

The Second Coming

📖 Matthew 24:23-31

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📅 October 26, 2016

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We are studying the Olivet Discourse, our Lord's most important and extensive eschatological teaching. It was prompted by His statement in Matt 23:38, "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!" The house referred to the temple. The temple was still under renovation begun by Herod the Great and would not be completed for another thirty-one years. How could its desolation already be forecast? For clarification in 24:1 as Jesus was going away His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. In 24:2 He said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down." Indeed, what they had thought He had said was here confirmed. The entire Temple proper built on the retaining walls would be cast down. In 24:3 they had meditated on His statement until He sat on the Mount of Olives and they came to Him with two basic questions. First, when will these things be? A question whose answer is only recorded by Luke and that answer is, "when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies." Second, "what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" His coming and the end of the age are connected in their mind and so the sign of one is the sign of the other. They want to know the sign of the end.

In Matt 24:4-8 He gives a general description of the first half of the Tribulation. He says in verse 6 this is not the end but in verse 8 that it is the beginning of the birth pangs. In 24:9-14 He gives a general description of the second half of the Tribulation. He says in verse 13 that the one who endures to the end of the Tribulation in love will be saved and in verse 14 that the gospel of the kingdom will be preached on a global scale and that will bring the world right up to the end of the age. Rather than give the sign of the end at this point He backs up in 24:15 to give the sign that the second half of the Tribulation will begin, that sign is the abomination of desolation. The abomination of desolation is the setting up of an image of the anti-Christ in the holy place which will stop sacrifice. It is the sign that the time of Israel's greatest distress is upon them, Therefore, when you see the abomination of desolation which was predicted by Daniel the prophet, erected in the holy place, then those in the region of Judea must of necessity flee to the mountains. The Jewish believers in the region must flee the area. The mountains they will flee to will be in the region of modern day Jordan at Petra. There God will miraculously protect and nourish them as He did in the wilderness wanderings. The two time periods are to be connected in our thinking. In 24:17, whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are

in his house. The reason is because he would be captured and such provisions will be unnecessary. In 24:18 Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. The reason is because he would be captured and a cloak will not be necessary. In 24:19, much pain and suffering will be in store for those who are pregnant and nursing babies in those days because their ability to travel quickly will be severely impaired. In 24:20 the believing Jews are commanded to pray that their flight will not be in the winter because harsh weather will make escape difficult. They are also to pray that their flight not be on a Sabbath because orthodox Jews will try to enforce Sabbath travel restrictions. The reason they are told to pray is because God intends to answer this prayer. God conditions some things in His plan on human prayer. The timing of their flight is one of them. In 24:21 the explanation for immediate departure is stated. For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. This great tribulation is an unparalleled time of difficulty for Israel because of persecution, it is a time of unparalleled difficulty for the world because of the catastrophic judgments coming. So catastrophic are the judgments that in 24:22 we are told that unless those days were suddenly terminated, no flesh on the entire planet would be preserved. The entire human race would be exterminated. But for the sake of the choice believing remnant of Israel, and only for their sake, those days will be suddenly terminated. They will be terminated from the divine view point because the period is decreed to last only seven years and they will be terminated from the human view point because the choice of Israel will utter the Messianic greeting. Then the Messiah will return as described in the following verses.

We now come to those following verses of Matt 24:23-31 which describe the Second Coming and the sign of His coming which brings the end of the age. In Jewish thought there were only two ages; the age preceding Messiah and the Messianic age which followed. The Second Coming of Messiah will end the age preceding Messiah and usher in the Messianic age. The disciples wanted to know what will be the sign of the Second Coming. In 24:30 Jesus explains the sign. This is a major difference between the Second Coming and the later revealed Rapture. The Second Coming has a sign; the Rapture is sign-less. Therefore, the Second Coming and the Rapture are distinct events. Walvoord said, "Because the great tribulation is unprecedented in history and consists largely in judgments of God on an unbelieving world, many interpreters have come to the conclusion that the church will not have to go through this period. If the church must endure the great tribulation, the chances of survival are quite remote...The possibility of rapture for the few that survive is not "the blessed hope" which is held before Christians in the New Testament. Our hope is not the horrors of the tribulation, but the blessed expectation of Christ's coming for His own (cf. 1 Th 4:13-18)."¹ While further differences will be shown, the period of horror that Israel and the world will face will suddenly terminate with a sign of Christ's coming.

To explain what the sign is Matt 24:23 begins by telling us what the sign is not. **Then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ,' or 'There He is,' do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Then** signifies the time of great tribulation. The great tribulation will be so difficult that the believing remnant of Israel will be seeking relief from any source. **False Christs and false prophets** will seize the opportunity in order to deceive

them into coming out of hiding. Thomas Ice said, "As events unfold during the second half of the tribulation, the antichrist (i.e., the Beast in Revelation) attempts to entice the elect, Jewish remnant out of their wilderness hiding by saying that the Messiah is clandestinely in Jerusalem, thus, they should come and see Him. However, Jesus has warned his disciples in advance not listen to such propaganda."² The propaganda will be even more convincing since the **false Christs and false prophets...will show great signs and wonders. Signs and wonders** have always been an ability of Satan and demons. In Egypt Pharaoh's sorcerers were able to duplicate to some extent the signs and wonders done through Moses. The future Tribulation is paralleled in many respects with Israel's stay in Egypt. In the future Tribulation not just signs and wonders but **great signs and wonders** will be done by **false Christs and false prophets**. They will be unparalleled by previous false signs and wonders. Some commentators think that these signs and wonders are just trickery, done to appear like the real thing, but truly only smoke and mirrors. However, as Thomas Ice explains, "...every time there are statements about these false miracles the language used is that they actually do these things, as we have in this passage "will show great signs and wonders." I don't know of an instance where the language of appearance is used to describe these miracles. In other words, if they were just tricking people into thinking that they were doing miracles with smoke and mirrors, it would seem to me that scripture would have used language that indicates this. Instead it uses words and phrases that say that they are actually doing these things."³ So great will these **signs and wonders** be that they will **mislead** many into thinking that some of them are true prophets and the true Christ. Chief among them will be the anti-Christ and false prophet. In 2 Thess 2:9 the anti-Christ is described as "...coming in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved." The anti-Christ will do real signs and wonders by the power of Satan. They will deceive those who heard the truth through the universal preaching of the eternal gospel by the angel but did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. I think the signs and wonders movement today is a false movement that is preparing the world to accept these future signs and wonders. Signs and wonders are always given by God to authenticate the message and the messenger. God is not doing signs and miracles to authenticate new revelation and messengers today. The next prophets of God to come on the scene will be the two witnesses described in the Book of Revelation. They will minister during the first half of the Tribulation. At the mid-point they will be killed, resurrected and ascended. It is in that vacuum that these false Christ's and false prophets will arise and do **great signs and wonders so as to mislead**. Chief among the false Christs will be the anti-Christ. Chief among the **false prophets** will be the false prophet. Rev 13:12 says of him that "He exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence. And he makes the earthdwellers to worship the first beast, whose fatal wound was healed. He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast..." The point is these **great signs and wonders** will be very convincing but the elect should not be **mislead** by them, they are false. The word **mislead** is from *πλαναω*, the same word used in 24:4, 5 and 11. It is exactly parallel to 24:11. Both describe the great danger in the second half of the Tribulation. This is the major warning of the

whole passage. Do not be misled! How will they protect themselves from being misled? The same way all believers of all ages are to be protected from being misled; by keeping their eyes focused on Scripture. Scripture is always more authoritative than experience. Scripture is the tool we use to interpret experience. If something happens in our experience that is contrary to Scripture it is false, even if it is **great signs and wonders**. Their message will be verse 23, **'Behold, here is the Christ' or 'There He is.'** Scripture says this is a false message. Therefore, the signs and wonders they do will be lying signs and wonders. Their purpose is stated at the end of verse 24, **to mislead, if possible, even the elect.** The expression **if possible** is *ει δυνατον* is a first class condition, assumed reality for the sake of argument. It means that their purpose will be **to mislead**; not necessarily that they will be successful. And as long as they keep their eyes on Scripture they will not be **mislead. The elect** in this chapter always refers to the choice remnant of Israel and not the Church. The whole discourse is devoted to God's plan for the nation Israel and not the Church. The elect of Israel are choice because they are clothed with the righteousness of Christ, just as in Matthew 22:11-14. Ice says, "Jesus referenced "the elect" (verse 24) for the second of three times in which that term is used in this passage, which refers to the Jewish remnant who will come to Christ during the tribulation." So while it will be tempting to come out of hiding to find the Messiah who will bring relief, they should not believe them.

The reason is clearly stated in verses 26-27, **So if they say to you, 'Behold, He is in the wilderness,' do not go out, or, 'Behold, He is in the inner rooms,' do not believe them. 27For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.** As Toussaint says, Jesus' coming, "...will not be so obscure that He must be pointed out."⁴ When He returns it will not be a gradual coming but it will be sudden and unexpected like lightning. The Greek says **just as the lightning** using *ωσπερ* to indicate the similarity between the two events. Therefore, the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the coming of a bolt of lightning.

This helps us resolve the very commonly misused passage in Luke 17:21 where it says in the KJV, "behold the kingdom of God is within you." Turn to Luke 17:20. This passage is used by kingdom now theologians to argue that the kingdom was already present among them in the 1st century, that the kingdom was present because the King was present. This is a distortion of the meaning of the text. In 17:20 "Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed;" This seems to contradict Matt 24:30 which says, "then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky..." Does it come with a sign or not? This is easily resolved by the fact that Luke 17:20 simply does not use the word for "signs." Instead, a literal translation is, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation." That is to say, the kingdom of God is not going to come in a gradual way so that it can be observed. Verse 21 explains, "nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' as if you see it and have enough time to draw other people's attention to it so you can all watch it come together. No. It will not come like that. Jesus says, "For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst." The KJV says "within you." That "within you" is an obvious mistranslation is apparent from the context. The people Jesus was talking to in verse 20 were the

Pharisees. Obviously the kingdom of God was not within them. But the translation of the NASB "in your midst" can be equally misleading. One might think that Jesus is referring to Himself as the already present kingdom of God. This is the argument of kingdom now theologians that argue from this passage that the presence of the King meant the presence of the kingdom. However, this too is incorrect. The beginning of verse 21 makes clear that Jesus is speaking of a future time when He says, "nor will they say" referring to the future people on earth when the kingdom of God comes. In that future time the kingdom will suddenly be among them or **in their midst**. The emphasis is on its sudden arrival. The following context confirms this understanding and is very similar to our context in Matthew 24. Verse 22, "And He said to the disciples, "The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. They will say to you, 'Look there! Look here!' Do not go away, and do not run after them." Why not? "For just like the lightning, when it flashes out of one part of the sky, shines to the other part of the sky, so will the Son of Man be in His day." In other words, He will come suddenly and unexpectedly and not in a gradual way so that it can be observed. Luke 17:21 never meant that the kingdom was within the Pharisees, it never meant that the kingdom was present in the King Himself, it always meant that it will suddenly and unexpectedly be here. No one will be able to forecast it or watch its arrival because it will come like a bolt of lightning. Toussaint says, "The Lord is saying that the kingdom will appear so rapidly that its coming will not be able to be observed. It will be no gradual development as can be seen by scientific observation; it will be cataclysmic and sudden."⁵ Contrary to the assertions that this verse teaches an already present kingdom it is a strong verse affirming there is no present kingdom but it will come in the future so quickly and suddenly that no one will be able to observe it. It will literally break into history as the stone in Daniel's statue suddenly broke into history and shattered all four kingdoms.

Returning to Matthew 24, in verse 25 Jesus says, **Behold, I have told you in advance**. He **told** them **in advance** so that they would know the nature of His Second Coming and not be misled by false propaganda. Verse 26 is the false propaganda, '**Behold, He is in the wilderness,**' '**Behold, He is in the inner rooms.**' They should not believe this propaganda. Ice says, "Christ will not return and hide out in some back room in which an undercover agent will lead people to meet."⁶ The explanation is verse 27, **For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be**. Again, suddenly and unexpectedly such that there will be no time to observe a gradual onset of His coming. He will simply be here.

24:28, **Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather**. This is admittedly a strange verse.⁷ It has a parallel in Luke 17:37. In that context Jesus had been comparing His coming like a bolt of lightning to the sudden judgment that came in the days of Noah and again at Sodom and Gomorrah. In both cases those who were not ready did not escape judgment. Therefore, it is best to understand the expression as meaning when He comes there will be judgment upon unbelievers resulting in mass carnage. Figart notes, "Taken literally, it means that wherever dead bodies are, there the *aetoi* (either eagles or vultures) will descend upon them. From a physical point of view, the vast carnage will result in this very thing. Symbolically, it can be related to the parallel passage in Luke 17:37 when the disciples asked "Where, Lord" in regard to the separation of the believers from

the unbelievers at that time. He answered, *"Wherever the body is, there will the eagles (aetoi) be gathered together."* This means that these two similar statements refer to the judgment to come upon the unbelievers who are not prepared to meet Him.⁸ The context indicates this judgment will come suddenly and they will not escape. Therefore, when the King first appears again He appears as Judge of His enemies.⁹

In 24:29 we come to the background for the sign of His coming. **But immediately after the tribulation of those days.** In other words, **after** the second half of the tribulation has expired. The expression **the tribulation of those days** refers back to the verse 21 "great tribulation" which is the period of greatest difficulty for the whole world. **Immediately after** that, not during or even on the last day of, but **after**, and note **immediately after**, so that the great tribulation will not be allowed to extend one second beyond the very exact moment the three and a half years ends. And verse 22 agrees where it says "those days will be cut short," the expression "cut short" meaning "be suddenly terminated." Precision is of utmost concern at this time since no flesh would have survived on the planet if His coming did not suddenly terminate the catastrophic judgments. But the choice of Israel will have uttered the Messianic greeting and He will be coming. At that time, verse 29 continues, **the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.** In effect this is a blackout accompanied by cosmic disturbances. Observe that part of verse 29 is a quotation from the OT. Several OT texts predict blackouts with cosmic disturbances in the end times. The Book of Revelation mentions blackouts within the Tribulation. The first is the sixth seal of Rev 6:12-17. But it cannot be this blackout because the sixth seal is within the Tribulation and this one is after the Tribulation. The second is the fifth trumpet of Rev 9:1-12. But it cannot be this blackout because the fifth trumpet is also within the Tribulation and this one is after the Tribulation. Revelation possibly mentions one other blackout after the Tribulation in Rev 19:17 when an angel is seen standing in the sun. However, it is unclear if he is blocking the sunlight. If he is then he could be the cause of the blackout described here on the day of the Second Coming. I find it unlikely. However, three OT passages do speak of a blackout that seem to correspond in time with the Second Coming. Isa 13:9-10, "Behold, the day of the Lord is coming, Cruel, with fury and burning anger, To make the land a desolation; And He will exterminate its sinners from it. ¹⁰For the stars of heaven and their constellations Will not flash forth their light; The sun will be dark when it rises And the moon will not shed its light." However, it's possible that this is a general description of blackouts in the Tribulation time. Even better is Joel 2:31, "The sun will be turned into darkness And the moon into blood Before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes." The passage definitely speaks of the day of the Second Coming and therefore is parallel to Matt 24:29. The passage goes on to describe Israel's deliverance at that time. Joel 3:15 also clearly refers to a blackout on the day of the Second Coming saying, "The sun and moon grow dark And the stars lose their brightness. ¹⁶The Lord roars from Zion And utters His voice from Jerusalem, And the heavens and the earth tremble." It then also concludes with a description of Israel's deliverance. "But the Lord is a refuge for His people And a stronghold to the sons of Israel." This is exactly the pattern of Matt 24:29-31. Verse 29 is the blackout, verse 31 is the rescue of Israel. **And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from**

the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. But for now verse 29 is the background for the sign which we now come to.

This is what they asked about in 24:3. What will be the sign of Your coming? Well, here it is. 24:30, **And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.** The million dollar question is, what is **the sign**? There are three popular views. First, an old view is that **the sign** is an image of the cross in the sky. This seems quite fanciful. There's no basis for it. Second, **the sign** is the Son of Man Himself. Robertson says "the sign which is the Son of Man, an appositional genitive." However, doesn't the sign of His coming cease to be such if the sign is His coming? In other words, the sign in this case does not precede the thing it is to be a sign of. So that view is not the best. Third, **the sign** is the bright light of Shekinah enshrouding His glory as He descends. Fruchtenbaum says, "As this sign is coupled with God's glory, it is obviously the *Shechinah* Glory light that will signal the Second Coming of the Messiah. The answer to the second question, "What will be the sign of the Second Coming?" is the *Shechinah* Glory. *But immediately after the tribulation of those days, there will be a total blackout with no light penetrating at all, followed by a sudden, glorious, tremendous light that will disperse the blackness. This Shechinah light will be the sign of the Second Coming of the Messiah. The light will be followed by the return of the Messiah Himself.*"¹⁰ This would constitute a sign because the first thing those on earth would see is a bright light of Shechinah Glory against the cosmic blackout. Then they would actually **see the Son of Man Coming on the clouds of the sky.** This fits well with the angel's words spoken at the ascension of Christ in Acts 1:9-11, "And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight."¹⁰ And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them.¹¹ They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come *in just the same way* as you have watched Him go into heaven." The Greek means that in the exact same way He left He will come again. Since He ascended physically and was enshrouded in a cloud so He will descend physically and be enshrouded in a cloud. Though this is really not difficult preterists continue to deny this is a reference to a physical return of Christ and opt to argue that it predicts Christ's spiritual and invisible coming through the Roman armies in AD70 to take vengeance on the Jews. This kind of mistreatment of the Bible ought to be called for what it truly is, sheer unbelief of Scripture.

When he comes **all the tribes of the earth will mourn.** The word translated **earth** is $\gamma\eta$. It can be translated "earth" but it can also be translated as "land." For a number of reasons, I prefer to translate "land." Therefore, **all the tribes of the land** is a reference to the twelve tribes of Israel. First, it would be strange to refer to all people on earth as **the tribes**. It would be more likely the author would say "inhabitants." Second, the word **tribes** is $\phi\upsilon\lambda\eta$ and most commonly refers to the twelve tribes of Israel. Third, Zech 12:12 predicted that "The land will mourn, every family by itself; the family of the house of David by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Levi by itself and their

wives by themselves; all the families that remain, every family by itself and their wives by themselves." This is a repentant mourning. Toussaint says, "It will be conceded by all that the first part of Matthew 24:30 looks back to Zechariah 12:10. However, it is important to notice that in Zechariah the mourning of 12:10 is explained by the verses that follow. It is a repentant lamentation by Israel because it results in the purification of the nation (Zech. 13:1). The context of Zechariah 12:10 is most significant. Rather than prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem, it is predicting the opposite. "And it will come about in that day that I will set about to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem" (Zech. 12:9). This is the tenor of Zechariah 12:1-8. It looks ahead to God's future deliverance of Israel when Jerusalem will again be surrounded by enemies. "In that day" is prophetic of a time of deliverance of Israel, not judgment. (Note the constant repetition of "in that day" [12:3, 4, 6, 8 (2x), 9, 11; 13:1, 2, 4]). It is clear that the context of Zechariah is a mourning that results in cleansing and deliverance for Israel. Whatever the sign of the Son of Man is, it results in the national repentance of Israel. This parallels perfectly what Paul says in Romans 11:25-27." Fourth, Rev 1:7 seems to agree saying, "Behold He is coming with the clouds and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him." The expression "even those who pierced Him" seems to refer to Israel's responsibility in the crucifixion. The expression "and all the tribes of the earth" is riddled with the same issues as Matt 24:30 and may equally refer to tribes of the land. Fifth, these events will occur in the land of Israel. Therefore, not all people on earth will see **the sign of the Son of Man** and **the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky**. The sign and the coming of the Son of Man are limited spatially just as the resurrection body of Jesus is limited spatially. He will be coming back to Israel to rescue the believing remnant from certain annihilation at the hands of the anti-Christ. It does not make sense to say that people all around the world will view this. The earth is a sphere. You cannot see around it. It will not be possible for people on the other side of the world to see the sign and the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky above Israel. Eyesight simply does not work that way. Therefore, for so many reasons it is not all the tribes of the earth that will mourn but all the tribes of the land, the twelve tribes. Ice says, "this sequence of events will unfold in Jerusalem Israel. This is the location on planet earth in which these things are scripted to unfold, even though they will have a global impact."¹¹

¹ John F Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p 188-89.

² <http://www.pre-trib.org/articles/view/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25-part-18>

³ <http://www.pre-trib.org/articles/view/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25-part-18>

⁴ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 275-76.

⁵ Herbert Bateman IV, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, p 236.

⁶ <http://www.pre-trib.org/articles/view/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25-part-19>

⁷ Perhaps even more strange is the interpretation of Pentecost and Toussaint that the corpse is the nation Israel, especially in light of the fact that the Messiah will not return to the nation Israel until they utter the Messianic

greeting. Evidently then, He will not return until the nation Israel is spiritually alive. Therefore, to say this verse characterizes Messiah returning to a spiritually dead corpse signifying the nation Israel is incorrect.

⁸ Thomas Figart, *The King of the Kingdom of Heaven*, p 462.

⁹ Cf Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Christ*, p 403.

¹⁰ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah*, p 643.

¹¹ <http://www.pre-trib.org/articles/view/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25-part-26>