

THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

A Study of Mark 13:1-37

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The Olivet Discourse derives its name from the place where Jesus delivered this message, namely “the Mount of Olives opposite the temple” (Mk. 13:3). The discourse is found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 24; Mk. 13; Lk. 21), but for our purposes we will focus on Mark, with a few references to the other two accounts.

The Olivet Discourse begins with the disciples commenting on the temple: “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” (vs. 1). The disciples’ words about the temple are understandable. “Herod’s Temple, still incomplete in Jesus’ day, had the reputation of being the most beautiful building in the whole world, and was certainly the largest and most imposing structure for hundreds of miles in any direction” (Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, p. 178). Jesus’ response must have staggered the disciples. He said, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (vs. 2). Then the disciples asked Jesus what we might expect, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?” (vs. 4).

As Jesus answered the disciples’ questions concerning the total decimation of the magnificent temple which took forty-six long years to complete, they could see the temple out of the corner of their eye, as they tried to imagine what Jesus was describing. This would be similar to us walking with Jesus through New York City, prior to 9/11/01, and commenting on the beautiful and massive structures of the Twin Towers, only to be told by Jesus that this generation would witness their complete collapse. We would know that only something awful could bring this about, and we would want to know *when* this would happen and what *signs* would precede the fulfillment of the prophecy. This would be especially important to you if you lived in New York City. Remember, the disciples lived in Jerusalem, so this prophecy would have been particularly relevant to them.

“CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT” is the mantra that runs through the mind of the best biblical scholars. If we are going to interpret this passage (or any passage for that matter) clearly and accurately it is incumbent upon us to vigorously labor to do so in light of the context. I will stress this *ad infinitum ad nauseam* because I can’t believe how otherwise capable, biblical scholars violate this first and foremost rule of hermeneutics (rules of interpretation) and rip this text out of its context. R. C. Sproul has astutely observed that many Christians mistakenly think the words of this discourse were spoken to them last week, instead of to the disciples two thousands years ago.

With that being said, let me draw your attention to the context. It’s unequivocally clear that Jesus is answering the disciples’ two questions, which were roused by his pro-vocative words: “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (vs. 2). In response to His startling statement, the disciples asked Him two questions. First, “*when* will these things be,” and second, “what will be the *sign* when all these things are about to be accomplished?” (vs. 4). The first question is a time-frame question: “*When* will these things happen?” The second question concerns indicators that would let them know that these things were about to take place: “And what will be the *sign* when all these things are about to be accomplished?” These questions relate to one event, not two (Many have misunderstood this because of how the disciples’ questions are posed in Matthew’s account; see *Appendix 1* for an explanation). Now that we have the context firmly established, we can move on to the Olivet Discourse proper (To consider why Christ judged the Jews see *Appendix 2*).

“And Jesus began to say to them, ‘See that no one leads you astray.’” (vs. 5). This is a warning for the disciples in the first century. Yes, of course, it has an application for all Christians in all ages, including our own. However, this warning must first be interpreted in its original, historical context, which is Jesus responding to the disciples’ questions about the *time* and the *sign* of the temple’s destruction. Directing His

words specifically to the disciples, He said, “See that no one leads *you* astray.” This shows us why Jesus brought up this whole discussion in the first place. He wants to warn and inform His disciples, so that they will not be lead astray during the approaching season of unprecedented persecution and tribulation.

THE BEGINNING OF BIRTH PAINS

“Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains” (vv. 6-8). Stuart Russell said, “False Christs and false prophets began to make their appearance at a very early period of the Christian era, and continued to infest the land down to the very close of Jewish history. In the procurator-ship of [Pontius] Pilate (A.D. 36), one such appeared in Samaria, and deluded great multitudes. There was another in the procuratorship of Cuspius Fadus (A.D. 45). During the government of Felix (A.D. 53-60), [Flavius] Josephus tells us ‘the country was full of robbers, magicians, false prophets, false Messiahs, and imposters, who deluded the people with promises of great events’” (R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, p. 34).

False messiahs, wars, rumors or wars, earthquakes and famines are *not* the signs of the end. Perhaps, like me, you have heard sermons where the pastor indicates that the end is near because of the increase in earthquakes. The statistics are cited and it seems that he wants you to almost panic. However, these signs, according to Jesus, “must take place, but the end is *not* yet.” These are *not* the signs of the end, but of the beginning of the end. Concerning these signs, Jesus says, “do not be alarmed... these are but the beginning of birth pains.” Let us remember that our day is not the only day that has experienced false messiahs, wars, earthquakes and famines. We know from the NT that there were plenty of these during the days between Jesus’ prophecy and its fulfillment in A.D. 70 (Matt. 27:54; 28:2; Acts 5:36-37; 11:28; 16:26). While the disciples are told that the end of Jerusalem is on the horizon, they must not come unglued at the least little report of bad news. For a short time, at least, they must stand firm.

“But,” Jesus continues to instruct them, “be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake to bear witness before them” (Mk. 13:9). Persecution would begin in the local Jewish courts, but then progress to the higher courts where the governors and kings would also be involved. A cursory reading through the book of Acts reveals that this was indeed what the early disciples underwent as they followed their Lord in proclaiming the truth. Again, let me highlight that the “you” referred to here is still the disciples, and not 21st century Christians. First we interpret the passage in its historical context, and then we can apply it to our own. But let us not pass over interpretation, as more than one Bible scholar has done.

THE WORLD-WIDE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

The next comment by Jesus has caused more confusion than it should have. “And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations” (vs. 10). Another “sign” that precedes the destruction of the temple is the world-wide preaching of the gospel. Many think this is a clear indication that a time far beyond the disciple’s lifetime is in view, since many remote tribes and people have not yet heard the good news of Jesus Christ. They don’t even know who Jesus is. This is true today, but was this true before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, when the Romans overturned Jerusalem and destroyed the temple so that not one stone was left on another?

Consider the words of the apostle Paul in Colossians, which most evangelical scholars date about A.D. 60 or 61. “The gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in *the whole world* it is bearing fruit and growing - as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth... if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed *in all creation* under heaven; and of which I, Paul, became a minister” (Col. 1:6, 23). Also, Paul wrote to the Romans, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed *in all the world*” (Rom. 1:8). “Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages

but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known *to all nations...*" (Rom. 16:25-26). Mark 13:10 is not to be confused with the Great Commission, which is a command to *disciple* the nations. Jesus says simply that the gospel would be *proclaimed* to all nations before the demise of the temple, and Paul's epistles confirm that that had indeed taken place.

HATED BY ALL FOR JESUS' SAKE

Continuing in the context of first century persecution, Jesus says to His disciples, "And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious before hand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit" (Mk. 13:11). As a side note, I wonder how many pastors think that this passage provides warrant for neglecting to spend hours in prayerful study preparing for Sunday's sermon. We see the fulfillment of Jesus' words in the book of Acts as the disciples stood before officials with their lives hanging in the balance. Remember Peter and John's boldness? "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20). Who gave them those insightful words?

"And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Mk. 13:12-13). Earlier in Jesus' ministry he made it clear that the gospel could and would disrupt families. He did not want His followers to be naïve. He said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household" (Matt. 10:34-36). Things are going to get so bad at this point that the disciples "will be hated by all for my name's sake." The disciples will be surrounded by hatred. But they must persevere, because "the one who endures to the end will be saved." The end in view is not the end of the world, but the end of this tribulation period that will culminate in the fall of Jerusalem. Basically, Jesus repeats his message that the disciples must hold on for a little while as the gospel would bring conflict and affliction into their lives. Jesus is still preparing them for the period that precedes the destruction of the temple (which ended up being about 40 years).

THE ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION

In this next section of the Olivet Discourse we have a decisive turning point. When the disciples (the context is still the disciples of the first century) see the "abomination of desolation" that *is* a sign that the end is near. Now they are to be alarmed, and get out of Judea as quickly as possible, without looking back. This will be the worst tribulation the disciples ever have or ever will face. It will be so bad that they should leave their homes and everything in them behind, and not even think of entering their homes, since they will be destroyed, if they are in the city.

Notice how the mood has changed: "But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not happen in winter. For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days. And then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. False Christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect" (Mk. 13:14-22).

The "abomination of desolation" is a reference to Daniel 9:27, 11:31 and 12:11, which was fulfilled in Antiochus Epiphanes who invaded Jerusalem, profaned the temple, stopped the regular burnt offering, and set up the abomination that makes desolate. R. C. Sproul quotes Stuart Russell on this point: "Most expositors find

an allusion to the standards of the Roman legions in the expression, ‘the abomination of desolation,’ and the explanation is highly probable. The eagles were the objects of religious worship to the soldiers; and the parallel passage in St. Luke is all but conclusive evidence that this is the true meaning (Let me insert the Luke reference here, so you can see Stuart’s point: “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near”; Lk. 21:20). We know from Josephus that the attempt of a Roman general (Vitellius), in the reign of Tiberius, to march his troops through Judea was resisted by the Jewish authorities, on the ground that the idolatrous images on their ensigns would be a profanation of the law” (Ibid., p. 39).

Then Sproul quotes Albright and Mann, who add: “Whether the *abominable sacrilege* refers to actual idolatry, or to the entrance of Roman imperial-eagle standards into the temple area, is immaterial. It was common practice then and for long centuries before, to assert sovereignty over a nation by dethroning its gods and replacing them by those of the conqueror” (Ibid., p. 40). Thus, there is no need to look for a future fulfillment. The disciples saw the “abomination of desolation” just as Jesus said they would, and that was the sign to “flee to the mountains” without looking back.

Note carefully that this period of tribulation (“great tribulation”; Matt. 24:21) is not world-wide, but is focused on Judea. “Let those who are in *Judea* flee to the mountains” (Mk. 13:14). Why? Because they will be safe in the mountains. Luke is even more precise in describing the area of the tribulation. “Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it...They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Lk. 21:21, 24). Jesus is not describing the end of the world, but the end of the nation.

This time will be especially difficult for pregnant women and those who are nursing infants, since they will be less mobile, which is crucial when you’re desperately trying to escape from an invading army. Jesus referred to this tribulation period as he was on his way to the cross: “And there followed [Jesus] a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them Jesus said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?’” (Lk. 23:27-31).

Jesus concludes this section of the discourse by saying, “But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand” (Mk. 13:23). I know I keep repeating myself, but isn’t it clear that Jesus’ concern has not turned away from his original disciples? At this point in the discourse, Jesus has still not ceased to warn them. He is telling them about all these things ahead of time, so that they will be prepared when it comes to fruition.

THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED...

Some commentators think that at this stage in the discourse Jesus switches from addressing the destruction of Jerusalem to address his second coming (see D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, vol. 2, p. 493). The reason for this view is that the language of the celestial disturbances seems too severe to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem. Consider Jesus’ words: “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from the heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken” (vv. 24-25). “Surely,” many say, “this is the end of the world. If the sun goes dark, the moon stops giving light and the stars fall from the sky, our cosmos will be utterly destroyed, and nothing will be left of the planet. Life as we know it certainly couldn’t continue.” Before you jump to that conclusion, remember that Jesus said life would continue on after this tribulation period. He said, “in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, *and never will be*” (Mk. 13:19). *Jesus’ point about tribulation never being this bad again is meaningless if this is the end of the world.*

Also, realize that Jesus is continuing to deal with “those days.” There is no reason to assume that he has jumped ahead a couple thousand years or more in his thinking. The parallel account in Matthew 24:29, stresses this point even more: “*Immediately* after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened...” D. A. Carson moves beyond the context of the first century by defining “those days” as “the entire interadvent period of [distress]” (Ibid., p. 505). I have two difficulties with his interpretation. First, the *distress* of *those days* is in

the narrow context of Jerusalem's destruction. Second, to interpret Matthew 24:29, as "*immediately* after two thousand years or more of the entire interadvent period" is virtually nonsensical. "Immediately" would hardly seem to be the right word.

Carson also says that "the cosmic portents...are probably meant to be taken literally" (Ibid., p. 505). Are they, or are they meant to be taken more symbolically? How shall we decide? One writer wisely advises, "The question of literalism must be decided on a text-by-text basis. For example, the genre of the particular text must be taken into account. The epistles of Paul are not written in the same way that the Psalms are written and cannot be interpreted in exactly the same way. History must be interpreted as history, allegory as allegory, poetry as poetry. Most importantly, the context, whether canonical, literary, historical, or cultural, must always be taken into consideration. The fundamental importance of the canonical context, of reading every Scripture in light of all Scripture, is stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.9: 'The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.'"

Notice that in Mark 13:24-25 Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament, specifically from Isaiah 13:10. Therefore, comparing Scripture with Scripture, seeing how Isaiah uses this language will help us to see how Jesus used the same language. Isaiah 13 is "an oracle concerning [the destruction of] Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw" (vs. 1). "The LORD of hosts is mustering a host for battle... to destroy the whole land. Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come!... Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger to make the land desolate and to destroy its sinners from it. *For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light*" (vv. 4-6, 9-10; italics added for emphasis). Is this the end of the world? It can't be, as we know from history and Isaiah's own words concerning the future of Babylon. "It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there; no shepherd will make their flocks lie down there. But wild animals will lie down there, and their houses will be full of howling creatures..." (vv. 20-21). This is not the end of the world, but the end of a nation. The statements in 13:10 about the heavenly bodies (i.e. stars... sun... moon) ceasing to function normally are *figures of apocalyptic speech* to describe the unimaginable and extensive destructive that was to come upon Babylon. Jesus, following Isaiah, uses the same speech to describe the destruction that would come upon Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

This apocalyptic language is by no means rare among the prophets. We have another example in Isaiah 34, where Isaiah prophesied judgment against Edom. "*All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall as leaves from the vine...*" (vs. 4). No scholar worth his weight in salt thinks this is to be understood literally.

Next, look at Ezekiel 32, where the prophet prophesied the demise of Egypt. The LORD says, "When I blot you out, *I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land,* declares the Lord God." "Time and again the prophets foretell the destruction of a people by military means using imagery of the sun, moon, and /or stars either going out or falling from the sky or changing to an unnatural color. It is no more meant to be taken literally than a reference to the beginning of the Nazi invasion as 'the night the lights went out in Europe' is meant to refer to a literal power failure" (Mark Horne, *The Victory According to Mark*, p. 163).

Consider Amos 8, where God says he will judge the northern kingdom of Israel. "The end has come upon my people Israel... The songs of the temple shall become wail-ing in that day..." (vv. 2-3). Due to Israel's sin, God will, "*make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight*" (vs. 9). Over and over, we see that apocalyptic language of cosmic disturbances in the heavens is the language of the prophets to depict the end of a nation. This is common in the Bible, and the disciples would have understood what Jesus was describing. We don't, because we don't know our Bibles as well as we should. When we interpret the Scriptures in a vacuum or based on our culture or our use of language, exegetical fallacies are inevitable. But this is easily avoided by comparing Scripture with Scripture.

One more passage is particularly relevant; Joel 2:28-32. "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams,

and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. *The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood*, before the great and awe-some day of the LORD comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” I hope those words sound familiar, because Peter quoted them on the day of Pentecost, and said they referred to his day (Acts 2:14-21). Will the moon literally bleed? We must be careful and qualify our “literal hermeneutic.” No one—I repeat—no one takes all of the Bible literally. Jesus said, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (Jn. 6:53). Is this literal cannibalism? Or, how about when Jesus said he was “the door of the sheep”?

The dark cosmic imagery used by Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Joel is consistently used to describe judgment coming against a nation, and it perfectly parallels the language employed by Christ in the Olivet Discourse to describe the judgment that was to come upon Jerusalem. If this language seems extravagant, remember that it is “poetic prophecy” and wasn’t meant to be interpreted with a wooden literalism. Jesus didn’t intend such an interpretation any more than the prophets did. We must keep in mind, as R. C. Sproul says “that the language employed in biblical prophecy is not always cold and logical as is common in the Western world, but adopts in kind of fervor common to the East. Scripture commonly describes the visitation of God’s judgment with images of convulsion and cataclysms” (R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, p. 45).

THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS

“And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mk. 13:26). I freely confess that at first glance this sounds like the visible, physical, Second Coming of Jesus Christ. However, let’s ask if it is possible that Mark 13:26 could refer to another “coming” of Jesus Christ? I believe that it is not only possible, but highly probable for several reasons.

First, the context (remember our mantra: CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT) warrants a type of “coming” within the original disciples’ lifetime. We have already seen that Jesus is describing events that the disciples will experience culminating in the destruction of the temple. “*And then they will see*” seems to indicate that Jesus has not leaped ahead two thousand years or more in his thinking; rather He is still firmly focused on illuminating the disciples understanding of the events of their generation. Think of the context as bookends: The passage began with a specific context and it also ends with a specific context. After detailing all the events leading up to and resulting in the fall of Jerusalem and the decimation of the temple, Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (vs. 30). So the preceding and following contexts suggests a “coming” within the lifetime of the disciples, who are a part of “this generation.”

Second, we need to realize that not every mention of Christ coming automatically means the Second Coming. It might, but it might not. Other passages speak of Jesus “coming” and we can see clearly that the Second Coming is not in view. For example, when Jesus sent out the twelve, He said, “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Matt. 10:23). Before the apostles finish preaching in Israel Christ will come in some way. If this is the Second Coming, this is a false prophecy. Here, Carson and I agree. This is a reference to Christ coming in judgment in A.D. 70.

Also consider Matthew 26:64: “You (i.e. the Sanhedrin) will see the coming of the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” This is a promise that the Sanhedrin themselves would see the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds. This cannot refer to the Second Coming, since they have died and will not be living to witness the Second Coming. Again, many commentators see this as a reference to the events of A.D. 70.

For another example of Christ coming in the first century, observe Matthew 16:27-28: “For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.” This sounds like the Second Coming, until you read on, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” I believe this also

refers to A.D. 70, but even if it doesn't, you have to place this coming somewhere in the lifetime of the disciples—before *they* all “taste death.”

Jesus told the church at Ephesus, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (Rev. 2:5). Similarly, Jesus said to the church at Pergamum, “Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth” (Rev. 2:16). These are both references to Jesus coming in judgment, and neither is the Second Coming. I'm afraid that too many of us read the phrase “the Son of Man comes” or similar phrases, and automatically (thoughtlessly?) assume that the Second Coming is in view, without any further consideration. I hope the aforementioned examples will help us from making this mistake again.

Third, the Old Testament speaks of the LORD coming on the clouds to refer to him coming in judgment, while not referring to a visible, physical coming.

An oracle concerning Egypt.

Behold, *the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt;*

And the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them. And I will stir up Egyptian against Egyptians, and they will fight each against another and each against his neighbor, city against city, kingdom against kingdom...and I will give over the Egyptians into the hand of a hard master, and a fierce king will rule over them, declares the Lord GOD of hosts. (Isa. 19:1-2, 4)

Was this intended to be understood literally and physically? Would the Egyptians look up in the sky and see Yahweh riding on a swift cloud as it descended upon Egypt? Of course, not! This is apocalyptic language to describe God coming in judgment upon a nation. When Jesus speaks of coming on a cloud, he didn't just make up his own language. He borrowed this language from the Old Testament prophets that was already in existence, and that the disciples would be familiar with, and then applied it to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

However, most noteworthy is Daniel 7:13. Horne is correct in saying that Jesus' statement that “then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory” is a direct appeal to this verse.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, *with the clouds of heaven there came one*

like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

“What is notable here is that this passage is not about a journey on the part of the Son of Man from Heaven to any place on earth, but rather it is about a movement from earth up to the throne of God in heaven. This passage refers to the Ascension of Christ, not to His Second Coming. Jesus will ascend before his disciples alone, but the destruction of Jerusalem will be his public vindication before the world. Daniel shows the Son of Man being enthroned...and the corrupt powers in Israel...will be judged” (Mark Horne, *The Victory According to Mark*, p. 164-165).

Following this “coming,” Jesus “will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mk. 13:26b). This corresponds well with Daniel 7:13-14 also, since the ascension of Christ to His throne at the right hand of God the Father Almighty is necessary for the elect to be brought into His kingdom. The purpose of the Ascension is summarized perfectly by Psalm 110:1, which the apostle Peter quotes on the day of Pentecost to describe Jesus' ascension. “For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool” (Acts 2:34-35). Daniel paints the same picture by describing Jesus' coming up to heaven and the Ancient of Days for His exaltation, which results in Him being “given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.”

THE LESSON OF THE FIG TREE

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Mk. 13:28-31). These verses further collaborate the nearness of the events Jesus has been describing. The lesson of the fig tree is that the preceding signs shout, “The time is near, right at the door, knocking, as it were.” With the passing of winter the twigs become tender and the leaves come out, thus anybody with two good eyes knows that summer is “near.” Jesus makes the parallel, “So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.” Repeatedly, it appears Jesus is predicting that the disciples themselves will see these things: “...when *you* see these things taking place, *you* know that he is near, at the very gates.” If there is any confusion as to just how near these events are, or what “at the very gates” means, the next verse should help remove any remaining doubt: “Truly, I say to you, *this generation* will not pass away until all these things take place.” If the events Jesus describes in this chapter don’t refer to A.D. 70, then “this generation” really means “that generation” – a generation that will be 2000 or more years later. If some future generation had been in view, Jesus could have chosen the adjective *that*. Note well that every single reference to “this generation” in the gospels *always* refers to the generation existing at that time. Consider just a few:

But to what shall I compare *this generation*? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates (Matt. 11:16)

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with *this generation* and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with *this generation* and condemn it... (Matt. 12:41-42)

so that on you may come all the righteous blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon *this generation*. (Matt. 23:35-36; I believe this passage also finds its fulfillment in A.D. 70)

So that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against *this generation*, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of *this generation* (Lk. 11:50-51).

Why will the blood of all the prophets be charged to this generation? Because they rejected the Messiah that all the prophets said was coming. This is why Jesus said to the Jews, “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote about me” (Jn. 5:45-46).

But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by *this generation* (Lk. 17:25)

In the sayings of Jesus, “this generation” always refers to the generation that is alive at that time and not to some future generation.

This is important, because if “all these things” didn’t take place within “this generation,” Jesus is a false prophet as Bertrand Russell and other unbelievers have said. Russell states in his book *Why I Am Not a Christian*: “I am concerned with Christ as He appears in the Gospels, taking the Gospel narrative as it stands, and there one does find some things that do not seem to be very wise. For one thing, He certainly thought that His second coming would occur in clouds of glory before the death of all the people who were living at that time” (quoted in R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, p. 12). Sproul comments, “There is irony in

Russell's negative polemic. One of the most important proofs of Christ's character and the Bible's divine inspiration is Jesus' astonishing accurate prediction of the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem, prophecies contained in the Olivet Discourse...

"Christ's prophecies in the Olivet Discourse differ sharply from ancient prophecies like those of the Oracle of Delphi, which were exercises in the art of studied ambiguity. They left fulfillment somewhat open ended, and they were capable of disparate interpretation. These oracles are not unlike the predictions found in modern daily horoscopes, which are sufficiently broad or ambiguous to allow for accidental fulfillment.

"Nor can Jesus' concrete predictions be attributed to educated guesses or the insight of a futurist. To first-century Jews it was unthinkable that such catastrophic events as the destruction of the Herodian temple, the devastation of the holy city of Jerusalem, and the dispersion of the Jewish people to the four corners of the earth could take place in the foreseeable future. Such events were eminently not foreseeable, save to one who had information from the omniscient God himself" (Ibid., p. 13).

NO ONE KNOWS THAT DAY OR HOUR

"But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, not the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake" (vv. 32-37). Some have used verse 32 to deny the full deity of Jesus Christ, since it seems to indicate that He doesn't possess omniscience (i.e. the ability to know all things, like the day or the hour). However, this is only because Jesus chose not to use His omniscience. While God incarnate was on earth He was led by the Holy Spirit. On this occasion the Holy Spirit revealed the signs and times leading up to the temple's destruction and the fall of Jerusalem, but not the exact day or hour in which it would occur.

Therefore, the disciples are admonished to "be on guard" and "stay awake." One last time, I want you to notice that as Jesus brings this discourse to a close He is unambiguous about whom He is speaking to and concerned for. "And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake." This discourse begins and ends with an admonition for the disciples about the imminent events that are going to take place in their lifetime—in this generation.

APPENDIX 1: COMPARING MATTHEW WITH MARK

Some questions may arise when you compare Matthew's account of the Olivet Discourse with Mark's. In Matthew's account, as apposed to Mark and Luke's, the disciples ask three questions. They asked, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" (Matt. 24:3).

First, we should clarify that the third question in Matthew is not about the "end of the *world*" (KJV), but about the end or "close of the *age*" (ESV). The Greek word is *aionos*, which means age, and not *cosmos*, which means world. The distinction is critical, for the end in view is *not* that of the world or all time, but of the age – the Jewish age, the age of the Old Covenant.

The writer of Hebrews, who wrote about A.D. 68, just prior to the destruction of the temple, and with it the sacrificial system, which was at the heart of Judaism, said, "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (Heb. 8:13). The author is describing the transitional period, in which the New Covenant is bringing the Old Covenant to an end. "For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second" (Heb. 8:7).

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, those believers (and not believers some 2,000 years later or more) were the ones "on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11). Clearly, Paul saw that the New Testament era was a new age; the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, which Christ inaugurated.

Second, we need to be clear about how many events Matthew is talking about in his account of the Olivet Discourse. In Mark's account, as well as Luke's, it is clear that the disciples ask two questions about one event. Some believe that Matthew is asking three questions about two or three separate events. How do we harmonize the three gospels and explain the two additional questions found in Matthew? It may help to place the three gospels side by side to compare the differences:

Matthew 24:3

Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?

Mark 13:3

Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?

Luke 21:7

Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?

John Calvin thinks we should interpret Mark and Luke in light of Matthew, since they don't state "the matter so fully as Matthew; for they only say that the disciples inquired about the time of the destruction of *the temple*, and—as it was a thing difficult to be believed—what outward *sign* of it God would give from heaven. Matthew tells us that they inquired about the time of *Christ's coming, and of the end of the world*. But it must be observed that, having believed from their infancy that the temple would stand till the end of time, and having this opinion deeply rooted in their minds, they did not suppose that, while the building of *the world* stood, the *temple* could fall to ruins. Accordingly, as soon as Christ said that the temple would be destroyed, their thoughts immediately turned to the *end of the world*...They associate *the coming of Christ* and *the end of the world* as things inseparable from each other..." (Ibid., p.32).

Sproul remarks that if Calvin were right, then "Jesus was answering a question that contained false assumptions." Perhaps, looking back at the discourse we can see that when Jesus mentioned the destruction of the temple the disciples associated it with his coming in judgment, not necessarily His Second Coming, and that they saw the destruction of the temple as the end of the *Jewish age*. It didn't mean that the whole world was coming to an end, which would be a little bit of a leap. The temple didn't represent the whole world, but it did almost represent all of Judaism. Therefore, Mark and Luke do not need to be interpreted in light of Matthew. In all three of the gospels the disciples are asking about one and the same event.

Another question that may arise from comparing Matthew with Mark is found in Matthew 24:30: "Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then *all the tribes of the earth* will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." First, notice the qualifier. It is not the Son of Man that appears in heaven, but "the *sign* of the Son of Man," whatever that sign may be. Second, "all the tribes of the earth" doesn't have to mean "all the races and peoples of the globe." It could be translated "all the tribes of the *land*." The Greek word *ge* can be translated "land" and could refer to Israel, the land of the Jews. "The land" is a common way to refer to Israel. This makes sense in the context of the Olivet Discourse, since it focuses on the land of Judea. Thus, a good interpretation could be "all the Jewish tribes of the land of Israel will mourn..."

Some wonder about the rapture found in Matthew's account: "As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake..." (Matt. 24:37-42). It is worth comparing Luke 17:20-37 with the Olivet Discourse, since they clearly describe the same events. "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. There will be eating and drinking and marrying....I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken the other left" (vv. 26-27, 34-35). Are these people "left behind" because they missed the rapture? Let's ask where these people were taken to. The disciples asked this question. "And they said to him, 'Where, Lord?' He said to them,

‘Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather’” (vs. 37). If they were taken to heaven, this sure isn’t a very glorious picture of heaven: A place where the vultures gather due to the corpses they feed off of. This is emphatically not the rapture of 1Thessalonians 4; this is judgment. These people are taken away, and you will know where they are, because you will see the vultures flying overhead.

APPENDIX 2: WHY CHRIST JUDGED THE JEWS

I want us to search the Scriptures to see why Jesus judged the Jews in such dramatic fashion. We don’t have to guess, since Jesus spoke clearly to those with ears to hear.

And when [Jesus] drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation’ (Lk. 19:41-44).

The celebration of the Triumphal Entry ends abruptly with Jesus weeping, because He foresees the destruction that is going to come upon Jerusalem, due to the fact that they “did not know the time of [their] visitation.” This “visitation” is a reference to God visiting his people (cf. Lk. 7:16). God comes to them in the person of Jesus Christ. However, they rejected God in Christ, instead of accepting Him and embracing Him. Now they will be judged by having the things that make for peace “hidden from [their] eyes.” But this is just the beginning of the judgment, since Jesus continues on, using language that parallels the Olivet Discourse: “your enemies will set up a barricade around you...And they will not leave one stone upon another.” Tragically, God visits His people, and they kill Him.

Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.’

Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the Scriptures: The stone that the builders rejected had become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.’ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them (Matt. 21:33-46).

Interestingly, the chief priests and the Pharisees knew that this parable was about them. They would kill the son, and as a result, they would be judged. The wretches will be put to “a miserable death.” The vineyard would be taken away from them and given to others. In fact, they asked that the blood of Jesus would be on them and their children.

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.’

And all the people answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children’ (Matt. 27:24-25).

God honored their request. Jesus’ blood did come upon them and their children in A.D. 70, when Rome demolished Jerusalem and the temple.

APPENDIX 3: REJECTING THE DOUBLE PERSPECTIVE, AND FILLING IN THE GAPS

Some commentators explain the Olivet Discourse by saying that we should see that Jesus is talking about two events simultaneously. Irving Jensen writes, “Prophecies of the Bible often have a double perspective. This is clearly true of the Olivet apocalypse. Jesus is prophesying about the coming destruction of Jerusalem as well as His second coming” (*Mark, A Self-Study Guide*, p. 86). I concur that some OT prophecies do contain a double perspective, like the prophecy of the virgin birth. But if this is carried over to the NT, where does the double perspective end? And by what criteria shall we evaluate whether or not a passage is meant to have a double perspective?

Sproul quotes Russell, who reacts strongly to this approach: “The commonly received view of the structure of this discourse, which is almost taken for granted, alike by expositors and by the generality of readers, is, that our Lord, in answering the question of His disciples respecting the destruction of the temple, mixes up with that event the destruction of the world, the universal judgment, and the final consummation of all things....

“An objection may be taken, *in limine*, to the principles involved in this method of interpreting Scripture. Are we to look for double, triple, and multiple meanings, for prophecies within prophecies, and mysteries wrapped in mysteries, where we might reasonably have expected a plain answer to a plain question? Can any one be sure of understanding the Scriptures if they are thus enigmatic and obscure?” (R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, p. 67).

Making interpretation even more difficult, Jensen says, “Points and periods of time are not always easily identified in a passage of prophetic latitude, when long spaces, like millenniums, are involved. For example, phrases like ‘after those days’ and ‘until’ might represent an interim of a thousand years (e.g., Lk. 21:24). Prophetic perspective is selective, describing not the full course of the ages, but the key crises of that unwritten history” (*Mark, A Self-Study Guide*, p. 86).

Yes, phrases like “until” can represent millenniums. One example is Ps. 110:1, which is quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost to refer to Jesus’ ascension: “For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’” (Acts 2:34-35). However, if we are going to insert huge gaps into a passage, we need to have good exegetical reasons for doing so. Perhaps, our interpretation has gaps in it, because it doesn’t fit our neat and tidy theology. We need to be careful not to read and force our theology into a passage. If it doesn’t seem to fit without doing exegetical violence to the passage, we might want to think about adjusting our theology.

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