

Matthew 24:1-28: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 24 verses 1 to 28. Jesus left the temple and was going away when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 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. 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?

And Jesus answered them, See that no one leads you astray, for many will come in my name, saying, I am the Christ, and they will lead many astray, and you will hear of wars and rumours of wars.

See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.

All these are but the beginning of the birth pangs. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.

[1 : 0 8] And then many will fall away, and betray one another, and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.

But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations. And then the end will come.

So when you see the abomination of desolation, spoken by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place, let the reader understand, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house. And let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant, and for those who are nursing infants in those days.

Pray that your flight may not be in winter, or on a Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now.

[2 : 1 1] No, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, those days will be cut short.

Then if anyone says to you, Look, here is the Christ, or there he is, do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise, and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

See, I have told you beforehand. So if they say to you, Look, he is in the wilderness, do not go out. If they say, Look, he is in the inner rooms, do not believe it.

For as the lightning comes from the east, and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

A passage in Matthew 24 begins the Olivet Discourse. Once again, there is a change in locality. And in the story of the Passion Week, there is common movement between the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives.

[3 : 15] This happens regularly throughout the week, and the juxtaposition of the two mountains seems to be important. The Mount of Olives stands over against the Temple Mount, and is the place from which judgment is cast upon the Temple Mount.

There is a reference to the Mount of Olives in Old Testament prophecy, in Zechariah chapter 14, verses 3 and following. Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as when he fights on a day of battle.

On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west, by a very wide valley, so that one half of the mountain shall move northward, and the other half southward.

And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountain shall reach to Azul, and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah.

Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. From such a passage we can see an association that already existed between the Mount of Olives and the day of the Lord.

[4 : 18] A further thing that's extremely important when reading this passage is to recognize the backdrop of the rest of the book of Matthew. Throughout the book of Matthew, it's imperative that we recognize just how imminent judgment is presented as being throughout.

It's just on the horizon. In Matthew chapter 10 verse 23, Christ declares that they will not have finished going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. In Matthew 16 verse 28, some standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

Matthew chapter 23 verse 36, all these things will come upon this generation. The parables are similar. They anticipate judgment that's very near at hand.

This is coming upon the people within that generation. They should be braced for it. And yet many Christians read these passages as if they were referring to some far distant event, the end of the world itself, rather than the end of the old covenant order.

And that's how I will be reading these passages and hopefully help you to understand how they can be read in such a way. Many do struggle to read them as referring to anything that has already happened in history, partly because they don't really grasp the way that biblical imagery works, but also because the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 just does not seem like a suitable contender for the events being spoken about by Christ in these chapters.

[5 : 44] It just seems so grand a description of what's about to happen that the fall of Jerusalem is just a minor event to a backwater nation in the very far distant past.

Why should we care about it? Yet, as we understand it properly, we'll see that it is an event of the most immense importance. It's something that stands as a turning point in the middle of human history.

It represents a remarkable change and shift. The chapter begins with the disciples showing Jesus the beauty of the temple, and then Jesus declares its imminent fate, after which they come to him later on and ask what will be the sign of his coming and the end of the age.

Jesus begins actually by not answering their question, rather by giving things that aren't signs of his coming to ensure that the disciples don't jump at false positives. So there will be a number of unsettling events that will occur before his coming, but none of those should be interpreted as a sign that his coming is just about to occur.

There will be false prophets and false Christs within and without the church, famines, earthquakes and other natural disasters. But these are just the beginning of birth pangs. The birth of a new world order still isn't taking place.

[6 : 59] There will be a major covenantal upheaval in the order of the world, but that still waits the future. There will be persecution and widespread falling away among self-declared disciples.

The disciples will be brought into the most extreme tribulation. And that tribulation, that time of testing, will reveal men's hearts and cause many to wither. We pray that we will be delivered from temptation because when we're put into that time of testing, we really have to be proved.

We have to have wisdom as serpents, and we have to have courage and faith that is of a greater scale than that which we usually need. This time will also be disorienting in other ways.

There will be treachery and betrayal within the church. People will sell their neighbours out. They will sell out fellow Christians to the authorities. And there will also be apostasy and falling away.

Many people who crumble under pressure. The gospel will be spread throughout the whole world. Now the world in question is the Roman world. It's not the globe as such.

[8 : 02] It's the Roman world. Every single part of the empire, that world order, will receive the message. And it's at this point that the stage is set for the climactic act. Christ's judgment tarries while the Gentiles are being brought in.

And then it falls. After this, an actual sign of Christ's coming will occur. And that sign is the abomination of desolation that Daniel foretold in Daniel 9, verses 24 to 27.

70 weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and profit, and to anoint a most holy place.

Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time.

And after the sixty-two weeks an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary, its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war.

[9 : 13] Desolations are decreed, and he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.

The abomination of desolation is the abomination that provokes the desolation of the temple. Not desolation itself as an abomination. Abominations are typically performed by Israel itself.

It's the perversion of the bride, the sin of the bride, not just the sin of the nations. In the Old Testament we can see this in the sin of the sons of Eli, or the idolatry of the nation in Ezekiel's day, or the action with the golden calf.

The abomination of the temple is caused by flagrant sin and or apostasy. And the temple is the marital chamber, the place where God meets with his bride. And now that bed is defiled, as it were.

I think a clue here is found in reflecting upon the words of the previous chapter in verses 34 to 36 and verse 38. Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Barakiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

[10 : 38] Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.

See, your house is left to you desolate. Reflecting upon the abomination of desolation, it seems to me that it's the filling up of the blood of the saints. Once that time has come, once they recognize that that condition has been met, they should flee to the mountains if they are in Judea.

The one who was on the housetop should not go down and take what is in his house. They should flee. And this is because the city is about to be destroyed. And if they don't flee, they will be destroyed with it.

This is a reminder of the story of Sodom. Jerusalem is about to face a similar fate. And there's going to be this time of great testing and tribulation.

They're going to be pushed to the absolute limit. It's only because of the elect that God spares them, that he does not push them beyond that limit. He preserves the elect and cuts the days short.

[11 : 48] And at that time, there will be all sorts of people leading others astray. False Christs, false prophets, even performing great signs and wonders. And they are to be prepared for this.

They're to recognize the dangers in advance and to take action without hesitation. The coming of Christ and judgment will be like a lightning bolt. It won't be something that comes in gradual stages.

It will be sudden and swift and devastating. And they must be prepared. They must take that action when they have that window of opportunity. Indeed, this is something that we read that the church did do.

The church did escape. And it was saved from suffering the full devastating force of the destruction of Jerusalem. Where the corpse is, there the vultures or perhaps the eagles will gather.

Some have suggested that this might be a reference to the corpse of the rebellion of Israel and the eagles of Rome preying upon the corpse of Israel.

[12 : 49] I think that's a fairly likely interpretation of these words. A question to consider within this chapter we have descriptions of tribulation that's going to come upon the disciples of Christ.

Tribulation that's going to test them to their very limits. And if it were not for God cutting that time short they would be tested beyond their limits and they would fall too.

How does the time of testing work? We have a number of references to it within the book of Matthew. A number of examples of it. How can we think about the time of testing and its purpose for the church?

What are the purposes for which God might bring us into a time of testing? And what might be worked out through it?