

# What Does Jesus Say in Matthew 24?

Revised 27 March 2023

*I wrote this article on Matthew 24 for ordinary Christians who'd appreciate a deep but accessible dive into this important chapter. My goal is to be substantive yet engaging. Blog posts are too short, and academic articles are often not written for the church—ironically, the very community teachers are supposed to serve!*

*One landmine which makes this journey hazardous is knowing what to leave out. Lots of scholarly men and women have lots of good stuff to say about this passage—but you don't need to know it all to grasp the lay of the land. This article has numerous footnotes, but feel free to ignore them if you wish. Use the hyperlinks to jump to specific verses you're interested in, but know the article is intended to be a coherent whole. I hope this small contribution helps Christians and serves the broader church family.*

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## The Map is Not the Territory (Introduction and vv.1-3)

In 1998 Robert DeNiro starred in one of his better action movies, a film titled [Ronin](#). It's about a gang of mercenaries recruited by a shadowy Irish woman to steal a case intact "from several men who will be intent on preventing us." The small team seems to be comprised of ex-military and espionage types. At one point, the team settles on a proposed ambush site. They've surveilled the target, mapped the area, the routes, and have a good idea of what they're going to do. DeNiro's character stares at a map, a cup of coffee in his hand, scowling. "The map, the map, the map ..." he mutters. "The map is not the territory."<sup>1</sup>

He puts the coffee down, grabs his car keys, and decides to walk around the target's hotel. He's tired of talking *about* the route, the hotel, the target. He wants to see the

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<sup>1</sup> I know this phrase did not originate with the movie *Ronin*, but work with me here, please ...

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ground for himself. And see it he does. It's fair to say that *Ronin* features some of the best car chase scenes in movie history.

My point is that while it does *some* good to *talk about* passages like Matthew 24, there is no substitute to working through it yourself—to seeing it. The map is not the territory. At some point, you have to grab the keys and drive out to see the ground for yourself. Still, we have to map the issue a little bit, so we'll talk about the passage before we dive into it.

Matthew 24 is a hard passage. One Baptist theologian suggested it was “the most difficult problem in the Synoptic Gospels.”<sup>2</sup> So, don't be discouraged if it seems like there's a lot here—there is! But, if we can capture at least the broad sweep of Jesus' message here (the details would be nice, too!), and the main thing He wants us *to do* with this information, then we'll be in good shape.

Lots of people write lots of material on prophecy. Some of it is irresponsible, much of it is too dogmatic, and a whole lot of it is click-bait. It misses the “so what” at the expense of the allegedly sensational. At the congregation where I'm a pastor, I once discovered an old book in the church library<sup>3</sup> in which the author declared that Saddam Hussein was re-building Babylon, hinted Hussein might be the Antichrist, and strongly suggested this event was therefore a sign of the end (*cf.* Rev 17-18). Of course, Saddam Hussein never recovered from the first Gulf War, he did not re-build Babylon, he was not the Antichrist (unless he springs to life sometime in the future), and the book is now an embarrassment.

We can do better.

There are three general approaches to this passage that you'll need to understand. It's almost impossible to come to Matthew 24 as an impartial, blank slate—what you've decided about other passages will effect what you do with this passage.<sup>4</sup> This means each of the three perspectives brings very different presuppositions to the table. It's hard to not fall into the familiar rut of adopting the system with which you're most familiar, dusting your hands off, and calling it a day. We should try our best to not do that!

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<sup>2</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1933), Mt 24:3. A.B. Bruce notes, “This chapter and its synoptical parallels (Mk. xiii., Lk. xxi.) present, in many respects, the most difficult problem in the evangelic records,” (“The Synoptic Gospels,” in *Expositor's Greek Testament*, 6th ed., vol. 1 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), p. 287).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Dyer and Angela Hunt, *Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 1991). See also Peter Steinfelds, “Gulf War Proving Bountiful For Some Prophets of Doom,” *NYTimes*. 02 February 1991, pp. 1, 10. <https://nyti.ms/3KTVeCm>.

<sup>4</sup> The answer to “when shall Christ return?” is “so comprehensive a question that each theory is in fact an entire eschatological scheme, complete with detailed exegesis and sweeping synthesis,” (D.A. Carson, *Matthew*, in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 490).

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## Three Different Grids for Understanding Matthew 24

Here are the three different interpretive grids. I intend these descriptions to be broadly representative—not precise descriptions:

1. The first option is to say Matthew 24 is **about the great tribulation**, and only the great tribulation. Everything here is about the Jewish people struggling against Antichrist in the age to come. The Church is not here, because God raptured the Church away before the tribulation began. It must be this way, because the great tribulation is “a time of trouble for Jacob” (Jer 30:7)—that is, for the Jewish people specifically.<sup>5</sup> The Church has nothing to do with the tribulation, so Matthew 24 is not directly applicable. However, we can glean principles to apply to this Church age. This view relies heavily on the assumption that Israel and the Church are two distinct peoples of God, on parallel but separate tracks.<sup>6</sup>
2. Another view is that most or all of this passage is **about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70**. Matthew 24:29-31 is not about Jesus’ second advent at all—it simply quotes the prophet Daniel and shows us Jesus being enthroned after His ascension.<sup>7</sup> This perspective tends to minimize data which suggests Jesus’ second coming and maximize all references to Jerusalem during the Roman siege of the city from AD 66-70.
3. The third position is that **the passage largely operates on two levels at once**—(1) it’s basically about the siege and capture of Jerusalem in AD 66-70, but (2) those awful events prefigure and foreshadow the great tribulation during some unknown future time.<sup>8</sup> This perspective tries to have it both ways, because it sees Jesus as often speaking about two things at once.

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<sup>5</sup> See John Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, revised and enlarged (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), pp. 42-44.

<sup>6</sup> For a representative view of this perspective, see John Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come: A Commentary on the First Gospel* (Chicago: Moody, 1974; reprint; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 920f.

<sup>8</sup> An anonymous patristic author noted, “We never saw the destruction of the temple, nor did they see the end of the age. It was expedient therefore that they hear about the signs of the temple’s destruction and that we learn to recognize the signs of the world’s consummation,” (Manlio Simonetti (ed.), *Matthew 14-28*, vol. 1b, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), p. 188).

A 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist theologian agreed and wrote, “But if the destruction of Jerusalem was itself in one sense a coming of the Lord, why may we not suppose that the transition from this to the final coming is gradual? Then much in 24:3-36 may be taken as referring both to the former and the latter topic, while some of the expressions may refer exclusively to the one or the other,” (John Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew*, in *American Commentary* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), p. 480). William Hendriksen said, “Our Lord predicts the city’s approaching catastrophe as a type of the tribulation at the end of the dispensation,” (*Matthew*, in *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), pp. 846-847).

Perhaps the foremost Greek scholar of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a Baptist named A.T. Robertson, suggested “It is sufficient for our purpose to think of Jesus as using the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem which did happen in that generation in A.D. 70, as also a symbol of his own second coming and of the end of the world or consummation of the age,” (*Word Pictures*, Mt 24:3).

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I believe the third grid presents the fewest problems, is the best explanation for the evidence, and best comports with the rest of Scripture.

### How to Weigh the Evidence? Rules of Affinity to the Rescue

The scriptures are the supreme or highest channel of religious authority;<sup>9</sup> the “supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried.”<sup>10</sup> This means that, while tradition, reason, and experience are important, they are not the final court of appeal. That means we need to pay attention to what Scripture says.

I’ve been an investigator for 20 years, in both Federal and State contexts. I’ve done both criminal and regulatory investigations. You may substantiate two cases, all while knowing one has better evidence than the other. It’s the same with Scripture—there are degrees of certainty based on the weight of evidence. An acquaintance of mine, Dr. Paul Henebury, has developed a system which he titled “rules of affinity” to explain how we can weigh probability of evidence in Scripture.<sup>11</sup> If we can correctly assign evidence a probative value, then we’ll know how dearly we ought to cling to a certain doctrine.

What’s the point?

The point is that when you come to Matthew 24, you likely arrive with preconceived ideas about what Jesus is saying. Maybe you’re right. Maybe you aren’t right. Be willing to fairly weigh the evidence, assign it a category from the rules of affinity chart, and adjust your “passion level” for your preferred interpretation accordingly. If you won’t do that, then you’ve already made up your mind and are simply after confirmation that you’re “right.” That’s the opposite of truth.

Here is a short slide deck which is largely inspired by Henebury’s scheme—the examples are not his (I suspect he would disagree with some of them!).

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<sup>9</sup> See James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 1 (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), pp. 206-209.

<sup>10</sup> 1833 *New Hampshire Confession of Faith*, Article 1—On the Scriptures, in Phillip Schaff (ed.), *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), p. 742).

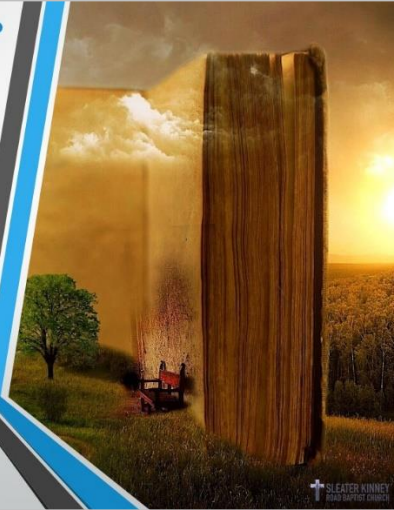
<sup>11</sup> See Paul Henebury, “The ‘Rules of Affinity’ Simplified.” 27 July 2021. <https://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2021/07/27/the-rules-of-affinity-simplified-repost/>.

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## Does the bible really teach that?

You can weigh bible doctrines by seeing how closely their justifications line up with what the bible says. You can do this by categorizing scriptural proofs on a scale of 1-5. This may sound hard to do, but it's actually pretty easy.



## Category 1: a direct statement

**Examples:** Jesus rose from the dead. God created the heavens and the earth. People are justified by faith. Jesus is the only way of salvation.

These are **clear, unambiguous, obvious** statements that are plain from the text. There is no room for argument.



## Category 2: strong inference

**Examples:** The Trinity. The bible is totally truthful, reliable, and infallible in everything it affirms

These are **very strong, inevitable conclusions** based on the data. There is no direct statement, but the weight of evidence relentlessly leads to the conclusion.



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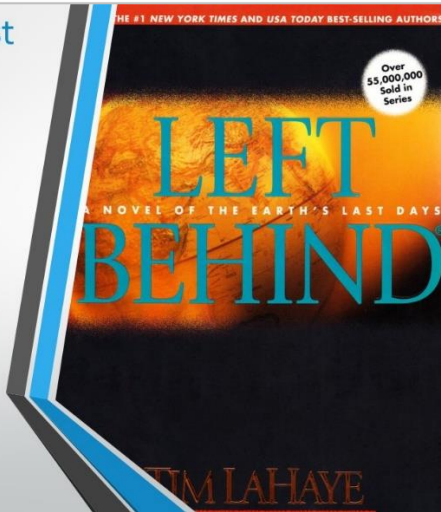
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## Category 3: inference to best explanation

**Examples:** Details about how the end-times will unfold. Modes of church government.

These are your **"best explanation"** for the data, **but they aren't bullet-proof**. We must be willing to revise our interpretation in light of other arguments based on the same data.

† SLEATER KINNEY  
ROAD BAPTIST CHURCH



## Category 4: weak inference

**Example:** Baptism as prerequisite for Lord's Supper.

**No clear or plain statement** of scripture. Built on **a series of inferences**—"if this is true, then that must be true, so *this* must be true!"

Weak logic. You should hold it lightly. Alleged "scriptural arguments" **often ignore context**.

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## Category 5: very, very weak

**Example:** Regulative Principle of Worship applied to *circumstances* of worship.

Built on **a series of increasingly weak inferences**. Feeble logic. Subject to diverse idiosyncrasies of different churches, indicating weakness of its argument. Alleged "scriptural arguments" **usually ignore context**.

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## Categories

1	direct statement
2	strong, inevitable inference
3	best explanation with fewest problems
4	weak inference
5	very, very weak

## Principles for applying categories

- All believing Christians, across denominational lines, should agree on C1 – C2
- No church should bind Christians to believe anything less than a C3
- C4 – C5 are too scripturally weak to be made a point of serious disagreement

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Are we willing to weigh the evidence fairly? Remember this chart in future articles as we work our way through Matthew 24.

### Some Tricky Issues

There are five key issues in Matthew 24 which need an answer. Most people will provide an answer which fits with their preferred “grid” for understanding the passage. Here are the issues, along with my answers. Justification and support for my positions will come in the commentary itself—you’ll have to wait!

1. **Abomination of desolation**—what is it? Jesus mentions this at Matthew 24:15. I believe it refers to the Roman army besieging Jerusalem from AD 66-70, which prefigures the great tribulation when the Antichrist will desecrate a holy space in Jerusalem at some future date.
2. **“Let the reader understand”**—what does this mean? This is also at Matthew 24:15. I believe it’s Jesus remark (not Matthew’s) which directs folks who read the prophet Daniel to pay close attention to the specific events which will come within the generation that was alive when Jesus spoke.
3. **“[G]reat distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now”**—what is this? Jesus mentions this phrase at Matthew 24:21. I believe it refers to both (1) Jerusalem’s destruction by the Romans, which squares with Jesus’ announcement of the temple’s destruction that started the entire conversation (Mt 24:1-2), and (2) the Antichrist’s brief reign as the ruler of the kingdom of darkness (Rev 13), later depicted by the Apostle John as Babylon (Rev 17-18). There is both a near and far fulfillment.
4. **The coming of the Son of Man**—when will it happen? Jesus describes this at Matthew 24:29-31. It refers to his second advent, a single-stage event wherein He returns at the end of the great tribulation to gather his elect (both alive and dead) from the four corners of the earth, destroy Babylon and establish His kingdom (Rev 19).
5. **“[T]his generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened**—to what is Jesus referring? He’s talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, which means Jesus is referring here to Matthew 24:4-26 (or possibly up to v. 28)—He isn’t talking about vv. 29-31 at all. “This generation,” then, is referring to people alive in Jesus’ day who will still be around to see the Romans destroy the temple.

One other issue that piques curiosity is the timing of the rapture—when will believers be snatched up to meet the Lord? (Mt 24:31; *cp.* 1 Thess 4:13-18)? I believe this passage suggests a post-tribulational rapture, and that the Apostle Paul refers to this passage when he describes that same event in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 (“according to the Lord’s word,” 1 Thess 4:15). This is a relatively unimportant issue, but I note it here because Christians often want to know about it.



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## Outline of the Passage

Here is an outline of the passage as I understand it.

Mt 24:1-2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Jesus has just finished his extended criticism of the Pharisees (Mt 23). As they're leaving the temple complex, a question from the disciples prompts a remark from Jesus which triggers this discussion</li> </ul>
Mt 24:3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The two questions from the disciples which frame this great passage—(1) when will the temple be destroyed, and (2) what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?</li> </ul>
Mt 24:4-14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o <b>Signs that aren't the end.</b> Jesus tells of "birth pains" of persecution from the world because of Jesus (vv. 4-8), followed by continued and escalating persecution because God's people advocate His values (vv. 9-13). Gospel saturation triggers the great tribulation ("and then the end will come") at some unknown point. This period stretches from the Ascension to eve of the great tribulation.</li> </ul>
Mt 24:15-22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o <b>Events of AD 66-70.</b> The coming destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70 prefigures the great tribulation</li> </ul>
Mt 24:23-28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Son of Man's return will be unmistakable and quite clear—ignore false, whispered rumors about His return. You'll know it when it happens!</li> </ul>
Mt 24:29-31	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o <b>Jesus will return, but who knows when!</b> Son of Man will return immediately after the great tribulation—there is no prefiguring here.</li> </ul>



- Mt 24:32-35. **Events of AD 66-70 (cont'd).** Jesus leaves the timeline to circle back to vv. 15-22 and answer the "when will the temple be destroyed" question. The generation listening to Jesus won't pass away before Jerusalem is destroyed in AD 70—Jesus is not referring to vv. 29-31 at all.

Mt 24:36-41	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Returning to the theme of the second coming, Jesus says nobody except God the Father knows when the Son of Man will arrive, but it will be as sudden and unexpected as the great tidal flood in Noah's day</li> </ul>
Mt 24:42-44	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ So, be watchful, be waiting, be about the job Jesus has given His people to do!</li> </ul>

Here is my attempt to depict the passage in graphic form, especially the foreshadowing aspect and Jesus' focus shifting between the near (the Romans destroying Jerusalem) and the far (Antichrist and the great tribulation).

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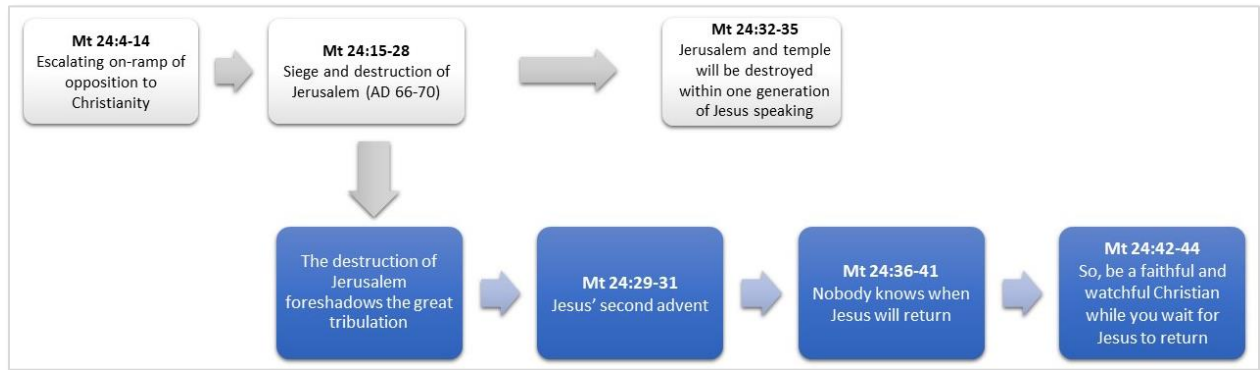


Figure 1.

Now, at long last, because the map *is not* the territory, let's get to Matthew 24.

## Mic Drop in Jerusalem (vv. 1-3)

Our passage opens when Jesus has just finished his jeremiad against the Pharisees (Mt 23). He capped it all with the pronouncement, “your house is left to you desolate!” (Mt 23:38). This could refer to Israel, to the temple itself, or to Jerusalem as the symbol of God’s place on earth. It’s probably a general reference encompassing lots of things, basically meaning “things as they are are gonna change.” Jesus then turns on His heels and walks away. This is likely Tuesday of Passover week, and Jesus never enters the temple again.<sup>12</sup>

*Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down (Matthew 24:1-2).*

We can imagine the disciples staring at the Pharisees, an unbearable tension filling the silence. They then hurry after Jesus, anxious to escape this awkward situation. They believe Jesus is referring to the temple complex itself, which is a huge structure. It was the size of several football fields, a massive feat of engineering. Herod the Great expanded the temple which the exiles rebuilt upon their return from captivity. He expanded the site by erecting massive retaining walls, filling them in to create an artificial plateau. He then added numerous exterior courtyards and other odds and ends, with the original temple at the center. This ambitious project was underway for nearly 80 years. It was finished shortly before the Romans sacked the city in AD 70.

<sup>12</sup> Broadus, *Matthew*, p. 479.

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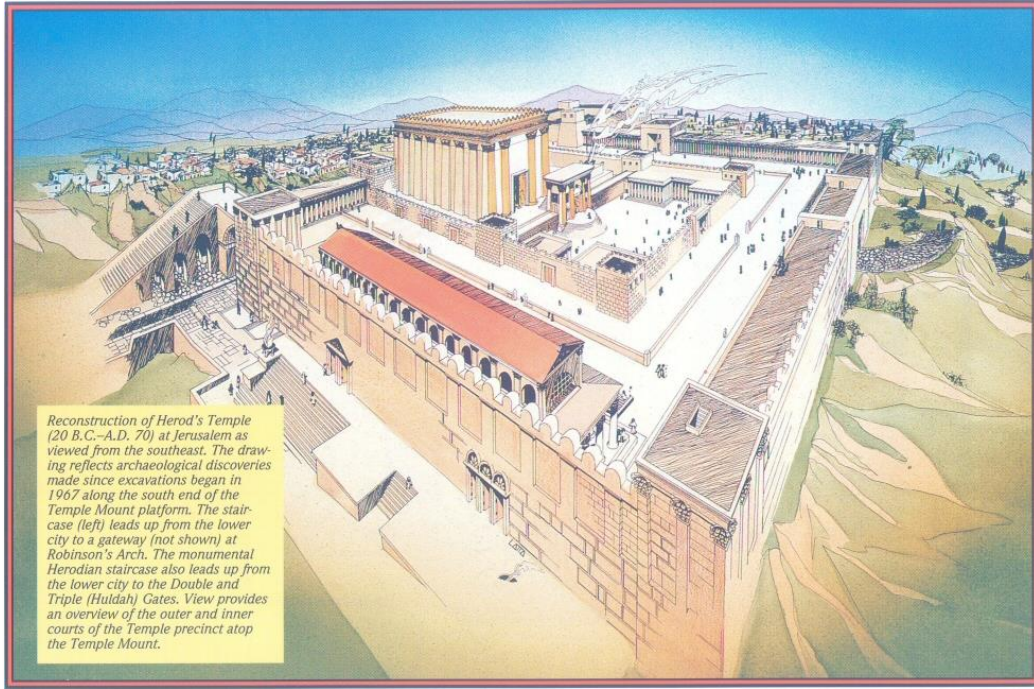
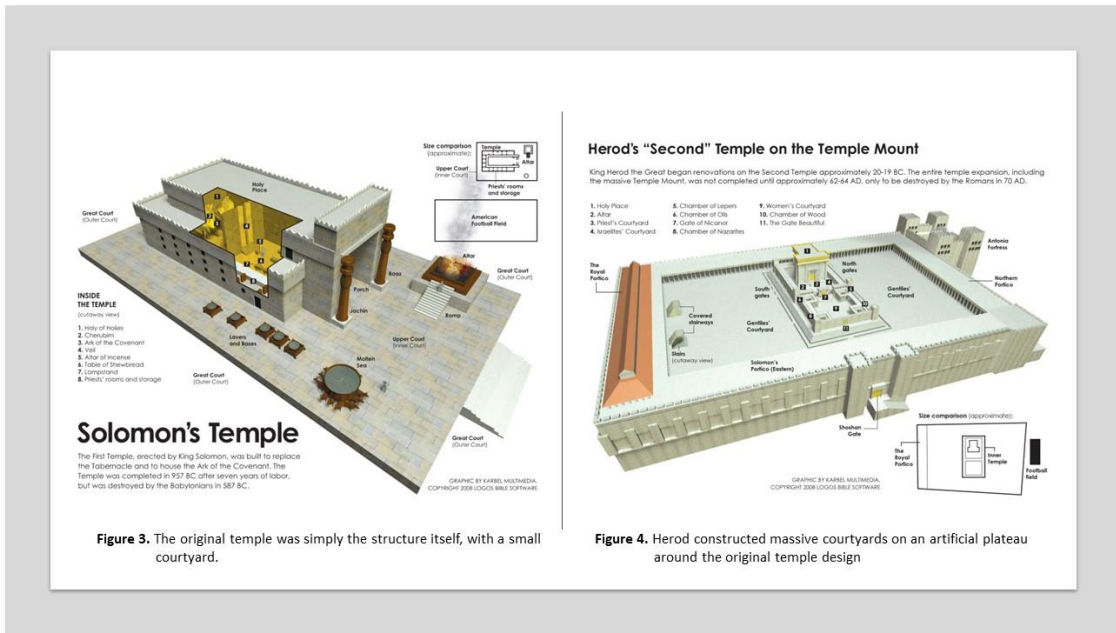


Figure 2. Herod's temple, from *Holman Book of Biblical Charts, Maps, and Reconstructions* (Nashville: B&H, 1993), p. 153.



How could this structure be left desolate?<sup>13</sup> So, they call Jesus' attention to the buildings—just look at them! Desolate? Deserted? Really? Jesus tells them the whole things would be rubble one day. That wasn't what they were expecting to hear!

<sup>13</sup> An famous 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Egyptian Christian scholar named Origen suggested that the physical temple had to be destroyed so the mystical temple of holy Scripture could be erected to take its place as

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This is a great time for some clarification.

*As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3).*

The disciples have two questions; (1) when will the temple be destroyed, and (2) what will be the sign that lets us know? The "sign of your coming and of the end of the age" is actually one question, not two—the disciples assume they are the same event.<sup>14</sup> They seem to assume the two events will happen at roughly same time—the temple will be destroyed, and Jesus will return.

These two simple questions, uttered on the Mount of Olives as they stared across the Kidron Valley at the temple complex, is the impetus for one of Jesus' most sweeping descriptions of history. He begins to answer their questions in v. 4-14, which we'll examine next.

### Let the Bad Times Roll (vv. 4-14)

There's a phrase in popular culture that goes, "if you know, you know." On social media, it's often abbreviated as IYKYK. Well, those who know the *Rocky* cinematic universe understand that Clubber Lang ([Rocky III](#)) was insane. As portrayed by the actor Mr. T, Clubber Lang was a crazed fighter on a bloodthirsty quest to be the no. 1 heavyweight boxing champ. Rocky stands in his way.

He watches Rocky defend his title 10 times against weak opponents. Disgusted, he begins training to take down the champ, driven by demons never fully explained. Every syllable he utters drips with rage and hate.

Clubber defeats an opponent in the ring, thus earning no. 1 contender status, then screams at Rocky's trainer who is watching the spectacle from the audience in horror:

*I want Balboa! I want Balboa! You tell Balboa to come here! Nobody can beat me! You tell him what I said! And he's NEXT! I'm gonna kill him! Nobody can stop me! You tell Balboa that! I'M COMING AFTER HIM! YOU TELL HIM!*

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the locus of authority. This will preach, but it isn't what Jesus is saying! (Simonetti, *Matthew 14-28*, in ACCS, pp. 186-187).

<sup>14</sup> πότε (at what time) ταῦτα ἔσται (will this happen?) καὶ τί τὸ σημεῖον τῆς σῆς παρουσίας (and what will be the sign of your advent) καὶ (and—the singular "sign" comprises two events which occur at the same time) συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος (the end of the age?).

See also Chrysostom, "Homily 75," in *NPNF* 1:10, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. George Prevost and M. B. Riddle (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), p. 450.

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Lang crashes the unveiling of Rocky's statue at an outdoor ceremony, howling that Rocky must accept his challenge to fight. "What did you say, Paper Champion? I'll beat you like a dog, a dog, you fool!"

Rocky begs off, then Lang taunts his beloved Adrian: "Since your old man ain't got no heart, maybe you like to see a real man. I bet you stay up late every night dreamin' you had a real man, don't ya? I'll tell you what. Bring your pretty little self over to my apartment tonight, and I'll show you a real man ..." Rocky loses control and tries to attack Lang, promising vengeance—he must defend Adriane's honor! The fight is scheduled.

Later, a reporter asks Clubber about his prediction for the coming fight. He turns to the camera, eyes narrowed. "Pain ..." he hisses.

Rocky's trainer, Mickey, knows Lang is a psycho and initially refuses to train Rocky for this fight. He allows Rocky to change his mind. But, the very night of the bout, the two fighters encounter one another on a stairway before they enter the stadium. Clubber screams:

*You made me wait too long, now you're gonna pay, boy. I'm the baddest, understand? You ain't nothin'! You're trash!*

He flings Mickey aside like a rag doll, going for Balboa before being hauled back by his entourage. Mickey then suffers a heart attack and lies on a locker room table, refusing to allow medics to transport him as he awaits the outcome of the fight. Rocky, heartbroken, is pulverized by the madman and loses the contest by knockout.

Clubber Lang is crazy. IYKYK. There is no debate, no dispute, no ambiguity. His ambition in life is to be champion. "No, I don't hate Balboa. I pity the fool, and I will destroy any man who tries to take what I got!!"

Well, in Matthew 24:4-14 Jesus presents us with a fact that's just as clear and obvious as Lang's madness—expect bad times to come, expect opposition, expect misunderstanding, expect hostility from a world that doesn't like or understand Jesus' message. IYKYK. If this is the case, then why be so surprised when the bad times roll?

A host of secular media personalities and Christian influencers want you to be upset, indignant, mad at the state of the world. Mad that it no longer pretends to be Christian. Angry that un-Christian things are called good, and that good is called evil. Well, no kidding. This ought not be a surprise, so why are some Christians still so surprised? You might as well be astonished that Clubber Lang is insane. Yes, he is—was that ever in doubt?

Here is where we are in the passage:

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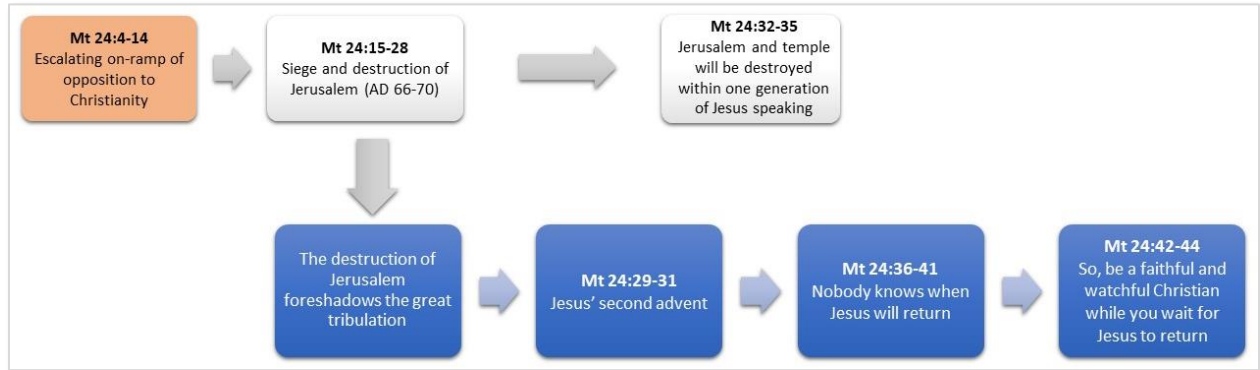


Figure 5.

Let's see what Jesus has to say about the reception Christians can expect from this world.

*Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains (Matthew 24:4-8).*

Jesus skips the "when will the temple be destroyed question" (but see timeline on vv. 32-35) and instead talks about what *are not* the "signs" of His coming. He begins with events which will start more or less immediately—dangers which lurk right at the very doors.<sup>15</sup>

- People will try to deceive Christians about the Messiah's return.
- General unrest and warfare will occur, but Christians shouldn't lose hope. This will be a time of increasing disorder on the international scene ("nation shall rise against nation"). It's possible the Apostle John was referring to tumultuous events in recent memory from his own day.<sup>16</sup> Some believers might now point to contemporary events with raised eyebrows, like the Russo-Ukraine war. But, we ought to remember this war is the first major, sustained *conventional* military action in Europe since the Second World War, and perhaps only the second in the world since the Six Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973). In short, international coalitions have been largely successful in suppressing conventional military conflict since 1945.

<sup>15</sup> "For neither concerning Jerusalem straightway, nor of His own second coming, did He speak, but touching the ills that were to meet them at the doors," (Chrysostom, "Homily 75," in *NPNF* 1.10, p. 451). Louis Barbieri states this entire section is about the great tribulation, but offers no textual evidence in support ("Matthew," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985) p. 76).

<sup>16</sup> See Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers: A Critical and Explanatory Commentary, New Edition*, vol. 1 (London; Oxford; Cambridge: Rivingtons; Deighton, Bell and Co., 1872), pp. 1:163f.

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- Earthquakes and famines will happen with increasing frequency.

Jesus says these events won't be the "end of the age" at all—they'll just be birth pangs which signal the coming main event. This will be the normal situation in this age.<sup>17</sup> Wars, earthquakes, famines—these will be common and in no way suggest "the end" is nigh at hand.<sup>18</sup> It's very important to not be led astray by weird speculations. Christians have always been prone to do this. One 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar chortled that a friend of his claimed the fifth kingdom in Daniel 2 was the United States of America, and that the "war in heaven" (Rev 12:7) was a prophecy of the American Civil War!<sup>19</sup>

It's important to note that Jesus is speaking to His disciples—to believers. Some Christians believe His words in ch. 24 are only for Israelites, but the text says nothing about that, here.<sup>20</sup> That idea is based on an interpretive system that sees a hard distinction between Israel and the Church and therefore infers sharp breaks in audience where necessary. However, the text doesn't support this hard break in audience to "Israel only" in ch(s). 24-25. Instead, we should simply understand Jesus to be speaking to the disciples, and then apply His teaching to our lives directly—just as we do for countless other passages in the Gospels.

So much for the "birth pangs" which signal the end of the age is on the way. What happens next?

*Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me (Matthew 24:9).*

The word which the NIV translates "then" could mean "at that time," meaning *during* the time of the birth pangs. Or, it could be sequential (i.e. "what happened next was ..."). It's probably sequential<sup>21</sup>—*after* the birth pangs, things get real. Nonetheless, all of vv. 4-14 is one on-ramp of escalating persecution. Oppression and martyrdom will occur. Nations hate Christians because they represent Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Craig Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), p. 107.

<sup>18</sup> Ed Glasscock, *Matthew*, in *Moody Gospel Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1997), pp. 463-464.

<sup>19</sup> Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), p. 499, fn. 1. A.T. Robertson, writing in 1933, observed, "It is curious how people overlook these words of Jesus and proceed to set dates for the immediate end. That happened during the Great War and it has happened since," (*Word Pictures*, Mt 24:6).

<sup>20</sup> Louis Barbieri, Jr. is representative when he writes, "They have nothing to do with the church, which Jesus said He would build (16:18). The church is not present in any sense in chapters 24 and 25. The disciples' questions related to Jerusalem, Israel, and the Lord's second coming in glory to establish His kingdom," ("Matthew," in *Bible Knowledge*, p. 76). Barbieri offers no support for this statement, and so it cannot be taken seriously as a conclusion drawn from Matthew 24.

<sup>21</sup> *Contra*. Alford, *New Testament*, p. 1:163; Carson *Matthew*, p. 498.

<sup>22</sup> Barbieri states this refers to the second half of the great tribulation but can only cite Daniel as alleged support ("Matthew," in *Bible Knowledge*, p. 77). It is unfortunate that he fails to engage Matthew 24 on its own terms.

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We must not forget the importance of faithfulness—we must be salt in light in an increasingly dark world. Some Christian influencers in America operate from a default posture of outraged defensiveness. They want Mayberry (or something like it) to come back, and they're rightly outraged at how hard and fast the cultural values have changed in the past generation. As newsman Howard Beale once declared, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not gonna take it anymore!"<sup>23</sup> But, Jesus here tells us *to expect to be* a prophetic minority—to be hated, persecuted, despised because we represent Jesus. Nobody likes prophets who tell the truth. We ought to expect opposition, which means we shouldn't respond with outraged defensiveness when our culture looks more like Babylon than Jerusalem. Did we expect something different?

What else will happen after these birth pangs hit?

*At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved (Matthew 24:10-13).*

Taken together, vv. 9-13 show us a time characterized by a deliberate persecution of Christians. They will be hated *specifically because* they represent Jesus ("because of me," Mt 24:9). Believers can only be hated because of Jesus if they're representing Jesus' values, His ethics, His agenda, His program. The corollary, of course, is that to the extent your "Christianity" mirrors this world's values and mores the more fake it is. Think about that.

This period of time is not the tribulation, but it is the precursor to it. It's a time during which the world's values grow more and more hostile to Christianity—to the extent that imprisonment, death, defections from the faith, vicious infighting, and false teachers stalk the land. Believers will grow cold—perhaps not apathetic, but insular. Safe. Hidden. Faith will be privatized, pushed indoors where the world can't mock it, persecute it, identify it. There will be a growing eco-system of secret Christians. The Book of Hebrews later criticized this tendency.

Now, Jesus gives us one of the closest answers we'll ever get to an answer for the "when" question (but see Mt 24:32-35).

*And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Matthew 24:14).*

When will "the end" come? Well, first the gospel of the kingdom must be preached throughout the whole world,<sup>24</sup> *and then* the end will come. The word here indicates "the end" is the next event in sequence once the gospel reaches the whole world. The

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<sup>23</sup> This is a line from Peter Finch's role in the 1976 movie *Network*.

<sup>24</sup> Most English bible version disagree with the NIV's rendering of "in the whole world." It's better to translate the preposition as "throughout the whole world." See NRSV, CEB, REB, NEB, RSV, NET, NLT, ISV, ESV.



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natural question is, “well, at what point is the gospel preached throughout the whole world?” One Christian leader from the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> century speculated that moment had almost arrived, “since it appears to me that there remains no nation that does not know the name of Christ.”<sup>25</sup> It’s safe to say he was wrong! Nor is this hyperbole from Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

So, what does that statement mean? It’s clear Jesus doesn’t mean “every single person must hear the Gospel,” because some people are always dying without hearing the message, and others are always being born. 100% contact is impossible.<sup>27</sup> It must mean something like *saturation*. At some point, the entire world will reach a divine “saturation level” for the Gospel, *and then* the end will come.<sup>28</sup>

Like many things in prophecy, “the end” is not a singular event. Here, it refers to the matrix of events which together comprise the end of “this present evil age,” (Gal 1:3). The “Gospel saturation level” is the trigger which kicks off this chain of events.<sup>29</sup> We have no idea what the saturation level is, or how to precisely measure it. What is clear is that missions (domestic and abroad) are critical. If a church is not about evangelization, then it’s derelict.

Therefore, once Gospel saturation is achieved, “the end” is triggered. What will be the opening move in this chain of events? Jesus tells us in the next section.

### Gangsters and Abominations of Desolation (vv. 15-22)

Prophecy is powerful because it tells a story in a very impactful way. Strange images, bizarre sayings, odd symbols—it’s all there, ready to fire the imagination. The medium is so much different than a narrative like Acts, a poem like Song of Solomon, or a lawyerly argument like Romans. It captivates and draws you in, even despite yourself. What does it mean? What’s it saying?

We’re drawn to epics, myths,<sup>30</sup> sweeping origin stories. You might have had to read *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in high school, but have you read it since? The modern myth largely exists

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<sup>25</sup> This remark is from Jerome. See Simonetti, *Matthew 14-28*, in ACCS, p. 191.

<sup>26</sup> *Contra*. Broadus, *Matthew*, p. 485.

<sup>27</sup> “It is not here said that all will be saved nor must this language be given too literal and detailed an application to every individual,” (Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Mt 24:14).

<sup>28</sup> Henry Alford remarks, “But in the wider sense, the words imply that the Gospel shall be preached in all the world, literally taken, before the great and final end come,” (*New Testament*, p. 1:164).

<sup>29</sup> R.T. France’s approach is to maximize evidence for a context of AD 70, so he disagrees that Jesus is referring to a worldwide evangelization during the run-up to the Antichrist’s reign. He believes “the end” is the destruction of Herod’s temple by the Roman army during the siege of AD 66-70 (*Matthew*, p. 908). I believe he is incorrect.

<sup>30</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* (online), s.v. “myth,” noun, no. 1a, <https://bit.ly/3JbZg6s> (accessed March 11, 2023). “A traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon.”

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on film—in the multiplex or via streaming from your couch. Sagas like the *Harry Potter* series and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy captivated an entire generation of people around the world. They're self-contained universes that tell tales of good v. evil, of darkness v. light, of heroes and villains, and of diabolical figures vanquished by good.<sup>31</sup>

In these modern-day myths, there is always a climatic showdown. This is never simply an individual contest (unlike Rocky v. Ivan Drago or Luke Skywalker v. Darth Vader),<sup>32</sup> but rather the fulcrum of an existential struggle against the evil system. Thus, the *Lord of the Rings* film saga ends with the battle at Minas Tirith and then at the black gates of Mordor. The original *Star Wars* trilogy ended with the Battle of Endor and the destruction of the second Death Star.

The Christian story has its own epic finale, and it occurs at the end of the great tribulation. Jesus tells some of that story here, in our passage (Matthew 24:15-22). But He also tells another story—actually two at the same time; the first foreshadows the other. *Star Wars* does something similar.

The Rebel Alliance did indeed destroy a Death Star battle station in the original 1977 film, *A New Hope*. The Empire has been shattered! Surely, it won't ever be able to replicate this fearsome weapon. Yet, [the opening crawl](#) for the 1983 film *Return of the Jedi* tells us that “the GALACTIC EMPIRE has secretly begun construction on a new armored space station even more powerful than the first dreaded Death Star ...”

You see, that first Death Star was but a foretaste of the more fearsome *second* Death Star to come. It pointed to it, foreshadowed it, gave a taste of what was 'comin 'round the mountain. Something like that is going on here.

Here's where we are in the passage:

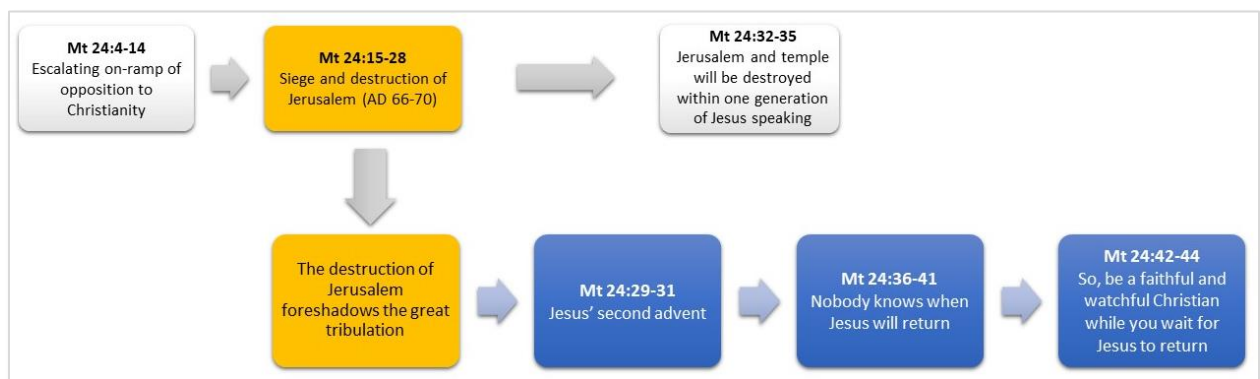


Figure 6.

<sup>31</sup> One theologian suggests the popularity of these stories is a Gospel echo from people who otherwise have no “script” into which to slot deeper human themes. See Joshua Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story: How to Talk About God in a Skeptical Age* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> See *Rocky IV* and *Return of the Jedi*, respectively.

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Jesus speaks of two things at once; a terrible ordeal which will happen soon and another, more definitive contest which occurs much later. I've said too much already, so I'll let the text speak for itself from here on out.

*So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains (Matthew 24:15-16).*

Now we're into the difficult part of Matthew 24. Some take this whole bit (Mt 24:15-22) to refer to the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. Others see it as completely future, indicating the start of the great tribulation. Still others see a blending of both perspectives—usually with the former as a type for the latter. Some minimize Daniel's context and speculate this "abomination" is a general reference to "every heresy which finds its way into the church."<sup>33</sup> One scholar suggests this was the desecration of the temple by the Zealot faction during the Jerusalem siege of AD 66-70.<sup>34</sup>

We ought to lay out the evidence, analyze it fairly to let it speak for itself, and set systems aside when they don't fit that evidence. Two pieces of evidence are critical here:

1. **What Daniel said.** Jesus even inserted a plea for us to read Daniel ("let the reader understand") to get His point,<sup>35</sup> and
2. **What Mark and Luke say.** Either they contradict each other, or we can harmonize them together to form a complete picture.

The first thing we must do is figure out what "the abomination of desolation" is, so we can figure out what Jesus is saying. He's likely either referring to Antichrist, or to events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The phrase occurs three times in the prophet Daniel.

The first of these is in Daniel 9:24-27, where the prophet provides a broad sketch of history to come:

1. A period of time which the angel Gabriel identifies as "seventy sevens" is the complete span during which God's plan will be completed (Dan 9:24).
2. This period of time is triggered by the decree to rebuild Jerusalem by the Persians. There is a dispute about when this precisely happened, but that isn't important for our purposes here. At this point, the exiles began to return to Israel from Babylon.

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<sup>33</sup> This is from an anonymous commentator. See Simonetti, *Matthew*, in ACCS, pp. 191-192.

<sup>34</sup> Alford, *New Testament*, p. 1:165.

<sup>35</sup> I think Carson is correct to see the "let the reader understand" as Jesus' remark for folks who read Daniel to pay close attention (*Matthew*, p. 500). However, many see it as Matthew's editorial insertion.

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3. From the decree to rebuild the temple until the Anointed One (Jesus) arrives on the scene, 69 “sevens” will elapse. The temple will be rebuilt during this period, but in troublesome times (Dan 9:25).
4. After the 69 “sevens,” the Anointed One will be killed, and have nothing. The “people of the ruler who will come” will then destroy Jerusalem and its sanctuary. War will rage on like a flood during this time until it’s all done (Dan 9:26).

Because it happened within a generation of Jesus’ death, this last part seems to refer to the sack of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70 (*cf.* Mt 24:1-2). The “people of the ruler” who will destroy the temple would then be the Romans, with the emperor representing a future Antichrist-like figure and the Romans Empire as a type for the kingdom of darkness—Babylon.

5. This sinister ruler will then confirm a covenant with many for one “seven.” In the vision, we’ve now transitioned from the Roman context to the kingdom of darkness—the ruler is the Antichrist and the time period of the great tribulation. In the middle of this last “seven,” Antichrist will stop religious practices in Jerusalem and erect an idolatrous figure of some sort—an “abomination that causes desolation”—inside the temple for about three and a half years (*cf.* Dan 12:11-12). This will continue until the Antichrist gets his just desserts and is cast into hell (Dan 9:27; *cp.* Rev 19:19-20).

Thus ends this great vision which sketches the decisive events of human history in four verses. Because this vision is comprehensive, capturing the entire sweep of history from the announcement of the temple’s reconstruction, through atonement for sin and unto the new tomorrow, this last “seven” is the final act. But, a whole lot of time has passed since the end of the 69<sup>th</sup> “seven,” whereas this final “seven” hasn’t yet happened—no sinister ruler has yet established a covenant with “many.” It seems Daniel hints at a “gap” between the 69<sup>th</sup> and 70<sup>th</sup> “sevens.”

It’s reasonable to conclude that when Daniel refers to “an abomination which causes desolation” here (Dan 9:27), he’s referring to the intentional desecration of a sacred space by the Antichrist.

Daniel mentions this phrase in two other places (Dan 11:31; 12:11). The first of these refers to a Syrian king named Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who persecuted the Jewish people terribly in the last quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. He erected a pagan altar inside the temple and prefigured the coming Antichrist in his cruelty and hatred (*read* 1 Maccabees 1). This action sparked the Jewish revolt and resulted in a quasi-independent Jewish kingdom until Rome came onto the scene. The second reference seems to leap forward and refer to the Antichrist himself.

Let’s return to our Matthew passage:

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*So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains (Matthew 24:15-16).*

So, to which “abomination of desolation” reference is Jesus referring? He’s looking forward to the future, so Antiochus IV Epiphanes is out. It seems Jesus must be referring to Antichrist, and that would mean Jesus is telling Christians to flee when the tribulation begins. But, we must now bring in evidence from Mark and Luke to see if the evidence still points that way:

<b>Matthew 24:15-16</b>	<b>Mark 13:14</b>	<b>Luke 21:20-21</b>
So when you see <u>standing in the holy place “the abomination that causes desolation,”</u> spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains ...	When you see <u>“the abomination that causes desolation” standing where it does not belong—</u> let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains ...	When you see <u>Jerusalem being surrounded by armies,</u> you will know that <u>its desolation is near.</u> Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains ...

Notice what Luke does. He wrote his Gospel last, and he’s apparently interpreting Matthew and Mark for his readers.<sup>36</sup> Luke records Jesus as meaning that the “abomination that causes desolation” was the Roman armies which surrounded Jerusalem.<sup>37</sup> The “abomination” would then be Roman military standards invading the city, especially the temple proper. These pennants bore the image of the Roman emperor, who claimed a divine status. This is blasphemy, of course. It is Jerusalem’s desolation to which Luke refers, and this means it’s what Mark and Matthew meant, too.<sup>38</sup>

Some might object that Luke could just as easily be referring to Antichrist’s armies encompassing Jerusalem to destroy it, but this event just doesn’t occur in any reasonable timeline. Antichrist does indeed gather an army to meet Jesus at his second advent but is defeated in quick order—Jerusalem is not destroyed (Rev 19:19). Likewise, Satan later raises an army to have a go where his minion failed but he is incinerated by a divine fireball (Rev 20:9). Again, Jerusalem is untouched.

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<sup>36</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. H. de Jongste (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1962), p. 492.

<sup>37</sup> Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Mt 24:15; Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. M. Ernest Bengel and J. C. F. Steudel, trans. James Bryce (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1860), p. 1:420. A.B. Bruce writes, “The horror is the Roman army, and the thing to be dreaded and fled from is not any religious outrage it may perpetrate, but the desolation it will inevitably bring,” (“Synoptic Gospels,” in *Expositor’s Testament*, p. 1:292). Bruce doesn’t see the Roman military standards themselves as the desolating sacrilege, but he’s on the same basic page as me.

<sup>38</sup> R.T. France suggests this abomination cannot be the Roman military standards invading the temple, because by then it would be too late for people to flee (*Matthew*, p. 913). It’s unnecessary to see the abomination as being actuated the *very moment* the ensign enters the temple compound. It’s enough to see the phrase as referring to the general siege and conquest of the whole city.

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Luke said Jerusalem's "desolation was near," (Lk 21:20). The word means destruction of the city—it will be laid waste.<sup>39</sup> This is precisely what both Antichrist and Satan will later fail to accomplish, yet it is exactly what Titus accomplished in AD 70. Josephus tells us:

*There was no one left for the soldiers to kill or plunder, not a soul on which to vent their fury; for mercy would never have made them keep their hands off anyone if action was possible. So Caesar now ordered them to raze the whole City and Sanctuary to the ground ... [a]ll the rest of the fortifications encircling the City were so completely leveled with the ground that no one visiting the spot would believe it had once been inhabited. This then was the end to which the mad folly of revolutionaries brought Jerusalem, a magnificent city renowned to the ends of the earth.<sup>40</sup>*

So, we're left with the conclusion that Jesus refers to the Roman sack of Jerusalem in AD 70. It's also more than just that, but we'll get there in a bit.

*Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath (Matthew 24:17-20).*

When the Romans attack Jerusalem, Jesus says everyone must run. Immediately. Get out. Don't stop to grab some valuables. Just flee. His reference to the Sabbath supports a reference to AD 70—"Jesus clearly expects these events to take place while the strict Sabbath law is in effect."<sup>41</sup> Some Jews would be reluctant to help on the sabbath, fearful of incurring religious condemnation even as Rome's armies massed against the city.<sup>42</sup> Some Christians believe this "Sabbath" reference points to some future time when the temple has been re-built, but Matthew says nothing about that.

Why does Jesus say this? Why such dire warnings?

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<sup>39</sup> See (1) G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), s.v. "ἐρήμωσις," p. 179, (2) Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 172, (3) Walter Bauer, Frederick Danker (et al), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), p. 392.

<sup>40</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. G.A. Williamson, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1969), 7:1 (p. 361). Chrysostom suggests, "And let not any man suppose this to have been spoken hyperbolically; but let him study the writings of Josephus, and learn the truth of the sayings. For neither can any one say, that the man being a believer, in order to establish Christ's words, hath exaggerated the tragical history," ("Homily 76," in *NPNF* 1.10, p. 457).

<sup>41</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, p. 501.

<sup>42</sup> See Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, in Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010; kindle ed.), KL 23617, and Chrysostom, "Homily 75," in *NPNF* 1.10, p. 457.

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*For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again (Matthew 24:21; cp. Daniel 12:1).*

This sounds pretty bad. But, God has said things like “this has never happened before” when, in fact, it *had* happened (cp. Josh 10:14 with Ex 8:13, Num 14:20; 2 Kgs 6:18)!<sup>43</sup> This suggests Jesus’ words here don’t have to be literal—it may just be a colloquial way of saying “this will be really, really bad.” We do similar things when we tell someone that a certain thing was “the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.” We say that, but is it *really* the craziest thing? Probably not. Some interpreters suggest Jesus is using hyperbole for deliberate effect, but this is unlikely.<sup>44</sup>

If Jesus is primarily referring to the events of AD 66-70, when Jerusalem was destroyed, then was this really the worst period of time “from the beginning of the world until now”? The Jewish historian Josephus was present with the Roman armies at the siege of Jerusalem and tells us all about it.

It was a terrible time. Civil war had torn the city into three Jewish factions (a “suicidal strife between rival gangsters”)<sup>45</sup> and war broke out during Passover when the city was filled to the brim with Jewish pilgrims. One faction controlled the temple courts, while two others held the city and the larger temple complex. Josephus tells us terrified worshippers were cut down by a hail of projectiles as they ran for the sanctuary. Blood collected in pools in the courtyards. The city became “a desolate no man’s land” as guerilla warfare raged on.

The Romans did not show up as evil conquerors, but arrived under the aegis of, as it were, the “Federal government” come to restore order to a city within its jurisdiction that was destroying itself. Bit by bit, the Roman general Titus conquered Jerusalem in a multi-year siege. Josephus tells of one Jewish woman named Mary, driven mad by hunger, who killed her infant son, roasted him, ate one half of him and saved the rest for later<sup>46</sup> (cp. Deut 28:53-57). The temple itself was destroyed by fire in a frenzy of rage by Roman legionnaires who ignored their commander’s orders.

*All the prisoners taken from beginning to end of the war totalled 97,000; those who perished in the long siege 1,100,000 ... No destruction ever wrought by God or man approached the wholesale carnage of this war.*<sup>47</sup>

By all accounts Josephus wasn’t the most honorable man in the world, but he was *there*. He witnessed the whole thing. But, can we fairly say the sack of Jerusalem was really *the worst* event in the world? One thinks of the German siege of Leningrad during

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<sup>43</sup> Keener, *Bible Backgrounds*, p. 108. Broadus, writing in 1886, suggests the siege of Jerusalem really was the worst thing which has ever happened (*Matthew*, p. 488).

<sup>44</sup> France, *Matthew*, p. 915.

<sup>45</sup> From G.A. Williamson’s introduction to Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. G.A. Williamson, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1969), p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 6:199-219 (pp. 341-342).

<sup>47</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 6:420f. See ch(s). 13-21 (i.e. 3:422 – 6:429).

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the Second World War. For a time, the city's only supply line to friendly Soviet forces during the brutal Russian winter was across a frozen lake. The siege lasted nearly 900 days and, by some accounts, perhaps 1,500,000 people perished. Just as during the siege of Jerusalem so many years before, it's likely that starving citizens resorted to cannibalism—stories were whispered about children disappearing.

While Titus' siege of Jerusalem lasted longer, we're at least speaking of comparable tragedies. It seems reasonable to take Jesus' words in Mt 24:21 as referring to Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans armies.<sup>48</sup> But, Jesus' pivot to His own second advent a few verses hence suggest Titus and his Romans legions don't exhaust vv. 15-21's meaning.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, Mt 24:15-21 refers to *both* (1) Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans, which squares with Jesus' announcement of the temple's destruction that started this entire conversation (Mt 24:1-2), *and* (2) the Antichrist's brief reign as the ruler of the kingdom of darkness (Rev 13), later depicted by the Apostle John as Babylon (Rev 17-18). There is both a near and far fulfillment.<sup>50</sup> Jesus began with (1) birth pangs of persecution against the church, (2) then told of sharply escalating hostility because the church represents Jesus, to (3) the fall of Jerusalem as a type for the coming kingdom of evil via the Antichrist.

This typology is the best way to understand Jesus' unmistakable pivot to the distant future in vv. 29-31.

*If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened (Matthew 24:22).*

Some say "those days" Jesus speaks about here refer to (1) the specific events in vv. 15-21,<sup>51</sup> or perhaps (2) the entire chain of events stretching from the birth pangs to the end of the Antichrist's brief reign (vv. 4-21; *cp.* v. 29).<sup>52</sup> I believe it's easiest to continue the typological theme and say v. 22 refers to the siege of Jerusalem in AD 66-70, which foreshadows the seven year great tribulation in the future.

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<sup>48</sup> Broadus, *Matthew*, p. 486.

<sup>49</sup> Ridderbos, *Kingdom*, pp. 493-497. Henry Alford remarks, "Our Lord still has in view the prophecy of Daniel (ch. 12:1), and this citation clearly shews the intermediate fulfillment, by the destruction of Jerusalem, of that which is yet future in its final fulfillment: for Daniel is speaking of the end of all things," (*New Testament*, p. 1:166).

<sup>50</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, KL 23639. Broadus remarks that vv.15f "apparently refers both to the destruction of Jerusalem and to the final coming of Christ," (*Matthew*, p. 485). Glasscock, a dispensationalist, also agrees (*Matthew*, pp. 468-471).

<sup>51</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, KL 23639.

<sup>52</sup> D.A. Carson, *Matthew*, in EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 502-503; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, in Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 605-606; *contra*. Broadus, *Matthew*, p. 488. Craig Blomberg defines this entire period as the "great tribulation." He writes, "Far from this age being a millennium, as in traditional amillennialism, the New Testament era in which we have been living is better characterized as tribulation for believers," (*Matthew*, in *New American Commentary*, vol. 22 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), p. 359).



## What Does Jesus Say in Matthew 24?

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### On False Alarms and Bogus Messiahs (vv.23-28)

*At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you ahead of time (Matthew 24:23-25).*

Jesus warns that during this this awful time—the Jerusalem siege of AD 66-70 which foreshadows the tribulation—everyone will surely die ... unless He preserves His community through it all. This suggests Christians will endure the tribulation at some point in the future. There will be false sightings of the Messiah. Charlatans and Satan-empowered teachers will lead people astray.

*"So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the wilderness,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather (Matthew 24:26-28)*

Jesus words are just a continuation of the same, with a folksy analogy for good measure. Just as circling vultures unmistakably mark the spot of a dead creature, so too will Messiah's coming be obvious and clear. It won't be necessary to speculate about *when* Messiah will arrive, because it will be as unmistakable as lightning in the night sky. It's no accident that Jesus refers to Himself here as "the Son of Man." This is the figure whom the Ancient of Days crowns as eternal king in Daniel 7 *just after* the beast (i.e. Antichrist) is slain and tossed into the burning fire (Dan 7:7-13; *cp.* Rev 17:11-14). Likewise, in Jesus' own chronology the Son of Man will appear to destroy Antichrist and establish His kingdom (Rev 19:19-21) *just as* the great tribulation plumbs new depths of evil.

The typology or prefiguring still holds. This is advice both for the residents of Jerusalem about 40 years hence, *and* for believers enduring the great tribulation sometime in the distant future.

Notice again that there is nothing here about Jesus returning twice, once to rapture the Church out of this world, and again to establish the kingdom. Jesus only tells of one single return.

### Things Just Got Real (vv. 29-31)

Darth Vader is rightly regarded as one of the best villains in movie history, in the same league as Maleficent and Hans Gruber. In the original *Star Wars* trilogy, his fiendishness was less a product of his skills in single combat, and more about his ruthlessness and the way he killed subordinates by choking them to death with "the

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force.” He was more a sinister administrator than a warrior. Still, it was clear Vader was a frightening individual.

“I’m not afraid!” Luke Skywalker told Yoda at one point.

“You will be,” the Jedi Master replied cryptically. “You will be ...”

Vader is not depicted as a fighter until *Rogue One* (the direct prequel to the 1977 film *A New Hope*) was released in 2015. In the climactic battle scene,<sup>53</sup> Vader and a force of stormtroopers disable and board a Rebel command ship which has stolen data for the first Death Star (still under construction). This information cannot fall into Rebel hands, and Vader’s goal is to personally ensure that it does not.

The Rebel sailors fall back into one portion of the ship. They point their weapons into the darkness, gasping for breath. They hear deep breathing.

*Hmmmm-pusssh.*

Silence.

*Hmmmm-pusssh.*

Then, out of the darkness a red lightsaber comes to life, illuminating Vader standing in the corridor, menacing in black.

*Hmmmm-pusssh.*

The sailors open fire. Vader quickly kills them all. This scene has become infamous because of the sudden, startling ferocity of Vader’s attack and the sailor’s inability to do anything about it. They fall before him like so much chaff before a bulldozer. They scream in fear, knowing they’re doomed. They fight anyway, even as they know it’s hopeless.

Something similar happens here. Jesus returns, the people of Babylon scream, panic, mourn. They fight back, but it’s all over in an instant. You’ll have to read Revelation 19 to get the full impact, but it’s all hinted at here.

Here’s where we are in the passage:

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<sup>53</sup> See <https://youtu.be/9Z8mgkqjq90>.

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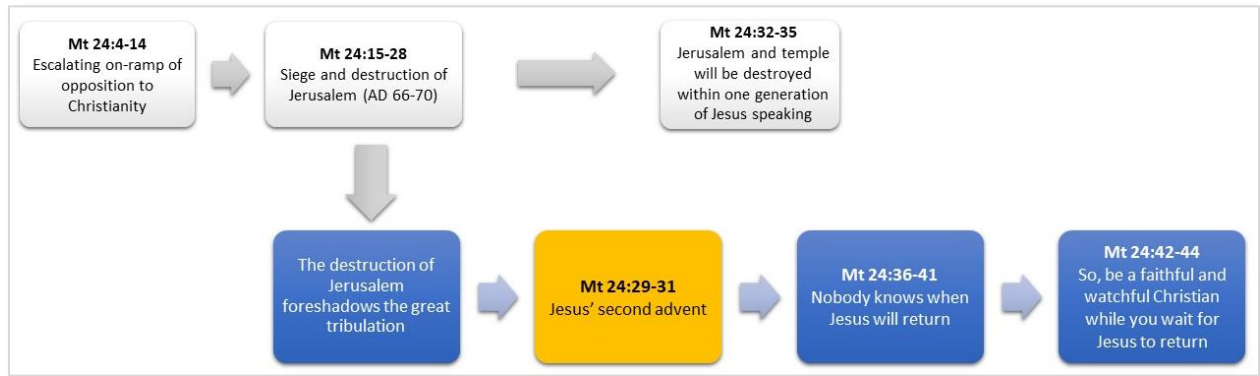


Figure 7.

Jesus explains ...

*“Immediately after the distress of those days*

*“the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light;  
the stars will fall from the sky,  
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’*

*“Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven”  
(Matthew 24:29-30; quoting Isaiah 13:10)*

The timeline skews at this point—if vv. 15-28 describes the destruction of Jerusalem as a type or foreshadowing of the great tribulation to come, then how can Jesus return *immediately after* those days? We’re still waiting, even now!

The best answer seems to be that here, in vv. 29-31, the typology (the events of AD 70 *and* the tribulation) now fades. We are now squarely at the end of the great tribulation, when Jesus returns. His second advent terminates the tribulation.<sup>54</sup> Jesus describes this by quoting from Isaiah 13:10, which describes an otherworldly phenomenon in the atmosphere—a plain and terrifying indicator that all is not well with the world.

<sup>54</sup> Even Chrysostom now sees the events of AD 70 fading, and Jesus skipping ahead to the second coming (“Homily 76,” in *NPNF* 1.10, p. 458). Alford remarks, “From ver. 28, the lesser subject begins to be swallowed up by the greater, and our Lord’s second coming to be the predominant theme, with however certain hints thrown back as it were at the event which was immediately in question: till, in the latter part of the chapter and the whole of the next, the second advent, and, at last, the final judgment ensuing on it, are the subjects,” (*New Testament*, p. 1:162).

A.B. Bruce writes, “... it appears that the coming of the Son of Man is not to be identified with the judgment of Jerusalem, but rather forms its preternatural background,” (“Synoptic Gospels,” in *Expositors Testament*, p. 1:296).

Bengel, however, suggests “immediately” covers the period between the destruction of Jerusalem and the second advent. “We must, however, keep to our first interpretation, so indeed that the particle *εὐθὺς* be understood to comprehend the whole space between the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus and the end of the world,” (*Gnomen*, p. 1:428).

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Some Christians believe the “sign of the Son of Man” is a cross appearing from on high which heralds Jesus’ arrival.<sup>55</sup> There is merit to the idea of (1) a sign of some sort appearing first, (2) *and then* the Son of Man “coming on the clouds of heaven.”<sup>56</sup> We just don’t know what this “sign” is—perhaps it’s simply Jesus appearing?<sup>57</sup> Whatever it is, it’ll be obvious and clear to everyone.

It’s no accident that this Isaiah quotation is from a passage about judgment on *Babylon*—that symbol of wickedness and evil (Rev 17-18; cf. Zech 5:5-11). It is the king of Babylon who seems to double as Satan in Isaiah 14:3-20—“How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn!” (Isa 14:12). Now here, Jesus describes His return by quoting judgment against Babylon—precisely what the Apostle John shows us in Revelation 19, just after Babylon is fallen (Rev 17-18).

What is the unmistakable sign that the Son of Man has come?

*And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory (Matthew 24:30).*

Jesus will arrive on the clouds of heaven—He’s alluding to His coronation scene from Daniel’s vision (Dan 7:13-14). The people who don’t belong to Jesus (the unbelievers) will be sad—they’ve already given their allegiance to another king, Jesus’ evil counterpart (as it were)—the Antichrist (Rev 17:1-8; cp. 13:1-8).

*And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other (Matthew 24:31).*

This is the great sifting of the wicked and the righteous. The image seems to be that of Jesus arriving to earth on the clouds while sending His angels to speed on ahead to gather the saints from all corners of the earth. The Apostle John describes the same event as Jesus returning to earth with “the armies of heaven,” (Rev 19:11-17). Trumpet blasts announce His coming, as they often do when God comes to earth (see Ex 19:16; 1 Thess 4:16). It is also a divine bugle call for the faithful (Isa 27:13). The trumpet blast in Scripture is a universal signal that can mean only one thing—God has arrived—just as when military bands play “Hail to the Chief” to welcome the U.S. President.

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<sup>55</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 76,” in *NPNF* 1.10, p. 459. See also Alford, *New Testament*, p. 1:168.

<sup>56</sup> The Greek temporal adverb τότε here could indicate sequence (“and then this happened”) or contemporaneous time (“at the same time ...”). Context must be the judge about whether this sign is different than the Son of Man coming on the clouds. Bengel sees this sign as “the triumphal train of the Son of man coming in His glory,” (*Gnomon*, pp. 1:429-430).

<sup>57</sup> Hendriksen, *Matthew*, p. 864. Barbieri speculates “Some believe the sign may involve the heavenly city, New Jerusalem, which may descend at this time and remain as a satellite city suspended over the earthly city Jerusalem throughout the Millennium (Rev. 21:2–3),” (“Matthew,” in *Bible Knowledge*, p. 78). This is incorrect.

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Earlier, Jesus spoke of this identical scene in His parable of the wheat and the weeds (Mt 13:40-43; *cp.* Lk 3:13), wherein “at the end of the age” the Son of Man sends forth His angels to sift the kingdom (i.e. the world, *cp.* Mt 13:38, 41) and sort out the righteous from the wicked. “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43), because the world has been cleansed of wickedness.

All told, Jesus leaves us with a basic outline which depicts:

1. Jesus beginning His return trip from heaven, terminating the tribulation, and fulfilling His second advent promise.
2. Jesus sending His angels out ahead of Him to gather the believers from all over the earth.
3. Then, presumably, Jesus “arriving” in Jerusalem to inaugurate His kingdom, bringing His saints along with Him.

These believers are from all over the world, because “Gospel saturation” has been achieved. These events are strikingly like what Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.<sup>58</sup>

### A Time for Everything (vv. 32-44)

Modern-day epics and myths have fallible heroes. The villain is always more powerful, more mighty, with more resources. Harry Potter and his friends (all of them children, really) struggle against Voldemort and his Death Eaters. The Rebels fight against the Empire, and later the First Order. The Elves, Dwarfs and the kings of men wage war against Sauron and the forces of evil from Mt. Doom. They’re each outgunned, outmatched—only their valiant hearts, their inherent *goodness* sees them through.

The Christian story is quite different. C.S. Lewis understood that. In his *Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan is never befuddled, outmatched, or not in control of the situation. In God’s story, He is never struggling against a superior foe. To be sure, Satan is pure evil and he is seducing and ruining people and societies across the globe. But, God’s victory is never in doubt.

God controls time, sets time, manages time. One confession of faith from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century reads:<sup>59</sup>

*We believe that the same God, after he had created all things, did not forsake them, or give them up to fortune or chance, but that he rules and governs them,*

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<sup>58</sup> Chrysostom sees Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 as the same event (“Homily 76,” in *NPNF* 1.10, p. 1:460). Ed Glasscock is representative of dispensationalists who argue this event is not a post-tribulational rapture (*Matthew*, pp. 474-475). He offers no meaningful argument himself but refers the reader to Paul Benware (p. 475, fn. 22), whose arguments are deminimis and weak (*Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), pp. 209-210).

<sup>59</sup> 1619 Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 13, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, p. 3:397.

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*according to his holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without his appointment ...*

This means your life has purpose, because it's not a random series of events. So, too, this world and the course of human history is not a sequence of bizarre accidents. God is moving, directing, piloting this ship on a course He's plotted.

*This doctrine affords us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father, who watches over us with a paternal care.<sup>60</sup>*

It's this control, this providence that God exercises over the world even as it's temporarily influenced by Satan, that makes prophecy possible. It's why God can declare something hundreds of years beforehand, and it happens. It's why Jesus can say what He says in this last section of our passage.

The disciples kicked off this discussion by asking two questions; (1) when will the temple be destroyed, and (2) what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age. He's already explained the signs which will mark His coming (Mt 24:15-28). But He hasn't yet addressed the first question—*when* will the temple be destroyed? We know it *will* be destroyed (see Mt 24:15-22), but when?

From the comfy vantage point of 2023, we know the answer because of the benefit of history (AD 70), but Jesus' audience didn't have a time machine or a crystal ball. He hasn't yet answered "when," but Jesus does so here. He also answers an implicit question; one the disciples didn't ask, but about which everyone is curious—the "when will you return" question. I'll call these the first and second "when" questions.

### On the First "When" Question (vv. 32-35)

Here's where we are in this passage:

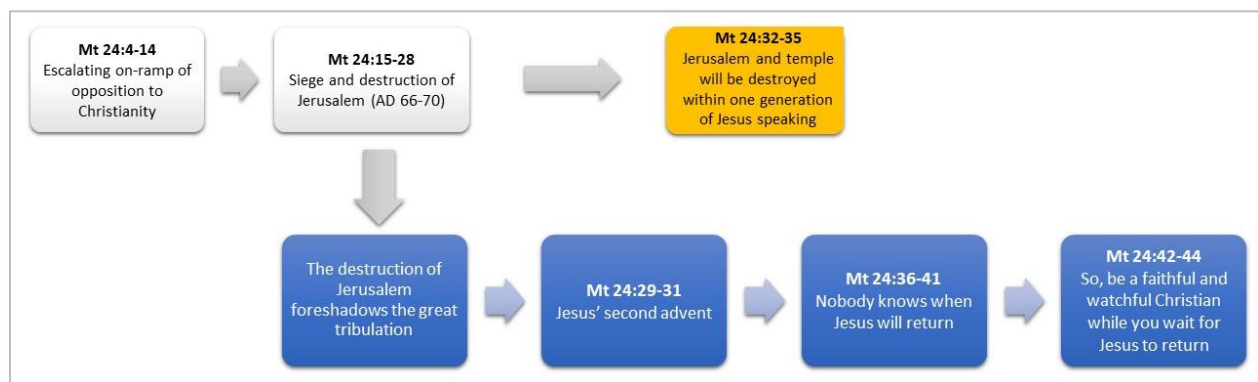


Figure 8.

<sup>60</sup> 1619 Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 13, in Schaff, *Creeds*, p. 3:397.

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*“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened (Matthew 24:32-34).*

These few verses are hard to interpret, because by the time you arrive here you’ve already locked yourself onto a particular track that dictates the shape of your answer.

1. If the generation to whom Jesus is speaking won’t pass away before “all these things have happened,”
2. and if those folks are now quite dead (and they are!)
3. and if Jesus hasn’t yet returned (and He hasn’t!),
4. then either Jesus was wrong, or the word “generation” here doesn’t mean what we think it means, or... something.

So, at this point you have three basic tendencies among interpreters when they get to Matthew 24:34:

1. If you believe Matthew 24 is basically about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, then you will tend to maximize those connections and become wishy-washy about seeing the second advent, here. You will emphasize “this generation,” and say “this means Jesus *had to be* talking about events from *that generation*.”
2. If you believe this passage is mostly about the second coming, you’ll be prone to minimize the evidence from vv.15-21 which suggests references to AD 70, and maximize the “second coming” data.
3. And some interpreters see a whole lot of foreshadowing. They’ll say, “there certainly is stuff here about AD 70 and the suffering and carnage of Jerusalem’s destruction, but all that stuff prefigures the *real tribulation* that’s coming one day!”

The two questions to answer here from v. 34 are (1) what are “these things,” and (2) what does “this generation” mean? There are four general answers that faithful Christians have offered:

1. “These things” is about the destruction of Jerusalem, which means Jesus is referring here to vv. 4-26 (or possibly up to v. 28)—He isn’t talking about vv. 29-31 at all. If that’s true, then there’s no problem with seeing “this generation” referring to people alive in Jesus’ day who will still be around to see the Romans destroy the temple.<sup>61</sup>
2. The phrase “this generation” refers to the character of people as a particular group, meaning “people like this” won’t pass from the scene before all this takes

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<sup>61</sup> See (1) Blomberg, *Matthew*, p. 364; (2) Carson, *Matthew*, p. 507; (3) A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Mt 24:34; (4) Bengel, *Gnomon*, p. 1:432; (5) Osborne, *Matthew*, KL 23984.

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place. Some Christians believe Jesus is saying that, despite everything, the Jewish people will be preserved until Messiah returns (*cp.* Rom 9-11).<sup>62</sup>

3. “This generation” refers to the folks who will be alive when Jesus returns—it’s a message for *that generation* which will be alive *in the future*.<sup>63</sup>
4. Finally, there is the idea that Jesus is using typology, whereby “this generation” and “these things” *primarily* refers back to vv. 15-22 and the timing question about the temple’s destruction in AD 70 (Mt 24:2-3), and it *also* prefigures the coming calamity of the great tribulation and Jesus’ return.<sup>64</sup>

The second can be *made* to work,<sup>65</sup> but it’s sketchy and kind of weak. It’s always dangerous to interpret a passage by saying, “Hey, even though every single English bible version you’ll ever see translates this word as ‘generation,’ I want you to know I know Greek and it *really means* something entirely different!”

The third option seems forced, because Jesus is speaking to the very people who will see these events happen. He tells the disciples “when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door,” (Mt 24:33). Note that Jesus didn’t say “when they see.” He said, “when you see.” He then says, “this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened,” (Mt 24:34). Jesus was referring to His audience (the disciples) who would see these things and know that it’s about to happen. That’s why it’s rendered “this generation” (the generation listening to Him), and not “that generation” (the one alive when He returns).<sup>66</sup> This option is incorrect.

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<sup>62</sup> See Hendriksen, *Matthew*, pp. 868-869 on the Jewish application. Henry Alford (*New Testament*, p. 1:169) doesn’t make the “Israel will be preserved” argument, but simply suggests “generation” stands for a particular type or class of people, as does Chrysostom (“Homily 75,” in *NPNF* 1.10, p. 462).

<sup>63</sup> Glasscock (*Matthew*, p. 475) offers a brief justification for this view. Barbieri simply asserts the position and provides no defense—something he is prone to do in his commentary (“Matthew,” in *Bible Knowledge*, p. 78).

<sup>64</sup> Broadus, *Matthew*, p. 491. “The difficulty is relieved by understanding a typical relation between the destruction of Jerusalem and his final parousia, on the ground of which relation v. 29-31 really points in some sense to both events.” See also (1) Morris, *Matthew*, pp. 612-613, and (2) possibly John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 3 (Bellingham: Logos, 2010), p. 3:151. Morris sees a double fulfillment, while also arguing that “generation” means a particular kind of person.

<sup>65</sup> The word translated “generation” can have a metaphorical meaning. When Jesus comes down the foothills of Mt. Hermon and is confronted with a demon-possessed boy whom the disciples couldn’t heal, He is angry. “You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?” (Mk 9:19). The word here doesn’t mean “you stupid Gen X’ers!” It means something like “what’s wrong with *you people*?” He means “you kind of people,” “you type of people.”

<sup>66</sup> The Greek reads ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη, which means “Truly, I say to you all that this generation will never, ever pass away until ...” The demonstrative pronoun (the “this” in “this generation”) refers back to the antecedent most vividly in the author’s mind (Nigel Turner, *Grammar of New Testament Greek, Vol III: Syntax* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), p. 44). This particular pronoun is often used “for that which is relatively near in actuality or thought,” (H.E. Dana and Julius Mantey, *Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: MacMillain, 1955) p. 127). See also Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 325-326. A.T. Robertson goes farther and declares “οὗτος does, as a rule, refer to what is near or last mentioned and ἐκεῖνος to what is



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The fourth option is similar to the first, but it insists on the events of AD 70 being a foreshadowing of a greater fulfillment. This produces a fuzziness about “generation” that I feel muddles things a bit. Also, Jesus couldn’t have been saying “I’ll be back within one generation” (even in a foreshadowey kind of way) because He’s about to tell us *He doesn’t know when He’s coming back* (v. 36)!<sup>67</sup>

The first option seems best because it lets Jesus speak plainly,<sup>68</sup> and it allows “this generation” to have its natural force.

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away (Matthew 24:35).*

Jesus is telling us, “you can trust what I’m saying!”

### On the Second “When” Question (vv. 36-41)

We’re here, in the passage:

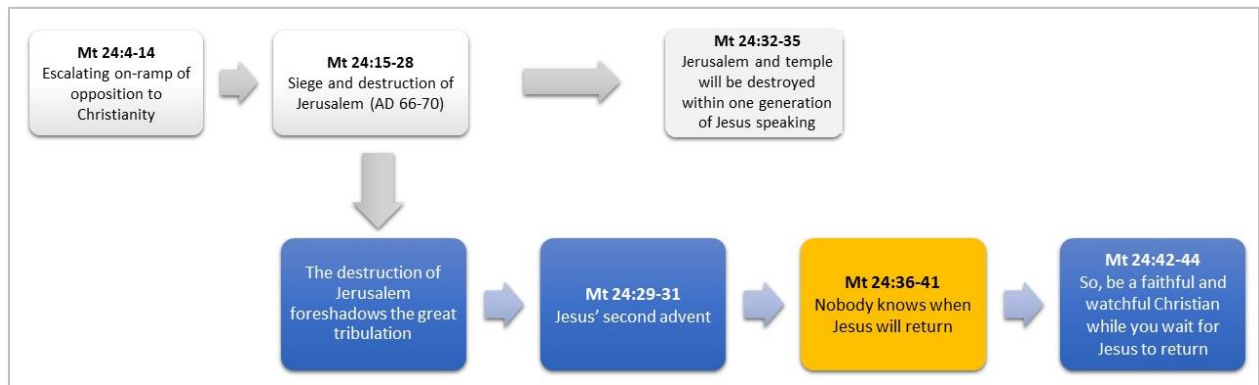


Figure 9.

remote,” (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), p. 702). The pronoun here is indeed an *ὁὐτος*.

So, what is the antecedent most vividly in Jesus’ mind? It’s the folks to whom He’s speaking, to whom He said, “when you see all these things.” So, the demonstrative pronoun should be contemporaneous (“this”), not future or remote (“that”). Jesus is therefore not referring to some future generation alive when He returns but has circled back to vv. 15-22 and the destruction of Jerusalem—He’s addressing the folks to whom He’s speaking right now. Charles Quarles agrees; “The near dem. *αὐτη* indicates that Jesus is referring to \*his own contemporaries ...” (*Matthew, in Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2017; Kindle ed.), p. 290). Quarles lists both options, but his asterisk denotes this is his understanding of the pronoun (“indicates the writer’s own preference when more than one solution is given for a particular exegetical problem,” p. 1).

<sup>67</sup> Morris, *Matthew*, p. 594.

<sup>68</sup> Robertson advises the most natural way to take the “this generation” statement is to see it referring solely to the events of AD 70 (*Word Pictures*, Mt 24:34). A.B. Bruce agrees that the events of AD 70 are plainly in view (“Synoptic Gospels,” in *Expositors Testament*, p. 1:296).

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*But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father (Matthew 24:36).*

This (along with v. 14) is the closest Jesus gets to answering the “when will you return” question. He answers it by saying that we won’t ever know—instead, only the Father in heaven knows the answer. Speaking from His human perspective as the representative person, even Jesus doesn’t know when “that day or hour” will happen. This suggests that any bible teacher, pastor, or Christian influencer who sets dates or speculates about the time of Christ’s return is in grave error. You should mark and avoid these people as unstable, spiritually immature, and untrustworthy.

Even though He doesn’t give us a date, Jesus does re-emphasize the motif of suddenness—He’ll come back quickly, without warning.

*As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man (Matthew 24:37-39).*

Some people assume this reference to Noah is about moral perversity, but that’s incorrect. Jesus isn’t saying “things will be just as bad as they were in Noah’s day before I come back.” Instead, He’s emphasizing the *suddenness* of His return.<sup>69</sup>

In Noah’s day, people ignored his warnings (Heb 11:7; 2 Pet 2:5). They couldn’t care less. They went about their lives. They ate. They drank. They married. They knew nothing about what was coming. Until it happened.

“That’s the way it’ll be when I return,” Jesus says. The Noah comparison seems to suggest a picture of carefree bliss, normal life—how can this be the tribulation? We forget that the tribulation will be a terrible time *for believers*, but *not for the unbelievers* who will pursue wickedness with unprecedented abandon—see the thriving commerce, political power, and economy of Antichrist’s kingdom at Revelation 18.<sup>70</sup> But, it’s the *suddenness*, the *violent, unexpected force* of the overwhelming cataclysm that’s the point. That’s how the Son of Man will return—with the arresting suddenness of a tidal flood.

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<sup>69</sup> Chrysostom wrote, “... these things He spake, showing that He should come on a sudden, and unexpectedly, and when the more part were living luxuriously,” (“Homily 77,” in *NPNF* 1.10, p. 464).

<sup>70</sup> “If there be luxury, how is there tribulation? Luxury for them that are in a state of insensibility and peace. Therefore He said not, when there is peace, but ‘when they speak of peace and safety,’ indicating their insensibility to be such as of those in Noah’s time, for that amid such evils they lived in luxury. But not so the righteous but they were passing their time in tribulation and dejection. Whereby He shows, that when Antichrist is come, the pursuit of unlawful pleasures shall be more eager among the transgressors, and those that have learnt to despair of their own salvation. Then shall be gluttony, then revellings, and drunkenness,” (Chrysostom, “Homily 77,” in *NPNF* 1.10, p. 464).

See also the comments by an anonymous interpreter in Simonetti, *Matthew*, in ACCS, p. 208.

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*Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left (Matthew 24:40-41).*

This is a strange scene. People will suddenly disappear. There one moment, gone the next. Some Christians believe this is the pre-tribulation rapture—*before* the tribulation. That chronology makes little sense here—the tribulation has now ended with Christ's return in v. 31. To see Jesus in vv. 40-41 describing the rapture of the church *before* the tribulation would be like inserting General Ulysses Grant into a D-Day landing craft approaching Omaha Beach.

Jesus is describing the rapture, but it's the one that accompanies His single return *at the end* of the tribulation—this is a post-tribulation rapture. That's why Jesus said to "keep watch" and referenced His return. Jesus begins His return from heaven here, sends out His angels to the four corners of the globe to call out the elect, and *together with them* and the armies of heaven returns to Jerusalem (see discussion at Mt 24:31).<sup>71</sup>

### The "So What" Bit (vv. 42-44)

Here's where we are:

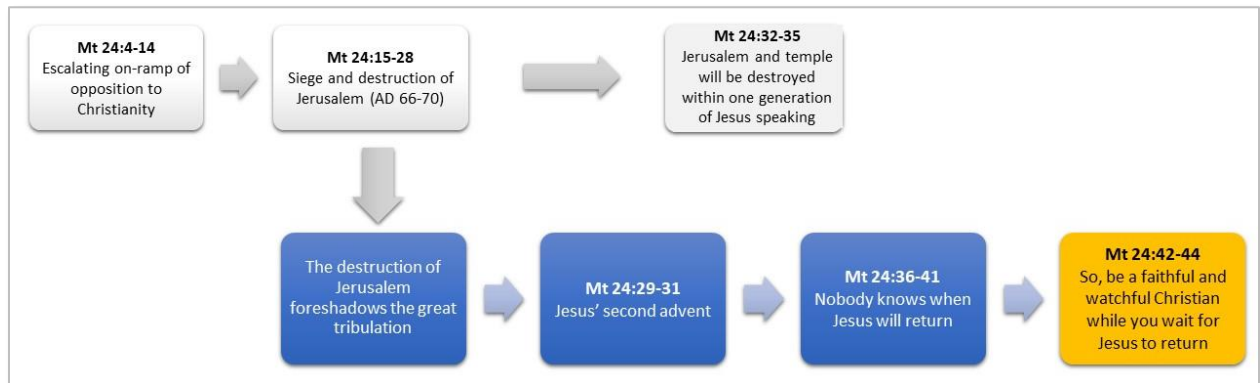


Figure 10.

<sup>71</sup> Broadus, *Matthew*, p. 495. Glasscock (a dispensationalist) bizarrely suggests this event is "not the Rapture of the church, but the gathering of the sealed Jews and faithful Gentiles of the Tribulation," which he stated happens at Mt 24:31 (*Matthew*, pp. 476-477). He must have it that way, because he cannot interpret Mt 24:31 as a post-tribulation rapture, so he must do *something* with it. His solution is odd—is this a second rapture at the end of the tribulation? Presumably, he believes there are two raptures? Glasscock is hard to follow, here.

Walvoord suggests this is a judgment reference, when the wicked will be sorted from the righteous in a mysterious, lightning-fast manner (*Matthew*, pp. 193-194). Barbieri agrees and (as is his wont) does little but assert his position and provides no defense ("Matthew," in *Bible Knowledge*, p. 79). The more obvious solution is to see Jesus gathering His people at His second advent, as He'd promised.

## What Does Jesus Say in Matthew 24?

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*Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him (Matthew 24:42-44).*

Our tale ends here as Jesus shifts from description of the signs of the end of this age and His return, and turns to the practical implication—be ready, be watching, be faithful to do the job I’ve given you to do! That is his burden at the end of our passage here (Mt 24:42-44) and the remainder of this chapter (Mt 24:45-51), and in the parables of the ten virgins and the talents (Mt 25:1-28), and in His warning about the great sifting upon His return (Mt 25:31-46).<sup>72</sup>

We’re making a mistake if we make Matthew 24 (or any prophetic passage) about speculations, timelines, charts, or questions the text isn’t designed to address. We ought to understand a passage in the spirit and context in which it’s given. This is harder than it sounds, because it’s possible to (1) accurately handle words in a passage, and yet (2) draw a wrong interpretation *from* those words because you miss the context. For example:

- 1 Corinthians 7 isn’t “about” how wives must give their husbands sex. Instead, it’s a passage in which Paul corrects a misguided sexual aestheticism that had taken root in that local church.
- John 5:26 isn’t “about” eternal generation. It’s where Jesus describes to skeptical Jewish leaders who He really is.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 isn’t “about” the rapture. It’s about Paul assuring one local church that Christians who’ve died won’t miss out on Jesus’ return.
- Genesis 11 isn’t “about” how mankind “failed” a “test,” making it necessary for God to initiate a new “dispensation” with Abraham. It’s about how a generation which came of age after the flood rebelled against God.

You may sincerely believe the texts *contain* these things, but in no conceivable world are they “about” those things. In the same way, Matthew 24 isn’t “about” your preferred millennial position, the rapture, the tribulation, or about you wanting to construct a timeline chart. It’s about Jesus telling us that “you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him,” (Mt 24:44).

What will Jesus find His people doing when He returns (Mt 24:46)? Jesus wants us to be doing our jobs—showing and telling the Gospel, growing in Christ, loving one another in the household of faith, being a subversive counterculture in a Babylon world, representing our King’s values and message. He rescued us because He has work for

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<sup>72</sup> “Jesus gives a half dozen parables to enforce the point of this exhortation (the Porter, the Master of the House, the Faithful Servant and the Evil Servants, the Ten Virgins, the Talents, the Sheep and the Goats),” (Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Mt 24:42).

## What Does Jesus Say in Matthew 24?

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us to do (Eph 2:10)—so let's get on with it, because we don't know when He's coming back.

Think about the topics that fire your imagination—what are they? Are they about any of those things? Or, are they ivory-tower, speculative, abstract? If you're a Christian, did God redeem your life from the pit, and crown you with love and compassion (Ps 103:4) so you could argue with people about when the rapture occurs? Do you know more about an alleged end-time chronology than you do about the doctrine of Christ? Does your church's doctrinal statement have more detail about "the last things" than it does about God or the Gospel? When God asks us what we've done with the talents He's given us, what will we say (see the parable of the talents, Mt 25:14-30)?

Prophecy is not information for information's sake—it's about moral transformation, about encouragement to persevere because a better tomorrow is coming. If we keep *staring at* prophecy myopically, we'll miss the point. Scripture is a refractive lens, a telescope we *look through* to see and hear God, by the power of the Spirit. Let's gaze through the telescope of Matthew 24 to the better future, and let Jesus' sure words move us to knuckle down and be good stewards while we wait. After all, Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, *but my words will never pass away!*" (Mt 24:35).

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