

The Second Coming of Christ: *Past or Future?*

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The understanding of a text involves the correct mental perception of a text's meaning. Another way of saying this is that understanding involves a correct grasp of the pattern of meaning willed by the author. Since there is a single meaning that the author willed, each individual who understands this meaning will have the same mental grasp of the author's pattern of meaning. Some understandings may be more complete than others because of a greater perception of the various implications involved, but, if an understanding is correct, it must have the same mental grasp of the author's meaning as any other understanding.¹

Christian book stores are loaded with books on prophecy that expect the return of Christ any day. The future so-called "Second Coming" is on the lips of many sincere Christians. Countless Christians are still waiting for the Second Advent of Christ. Unfortunately, numerous followers of Jesus do not associate His coming with His judgment-coming upon those who pierced Him (Matthew 26:63-64), which judgment-coming is God's wrath against Israel for its rejection of His Messiah.² The Second Coming is connected with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, not the end of this physical universe. This Second Advent is set forth in Matthew 24 and 25 in graphic details with apocalyptic language. The Book of Revelation is an enlargement scenario of Jesus' Olivet Discourse. This book (Revelation) is about His coming in judgment against apostate Judaism.

The traditional reading of Matthew 24—25 confirms the long-established focus upon the signs of the times as read in the newspapers on a daily basis, so it seems. This in-depth study on the Second Coming is designed to analyze the consensus of many Christians today. The Second Coming is generally linked with the so-called "rapture," which event occurs at the end of the world according to many saints. The expression Second Coming does not appear in the New Testament writings, even though it does mention His appearance and return as a "second time" in Hebrews 10:28, which coming is identified by the author of Hebrews as occurring in the final

¹Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 49. **Robert H. Stein** was senior professor of New Testament interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He previously taught at Bethel Seminary. A world-renowned scholar of the Synoptic Gospels, he is the author of several books, including *Jesus the Messiah*, *Mark* in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series, and *Luke* in the New American Commentary series.

²See "The Coming Wrath of God"), 136-153 for a detailed explanation of this judgment under the caption ESCHATOLOGY: freedominchrist.net

downfall of apostate Judaism in AD 70. The following is the author's comments about the "new Jerusalem" and the dissolution of the "old Jerusalem":

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. ²⁵ Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more **as you see the Day approaching**. ²⁶ If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, ²⁷ but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. ²⁸ Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:24-29)

The Book of Hebrews sets forth the coming of the new heaven and the new earth (God's spiritual kingdom foretold by Daniel) and the passing away of the old covenant world of Judaism. The author writes: "By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (8:13). Once more, the Book of Revelation discloses this particular coming in judgment against apostate Israel, which was "obsolete" and would "soon disappear." Regrettably, scores of God's people often read the Scripture with the spectacles of their inherited traditions from their church fathers. As believers, we need to learn how to reread the Scriptures with open eyes. Robert Stein (Professor of New Testament at Bethel Theological Seminary) is on target when he writes: "To understand the divine meaning of Scripture, then, is to understand the conscious meaning of God's inspired servants who wrote them."³ We need to focus on the various contexts as we seek to arrive at a clearer understanding of this critical issue among so many believers.

This is especially true as we seek to unravel Jesus' teachings as found in Matthew 24 and 25, which Scriptures are frequently read without consulting the framework behind these two chapters. This failure to check the immediate background of this discourse is prevalent among many devout saints. In addition to the Book of Matthew, there are numerous statements taken from other New Testament writings that are also wrenched from their environment in order to uphold the prevalent views about Christ's return as yet to take place. It is not uncommon for God's people to talk about the "soon" return of our Lord.

One of the problems that believers face in their search for meaning is a failure to interpret Scriptures within its immediate context (verses preceding and following), the remote context (the book itself), or the larger context (other books dealing with the same subject). The current belief about the "before long" return of the Lord centers on Scriptures cited from the Book of Matthew, as well as numerous other books, which statements are yanked from their context and utilized as proof texts to substantiate the contemporary teachings among many Bible prophecy teachers. This study is not intended to question the integrity of those who advance views that are not in harmony with the whole of Scripture. We should be thankful that God has not made absolute perfection in knowledge of His Word a condition of salvation, if so, no one could be saved. My objective in this investigation is to assist God's people in a greater understanding and appreciation for what God has accomplished for us in His scheme of redemption.

³Ibid., 28.

ESCHATOLOGICAL JUDGMENT AGAINST THE OLD COVENANT WORLD OF JUDAH

MATTHEW 24—25

The eschatological judgment against Judah is described with apocalyptic imagery concerning His Second Coming, which coming signals the final overthrow of the nation that rejected God's Christ. Matthew 24 is on the lips of every Christian as he or she contemplates the so-called "last days." For many Christians, the phrase *last days* is interpreted as the end of the world.⁴ It is not uncommon for Christians to cite Jesus' comments about "wars and rumors of wars" to suggest that the modern events of "wars and rumors of wars" signal the end of the Christian age. On the other hand, there are lots of believers who construe Matthew 24:1-35 as describing the destruction of Jerusalem, but, on the other hand, they will take 24:36-51 as picturing the end of the world. Just a casual reading of Chapter 24 reveals that there is not a break between verses 35 and 36.

In fact, Matthew 24:36 through Matthew 25:1-46 is a single unit dealing with the punishment of those who refused to accept Jesus as the Lord's Messiah as well as the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, which teaching is a continuation of His discourse concerning the end of the Old Covenant world of Judaism in 24:1-35. In order to interpret Matthew 24 and 25 correctly, we should read Matthew 23 as the backdrop for the following two chapters. In spite of the traditional approach to Matthew 24, there are other Christians who understand the whole of Matthew 24 and 25 as depicting the closing stages of the Jewish age as culminating in the annihilation of Jerusalem, not the final return of our Lord Jesus as taught by various dedicated Christians. One should read the entirety of Matthew 23 in order to see the force of Matthew 24—25. In order to set the tone for the beginning of Matthew 24, we need to read the following from Matthew 23:

Woe to **you** [ὁμῖν, *hymin*, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous.³⁰ And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'³¹ So **you** testify against yourselves that **you** are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets.³² Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! **You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell** [τῆς κρίσεως τῆς γεέννης, *tēs kriseōs tēs geēnnēs*, "the judgment of gehenna"]?³⁴ Therefore I am sending **you** prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them **you** will kill and crucify; others **you** will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.³⁵ **And so upon you** will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berechiah, whom **you** murdered between the temple and the altar.³⁶ **I tell you the truth**, all this will come upon **this generation** [γενεάν ταύτην, *genean tautēn*].³⁷ **O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you** who kill the prophets and stone those sent to **you**, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but **you** were not willing.³⁸ **Look, your house is left to you desolate.**³⁹ **For I tell you, you will not see me again until you** say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Matthew 23:29-39)

⁴See Dallas Burdette, "Last Days in the Old and New Testaments." View under ESCHATOLOGY on freedominchrist.net

Jesus spoke directly to the “teachers of the law and Pharisees.” Over and over again, He used the plural pronoun “you” to identify the ones He addressed. Toward the end of this castigation of the religious leaders, He informed them that upon their generation (“this generation”) that their house would be left “desolate,” which meant that the power of the holy people would be completely obliterated. Finally, He addresses those living that they would “see” him coming in judgment against them (Second Coming). The expression “condemned to hell” conveys to the modern mind a lake of fire in which people will be cast at the so-called final judgment of the world (**κόσμος**, *kosmos*). This judgment that Jesus addresses had to do with God’s fiery judgment of wrath against apostate Israel, which is the same judgment presented by John the Baptist as recorded in Matthew 3:7-12. The following is Matthew’s account of John’s confrontation with the religious leaders:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath [τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς, *tēs mellousēs orgēs*, “the **about to come** wrath”]?⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.¹⁰ **The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.**¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (3:7-12)

After Jesus rebukes the religious leaders and pronounces judgment upon that generation, immediately the disciples wanted to know when these things would occur. Again, Matthew gives us pivotal information in order to interpret the events just transcribed by him. We need to listen in on this conversation between Jesus and His disciples:

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings.² “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming [τί τὸ σημεῖον τῆς σῆς παρουσίας, *ti to sēmeion tēs sēs parousias*] and of the end of the age [συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος, *synteleias tou aiōnos*, “of the completion of the age”]?” (Matthew 24:1-3)

Matthew 23 foretold what would happen to that generation for its rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. After His denunciation of the religious leaders, His disciples wanted to know when this would happen. Jesus then called attention to the Temple and said, “not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” The disciples wanted to know (1) “when will this happen?,” (2) “what will be the sign of your coming?,” and (3) “the end of the age?” Following these questions, the rest of Matthew 24 and 25 unravels the mystery for the disciples. Jesus did not address the end of the physical universe, but rather the end of Judaism. Gary DeMar (an American writer, lecturer, and president of American Vision) is on target when he draws attention to Matthew 23 as the backdrop to Matthew 24. He writes:

Like all of Scripture, Matthew 24 cannot be understood fully without surveying its context which flows from chapter 23. Keep in mind that in the original manuscripts of the Bible, there are no chapter and verse divisions. In the Greek text, chapter 24 follows immediately after chapter 23. Furthermore, the prophetic words Jesus spoke in chapter 24 are directly related to the events described in chapter 23. The disciples had just heard Jesus pronounce “woes” on the scribes and Pharisees who “have seated themselves in the chair of Moses” (23:13, 14, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29). Jesus ended with this bombshell: “Behold your house is being left to you desolate!” (Matt. 23:38). Chapter 24 begins with, “Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple building to Him” (24:1). So then, the “house” that would be left “desolate” was the first-century temple that had been rebuilt under the direction of Herod the Great. The disciples were obviously shocked. That’s why they asked Jesus, “When will these things happen and what will be the sign of Your coming, and the end of the age?” (24:3). The disciples equated the destruction of the temple with the coming of Jesus and the end of the age.⁵

There are few elements in the Bible that present more problems for Christians than the eschatological passages in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Revelation, and the writings of Paul. The graphic language employed by Jesus is frequently applied literally by many interpreters, and, as a result of wooden literalness, many wild and bizarre interpretations are concocted to uphold the so-called “rapture” interpretation and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. In addition, some Christians even advance a literal 1000 year reign of Christ on earth. One objective in this in-depth study is to help each of us not to strain and stretch the text beyond the original intent of Jesus’ intended meaning. We become disloyal interpreters whenever we depart from the original and natural meaning of the text. Every interpreter, as much as possible, must be conscious of his or her perception in approaching the text and not allow one’s preconceived expectations to guide the questions that he or she might ask. This is more easily said than done! Brian L Martin’s (General Editor of *Fulfilled Magazine*) comments help to put the Olivet Discourse in proper perspective:

In Jesus’ Olivet Discourse (Matt 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21), He lumped the destruction of the temple together with His Second Coming, and then summed things up by stating, “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (Matt 24:34). The temple’s destruction in AD 70 is an undisputed fact, and fits within the “this generation” timeframe of Jesus’ prophesy. But if Christ has not yet returned, we have a problem because the events prophesied to occur within the span of a generation are now stretched across nearly two millennia.⁶

Before we embark upon an analysis of Matthew 24, I would like to call attention to the fact that God is in control, not men and women. Jesus, in this Olivet Discourse, asserts that God controls the direction of history. He called His disciples to be patient and to proclaim His Good News of salvation by grace through faith in Himself. Matthew records Jesus’ words: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world [τῇ οἰκουμένῃ, *tē oikoumenē*, “the inhabited earth”] as a testimony to all nations, and then the end [τότε ἔξει τὸ τέλος, *tote hēxei to telos*, “then the end will come”] will come” (Matthew 24:14). As we reflect

⁵Gary DeMar, *Is Jesus Coming Soon?* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999, 2006), 20-21.

⁶Brian L. Martin, “Dealing with the Time Texts,” *Fulfilled Magazine* Volume 7, Issue 1 (Spring 2012): 16. See also Brian L. Martin, *Behind the Veil of Moses: Piecing Together the Mystery of the Second Coming* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009).

upon the “nearing end” of apostate Jerusalem, we cannot help but let our minds flash back upon the righteousness of God in His determination to bring about the punishment of those who rejected His Son Jesus as His anointed One. It is in this vein that Paul reflects upon Matthew 24 when he writes to the Thessalonians.

Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. ⁵ All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. ⁶ God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ⁷ and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power ¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes **you**, because **you** believed our testimony to **you**. (2 Thessalonians 1:4-10)

God’s judgment for Judah was just around the corner. Since the Jewish nation, as a whole, rejected the “righteousness of God” made available “through” His Son Jesus. Paul writes with passion as he contemplates Israel’s rejection of God’s righteousness. Listen to Paul as he unfolds his heart:

Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. ² For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. ³ Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. ⁴ Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. (Romans 10:1-4)

God determined to obliterate the Jewish nation with its Temple and to bring in “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1), which is none other than God’s new community of believers.⁷ This nation fought against Christ and His messengers. This negative response and denunciation of His messengers is what the Parable of the Sheep and Goats is all about (Matthew 25:31-46). This parable is not about God’s sentence at the end of the world, but rather, this verdict is about God’s punishment of Judah for its rejection of Jesus and His disciples. This display of the righteousness of God in Matthew 24 is the same righteous decree that Paul also develops in his Roman Epistle concerning God’s upright righteous anger against sinful behavior.

Out of this eschatological message of Jesus in Matthew 24—25, we come away with awareness that ethical behavior is “part and parcel” of the message of the Gospel. In addition to right conduct, we must “obey the gospel,” which obedience is associated with the acceptance of Jesus as God’s Anointed One for the salvation of humanity. In our acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah, this receiving also demands moral conduct that will uphold the Gospel. The Jews, as a whole, rejected Christ’s Death, Burial, and Resurrection. Yet, many of the Christians in Rome

⁷See Dallas Burdette, “A New Heaven and a New Earth” under the caption of ESCHATOLOGY: freedominchrist.net.

had acknowledged this teaching, but, at the same time, failed to live holy lives. Listen to Paul as he reminds those who had been buried and resurrected with the Lord Jesus in baptism:

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. ¹⁸ You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. (Romans 6:17-18)

As we examine Matthew 24—25, we quickly discover that Israel paved the way for her own destruction in Jerusalem in AD 70. She had relentlessly persecuted God’s messengers and His people as a whole, especially His prophets and His disciples. The Book of Acts is an account of the persecutions that Jesus warned His disciples about before it happened. We should pay attention to Jesus’ prophecy concerning persecution of His followers, which harassment and hounding was instigated by the Jewish leaders:

Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. ¹⁸ On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, ²⁰ for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. ²¹ “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ²² All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. ²³ When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. ²⁴ “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! ²⁶ “So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. (Matthew 10:17-26)

Jesus identifies his Second Coming by announcing that His disciples “will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” This statement (10:17-26) is within the context of His calling His Twelve disciples (10:1-4). Jesus warned them of impending persecution in their evangelistic endeavors to proclaim God’s Good News of salvation by faith in the Messiah. Within this context, He also informed them that they would “not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (10:23). This event is the Second Coming of Christ, which coming depicts the overthrow of apostate Israel. In Jesus’ renunciation of the religious hypocrites for their harassment of His prophets, His wise men, and His teachers, He forecast their utter destruction with the following words:

And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. ³⁶ I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation. (23:35-36)

Jesus says that these events will all come upon “this generation” (*γενεάν ταύτην*, *genean tautēn*). **THIS GENERATION** should capture the attention of the reader. What is meant by “this generation”? Is Jesus discussing the generation of those then living or is He predicting

something that will occur in the twenty-first century or later? Just a casual reading of these two text reveals that He is addressing the people then living:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. ³⁸ Look, **your house is left to you desolate.** ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ (23:37-39)

Just a common-sense reading of Chapters 23—25 in the Book of Matthew reveals that He is forecasting events that would occur during their life times, not ours. These catastrophic or shattering events would occur within their own generation, which had its fulfillment in the complete overthrow of apostate Israel in AD 70. Following His statement about the time frame of punishment, He, immediately, begins to elaborate in greater specificity, or detail, of what He had just predicted. Following His comments in Matthew 23, He set the tone for His introduction to the destruction of the Temple as well as the end of the Jewish economy. As the disciples listen to Jesus, they marveled about the immensity of the Temple in all of its glory and splendor.

Jesus reacted to the disciples’ remarks about the Temple. He astonished His disciples with His startling statement about the eventual destruction of this impressive and inspiring Temple. Listen, once more, to Him as He unfolds what the prophets had foretold centuries earlier (see Deuteronomy 28—32; Daniel 12; Malachi 4). God is going to judge this unrighteous system, which scheme is the old covenant world of Judaism with its rituals and with its Temple. Matthew records his introductory comments leading up to Jesus’ response to their statement:

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. ² “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” ³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (24:1-3)

It is significant that Jesus points out that “not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (24:2). Whereupon, they asked Jesus, as stated above, three questions: (1) When will this happen? (2) What will be the sign of your coming? and (3) When will the end of this age occur? Unfortunately, the King James Version renders the Greek word **αἰών** (*aiōn*) as world (**κόσμος**, *kosmos*), not age. The King James’ translators translated the Greek in 24:3 as “world,” which translation has misled a proper understanding of the Olivet Discourse. The New King James Version makes the correction:

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age [**συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος**, *synteleias tou aiōnos*]?” (24:3)

Jesus did not speak of the “end of the world,” but rather He spoke of the “end of the age,” that is to say, the age of Judaism with its Temple and all of its rituals. Often times, it is helpful

to consult parallel accounts in order to clarify a statement by another author (larger context). For this reason, Luke adds valuable information, which data adds to the comprehension of Matthew's account. Luke 21 is parallel to Mathew 24. Prior to Jesus' final remarks about the overthrow of Jerusalem in Luke 21, Luke records another conversation that Jesus had with the Pharisees. In this discussion, He reveals the final overthrow of apostate Israel:

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."³² He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.'³³ In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!³⁴ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!³⁵ Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Luke 13:31-35)⁸

Jesus sorrows often over Jerusalem's rejection of Him as the Messiah foretold by the prophets. Luke 13:35 is the epitomized version of Luke 21. Once more, Luke records another reaction of Jesus on His final journey to Jerusalem. Jesus knew what was coming upon Jerusalem and breaks down and weeps. Listen to Luke as he reports Jesus' sad and prophetic words:

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it⁴² and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.⁴³ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side.⁴⁴ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." (Luke 19:41-44)

Shortly after Jesus' statement about the desolation of Jerusalem, Luke gives further commentary concerning His prophetic statement about the city. As the Romans led Jesus away to be crucified, there were numerous women weeping at this ordeal of the crucifixion of Jesus. He looked at these women and remarked:

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.²⁹ For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!'³⁰ Then they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!' (23:28-30)

This statement by Jesus is also reminiscent of His remarks, as recorded by Matthew, in His Olivet Discourse:

So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' [Daniel 9:26; 11:31; 12:11] spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—¹⁶ then let those

⁸For an excellent analysis of the Gospel of Luke, see Joel McDurmon, *Jesus v. Jerusalem: A Commentary on Luke 9:51-20:26, Jesus' Lawsuit against Israel* (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision Press, 2011).

who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁷ Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. ¹⁸ Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. ¹⁹ How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! ²⁰ Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. ²¹ For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. ²² If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. (Matthew 24:15-22)

John, one of the Twelve, received His Revelation from Jesus about the termination of apostate Israel in the opening of the sixth seal. This seal covers the same period of time that Jesus discloses in His Olivet Discourse as recorded in Matthew 24—25. Listen to John as he pens the following words:

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, ¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. ¹⁴ The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. ¹⁶ They called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!” ¹⁷ **For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”** (Revelation 6:12-17)

All three Gospels call attention to Jesus’ prophetic words about the final removal of political power from Judaism. In these three books (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), we discover that God foretells the final demise of the old covenant world of Judaism with the announcement of a new relationship between God and His people based upon the work of Christ upon Calvary. This unique breaking in of God into history is set forth in apocalyptic language in all three Gospels as well as the Book of Revelation, which book is an enlargement upon Matthew 24—25, Mark 13, and Luke 21.

The disciples immediately wanted to know when these things would occur: “‘Tell us,’ they said, ‘when this will happen, and what will be **the sign of your coming** and of the **end of the age?**’” (Matthew 24:3). As to when all this would occur, Jesus says, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (24:36). The reason Jesus did not know is that the Father had not revealed this to the Him in His fleshly nature. Yet, He did forewarn them of signs that would precede the end of the Jewish age, that is to say, the old heaven and earth. Some of these signs included many individuals coming in His name and claiming I am the Christ. In addition to these false claims, He also spoke of wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, persecution of His disciples, and the love of many growing cold (24:4-13) as signs of His coming in judgment against Israel.

In spite of all these signs, nevertheless, the end of Judah’s political power is not yet. **Before the end of the age of the old covenant world of Israel**, “‘This gospel of the kingdom will be preached,’ says Jesus, ‘in the whole world [ἐν ὅλη τῇ οἰκουμένῃ, *en holē tē oikoumenē*, “in all the inhabited earth”] as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come’” (24:14). Once more, the word *world* (κόσμος, *kosmos*) is not employed by Jesus. He uses the Greek word (οἰκουμένη, *oikoumenē*, “the land that is being inhabited”) that speaks of the inhabited earth known as the Roman Empire. **As the end of the age, not the end of the world**, draws

near, Jesus sets forth another piece of the puzzle to help His hearers discern the signs of the time, which signs alert them to His Second Coming:

So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.¹⁷ Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house.¹⁸ Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak.¹⁹ How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers!²⁰ Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath.²¹ For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again.²² If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. (24:15-22)

Even though I cited this Scripture earlier, the principle of repetition is sometimes necessary in order to drive home a particular truth for greater understanding of the text. Both Matthew and Mark (Mark 13:14-20) record the words of Jesus concerning Daniel’s prophecy about “the abomination that causes desolation” (see Daniel 9:24). Luke reports additional information given by Jesus that assisted first-century Christians to understand more clearly the “abomination that causes desolation.” We should listen carefully to the words of Jesus as reported by Luke:

When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near.²¹ Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city.²² For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written.²³ How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and **wrath against this people.**²⁴ They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. (Luke 21:20-24)

Jesus speaks of His Second Coming in judgment against apostate Israel. If this were the end of the world (κόσμος, *kosmos*) and **not** the “time of the end” for the old covenant world of Judaism, why would Jesus instruct His followers to “flee to the mountains”? In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus forewarned His disciples about the impending destruction on Jerusalem—“When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near.” He told them to flee whenever they saw the approaching armies of Rome. They were not to even take the time to go back into their houses to get their belongings (Matthew 24:17). Get out of Jerusalem immediately, said Jesus. If Jesus’ remarks pertained to the so-called end of the world, we wonder why he said, “How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers”? Also, if it were the end of the world, we wonder again why He said, “let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”

This was a time of punishment for Israel’s rejection of Himself and His messengers. Apostate Jerusalem had to be taken out of the way to make way for “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1), that is to say, the Church, which our Lord purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). Paul, in his Galatians’ Epistle, speaks of “the Jerusalem that is above” as being our mother (Galatians 4:26). With the final overthrow of apostate Israel with its capitol Jerusalem and its Temple with its rituals, John says,

Then **I saw a new heaven and a new earth**, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² **I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem**, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:1-4)

All of these events transpired in the fulfillment of what God had said long before through His prophets. God’s toleration and patience reached a boiling point in their rejection of His Messiah; unfaithfulness is something that God does not put up with forever. Jesus foreshadowed the ultimate coming judgment against Israel and its religious leaders in His Sermon on the Mount. After Jesus compared the oral law of the religious leaders with the Word of God itself, He exclaimed: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Jesus began His ministry with castigation of the religious leaders and ended His ministry with criticism of the spiritual leaders—Pharisees and teachers of the Law, with a forecast of the complete destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple.

Following the foretelling of the full annihilation of Jerusalem, Jesus describes the transpiring events in apocalyptic language, which is often associated with the final return of Christ. But this forbidding rhetoric is descriptive of the national destruction of the city turned harlot, not the end of the world. His words are also expressive of His coming judgment (Second Coming) upon those who refused Him as the Anointed One of God. Listen to the apocalyptic language of Jesus as He describes this out-and-out wreckage of this sinful and wicked nation:

Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ ³⁰ “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. (Matthew 24:29-31)

At first glance, this apocalyptic language appears to describe what many Christians refer to as the end of the world. But a close reading of the text in Matthew’s Gospel with Luke’s Gospel unfolds the intent by Jesus’ apocalyptic language as reported by Matthew. For instance, Luke gives additional comments that Matthew does not record. For a case in point, he reports the words of Jesus this way: “They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. **Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles** until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24). We should reflect on “trampled on by the Gentiles” before reading the apocalyptic language that follows. There is a great deal of similarity between Matthew and Luke, but still, Luke gives a slight change in reading that sheds additional light on this difficult pericope (section or unit of Scripture).

There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. ²⁶ Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world [τῆ οἰκουμένη, *tē oikoumenē*, “the inhabited earth], for the heavenly bodies will

be shaken. ²⁷ At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.
²⁸ When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:25-28)

“The Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” **refers to His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem, not the end of the Universe.** In essence, this “coming” is the Second Coming of Christ in judgment upon spiritual Sodom and Gomorrah. In the Book of Revelation, following Jesus’ remarks about the holy city being under siege for **forty-two months** (Revelation 11:1-3), He speaks of this city as Sodom and Egypt (Jerusalem). Listen to Jesus as He relates to John the aftermath of this battle: “Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified” (Revelation 11:8). Prior to Jesus’ final remarks about the destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 24), He had previously warned His disciples about this specific coming, which coming would happen before the death of some who heard His remarks.

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. ²⁸ I tell you the truth, **some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.** (Matthew 16:24-28)

Jesus refers to this trampling of Jerusalem by the Gentiles as the Son of Man coming “in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done” (16:27). In Matthew 24, which describes the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus once more depicts this overthrow of this wicked nation as the Son of Man coming in His glory:

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the sign of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. (24:30)

Jesus even concludes His judgment on the religious leaders with this reference to His coming in judgment with separation of the believers from the non-believers:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (25:31-32)

This separation is also revealed in the Book of Revelation. Listen to John as he discloses this division:

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. ² Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: ³ “Do not harm the

land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.”⁴ Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. (Revelation 7:1-4)

I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “**These are they who have come out of the great tribulation**; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (7:14)

This appears to be the warning of Paul in his Second Epistle to the Thessalonians:

All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.⁶ God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you⁷ and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you. (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10)

The language that Paul employs appears to be reminiscence of the words spoken by our Lord Jesus. **The poetic language that Jesus uses is similar to the poetic language that Isaiah used to prophesy against Babylon:**

See, the day of the LORD is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.¹⁰ The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.¹¹ I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless.¹² I will make man scarcer than pure gold, more rare than the gold of Ophir.¹³ Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the LORD Almighty, in the day of his burning anger. (Isaiah 13:9-13)

After speaking of the “rising sun” being darkened, Isaiah says that the “moon will not give its light” and that “the heavens tremble and the earth will shake from its place.” Then, following this invigorating language, he cries out once more about what all this means: “Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians’ pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah” (13:19). This overthrow of Babylon is described as “the day of the Lord” (13:9). Peter, in his description of the downfall of Jerusalem, also describes this punishment as a “day of the Lord.”

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. (2 Peter 3:10-13)

CONCLUSION

With the complete destruction of apostate Jerusalem, John describes the following scene:

Then I saw a **new heaven and a new earth**, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² **I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.** ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for **the old order of things has passed away.**” ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” (Revelation 21:1-5)

When would all these events transpire in Jesus’ eschatological discourse? Listen to Jesus: “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. **Heaven and earth will pass away** [the Old Covenant world of Judaism], but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35-36). Jesus had previously said to His disciples, as cited above, that: “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (16:28). Jesus warned them of the impending judgment:

How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. (24:19-21)

This is “**the day of the Lord**” that the author of the Book of Hebrews encouraged the Christians to continuously encourage each other not to despair: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as **you see the Day approaching** (Hebrews 10:25). The “day of the Lord” and “the Day approaching” had to do with His Second Coming. In bringing to a close this in-depth study of the Second Coming of Christ, I wish to cite one more author (Don Preston) concerning our need to reflect upon “the world mission, Babylon, and the coming as a thief” in his book *He Came As A Thief*:

This is a *critical point*, but we will only mention it briefly. Jesus said the gospel would be preached into all the world before His coming against Jerusalem (Matthew 24:14). In Revelation 14 the gospel is depicted as preached into all the world before Jesus’ thief coming against Babylon. We have already identified Babylon as Jerusalem of the first century.

The gospel was definitely preached to all the world in the first century (Romans 10:18; Colossians 1:23). Since Jesus said the gospel would be preached into all the world before His coming against Jerusalem, and since Revelation said the gospel was preached into all the world *before the thief coming of Christ* against Babylon, then it follows that the thief coming of Christ was to be against Jerusalem in the first century.⁹

⁹Don Preston, *He Came As A Thief!* (Ardmore, OK: JaDon Management, Inc., 2008), 26. I recommend the reading of this book in its entirety.

Finally, we need to examine another statement by Jesus to Caiaphas the high priest. Caiaphas demanded to know from Jesus if He was or was not “the Christ, the Son of God” (Matthew 26:63). What is significant in this confrontation is Jesus’ response:

“Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: In the future you [ὅμῖν, *hymin*, plural form] will see [ὄψεσθε, *opsesthe*, plural form] the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (26:64)

Jesus told the high priest and the members of the Sanhedrin (the Supreme Court of Israel) that they themselves would see the Son of Man “coming on the clouds of heaven.” Whether all of them lived to AD 70, we do not know. But, apparently, some did since Jesus clearly states: “You will see the Son of Man . . . coming on the clouds of heaven.” The Second Coming of Christ occurred in AD 70. Toward the end of Peter’s ministry, he wrote to the Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia about the approaching judgment that Jesus and John the Baptist warned the religious leaders about. The following comments by Peter go right to the heart of the matter of imminent judgment:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” ¹⁹ So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. (1 Peter 4:2-19)