

“JESUS’S TEACHING ON THE END TIMES”

**I. Introduction**

- A. This passage, along with its parallels in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, is known as the Olivet Discourse.
1. It is so named because we are told by Matthew and Mark that it was delivered by Jesus on Mount Olivet, which stands across the Kidron Valley to the east of Jerusalem, offering a spectacular view of the temple in Jesus’s day.
  2. Before we delve into this passage, I want to address a question that it raises for interpreters.
  3. The question is: what event, or events, is Jesus speaking of here?
  4. Is he only talking about the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., or is he also talking about the entire period leading up to the time of his return?
  5. A minority of interpreters, known as preterists, say that the discourse is only about the destruction of the temple.
  6. The key verse cited in support of this interpretation is verse 32, where Jesus says, “this generation will not pass away until all has taken place.”
  7. One reason why preterists argue for this interpretation is because most of them are also postmillennialists, whose eschatological hope tends to be focused not so much on the return of Christ at the end of this age, but upon the belief that the church will eventually enjoy an extended period of global success and influence within this age.
  8. This leads postmillennialists to contend that passages that speak of tribulation and trouble for the church are talking about things that

took place early on in church history.

- B. While there are good men who hold to the preterist interpretation, there are a number of reasons why the majority of interpreters, myself included, are not convinced that this is the right way to read this passage.
1. First of all, take note of what Jesus says in verse 9: "And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once."
  2. What does Jesus mean by "the end" here?
  3. Is he talking about the end of the Jerusalem temple, as preterists contend?
  4. We gain insight into this by looking at Matthew's version of the discourse, where Jesus's statement about the things that need to take place before "the end" is made in response to this question from the disciples: "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Mt. 24:3)
  5. This question tells us that at that time the disciples thought that the end of the temple would mean the end of this present age and the ushering in of the consummated kingdom of God.
  6. They were obviously wrong about that, as Jesus pointed out in the first chapter of Acts when he answered their question "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" by saying, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority."
  7. When it comes to Jesus's use of the term "the end" in our text in Luke, the key question is whether Jesus would use the terminology that the disciples' used, specifically "your coming" and "the end of the age," to describe the destruction of the temple.
  8. This does not seem likely when we note that there is no other instance in the New Testament where this terminology is used to

refer to events prior to the second coming of Christ.

9. For this reason, it is best to conclude that when Jesus speaks of “the end” in verse 9, he is referring to the very end of this present age.
- C. Second, in Matthew’s version of the discourse Jesus says that the gospel must be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations before the end comes.
1. In my opinion, preterist attempts to make a case that this somehow happened before 70 A.D. are unpersuasive.
  2. Third, Jesus says in verse 35 that the things that he is talking about will come “upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth.”
  3. Again, it is difficult to square this with the contention that these events are limited to what took place in Jerusalem when the temple was laid waste by the Romans.
  4. Fourth, in Matthew’s version of the discourse, the second coming of Christ is said to be “immediately after the tribulation” that Jesus is describing in this discourse.
  5. It is hard to see how the tribulation of 70 A.D. can be the final tribulation when the second coming did not immediately follow it.
  6. The preterist argument that the coming of the Son of Man in this discourse is not referring to the second coming but to the announcement of the gospel is in conflict with the Old Testament background in Daniel 2 and 7.
  7. As for Jesus’s statement that “this generation will not pass away until all has taken place,” the contention that this requires that we interpret the entire passage in reference to the fall of Jerusalem is unwarranted.
  8. There are other ways of understanding this statement.

9. It could simply be that this statement is limited to what would take place in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., even though other elements in the discourse point beyond those events.
  10. Alternatively, it could be that Jesus is saying that the Jewish people will continue to exist as a distinct race until the time of his return.
- D. In light of these factors, it seems to me that while the events of 70 A.D. are certainly in view in the Olivet Discourse, it also describes the entire period of history that extends to the time of Christ's return at the end of the age.
1. This is consistent with the tendency of the Old Testament prophets to talk about the events of their own day alongside events that will only take place in the distant future.
  2. Very often, the prophets provide a picture of judgment that is both contemporary to their situation and at the same time far too wide-scaled to be limited to their situation.
  3. This literary feature has been referred to as "prophetic foreshortening," in which events in the distant future are spoken of in a manner that is almost indistinguishable from events in the near future.
  4. It should not surprise us to see Jesus employing the same device.
  5. In the Olivet discourse, the fall of Jerusalem functions as a type, or a foreshadowing, of the final judgment that will come at the end of all history.
  6. In other words, the things that Jesus said to prepare his disciples for the judgment that was about to come upon Jerusalem have an application for the church in every age.
  7. For this reason, the remainder of this sermon will focus on the general principles that the Olivet discourse teaches us about the end times.

## II. The End Times Are Marked by Destruction and Persecution

- A. As we turn now to look at these general principles, the first thing that I want us to consider is that the end times are marked by destruction and persecution.
1. We see in verse 5 that this discourse was prompted by comments that the people around Jesus were making about the majesty of the temple.
  2. Herod the Great began a massive rebuilding of the temple in 20 B.C., and in Jesus's day it truly was a sight to behold, taking up one-sixth of the area of the city of Jerusalem.
  3. Yet Jesus tells his disciples that this glorious structure is going to be completely destroyed.
  4. Its destruction is necessary because, in the words of one commentator, "One greater than the temple has come, and because the people have rejected Him and desire to retain the temple as the centre of their own religion, there is no other alternative." [Geldenhuis, 525]
  5. Jesus's words were fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the Roman general Titus ordered the total destruction of the temple, first burning it and then leveling it.
  6. As our Lord had foretold, not one stone was left standing.
- B. When Jesus's disciples heard his prediction about the temple, they wanted to know when this catastrophic event would take place, and what signs they should look for so that they could know when it was drawing near.
1. As we have already noted, in Matthew's account, the disciples asked Jesus, "what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Mt. 24:3)

2. In the disciples' eyes, the end of the temple meant the end of this present age and the beginning of the age to come.
  3. They had no way of knowing that there would be a span of at least 2,000 years between the destruction of the temple and the final judgment.
  4. Yet there is a sense in which the end of the temple did mark the beginning of the end of the present age.
  5. When Jesus offered himself as the one true sacrifice for sins, the age to come was inaugurated, even though it overlaps with the present age until the day of Christ's return.
  6. This has been described as "inaugurated eschatology" or "already-not yet eschatology."
  7. It means that Jesus's life, death and resurrection ushered in the era of the new creation, even though we are still waiting for its consummation.
- C. This explains why Jesus told the disciples that the end will not be at once.
1. The signs of the end are not a secret code that clues us in to the precise timing of the coming judgment.
  2. The signs that Jesus mentions — wars, natural disasters, famines, pestilences — these are crisis events, and at times of crisis, people are easily swayed by those who try to capitalize on the atmosphere of worry and uncertainty.
  3. This is exactly what happened during the decades leading up to the temple's destruction.
  4. The Jewish historian Josephus writes of a number of false messiahs who arose during that period.
  5. The same thing continues to happen throughout history.

6. As Paul says in his second epistle to Timothy, “the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” (2 Tim 4:3–4 ESV)
  7. Times of crisis create opportunities for charismatic leaders to gain a following for themselves.
  8. The way to make sure that we are not led astray by such figures is to understand that the signs of the end do not tell us the precise moment when the end is going to take place.
  9. They simply serve as evidence that this world is under strain and that its end will eventually come.
- D. Jesus also says that his followers need to be ready to be persecuted for the sake of the gospel.
1. It is easy to see how this warning was relevant for the apostles.
  2. They were literally handed over to councils, beaten in synagogues, and brought before governors and kings because of their proclamation of the gospel.
  3. Tradition tells us that all of the apostles, with the exception of John, died as martyrs for the Christian faith.
  4. So the initial fulfillment of what Jesus says here is seen in the persecution that was experienced by the apostles and other Christians in the first century.
  5. At the same time, the New Testament makes it clear that opposition from the world is a mark that will characterize Christ’s church throughout history.
  6. As John says in his first epistle, “Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.” (1 John 3:13 ESV)

7. This is an important thing for us to remember.
8. You should not be surprised that the world hates you for being a Christian.
9. Yet you should not be discouraged either.
10. You have nothing to fear from the world, because it cannot do you any lasting harm.
11. As Jesus says to the disciples, even if the world does its worst to us, even if it puts us to death, not even a hair of our head will ultimately perish.

### **III. The End Times Are Met by Some with Foreboding, and by Others with Hope**

- A. The second general principle that this passage teaches us about the end times is that they are met by some with foreboding, and by others with hope.
  1. Jesus says in verses 25 and 26 that the signs that herald the end of this age will cause the people of the world to faint with fear and foreboding.
  2. While there are many troubling things in this world, the unbeliever responds to these things differently than the way a believer should respond to them.
  3. Just look at the way many people are expressing their political and social disagreements these days.
  4. Some people are abandoning basic civility.
  5. Some are regarding those who do not share their views as non-persons.
  6. Some are willing to use violence to express themselves.

7. The world today looks just like the apostle Paul said it would when he wrote these words to Timothy: “in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Tim 3:1-4 ESV)
  8. When unbelievers see signs that the world that they have built for themselves may be falling apart, they panic.
  9. They will do whatever it takes to try to preserve the life that they so cherish.
- B. Now certainly, we Christians see many troubling things when we look at the things that are happening in the world.
1. And while we are right to try to address these various matters of concern, we never have reason to panic.
  2. Remember what our Lord says in this text.
  3. He tells us that when we see the signs of the end taking place, we are to straighten up and raise our heads.
  4. While the things that remind us of the instability of this present age are not pleasant, they do assure us that the fullness of our redemption is drawing near.
  5. The kingdom of God in its final and consummated form is close at hand.
- C. Now, some people read this and wonder how Jesus could say that the kingdom of God is near.
1. Some preterists will point to this as proof that Jesus is talking about 70 A.D.

2. But consider what Jesus says in the very last chapter of the Bible: “And behold, I am coming soon... Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done... Surely I am coming soon.” (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20)
3. In Revelation 22, a passage where we are given a glorious picture of God’s kingdom in its consummate state, Jesus places an emphasis upon the immanence of his return.
4. Three times he says that he is coming soon, even though 2,000 years have passed since he spoke those words to John.
5. How are we to make sense of this?
6. We need to understand that the return of our Lord is “soon” and “near” in the sense that it is the next great event in salvation history.
7. Think of the things that we confess about Jesus in the Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed: he suffered, was crucified, died, was buried, rose again, ascended into heaven, is seated at God’s right hand, and will come again with glory at the final judgment.
8. All of those things have already taken place, with the sole exception of the last item on the list.
9. The return of Christ is “soon” and “near” because it is the last thing that we are waiting for.

#### **IV. The End Times Call for Watchfulness**

- A. The third general principle that this text tells us about the end times is that they call for watchfulness.
  1. Jesus underscores the certainty of his return by using the example of the fig tree, one of the few trees in the Middle East that loses its leaves.

2. When the leaves of the fig tree appear, it is a sure sign of summer.
  3. In the same way, there are many signs in our world that are sure indicators that a day of judgment is coming.
  4. The world is full of reminders of how it is falling apart.
  5. These things can be seen by Christians and non-Christians alike, but, as we have seen, they provoke differing responses.
  6. While the non-Christian panics as he scrambles to hold his world together, the Christian can remain steadfast because he knows that these things are signs pointing to the fact that a new world is on the horizon.
- B. Even though there are signs that herald Christ's return, no one knows exactly when his coming will be.
1. This is why we need to remain alert at all times.
  2. We are not to get weighed down by the pleasures and cares of this life.
  3. We need to be doing the things that our Lord has given us to do, lest the day of his return come upon us like a trap.
  4. Of course, Jesus is not saying that we should never take time to relax or enjoy ourselves.
  5. What he is saying is that everything that we do in this life, even our resting and recreating, should be done with an eye on his return.
  6. As the apostle Paul says, even our eating and drinking should be done to the glory of God.
  7. The Christian is never "off-duty."
  8. It is especially important for us to remember this as we live in a culture that is so addicted to entertainment, a culture that makes all

sorts of diversions available to us at any time and any place.

9. It is so easy for a person in our world to be lulled into a state of spiritual slumber by frittering away his time on worthless things.
10. Watch yourself.
11. Stay awake.
12. Pray that you will have strength to escape the things that will prove to be a snare to so many.
13. While there is no need to panic, there is great need for prayer.
14. As Paul said to the Christians in Corinth, "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." (1 Cor 10:12-13 ESV)