

“For then there will be great tribulation...”**Matthew 24 v 1 to 28**

The ‘Olivet Discourse’ is one of the most important prophetic passages in the New Testament, and also one of the most widely misunderstood. Many people assume that Matthew 24 parallels Mark 13 and Luke 21, but the Luke passage has some notable differences. As you read through, ask yourself the following questions: Is the destruction of the temple now past (70 AD), or is it still in the future? What is the “abomination of desolation” (v 15)? What does the parable of the fig tree mean? What does Jesus mean by “this generation” – the one he is talking to, or a future generation? What is the ‘doctrine of imminence’ (Jesus can come at any time), and how does this fit into these end-time prophecies?

Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple (Matthew 24 v 1, 2)

The temple was originally rebuilt by Zerubbabel and Ezra (Ezra 6 v 15), but greatly expanded and improved by Herod. It was the centre of Jewish life – it was customary to swear by the temple (Matthew 23 v 16), and speaking against the temple could be considered blasphemy (Acts 6 v 13). “There will not be left here one stone upon another” (v 2) – some 40 years after Jesus said these words, there was a widespread Jewish revolt against the Romans in Palestine, but Rome crushed the rebels.

In 70 AD the city of Jerusalem, including the temple, was destroyed by the Roman armies. It is said that at the fall of Jerusalem, the surviving Jews fled to the temple because it was the most secure building in the city. Roman soldiers surrounded it, and one drunken soldier started a fire that soon engulfed the whole building. Ornate gold detail work in the roof melted down into the cracks between the stone walls of the temple, and to retrieve the gold the Roman commander ordered that the temple be dismantled stone by stone...

Signs of the end of the age (Matthew 24 v 3 to 14)

From verse 3 onwards Jesus gives a private briefing to an ‘inner group’ of four disciples (Peter, James, John and Andrew, see Mark 13 v 3). They ask him two questions (v 3). Jesus said the temple would be completely destroyed, so the disciples wanted to know when it would happen. Matthew does not record Jesus’ answer to this first question, but Luke effectively does so in 21 v 5 to 24. Jesus then describes a group of signs, “the beginning of the birth pains” (v 8) – and here it is important to distinguish between Luke’s account (a public day time address given in the temple grounds), where Jesus lists these signs and says “but *before* all this...” (Luke 21 v 12), describing what happens *before* the signs occur, whereas in Matthew’s account (a private briefing given later to four disciples on the Mount of Olives) Jesus says “*then* they will deliver you up to tribulation” (v 9) and describes what happens *after* these signs. Luke focuses on the near-future destruction of the temple by the Romans in AD 70 and warns his Gentile readers (Luke 21 v 20), whereas Matthew’s focus is on the distant-future rise of Antichrist and warnings to Jews (v 20)...

- What are the ‘signs’ described in verses 5 to 7? Is there evidence that such events have occurred throughout history and are taking place today?
- Is there a link with the ‘four horsemen’ in Revelation 6 v 1 to 8? What happens during the time between these ‘signs’ and the end (v 9 to 14)? “This gospel... will be proclaimed...” (v 14) – compare this with Revelation 14 v 6 to 7.

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The abomination of desolation (Matthew 24 v 15 to 28)

The “abomination of desolation” was prophesied by Daniel (11 v 31, 12 v 11), but the Jewish hearers would readily identify the events of 168 BC when the Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes ordered swine to be sacrificed in every Judean village (see Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book XII) and then built an idol to Zeus in the Holy of Holies (1 Maccabees 1 v 54). Then came the Maccabean revolt, the Seleucids were overthrown, and 164 BC saw the rededication of the temple, celebrated by Jews to this day as *Hanukkah* (which is referred to in John 10 v 22).

- But Jesus refers to this event as yet *future* – so has it happened again? Or is it *still* future? And what does Jesus mean by “when you *see* the abomination... standing in the holy place” – surely, only the high priest could enter the ‘holy place’ at Yom Kippur? See 2 Thessalonians 2 v 1 to 4.
- What are “those who are in Judea” told to do, and when? “Pray that your flight may not be... on a Sabbath” (v 20) – what does this tell you about Jesus’ audience here?
- “Great tribulation” (v 21) – Jesus’ label, not ours. “No human being would be saved” (v 22) – does this suggest Romans armies with swords, or a future apocalyptic nuclear holocaust? Where is the Church at this time? See 1 Thessalonians 4 v 16, 17.