

“Spoken of by the Prophet Daniel”

Jesus, the Temple, and the Prophecy of Daniel (An Introduction to the Study of Daniel, Part One)

Matthew 24:15-28; Daniel 9:20-27

We begin our series on the Book of Daniel in a surprising place—the Gospel of Matthew with Jesus giving the Olivet Discourse. The discourse is so named because Jesus and his disciples were sitting on the Mount of Olives, looking across the Kidron Valley at the magnificent Jerusalem temple, restored to its original grandeur by King Herod. Jesus uses this occasion to predict the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem, as well as to discuss the end of the age. When passing the temple earlier that day, his disciples asked him a question about the end of the age and what would happen to the temple. Jesus told them, “*you see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down*” (Matthew 24:2). The temple will be completely destroyed—again. Jesus is predicting something unthinkable for a Jew, since the Jewish people had endured this fate once already. And this time, Jesus implies the destruction will be final. While predicting the destruction of the temple and teaching his disciples about the end of the age, Jesus repeatedly appeals to the prophet Daniel. And so it is here we will begin our series on the Book of Daniel—with Jesus, on the Mount of Olives, teaching his disciples about the end, by quoting from or alluding to Daniel’s prophecies. By considering how Jesus read and understood the Book of Daniel and considering our Lord’s role in Daniel’s prophecies, we will be better able to interpret Daniel correctly.

Taking this brief detour will prepare us by providing background for our upcoming series on Daniel, a book which many preachers avoid because Daniel is a very difficult book to interpret. I also chose to start with the Olivet Discourse because our recent sermon series on Ezra-Nehemiah, and our recent Advent sermons in many ways, are either tied to the Book of Daniel, or address some of the same themes (especially the fate of the Jewish people, their temple, and Jerusalem), which we have covered in these recent series. So I thought it helpful to begin our series on Daniel by considering a remarkable passage in the New Testament where all of these things are in view. That passage is the Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24 (with parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21) where Jesus quotes or alludes to prophecies of Daniel, especially as these prophecies impact the future role of the temple and the city of Jerusalem in redemptive history. As we will see next time (as we conclude our time in Matthew 24), Jesus even refers to himself as the mysterious divine figure, the Son of Man, who is the central figure in one of Daniel’s visions (chapter 7). We must understand Daniel as does Jesus.

We begin this morning with a bit of historical recap. The first Jerusalem temple (built by David and Solomon) was destroyed by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC in the days immediately before the Babylonian exile. As we will see when we take up Daniel’s prophecy, Daniel actually served in Nebuchadnezzar’s royal court and even interpreted one of the king’s dreams. The destruction of the temple and the sacking of Jerusalem in 587 was Israel’s darkest moment, until Jesus predicts an even darker day to yet come for Israel—a day of terrible distress foretold by Daniel. In the days of Ezra-Nehemiah—who write a century or so after Daniel—the Jews eventually returned to the land, and rebuilt their temple in 516 B.C. After four centuries of struggle and oppression by Gentile empires, by the time of Jesus, Israel’s national identity once again centered around this magnificent building.

The Jerusalem temple figures quite prominently in the last week of Jesus’ earthly ministry, because the conflict between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees escalates to the point of no return once Jesus entered the temple after his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, only to find his messianic

mission challenged and then rejected by Israel's leaders. Though the temple pointed to the work of redemption that Jesus was about to accomplish with his death and resurrection, the Pharisees sought to keep Jesus from preaching in his father's house. The tragic irony in all of this is that Israel's spiritual condition had fallen to the same level of unbelief as in the days before the exile. The people's hearts are once again far from YHWH. The religious leaders trust in their rituals and in human righteousness. They think the temple, the law, religious ceremonies and festivals, and circumcision are ends in themselves. They see no need for the righteousness of Jesus Christ, thinking their own quite sufficient.

John the Baptist had come several years before preaching repentance and giving Israel one last chance to repent—only Israel's so-called king, Herod, put him to death. And now Jesus, the covenant mediator has come to dispense the covenant curses and blessings upon this nation which has rejected his messianic mission and office. Jesus pronounces covenant curses upon the Pharisees and teachers of the law, but also foretold that the nation of Israel will be left desolate. If this was not troubling enough, Jesus also informs the disciples that the magnificent temple of Herod will be completely destroyed.

In addition to the covenant curses and the declaration that Israel will be left desolate, the news about the temple prompted the disciples to ask Jesus a series of questions about the future course of history as it relates to Israel and the temple, which Jesus answers in the Olivet Discourse. As we learn in verse 3, "*as he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will these things be?'*" As far as the disciples were concerned the very thought of such a calamity as the destruction of the temple must also mean that the end of the age is at hand. The disciples also ask Jesus, "*what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'*" As they see it, the destruction of the temple and the end of the age must be one and the same event.

Unfortunately, the Olivet Discourse is highly disputed and one's interpretation of it is tied directly to how one reads and understands the prophecy of Daniel. One approach to the Olivet Discourse is called preterism. This view understands Jesus to be describing the judgment to come upon Israel when the Roman army destroyed the temple and sacked Jerusalem in A.D. 70. On this view, everything in Matthew 24, including the coming of Christ upon the clouds in glory, was fulfilled by the events of A.D. 70, and is thought to be already past and therefore, completely fulfilled.

A much more popular approach, called futurism, sees much of Jesus' explanation as referring to a time in the distant future in which Israel is back in the land with a rebuilt temple. This view, which is associated with dispensationalism and very popular among American evangelicals, understands the Olivet Discourse to be referring to a future tribulation period in which Antichrist makes a peace treaty with Israel, but then turns upon the Jews and desecrates their temple. Both these views, futurism and preterism, mistakenly assume that the disciples are correct when they link the destruction of the temple to the end of the age. The difference between them is that preterists locate this in A.D. 70, while the futurists place this after the so-called rapture, when Christians are mysteriously "snatched away," when the Antichrist appears.

The best way to understand the passage is to notice that the disciples have made an incorrect, albeit understandable assumption when they question Jesus—that the destruction of temple and the city of Jerusalem is the end of the age and must be somehow associated with the coming of Christ in the clouds with great glory. But Jesus will correct this mistaken assumption and speak of two events separated by an indeterminate period of time. The first event to occur is the destruction of the city and the temple, and includes the horrible suffering of A.D. 70, after which Israel will be cut off and left desolate. The other event of which Jesus speaks is the end of the age, when the Son of Man returns in final judgment at the end of the age. The key, then, to interpret the passage correctly, is to look at the disciple's questions and

to see how Jesus answers them (in light of Daniel's prophecy) so as to correct their misconceptions about the destruction of the temple and the end of the age being the same event.

In the first section of Matthew 24—the first fourteen verses—Jesus answers the last question the disciples put to him first. After they ask, “what will be the sign of your coming?” Jesus enumerates a series of signs of his coming in verses 3-14 which tell his disciples what they will face between the time of our Lord's death and resurrection and the destruction of the temple, but which also clearly extend into the present age. These so-called “signs of the end” include wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famine, the rise of false Christs and heretics, as well as the hatred and persecution of Christ's disciples by the Gentile nations. Jesus speaks of increasing wickedness throughout the age—a point which is very difficult for postmillennialists and cultural transformationalists to explain. Jesus explains that hearts will grow increasingly cold, the manifestation of human wickedness. In the midst of these tumultuous signs, Jesus says, believers must persevere to the end to be saved. For these are not signs of his absence or God's lack of power to control his creatures and his creation. These signs of the end guarantee Jesus' return. When seen through the eyes of faith, the tumult of the nations, and the groaning of the earth, are actually signs that our Lord will return, not signs of God's indifference or powerlessness.

But Jesus sets forth another sign, a sign which clearly indicates that these things extend beyond the destruction of Jerusalem into the present age. Says Jesus, the gospel must be preached to all nations *before* the end can come. This, then, is the mission of Christ's church until the end of the age, as is clear from our Lord's final instructions to his disciples recorded at the end of Matthew's Gospel, the so-called “great commission” of chapter 28:18-20. “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” No doubt, Jesus associates the end of the age with his second coming, not with God's judgment upon Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. In the Great Commission Jesus gives his church the missionary mandate—go into all the world and make disciples. This must happen before Jesus returns at the end of the age.

In verse 15, where we pick up with our text this morning, when Jesus answers the disciple's question about the destruction of the temple—“when will these things happen?” i.e., “when will the temple be destroyed?” Jesus warns of a period of great tribulation yet to come, one completely unsurpassed in the previous history of Israel. Many commentators believe that the horrors of which Jesus speaks are so great that this must mean he is referring to some distant future event associated with the Antichrist and Battle of Armageddon, yet to come at the end of time.

But there are very good reasons to think that Jesus is speaking about the events of AD 70—just forty years or so off in the distance from the time he gives this discourse. Recall that the disciples' questions are prompted by Jesus' comments about Israel's coming desolation and the destruction of the temple. This is Jesus' answer to the disciple's question about the destruction of the temple as seen in light of the parallel passage in Luke 21:20-21, where Luke records Jesus telling the disciples “*when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it.*” A Roman siege will lead to the destruction of the city and the desolation of the temple. Jesus also switches subjects from the preaching of the gospel to all the nations, to the frightening prophecy of an abomination which will render the temple “desolate.” It is clear that Jesus is describing what lies ahead for Israel (desolation), and for the temple (its destruction).

In the warning found in verse 15, Jesus makes two prophetic predictions drawn directly from Daniel 9:24-27, part of our Old Testament lesson, as well as from Daniel 12. Both of these texts from Daniel's prophecy speak of an idolatrous image which will be set up on the altar of the temple at the time of the destruction of the city. It is this abominable image which thereby renders the temple "desolate."¹ Says Jesus, "*so when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.*" A portion of the messianic prophecy of the seventy weeks of Daniel 9 is quoted by Jesus, but Jesus also refers to Israel's not too distant past, when in 163 B.C., Antiochus Ephiphanes profaned the temple during the Maccabean wars by slaughtering a pig on the altar and then erecting a pagan statute in the Holy of Holies. Every Jew knew this story from Israel's history. They also knew full well what such an abomination entailed—the temple was rendered "unclean." This is the image which Jesus now evokes to characterize what will happen to the temple yet again, only this time, in such a fashion as to make the profanation of the temple by Antiochus to pale by comparison.

When Jesus evokes the prophecies in Daniel 9 and 12, in effect, he now claims to be the true interpreter of Daniel's mysterious vision, and that the prophecies of Daniel about this terrible abomination extend into the future, and were not fulfilled by the events of 163 BC. Jesus warns his disciples, when you see this abomination, standing in the temple, rendering it unclean, "*let the reader understand.*" This is a reference to chapter 8 of Daniel's prophecy, in which Daniel was struggling to understand the meaning of the vision God had given him about the time of the end. By adding these words, "*let the reader understand,*" Jesus is explaining the mysteries which Daniel revealed, but was never able to fully explain before the coming of Jesus. This also means that the desolation of temple by Antiochus is but a foreshadowing of another desolation yet to come, one which completely fulfills Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks, a desolation which will be far more horrific and is now explicitly connected by Jesus to the coming destruction of the city of Jerusalem. This was every pious Jew's greatest fear—the temple would become desolate once again, and the people of Israel will be hauled off into captivity, to suffer and die in a land not their own. This is exactly what Jesus predicts. This is exactly what happens.

But Jesus not only warns of a desecration of the temple, he warns of a great calamity to come upon the entire nation—a calamity which comes to pass when the temple is desecrated. When you see this happen, says Jesus in verse 16, "*then,*" that is, at the time you see the abomination in the temple, "*let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.*" The moment the temple is profaned, it is time to go! The apostolic church remembered these words of our Lord, and when it became clear that Rome was going to use great force to put down the ever-growing Jewish rebellion in the latter part of AD 66-67, those Christians remaining in the Jerusalem area began to relocate to the hill country north of Judea, the same place where the Jews hid safely during the Macabbean wars.²

This crisis will come to pass so quickly and the consequences will be so great that Jesus warns his disciples in verses 17-20, "*let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath.*" There is a loud echo in these words of the warning given to Lot, when Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed—don't look back. But there are cultural reasons for this warning as well. Jewish dwellings

¹ D. A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 699-700.

² D. A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 701.

of the first century were often built so that they utilized the roof area as a kind of deck-patio. If the abomination occurs when you are on your roof relaxing, don't go down into the house to pack. Flee! Don't even stop to pick up clothing! Things will be so dreadful that women who are pregnant, or who have small children, will have an especially difficult time. The disciples are even exhorted to pray that this will not happen during bad weather—during the winter—or on the Sabbath, when the Sabbath observance of many Jewish Christians would make travel very difficult.³

The most troubling statement of Jesus is that which follows in verse 21—*“for then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.”* The reason the coming tribulation is difficult to identify is that Jesus speaks of this tribulation to come as so great that nothing has or will ever equal it, past or future. This statement leads a number of commentators to argue that tribulation of this magnitude obviously hasn't happened yet and cannot be referring to the events of AD 70. This ignores the fact that this prophetic warning given by Jesus to the generation then living, who will see the destruction of Jerusalem in the near future, the people who are to flee from Jerusalem when they see the abomination in the temple!

The horrors which will come upon Jerusalem in AD 70, are the worst that Jerusalem has ever, or will ever experience. Jesus says it will be far greater than the destruction of the temple in 587 BC. It will be greater than the desolation of 163 BC at the hands of Antiochus Epiphanes. Desolation will fall upon the temple and the people, and as a result, they will be dispersed to the end of the earth. Anyone who has ever read Josephus' description of the Roman siege of Jerusalem, including the terrible famine and infant cannibalism, cannot help but be moved by the unspeakable horrors the Jewish people endured while the Roman army crushed the revolt and then burned the temple to the ground. In fact, once the temple burned—accidentally, by the way, and against Titus' orders—the soldiers were so eager to retrieve the gold which melted and which had flowed down into the cracks between the stones of which the temple was built, that they overturned the huge stones of the burned out building to retrieve the gold. As Jesus himself as just predicted—not one stone was left standing upon another.

Yet, Jesus goes on to speak *not* of final judgment—which comes at his Parousia [his coming] at the end of the age, but of God's grace in restraining the evil forces which fall upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Says Jesus in verse 22, *“and if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”* As God had restrained his judgment on Sodom, because the presence of believers—i.e., the “righteous,” so too, even as Israel becomes desolate and as the temple is destroyed, God will shorten the days of judgment for the sake of his elect, a reference to Christians living in Jerusalem at the time of the cities' destruction, and whom God will deliver, even in the midst of the judgment to come upon Israel. Israel will be cut off, the Jews dispersed. But God will preserve his people, even under the worst of circumstances.

In verse 23, Jesus returns to the theme which he addressed earlier in verse 4, the inevitable appearance of false Christs and deceivers who will plague God's people until the end of the age and final judgment. By returning to this theme in connection with the judgment to come upon Israel, Jesus, in effect, makes the point that the destruction of the temple and the city is not the *Parousia*, nor the end of the age, for the presence of false Christs will be a threat to Christ's church, even after the temple is destroyed.⁴ Notes

³ D. A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 701-702.

⁴ D. A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 704-705.

Jesus, “*then if anyone says to you,*” in the aftermath of the confusion generated by the great tribulation which will come upon Israel, “*‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. at that time.*” The judgment to come upon Israel in AD 70 will be a breeding ground for messianic pretenders. Christians are warned not to be taken in by them.⁵ Jesus warns us, “*See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it.*”

Jesus warns of men who will come and perform amazing signs and wonders, all for the express purpose of leading God’s elect astray—those whom he has preserved from the great tribulation to come upon Israel. But, Jesus says, it is not possible for God’s elect to be deceived, for God’s people will be able to discern such false teachers and deceivers. Whenever someone claims to be a “Christ,” the very manner of their coming, “out in the desert,” or in some private or secret place, betrays the fact that they are liars and we are commanded to have nothing whatsoever to do with them.

More to the point, in verse 27, Jesus says his coming will not be a secret or isolated event. “*For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.*” Our Lord’s return is no secret, but visible to the entire earth. This seriously weakens the notion of a secret rapture (which only Christians see and experience). It also demonstrates the implausibility of preterism. Jesus’ point is simply that his own Parousia [coming] at the end of the age “will happen in such a sudden and dramatic way [that it is] incapable of being missed.”⁶ This is why we are not to listen to claims that Christ has already come—no matter how many miracles the claimants may perform, since our Lord’s return is not a private event, but will be witnessed by the entire world.

The disciples have asked Jesus, “what will be the sign of his coming?” This is his answer. “*For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.*” There will be no secret rapture. Nor can this “coming” be limited to or fulfilled by the events of A.D. 70. Our Lord’s coming is an unmistakable event, and like lightening flashing across the sky, will be impossible to miss. Jesus even tells them where his coming will take place—*Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.*” The image of flesh-eating birds gorging upon the dead is drawn from the Old Testament—Habbakuk 1, Job 39, Ezekiel 39—and refers to the day of judgment yet to come at the end of the age when the Son of Man returns on the clouds in glory and power.⁷ By its very nature, the coming of Jesus Christ at the end of the age, will not be something which can be missed. This is why we must not listen to reports that the Christ has come in some far away corner, or in secret. No one will miss it!

What lessons then are we to draw from our Lord’s words to his disciples? First, Jesus warns that Israel will be cut off, and the temple destroyed. When the temple is desecrated by Roman armies it is time for God’s people to flee to the hills. The Roman army will surround the city and crush the rebellion. It will be a time of tribulation greater than anything the nation and its temple had ever experienced or will ever experience. As a result of Israel being left desolate, the Jews will be dispersed to the ends of the earth. As Jesus tells his disciples these difficult and astonishing things, he appeals to the prophecy of Daniel

⁵ R. T. France, Matthew, 342.

⁶ D. A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 704.

⁷ D. A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 707.

written nearly six centuries earlier. In fact, these prophecies are fulfilled in such exacting detail, that critics of the Bible must go to great lengths to argue that these words were put back into Jesus' and Daniel's mouths after these things had come to pass. But the first-century Christians of Palestine remembered these words, and many of them left Jerusalem when they saw the Roman siege, sensing that the things of which Jesus warned them nearly forty years earlier were soon to come to pass.

Second, Jesus reminds his disciples that God will preserve his people in the midst of whatever persecution he might allow as the end draws near. The same Savior promised to return in judgment, has also promised that the Gates of Hell cannot prevail against his church. We see this in the fact that Israel's tribulation was cut short for God's elect and God's people are warned in advance to flee so as to escape it. Here we see God's grace restraining evil, even in the midst of the great tribulation. God will never give us more than we can bear and he will always provide a way of escape. This is his promise.

Third, Jesus also warns us to always be on our guard for false Christs and miracle workers, who arrive on the scene, performing signs and wonders so as to deceive God's elect. We are not to listen to them. We are not to be taken in by them. We must resist them with the gospel. For Jesus himself says his coming will not be secret. It will not occur in some private meeting room, nor in some far away corner of the world. *"For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.* This then, beloved is our blessed hope as we watch the signs of times, and go about our divinely mandated duty of preaching the gospel to all nations as we await the coming of the Son of Man to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. For when he appears in the clouds with great glory, we shall be made like him.

But as Jesus utters these words, he reminds his disciples that they were previously foretold by the prophet Daniel. So before we turn to Daniel's amazing but difficult prophecy in the weeks ahead, it is good to lay the background for the next series by considering how Jesus regarded Daniel's prophecy, and how Jesus interpreted the Book of Daniel in light of his own messianic mission. For as Jesus himself speaks of the end of the age, he reminds us that all of this was "spoken by the prophet Daniel."