is the Greek word *paralambano*. It means to receive near, *to associate one's self with, or to assume an office*. This is therefore speaking of the sons of the kingdom who are alive and remain on the earth. These will be "*paralambano*", received by the Lord and will receive an office or position of leadership alongside Christ in His kingdom government. This is confirmed by the fact that the twelve disciples had already been told what their office would be, they will be judges judging the twelve tribes of Israel (see Matt 19:28).

Verses 42-51

42 "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. 43 "But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. 44 "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. 45 "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? 46 "Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. 47 "Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. 48 "But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' 49 "and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, 50 "the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, 51 "and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Where verses 15-22 were a warning and encouragement to watch for the signs of the eminent destruction of Jerusalem, verses 42-51 warn us to be watchful for the Lord's return. Verse 45 tells us that Jesus has given us authority to rule while awaiting His return and this is what Jesus also taught in the parable of stewardship in Luke 19:11-27.

Verse 48 gives us the impression that a long period of time has passed before Jesus' return and as a result even the believers may grow weary and stop watching and begin to backslide. Verse 49 also gives a strong impression of "life as normal," not a time of world-wide catastrophic tribulation. The reference to the servant (a believer) that was not watching and became cruel, is very similar to the wicked lazy servant in the parable of stewardship (see Matthew chapter 25 and Luke 19). In fact, in the next chapter, Jesus goes on to explain the end of the age and His second coming in greater detail (see Matthew Chapter 25).

Conclusion

Interpreting prophecy is tricky business, and I don't believe anyone has every detail figured out. I am always seeking better understanding but having examined all the major views of the end times and comparing them to history, the perspective presented here makes the most sense to me. It fits with history and the reality of how life is. It doesn't over sensationalize the days before Christ's return. It does not give us a false hope of exemption or escape from all troubles or persecution, nor does it give us the idea that we can completely reform this earth before Christ's return. Neither does it give us a fatalistic view of the earth in a hopeless downward spiral.

God has given us a job to do - Prepare the way for the Kingdom. It will require work and sacrifice. The war is intense, but we can expect to have a positive influence on our culture to varying degrees. We must preach the good news of the coming Kingdom to all nations, then the King and His Kingdom will appear and there will be peace on earth and good will toward men.