

<sup>4</sup> And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. <sup>5</sup> For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. <sup>6</sup> And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. <sup>7</sup> For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. <sup>8</sup> All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. <sup>9</sup> "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. <sup>10</sup> And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. <sup>11</sup> And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. <sup>12</sup> And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. <sup>13</sup> But the one who endures to the end will be saved. <sup>14</sup> And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Mat.24.4-14).

## Introduction

In Matthew's Gospel, the Olivet Discourse is a two chapter answer (24-25) to a one verse question (24.3): **As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?"** The disciples ask about timing and signs. In His answer, Jesus begins with a discussion of signs, treating the second half of their question first (4-31). Our goal for today is to consider the first part of His discussion of signs in 24.4-14. In this part of His answer, Jesus tells His disciples that the signs of His coming and the end of the age include wars, tribulation, and gospel proclamation.

Some preliminary remarks are necessary before we study these verses in detail. 1) It is important to remember that prophecy puts different future events before us in a vision in which these events occur at the same time. For example, when Jesus speaks of His contemporaries as living until His second coming in glory, He is speaking in prophetic metaphor. He is using the language of prophetic perspective. Therefore, prophetic perspective is the key to understanding the details of the Olivet Discourse. Putting on the glasses of prophetic perspective is like putting on special glasses at a 3-D movie: all that is hopelessly blurry suddenly becomes remarkably clear, once you put on the glasses. 2) Accordingly, it is important to remember that that strict chronology of events is not what biblical prophecy gives us. For example, the use of "then" (24.9-10, 14) does not indicate chronological sequence. We might think of it as an indicator of sequence *within the vision*, or, at the least, it is a *general reference to the events of the future* that are described in the prophetic vision (then, during the interval, during the time between the comings of Christ). 3) We should also mention that the fact of prophetic metaphor does not remove the reality of the events to come; it simply sees that reality in broad and sweeping terms. 4) Finally, prophecy is not the writing of history ahead of time, and it does not have the design of satisfying our curiosity about the future. It presents the future in broad strokes to establish and focus our hope in the certainty of God's plan of human history, past, present, *and future*.

The outline for this message has two points: the signs in prophetic vision, and the prophetic vision in practical application (the signs and their relevance).

### 1A. The Signs in Prophetic Vision

Jesus presents the signs in a recapping way; commentators call this recapitulation. The principle of recapping simply means that a vision of the future may have some "short stories" within it. Each story unfolds from beginning to end in broad strokes without details of strict chronology. In our case here in Matthew 24, each mini-story covers events that lead up to the end of the age, but with different emphases. We thus come to the end of the age in 24.14. Then verses 15-31 cover the signs again in recap leading up to the end of the age. Therefore, we have two parts to the discussion of the signs (they travel the same path adding different details that fill out the picture). It is important to recognize that Jesus presents the signs in prophetic metaphor;

the signs are elements of the prophetic vision of the Olivet Discourse. If we recognize that the signs come to us in prophetic vision, then *we can easily see how the signs of Christ's coming can be truly and historically present while His coming remains in the future*. When the signs occur, the end does not arrive, as Jesus says, **this [complex of signs] must take place, but the end is not yet** (24.6). Then after elaborating on the signs, He says, **then the end will come** (24.14). The signs do in fact point to the coming of Christ as an impending reality, even though they do not signal the end *per se*. Instead, they present us with the beginning stages of the end. In effect, the signs describe the time between. They give conditions that precede and lead up to the coming of Christ. Jesus gives five of them.

1) The appearance of false messiahs and prophets

Throughout the history of the church (from the resurrection to the second coming), people will claim special divine anointing that qualifies them to be messianic deliverers and spokespersons for God. Jesus says, **many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray** (24.6) and **many false prophets will arise and lead many astray** (24.11). There are two sobering facts that surface in this connection: a) these people will name the name of Christ as the ground of their authority, and b) though their claims are patently false, nonetheless, they will deceive many and lead them astray. In our present situation, it seems correct to point out that many educational institutions that were strongly fundamental now have faculty members that deny God's knowledge of the future (this is "open theism" or "presentism"). One example is the recent appointment of an open theist to a post at Biola University in California; He comes expressing the desire to serve Jesus and train more than sixty graduate students in philosophy for future service in God's kingdom. This is a frightening dark cloud arising in the west and pointing to the coming of Christ.

2) Wars and rumors of wars

Jesus speaks to this fact in two ways in 24.6-7a: **And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. <sup>7</sup> For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.**

3) Famines and earthquakes

In 24.7b, Jesus tells us that famines and earthquakes are signs of His coming and of the end of the age: **and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places**. He gives us little detail, but it is easy for us to look back historically and to look around presently and identify the fact of famines in this country or that country and earthquakes in this or that part of the earth. We should note them and raise our heads in anticipation of the coming of Christ. Thus, our Lord informs us that these things do not mean that He already came and we missed His appearing. Instead, these things (false messiahs, wars, natural disasters) are only part of the hard times ahead for the human family on earth in the time between His appearances.

4) Gospel proclamation to all nations

**And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come** (24.14).

The gospel has universal dimensions to it. There are no geographical or racial restrictions for *the gospel of the kingdom* of God. Thus, the gospel-good-news refers to *kingdom* salvation, which is the deliverance of sinners from their claims of autonomy and their slavery in sin. The deliverance is from attempted autonomy... to submission to the rule of God. It refers to restoration of man the image of God, but fallen from that image, to a place of submission to the kingship of God. The Lord grants this restoration through testimony and witness bearing. Witness of the saving work of Christ to the nations abides until the end of history. The witness of the apostles continues in the cities of Israel expanded in prophetic vision to engulf the earth (10.23). Figuratively speaking, the apostles continue to preach in those cities to the nations of the earth in the place where none are the Lord's people. There, as Hosea predicted, they are "**not my people**" (Hos. 2.23; Rom. 9.24-26). From them, God calls a new people out from the nations of

Jews and Gentiles. This is the new Israel, the nation bringing forth the fruits of the kingdom (Mat. 21.43). Therefore, metaphorically speaking, both Jews and Gentiles in the church are the new Israel and all outside of the church, both Jews and Gentiles, are figuratively speaking, Gentiles. Note how Peter confirms this application of Hosea:

<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. <sup>12</sup> Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation (1 Pet. 2.9-12).

We have the outstanding fact that those who “Once...were not a people” are now “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.” Now, this new people live on earth among fallen sinners as “sojourners and exiles” and they live “among the Gentiles”; they are believers, Christians, and the new Israel. They are not Gentiles, but all (Jews and Gentiles) outside of the church are Gentiles (cf. Grudem, *1 Peter*, 46).

Furthermore, we have confirmation that the mission work of Matthew 10 extends (in prophetic metaphor) to the end of the age. Hence, gospel preaching characterizes the interim (the time between the comings of Christ). There is good news for the nations, but the process of delivering that news is costly, which leads us to the next point.

5) Tribulation for the people of God (associated with gospel proclamation)

All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. <sup>9</sup> "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. <sup>10</sup> And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. <sup>11</sup> And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. <sup>12</sup> And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. <sup>13</sup> But the one who endures to the end will be saved. Tribulation, suffering, birth pangs, and persecution make up the experience of those who spread the gospel. All who take up this task must expect challenges and difficulties. The persecutions will have differing degrees from hardships on one end to death on the other, with everything in between. There will be a dampening and cooling of love in the world that makes things all the more difficult for believers. Many who profess faith in Christ will fall away; tribulation tests and separates true possessors from false professors of the gospel. A painful experience for genuine saints will come from within the professing community where they must endure the proverbial knifing in the back of betrayal. Finally, lawlessness in the world will make things all the worse for believers as it leads to coldness in human relationships in general that cannot help but affect the family of God in particular.

We may not want it to be this way with no “bed of roses,” but that is not ours to decide. We have advance notice and must brace ourselves for battle on many fronts both inside and outside the church. The signs of the coming of Christ are false messiahs and false prophets, wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, and gospel proclamation along with tribulation.

## 2A. The Prophetic Vision in Practical Application

The movement from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth is not just a chronological movement. It is that historically if we look back and watch what unfolds in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1.8). However, this prophetic vision presents the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth in a non-chronological and temporally compressed way. In prophetic metaphor, the apostles preach the gospel in the cities of Israel, which, figuratively, become the cities of the earth. The preaching in Israel with Israel expanded to encompass the earth goes on until the coming of Christ (Mat.10). Therefore, this is what will occur throughout the time between from the apostolic era to the return of Christ. Thus, the spreading of the gospel everywhere is a sign that points to the coming of Christ in glory.

The signs have been present in each succeeding generation of Christians since the apostolic period. From the end of the apostolic era forward, everything is in place pointing to His coming. The end could have come in the first century (Hagner, 696), just as it could have come

last week. Therefore, we can best see the relevance of prophecy through prophetic vision. It has universal application for every generation of disciples. By the use of prophetic vision, Jesus speaks to you and me here in our place in history today. Thus, the vision is solidly relevant to our lives in our contemporary context.

Accordingly, the three exhortations contained within this section (24.4-14) furnish us with important practical applications. Stated in a positive way, the exhortations are 1) be on your guard against deception (24.4), 2) brace yourselves against fear (24.6b), and 3) endure hardship faithfully (24.13).

1B. Be on guard against deception (24.4, **See that no one leads you astray**)

What do you think, how can you guard yourself from being deceived? This is a question for you to ponder in your own context of life, but some suggestions may help you go down the right path.

1) Keep this warning in focus

By this, I mean that you need to be earnestly aware of the possibility of being deceived and led away from the narrow path and into what John Bunyan called “by-path meadows” (*Pilgrim’s Progress*) where many dangers abound. Deception is obviously something tricky and subtle; you have to splash some water on your face and keep your eyes wide open.

2) Keep re-checking your road map

You have to be a good student of the gospel of the kingdom in order to avoid this danger. This means that you are always ready to check and re-check claims of truth by diligent comparison of them with the road map of Scripture. This involves honest dialogue on all issues with a humble-Berean spirit. In Colossians 2, Paul shows us how professing believers fall prey to deception and how to avoid it:

**For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, <sup>2</sup>that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, <sup>3</sup>in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. <sup>4</sup>I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. <sup>5</sup>For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. <sup>6</sup>Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, <sup>7</sup>rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. <sup>8</sup>See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ (Col. 2.1-8).**

You have protection from deception and its captivating enslavement by avoiding human autonomy, which is thinking and arguing in ways that are not according to Christ, that involve some kind of autonomy. It is this principle of autonomy at work today that leads many down the road of open theism to denials of the perfections of God and the true deity and humanity of Christ. You must remain alert to the danger that you may be deceived and you must always remain open to the teaching of the Spirit by continually re-checking your road map of Scripture.

2B. Brace yourselves against fear (24.6b, **See that you are not alarmed...**)

Be prepared for opposition, persecution, and even hatred driven tribulation. Death could be the result depending on where you serve the Lord. Note that tribulation will come from the very ones to whom Jesus sends His disciples, to whom Jesus sends you and me in our joint labor in the gospel (cf. v. 9, hated of all nations with v. 14, gospel witness to all nations).

Additionally, there is disloyalty and treachery among those who claim the name of Christ (24.10). Nonetheless, Jesus says, “see to it that you do not let these things overwhelm you with fear.” He does not explain how to do this here, but from other places in Scripture, we learn that love casts out fear (1 Jn. 4.18) and that He overcomes the world where we will face tribulation (Jn. 16.33). Brace yourself against fear by filling your heart with a sense of His love and with full knowledge of His sovereign rule over the nations.

3B. Endure hardship faithfully (24.13, **But the one who endures to the end will be saved**)

In times of testing, not all disciples endure. **And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another** (24.10). It is painful when professing Christians reverse the principle of one-anothering love and turn it into one-anothering hatred. It is painful to watch and painful to experience. Sometimes, things are worse within the church than without it. Troubling as this may be, it should not surprise you. Your Lord tells you to brace yourself for it and to endure it along with many other hardships that are part of the experience of the church over the centuries until He comes.

The motivation to help you endure is the promise of salvation. Enduring is not salvation (though to be able to endure is a saving grace). It is encouraging in the heat of battle to know that by enduring you will win. Thus, the promise of salvation to those who endure enables enduring.

Enduring is the way you obtain salvation. Central here is the endurance of tribulation, threat of death, and hatred without quitting. Endurance also includes not quitting in the task that brings tribulation, which is the witness-bearing task you have in the world. It includes continuing your work despite wars and natural disasters. It includes “hanging in there” and “holding on” despite lawlessness, lack of love, false religion, and betrayal.

If these things take you back on your heels for a moment, you need to ask and answer the “how” question again. What can I do when I feel overwhelmed by the signs of the times, by all these things that are but the beginning of sorrows? The answer, of course, is staring you in the face in the very signs of the times that raise your concerns. The answer is that these signs point to the coming of the Son of man in glory. Therefore, whenever you feel a strong sense of alarm arising in your soul because of the signs of the times (false messiahs and false prophets, wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, and gospel proclamation and tribulation), do not keep your attention on the troubling waters below. Instead, raise your heads and fix your eyes on Jesus the author and finisher of your faith; know this, these signs are testimonies to the sure reality of His coming in glory. When He comes, He will take you to heaven, to a glory beyond what you can possibly imagine.

**Now may we fall down before the majesty of the triune God in humble acknowledgement of our weakness and need of His encouragement by the gospel. May our Father, and our Lord Jesus cause us to increase and abound in love for one another and for all people everywhere. May the Lord establish our hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints, amen (1 Thess. 3.11-13).**