

“The Son of Man Is Coming”

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

Matthew 24:29-44; Daniel 7:9-18

Before we begin our series on the Book of Daniel, we are spending several weeks looking at Jesus’ use of Daniel’s prophecy as recounted in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24. Jesus sees the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy as centered in his own messianic mission. Jesus even declares himself to be Daniel’s mysterious “Son of Man,” making a connection to the remarkable vision found in Daniel 7. At the end of Matthew 23, Jesus pronounces seven words of woe (covenant curses) upon Israel, the Pharisees, and teachers of the law. Jesus also announced that Israel will be left desolate—its people scattered among the nations. And then shortly after as he was walking in the temple area with his disciples, Jesus points to the temple’s great stones and tells 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.*” If the magnificent temple of Herod will be destroyed, the disciples quite naturally thought the end of the age must be at hand—they are mistaken. It is in the context of dispensing covenant blessings and curses upon Israel that Jesus appeals to Daniel’s prophecy.

With this prophetic warning ringing in their ears, at the very first moment the disciples are alone with Jesus they ask him three questions, prompted by all of the things that Jesus has just told them. In the opening verses of Matthew 24—the account of Jesus’ speaking about the course of future events known as the Olivet Discourse—the disciples ask Jesus “*tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*” In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus answers these three questions, and in doing so speaks authoritatively about the future desolation of Israel as well as his own coming in judgment at the end of the age. Throughout the discourse, Jesus appeals to the prophecy of Daniel, and as we will see, Jesus even speaks of himself as the “Son of Man”—one of the key figures from the remarkable vision in the seventh chapter of Daniel’s prophecy.

The key to interpreting the Olivet Discourse correctly—given what Jesus has foretold about the immediate future of Israel—is that the disciples incorrectly assume that an event so disastrous to Israel such as the destruction of the temple, must mean that when the temple is destroyed the end of the age must therefore be at hand. But this is not correct, and as we have seen, as Jesus answers their questions, he corrects this faulty assumption. The destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem will come to pass within a generation—AD 70, but the end of the age, and the Parousia (or coming of the Son of Man) will come much later, only after an indeterminate period of time, when the sign of the Son of Man appears in the sky and all of the nations mourn as the day of the Lord and final judgment has come.

In verses 4-14, Jesus answers the disciples’ last question put to him first—“*what are the signs of the end of the age?*” In answering their question, Jesus speaks of various signs of the end of the age, including wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famine, the coming of messianic pretenders, the coming persecution of God’s people, as well as the preaching of the gospel to the ends of the earth. While all of these things will be experienced by Jesus’ disciples between the time of his soon to come death and resurrection, and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, these signs also extend into the present age as guarantees of our Lord’s second advent at the end of the age. Because Jesus speaks of the preaching of the gospel to all nations as a sign of the end, the things of which Jesus has just spoken will indeed continue on into the present age *after* the destruction of Jerusalem, in A.D. 70.

As we saw last time, in verses 15-28, Jesus answers the disciples' question about the destruction of the temple. 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).*" Explaining the meaning of Daniel's mysterious prophecy about a coming desolation of the temple (from Daniel 9:24-27), Jesus sees this event predicted by Daniel as yet future, even though most Jews understood Daniel to have been referring to the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes in 163 B.C. But Jesus now says such desolation of the temple is yet future and is associated with the coming destruction of Jerusalem, a period which is described by Jesus as the greatest period of tribulation Israel will ever face. Jesus is speaking prophetically of the coming Roman siege of Jerusalem in AD 70. Says Jesus 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.*" Although some have argued that because the tribulation Jesus describes is so great that it must off in the distant future, the reason why Jesus warns those in Jerusalem to flee when they see this desolation of the temple is precisely because this tribulation—terrible as it is—is soon to come.

Again, some history here is important. The first temple of Solomon was destroyed in 587 B.C., and the rebuilt temple was desecrated by Antiochus in 163 B.C. These events left deep scars on the Jewish consciousness. But the coming destruction of the temple will be so thorough, says Jesus, that not one stone will be left on another. In addition, Jerusalem will be surrounded by the Roman army, the city will be destroyed, and the Jews dispersed to the ends of the earth. The greatest tribulation Israel will ever face is just forty years ahead, as this generation (the disciples hearing him answer this question) will not pass away until all these things (the desolation of Israel and the destruction of the temple) have come to pass.

There are also theological reasons underlying the destruction of the temple as well. Israel's hope was in that building, in the rituals performed there, in the blood of bulls and goats shed upon its altar. The temple had become an obstacle to faith in Jesus—Israel's Messiah. With the true temple standing in their midst in the person of Jesus, Israel and its leaders were so blind to the things of God that they rejected Jesus and his perfect righteousness, seeing their own righteousness as quite sufficient, and believing that the blood of bulls and goats would take away guilt for the few and insignificant sins they may have committed. Salvation stood in the temple before their very eyes, but the Scribes and Pharisees cannot see it. The great irony is that Israel's unbelief is the very means by which Jesus will go to Calvary's cross, and make the one sacrifice that can remove the guilt and stain of sin. Israel's desolation means salvation for the nations. Such is the great reversal and irony associated with the coming of Christ's kingdom.

While speaking of the destruction of the temple and the great disaster to come upon Israel, Jesus also warned the disciples about false Christs who will surface in the period immediately after the temple's destruction and who will plague Christ's church until the end of the age. Warns Jesus, if you hear that the Christ has returned in the desert, or a secret room, don't believe it, for the coming of the Son of Man will not be secret. Says Jesus in verse 27, "*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, and Jesus himself warns us about interpreting his coming as preterists do—that his coming on the clouds with great glory occurred when Jerusalem fell. No, says Jesus, his coming will be like lightning flashing across the sky! You can't miss it. This will be the day of mourning for all the nations, not just Israel. As Jesus will soon make plain, his coming marks the end of the age, the final and terrible day of judgment.

With this in mind, then, let us turn to our text, verses 29-44 of Matthew 24, the third section of the Olivet Discourse, in which Jesus now speaks directly to the question about his coming at the end of the age. Having made it clear that the destruction of the temple, while a period of unsurpassed tribulation for Israel, is not the end of the age, Jesus now answers the disciple's question about the timing and nature of

his coming in judgment (his second advent).

Jesus has been describing the signs of his coming, now he goes on to describe that coming itself.¹ The critical issue here is, “how is what follows is connected to the preceding?” As Jesus states in verse 29, “*immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*” There are a number of questions here which much be answered if we are to interpret these words correctly. Is Jesus speaking of the events of the destruction of the temple in AD 70—*immediately after the tribulation of those days*—giving credence to the preterist view that the coming spoken of did occur in AD 70? Or is Jesus speaking of the tribulation of the entire period from the days of his death and resurrection to the destruction of the temple, and which extends on into the present age? There good reasons to embrace the latter position, and to understand Jesus as speaking about his second advent at the end of the age.

In the first place, Jesus’ words clearly echo the words of Isaiah 13:9-11, which speak of the Day of the Lord as characterized by cosmic signs and final judgment. In the words of Isaiah—“*behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless.*” The picture given us by the prophet is one of a day of judgment, yet to come upon the entire world, a day in which the heavens themselves will convulse. While this can be said, in part, about the events of AD 70 and the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, the words of Isaiah’s prophecy make it difficult to localize this to events surrounding the desolation of Israel. These signs are cosmic and universal and associated with final judgment. As we will see in the following verses, Jesus will not only echo the words of Isaiah, he will magnify and apply these words to himself.

But why would Jesus say that this coming occurs *immediately* after the tribulation of those days—i.e., after Israel is left desolate? As Jesus himself will go on to say about his coming in verse 36, “*concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.*” Jesus must mean that his return, of which he is now speaking, cannot be fulfilled by the events of AD 70, precisely because he has just told his disciples the exact time when Jerusalem and the temple will be destroyed—when you see the abomination that makes desolate standing in the temple! When that happens it is time to flee! From verse 29 on, Jesus is obviously speaking of an event about which no one can know the day or the hour, only his Father in heaven. This cannot be limited to the events of A.D. 70.

The reason Jesus does this is surely intentional—the tension between signs which precede his coming contrasted with the suddenness of his coming is set forth so that his people will live every moment in light of the promise of his coming because the signs of the end point to his return. And yet, not knowing the day or the hour when he will come again, we, as his people, are to live every moment to its fullest, going about our divinely mandated task of fulfilling the cultural mandate—that is, marrying and raising our families, fulfilling our callings and vocations, etc.—and as a church, taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. This is the same tension we find throughout the New Testament between the already and the not yet. For the signs which point to the certainty of our Lord’s return stand in direct contrast to the teaching about suddenness and unexpected nature of his return, about which no one knows the day or the

¹ H. N. Ridderbos, Matthew, 447.

hour.² The reason for this tension will become clearer as we work through the passage.

Jesus' point from verse 29 on, is that his coming will shake the very heavens, picking up on the earlier image he gave of lightening flashing from east to west in verse 27. When Jesus returns, "*the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*" These are cosmic signs. No one is going to miss it! No secret rapture here. In fact, Jesus goes on to say in verse 30, that when the heavens are shaken, "*then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.*" Jesus will define what he means by this "sign of the Son of Man" in the next verse, but what is important to note here is that he is now speaking of the final judgment—all the nations of the earth will mourn at the very sight of his coming. Revelation 6:15-17 comes to mind when we read, "*then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"*"

Jesus' words echo the prophecy found Zechariah 12:10-13:1. "*And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land shall mourn, each family by itself: the family of the house of David by itself....`On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.*" The nations will weep at the time Jesus appears, because it is the day of judgment, and the judge is the one whom the nations have crucified with sinful hands. Jesus has died for the sins of the world (the cleansing fount), but the nations, just like Israel have rejected him. On that day they will be overcome with grief.

But what is the sign of the coming of the Son of Man? Jesus tells us in verse 31, "*and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*" When Jesus speaks of this coming as occurring *immediately after* the tribulation of those days, this cannot be confined to God's judgment upon Israel. The Son of Man will come in great glory. His coming will be heralded with cosmic signs and the trumpet call of God, the sign of final judgment. In that day the great prophecy of Daniel 7:13-14 will be fulfilled—"*I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*" This is the day when the trumpet sounds, and when the angels appear to gather God's elect from the ends of the earth. This is the day when the everlasting kingdom of the "Son of Man" of Daniel's vision comes into its fulness.

As Paul puts it 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10: "*when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey*

² See C. E. B. Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark (Cambridge) 402; Ridderbos, Matthew, 447 ff; Carson, Morris and others. Hagner's discussion is also helpful, though he adopts the preterist exegesis while interpreting the passage along futurist lines.

the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed.” The trumpet call mentioned by Jesus is an important theme in Paul’s writings also. The heavenly trumpet announces the long-expected day of resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15:52, Paul tells us that the resurrection will occur “*in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.*” In 1 Thessalonians 4:16 he puts it this way: “*For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.*” This is the day of judgment and resurrection, not the tribulation to come upon Israel in AD 70.

Returning to a theme Jesus used just a day or so earlier with his disciples, he speaks once again of the fig tree, because it makes a perfect object lesson in the present context. “*From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near.*” In a world dominated by agriculture, the images Jesus used were familiar and powerful. When the fig tree buds and produces leaves, summer is near, the temple and Jerusalem are soon to be destroyed and Israel left desolate. Given that the signs of the end are also present and continue past the events of A.D. 70, the coming of the Son of Man is both immanent and inevitable, even though he himself has not yet appeared in his glory. From the fall of Jerusalem until this very moment, the universe groans, longing for the coming of the Son of Man to make all things new. The signs he has given tell that Jesus is right at the door, but that he has not yet returned because the end of the age has not yet come.

In fact, in verse 34, says Jesus “*truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.*” Since Jesus has just told us that his coming is near, and that the people listening to him we see the abomination which makes desolate standing in the holy place, so too, Jesus now tells his disciples that all of these things, i.e., all of the signs of which he just spoken, including the sign of the destruction of the temple and the city will come to pass before the generation to whom Jesus is speaking passes away. If, as our dispensational friends argue, that Jesus is speaking to us at the end of the age, and that this reference to the fig tree points to the modern nation of Israel, then Jesus never does answer the disciple’s question about the destruction of the temple, but allows them to think he is doing so.

In fact, since Israel became a nation in 1948, over sixty years have gone by—far more than a generation. I have books from one dispensational writer defining a generation as 30 years, then, 33, then 40. Jesus is speaking to his disciples and answering their query. He is not speaking about the birth of the modern nation of Israel. And, in point of fact, the signs of the end were present from the beginning and the temple was destroyed with Jerusalem becoming desolate exactly as he predicted. Only God in human flesh could predict the future, much less utter the following sentence—“*heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*” This is perhaps our Lord’s strongest assertion of deity yet. His words, being the word of God, will never pass away—though the heavens and the earth will. The reason Jesus can speak of the future with such certainty is because his words are the words of God.

And yet, while the signs of the end can be known and to some degree understood, the timing of our Lord’s return remains a mystery—intentionally so. Says Jesus, in words so clear to as be beyond misinterpretation, “*but concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.*” If, in his incarnation and humble estate, Jesus laid aside certain divine prerogatives and chose not to know the hour of his coming, we can be sure that no one else does either. In fact, the about only time when we can be sure that the Lord will not come back is when someone sets a date predicting his return! We are all precluded from date setting, and from listening to those who do.

Though certain signs precede his coming, no one knows the day or hour of his return, and anyone who says he does is either deceived or a deceiver.

In verses 37-44, Jesus comes to the reason as to why he leaves his disciples with the tension between the signs which precede his coming and the suddenness and unexpected nature of his return. God's people are to be ready for the return of Jesus Christ. Says Jesus to us his people, watch! Once again, Jesus returns to the prior course of redemptive history to explain the future. Says Jesus, "*for as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.*" In the days of Noah, God's judgment was swift and universal—the great flood destroyed the earth and its inhabitants. The use of the Noah story by Jesus lends great weight to the argument that Jesus is speaking of final judgment upon the wicked—not a temporal judgment upon unbelieving Israel in A.D. 70—but when the Son of Man returns at the end of the age. Though the signs of his coming are present for everyone to see, the nations will go about their business, oblivious to the signs of the times and the certainty of final judgment. While believers are to live life to its fullest, they also wait in eager expectation of the coming of the Son of Man. Non-Christians will be swept away in the judgment yet to come, not realizing what is happening to them until it is too late.

In verses 40-41, Jesus goes on to speak of this judgment in more detail. "*Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.*" Indifferent to the fate that is about to befall them, Jesus describes people going about their everyday activities, preoccupied by the things of this world, when they are caught unawares by his return and the judgment yet to come. Jesus will separate humanity into two categories—those who are taken away and those left behind. In light of verse 31, it is presumably believers who are "taken" to be with Jesus. These are God's elect and are gathered from the four corners of the earth by the legions of the heavenly host who accompany the Son of Man at his coming. Jesus spoke earlier of wheat and tares growing together until the day of judgment (his return) when the tares are thrown into the fire. Jesus will continue to do this in the next chapter of Matthew (25) when he speaks of sheep and goats, one group receiving the blessings of the kingdom, the others receiving eternal judgment. But from these words in the Olivet Discourse, it is clear that those left behind now face certain judgment.

In verse 42, we now come to the heart of the Olivet Discourse—Jesus' exhortation to his disciples to watch for his coming, an exhortation couched in the tension between the signs which precede his coming and the unexpected suddenness of his return. Says Jesus, in light of everything he has just told them, "*Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*" Rather than focus upon the date of his coming, Jesus plainly tells his disciples to concentrate on being ready at any time, since it is impossible to know that date of his coming. Watch, Jesus says. Keep vigil. Be alert.

To make this case more powerfully Jesus now uses a simple analogy and then identifies himself as the mysterious "Son of Man" from Daniel's vision. "*But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*" Yes, signs will precede his coming. But his coming will be unexpected. And since we don't know when the thief is coming, we must be watchful all the time, ever diligent, always prepared.

What does the Olivet Discourse mean for us as we prepare to study the Book of Daniel? With the advantage of two-thousand years of hindsight, we can see how Jesus' words to his disciples did indeed

come to pass exactly as he foretold and as predicted in Daniel 9:24-27. The nation of Israel has been cut off and left desolate, the Jews dispersed into all the earth, and only now have they returned to their ancient home. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed as was Herod's magnificent temple by Rome's army in A.D. 70—not one stone was left upon another—a time of tribulation unsurpassed in Israel's history. But Jesus' words have not passed away, the signs of the end of the age continue on to the present day. There are wars and rumors of wars. There are earthquakes, false Messiahs, and persecution and the on-going martyrdom of God's people. But the gospel is also being preached to all nations as Jesus said it would. This is how then, we should read and interpret Daniel's prophecy to which Jesus repeatedly appeals when talking of the destruction of Jerusalem and the times of the end. Daniel's prophecy points ahead to Jesus' messianic mission.

Jesus' words about his second coming are spoken in such a way as to create a tension between signs which precede his coming and the fact that his coming would be sudden and unexpected. As the disciples were to watch for the abomination which makes desolate (as foretold in Daniel 9), so too are God's people in all ages to watch for the sign of the Son of Man (foretold in Daniel 7). For two thousand years people have gone about their business—just as it was in the days of Noah. Non-Christians see the signs of the end and laugh and scoff—where is this coming that he promised? But as the city of Jerusalem was laid bare and the temple utterly destroyed, so will it be in the day of judgment. When Jesus came to earth as a child he did become meek, mild, and helpless. He did so to fulfill the law of God, and then die for our sins at the hands of his own people. But Jesus rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven, awaiting the day of his coming in judgment. On the day of Jesus' return, we will not face the babe in the manger. We will face the Son of Man, who will come unexpectedly to render certain judgment. Now, while there is time, flee to Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Receive the free gift of eternal life and be clothed in his perfect righteousness.

But for those in Christ, let us do as Jesus told us to do. Let us watch with eager expectation. For the great day of the Lord will certainly come even though life goes on, just as it did in the days of Noah. But in that day of his return, there will be no more sin, no more curse, no more pain, no more tears, no more suffering. May we be alert, and may it please the Lord that we be that generation living when the sign of the Son of Man appears in the sky, and that like Enoch and Elijah, may we not taste the sting of death. And so I say to you, "*therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*" Indeed, the Son of Man is coming—the Son of Man described by Daniel in the seventh chapter of his prophecy—to receive his everlasting kingdom and exercise his full dominion.