

# THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

## 1. THE PRECEDING CONTEXT:

The preceding context is the Triumphal Entry where Jesus presents himself to the nation of Israel as their King on a peaceful mission (notice the riding on a donkey.) Matthew brackets this section with the quotation found in 21:9 and 23:39. "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

## 2. THE PREDICTION OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE JERUSALEM TEMPLE.

Jesus pronounces the word of cursing in 23:38 and then reinforces it with His answer to the question of the disciples in 24:2. This predicted destruction was carried out by the Romans in A.D. 70-73 and again in A.D. 130 during the Bar Cochba revolt. In theological terms He was announcing the destruction of the symbol of the Old Covenant on Mt. Moriah.

## 3. THE BEGINNING OF THE DISCOURSE PROPER.

Because of an unfortunate chapter division we often fail to see that the physical location of Jesus and the disciples has changed radically. They have left the temple mount, gone down through the Kidron valley and up the Mount of Olives. There the disciples approach and ask three key questions. In reality there are two questions with the second question in two parts. Question no. 1 is the question WHEN. "When will these things (notice the plural) be?" When we search the preceding context we find that two things are predicted. First of all the Jewish nation will say "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" as they physically see Jesus. Secondly, the physical temple at Jerusalem will be destroyed. So the disciples want to know when these two things will happen.

But there is also question no. 2 asking WHAT. What will be the sign of your coming (part A) and what will be the sign of the end of the age (part B)?

4. THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE NARRATIVE. So far we have not said anything unique. However, here we depart from many writers who have written on this passage. We must force ourselves to ask the question, "In what order did Jesus answer the questions posed to Him by the disciples in 24:3?" After studying the passage thoroughly I believe that we will conclude that Jesus answered the questions in reverse chronological order.

## 5. A DISCUSSION OF THE END OF THE AGE QUESTION.

Notice that the word "end" appears in verse 6; "the end is not yet" in verse 13; "until the end" in verse 14; "then the end will come." So it seems obvious that we are talking about the last question that the disciples asked. This question is answered in three parts that we can entitle: THE BEGINNING OF BIRTH-PANGS (24:4-8); THE TRIBULATION (24:9-14); THE GREAT TRIBULATION (24:15-28). Before we break it down further we must also note that in each one of these subsections there is a warning about DECEPTION.

## 6. THE BEGINNING OF BIRTHPANGS (24:4-8).

There are two commands from Christ in this section. The first command is "Take heed that no one deceives you." The reason why this is necessary is found in vs. 5. Many deceivers will come claiming to be the Christ. The result will be that many will be deceived. Jesus' warning to the disciples is that they should be careful not to be swept up in the excitement.

The second command is "see that you (plural) are not troubled by wars and rumors of wars." The reason why they should not to be troubled is because political turmoil and natural disasters such as famines and earthquakes are part of the divine plan to bring in the second coming of Christ. In verse 6 the word "must" in the original language indicates that these wars and natural disasters are a divine necessity. Verse 8 closes this section with the statement that these are only the 'beginning of sorrows'. The word "sorrows" should be translated "birthpangs" as if the kingdom age will be born out of the sufferings of the present age. We must note that many prophecy teachers view these signs as general signs of the end of the age. I do not. The word for birthpangs was a technical term in Jewish writings to define the time period IMMEDIATELY preceding the coming of the Messiah. More than that the word "beginning" in verse 8 surely corresponds to the word "end" in vss. 3,6,13, and 14. This indicates that a clearly defined time period is under consideration. Lastly, Daniel 9:27 suggests that the total elapsed time in view is in fact 7 years.

## 7. THE TRIBULATION (24:9-14)

This section is easily misunderstood and applied to the church where it is still talking to Jewish disciples who will be alive right before the coming of the Messiah. The following characteristics will be present during that time:

- The Jewish disciples will be handed over to the courts for official persecution. (vs.9a)  
So we see the pattern that the Jewish disciples in the Tribulation period will duplicate the experience of the Lord during His earthly life. Just as Jesus was handed over to the Romans by the Jews of His time, so also will the disciples be handed over to the Gentile rulers for trial during the Tribulation period.
- The Jewish disciples will suffer capital punishment for their faith. (9b)
- The Jewish disciples will be universally hated by the Gentile nations. (9c) They will be hated "for My name's sake" implying that they are doing the work of world wide evangelism to which God has called them.
- Verse 10 deals with the nation of Israel itself. Many believers will be caused to stumble by the anti-Christ or the false prophet or apostate Jews. (10a)
- As a result the nation will be split into factions of loyalists versus apostates and they will hand each other over to persecution or death. (vs. 10b)
- They will hate one another, paralleling the hatred already experienced in relationship to the Gentiles. (vs. 10c)
- As a result of factionalism many false prophets will arise and gather people to themselves. (vs. 11)

- Because violations of the Mosaic law will be multiplied, what should be covenant love within the community of Israel, both for God and their fellow Israelites, will grow cold.
- In spite of all these obstacles "the one who endures (all these tribulations until the end of the seven year period ) will be saved" which means that he will be able to enter the kingdom age and be rewarded. (Compare 10:22 and 19:25)
- The Lord closes this section on a positive note. "This gospel of the kingdom," i.e. "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" will be preached (as a herald) in the whole inhabited earth for the purpose of a testimony to all the nations. Then and only then will the end (of this present age) come.

#### 8. THE GREAT TRIBULATION (24:15-28)

Just as birth-pangs get more severe as the time of delivery gets close so also does the severity of the tribulation. We come in this section to a time close to the very end of the tribulation period. Most scholars think we are dealing with the last 3 1/2 years of the 7 year period. The Lord tells us that the event that initiates it all is something called the "abomination that causes desolation" spoken of by Daniel the Prophet. An abomination is "an idol or pagan altar that causes worshippers of the true God to stay away from the place of sacrifice." (Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) The desolation is caused when God sends the armies of the Gentiles against Jerusalem again to destroy the temple with the very presence of anti-Christ in it.

The only appropriate action at that time will be to flee. The disciples are warned about taking anything personal with them. They are warned about the difficulty of trying to accomplish an escape while nursing or pregnant. They are warned about the difficulty of escape in the winter or on a Sabbath where necessary services are not operative. In verse 21 the reason is given why they should try to eliminate all obstacles to flight. When the anti-Christ erects his statue in the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple and the Jews resist, then will break out the most severe persecution of believers from the creation of the world until the time Jesus was speaking and even beyond. We must then conclude that the Holocaust of the days of Hitler was a dress rehearsal for the one that is to come. In verse 22, Jesus says "if those days had not been shortened (but they have) then life would have disappeared from the earth like in the days of Noah. But for the sake of the elect Jews (possibly also Gentile believers among the nations) those days will be curtailed."

This section closes with a double warning against being deceived during this period of intense tribulation. Verse 23 gives the first warning. The listeners are told, "Do not believe a person that says the Messiah is here (in the Holy Place in the Temple) or there (in the wilderness)."

The reason why they are not to be believed is the possibility of false Messiahs and false prophets raised up by Satan to deceive even the elect Jews if that were possible (but it is not). In verse 26 the warning is made again. If someone suggests that the Messiah is in

the wilderness i.e. like John the Baptist or if someone says that the Messiah is in the inner rooms of the Temple Precinct (the priestly Messiah from Qumran) then the disciples were not to believe it. The reason for not going to the desert is found in verse 28. There is no use hunting the Messiah in the wilderness if you have not seen the sign in the sky just as there is no use hunting a dead carcass in the desert if you have not seen the vulture circling. The reason for not going to the inner rooms to discover a secret Messiah is found in vs. 27. His appearance will be as universally visible as lighting in the sky. And that leads us to our Lord's answer to the first part of the second question. WHAT shall be the sign of your coming.

#### 9. THE SIGN OF HIS COMING. (24:29-31)

Notice the time marker in vs. 29 "immediately after the tribulation" certain things will happen. The sun and moon will be darkened probably as a judgment on those who worship them. The stars will fall from the sky. The cosmic powers (usually refers to demonic forces) of the heavenlies will be shaken. Notice Isaiah 24:11 where God punishes the host of heaven before He punishes the kings of the earth.

In a more positive light then the "sign" of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. What is it? More than likely it is the glory cloud or star of Bethlehem again. All the tribes of the "land" (not earth) will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming with power and great glory. This will be a mourning of repentance carried out by the nation of Israel. This will be an official mourning period for the death of Christ similar to the 30 days of official mourning that was carried out at the death of Moses. In verse 30 we are told that the Son of Man first mentioned in Daniel 7:13 will come with "power and great glory".

At that time there will be a gathering. The Son of Man will send out His angels to gather together "His elect" from all the countries of the world. These are no doubt elect Jews but may also include the Gentiles. Compare the activity of the angels here with the dragnet parable in Matthew 13.

#### 10. THE PARABLE OF THE FIG TREE.(24:32-34)

It is obvious that the "fig tree" is a symbol for the nation of Israel (21:19). It was obvious to the hearers that when there were certain signs of life in the fig tree that the season of summer was near. It was also to be obvious to the disciples that when "ALL these things" which had just been discussed had happened then Christ's return was also near. Our Lord then closes with a statement that has confused many readers and commentators. Basically you have only two options to consider when interpreting the phrase "this generation". The first option is that it is a reference to the generation that was alive when Jesus spoke. The other option is that it is a reference to a future generation immediately preceding the end of the age. Based on the controlling question in 24:3 the second option is the correct choice. To review, we have now answered question 2a and 2b. We answered WHAT shall be the sign of the end of the age? The answer was a 7 year period with a multitude of signs and much activity centered in the nation of Israel. We also answered WHAT shall be the sign of His coming. We discovered that the sign shall

immediately follow the tribulation and that it will be universally seen and produce a certain response among all the tribes of the land of Israel. The remainder of chapter 24 attempts to answer the question WHEN. WHEN IS THIS GOING TO HAPPEN?

11. ANSWERING THE WHEN QUESTION. (24:36-42) Although many times it is obscured in the English translations, the two Greek words (**peri de**) that begin verse 36 are used to indicate a change in subject material. The Lord is moving on to a new topic. Notice also that the words "day and hour" really are equivalent to the word "when". He will now start to answer the WHEN question. Before we discuss this in detail, we must note that the phrase "day and hour" in verse 36 forms an inclusion with "day and hour" in 25:13. That effectively eliminates the idea that the three parables that follow this discourse pertain only to tribulation Israel. The first statement that the Lord makes in verse 36 is that "no one knows". This statement is made more emphatic by the addition "not even the angels in heaven nor the Son". As you will notice, the phrase "nor the Son" is left out of some manuscripts. Apparently some scribes were attempting here to defend the Lord's omniscience. One solution has been to suggest that the Lord is simply speaking out of His human nature. However, I think a better solution is to consider that our Lord was speaking metaphorically using Jewish nuptial imagery. As we have learned previously, when a Jewish young man betrothed a bride they did not immediately live together. In fact, the bridegroom returned to his father's house to build a room onto the house where he was to live with his bride after the marriage was consummated. Although this is foreign to our culture, the purpose of this arrangement was so that the young bride could learn from her mother-in-law how to properly care for her new husband. So the groom was responsible for building a new room onto the house. However, to prevent the young man from doing a sloppy job because of his desire to be with his bride, the son was only allowed to go bring his bride after the father had inspected AND APPROVED the new dwelling that the son had prepared. In this sense then only the father knew when the bridegroom would go for the bride.

In verse 37 Jesus elaborates and advises us not to ask the question WHEN but to make a comparison between the days of Christ's return and the days of Noah prior to the great flood. In verses 38-39 the point is that life continued as normal until the day that Noah entered the ark. The majority of people did not comprehend what was happening until the flood came and took them all away. It is interesting to note that Noah entered into the ark for 7 days without anything happening. In the same way the bride will enter into heaven for 7 years while things on earth are happening.

In verse 40 we have a unique event mentioned. If there are two people working in a field then "one shall be taken into close fellowship" and the other shall "be left behind." Because of the English translation many understand the verb "taken" in verse 40 in the same way as the verb "took" in verse 39. But that is not really possible. First of all they are not the same Greek words.

More than that, the verb in verse 40 (**paralambanoo**) is used in some unique passages especially by Matthew. It is used in John 14:3 which is a standard Rapture passage using the same nuptial imagery we have already discussed. It is used in Matthew 4:5,8 concerning Satan's ability to levitate the physical body of Jesus to both the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem as well as supernaturally transporting Him to a very high mountain. Lastly it is used in Matt. 1:20 referring to Joseph consummating the marriage covenant with Mary His betrothed. So we cannot say as some interpreters do that "taking away" in verse 40 means being taken away in judgment.

Also in the same verse we cannot say that the verb "to be left behind" means to be left out of the judgment to physically enter the millennial kingdom. The verb is used in John 14:18 when Jesus said upon getting ready to leave this earth, "I will not leave you behind as orphans." The same word is used in Mat. 23:38 referring to Jesus "leaving" behind the Temple. The same picture of a Rapture is presented in verse 41 with women in view.

This discussion closes in verse 42 with a practical implication that believers should draw from the answer to the question WHEN. Notice the inferential word "therefore" in verse 42. Because the hearers do not know at what hour the Lord is coming they needed to "be continually on the watch." This translation catches the idea of the present imperative tense in the main verb.

12. THE EMPHASIS ON WATCHFULNESS (24:43-44) We could almost view this as a continuation of the preceding section. Jesus had just warned the disciples of the need for watchfulness because they did not know when He would return to translate them into heaven. He starts off verse 43 with a mild contrast "But you (plural) must understand this." It is possible to understand the verb as either an imperative or as an indicative. I have chosen the indicative because of the nature of the following warning. The warning as a conditional statement says: "If the master of the house had known (but he did not) at what watch the thief was coming (then) he would have watched and would not have allowed his house to be dug through." Then in verse 44 the Lord draws the inference again "For this reason (the potential for loss) you (plural) also must be prepared. For the Son of Man is coming at an hour you (plural) do not expect." This unexpected coming of the Lord can only be a warning to disciples in view of the possibility of a Rapture.