

## **Exegetical Notes, Matthew 24:15-35**

### **“The Little Apocalypse: The Sign of the Son of Man”**

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### **Matthew 24:15-35**

(Matthew 24 is called the “Little Apocalypse” or the “Olivet Discourse”. It is the last great discourse or section of teaching by Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel. Its subject is the “end times” or the end of time. This is the second sermon in a series of sermons on Matthew 24.)

### **Verse 15-18**

***“So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel ... let the reader understand... then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak.***

- There is a great deal to understand in these verses. They must be looked at with great care.
- First, the “holy place” spoken of by Jesus is the inner room of the Temple where, in Solomon’s day, the Ark of the Covenant had stood. It was believed to be the place where God’s feet touched earth, where God sat enthroned. Its presence assured the people of God’s continued and abiding presence with them
- The “abomination that causes desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel” is a reference to some object or event that will happen to desecrate the “holy place.” Daniel speaks of such an occurrence during the reign of the great Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes. At that time, Antiochus Epiphanes invaded Judah and sacked Jerusalem. He poured the broth of a boiled pig over the high altar in the Temple and erected a statue of Zeus in the “holy place.” For three years this abomination stood in the Temple. Worship of YHWH stopped in the Temple and the sacrificial system was interrupted. In the book of Revelation, as in the Books of Daniel and Ezekiel, this act is seen as a type, or picture, of a future time when the Anti-Christ will erect a

statue of himself in the “holy place” in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. It is to this action of the Anti-Christ that Jesus, here, refers. This event will happen toward the end of the 70<sup>th</sup> week spoken of by the prophet Daniel or at the end of the period we call the Great Tribulation, a 7-year period in which the Anti-Christ will rule the earth.

- Jesus says that this event will be a sign to all the faithful that the end of time is near and that the final events in history are about to unfold.
- Jesus’ point is that there is no time left in time when this event happens. The end is at hand and all of those who are in Judea should leave the place where the great last battle will happen, post haste. They should flee to the mountains for safety without stopping to take any provision because the end of time has come.

### **Verse 19-21**

***“How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now...and never to be equaled again.***

- The Book of Revelation teaches that in the last 3 ½ years of the Great Tribulation, the Anti-Christ will unleash great persecution of the faithful, both Christians and Jews. This will be a terrible time for those who believe in God. However, that will be as nothing compared to the great plagues of judgment that God will send upon the unfaithful and the Anti-Christ at the very end. The suffering of that judgment will be like nothing that has ever preceded it or anything that will follow it. The full wrath of God will fall upon the earth.
- In the verses preceding these, Jesus warned the faithful to flee to the mountains so as to escape the full force of these events. In these verses, he reminds us that these will be especially troubling days for pregnant women for two reasons: The judgment will make it impossible for them to get the supplies they need to care for their children and they will see their children suffer as a result thereof. He also says that the faithful should pray that these events do not happen in winter because the winter will make it even more difficult to get supplies. Many of the faithful who Jesus tells to flee will be Jews. The law said that Jews could only travel a few steps on the Sabbath without breaking the Sabbath law. Therefore, if these events fell on a Sabbath, the Jews, being loyal to the whole Law, would not be able to escape the full effect of the terrible judgment that will fall.

## Verse 22

***“If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.”***

- This verse is at the heart of the great controversy which rages among Christian scholars concerning the Rapture of the Church. Most Christian scholars believe that prior to the beginning of the Great Tribulation, Jesus will call those who know him out of the world so that they will escape the period of judgment that Jesus here discusses. They believe that the “elect,” referred to by Jesus in this verse, are those who turn to Christ after the removal or Rapture of the Church. This is known as the pre-Tribulation Rapture Theory. However, other scholars say that this reference proves that the church, the elect, will remain in the world until after the Tribulation. This is known as the Post-Tribulation Rapture Theory.
- Regardless of the theory to which you may subscribe, this passage teaches that the days of God’s judgment of the earth, which concludes the reign of the Anti-Christ, will be shortened for the sake of the faithful who remain. This is an act of God’s grace.

## Verse 23-25

***“At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect... if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time.”***

- “Christ is the Greek form of the Hebrew word “Messiah.” Jesus predicts that at the time of the end of history people will claim that they have seen the Messiah. But these private sightings of the Messiah are not to be trusted.
- Jesus said that, at that time, false Christs would appear. In this verse the word Christ is plural. The title, “Anti-Christ” which is given to the world ruler at the end of time who openly opposes Jesus and persecutes the faithful is also a plural term. Therefore, in this verse Jesus predicts the rise of the Anti-Christ. He also predicts that the Anti-Christ will have many helpers, the false prophets. These people will deceive many people into believing that the Anti-Christ is the true Messiah.
- They are so good at this deception that the elect, those chosen by God, would also be deceived about this issue, if it were possible for them to be deceived.

- Jesus' warning is important to remember in order not to be deceived.

### **Verse 26-28**

***“So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the desert,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.”***

- Jesus says that his second coming, that is, his return to earth at the end of time, will be visible to everyone at the same time. It will not be a secret. Therefore, no one will need to be told about it. All flesh will see it together.
- Just as we know that vultures circling in the sky are a sure sign that something has died, so will we know when Jesus comes.

### **Verse 29**

***“Immediately after the distress of those days  
     ‘the sun will be darkened,  
     and the moon will not give its light;  
     the stars will fall from the sky,  
     and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.***

- These words come from the prophet Isaiah 13:10. In that passage Isaiah describes the day of the Lord's return.
- These words do not describe the break up of the universe. These are signs that will tell everyone that the Lord has returned. They are signs that no one will miss.

### **Verse 30**

***“”At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.***

- In this verse Jesus says, “the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky.” This “sign” is perplexing to Bible scholars. No one knows for certain what it is. Some scholars say it is lightning (see verse 27). Others claim it is the “Shekinah glory of God” which caused Moses' face to shine (see Exodus 34:29-35). Still others say that this sign will not be revealed to us until we see it. Whatever the “sign” is, it will appear in the sky at the appointed time immediately before the second coming of Jesus Christ.

- This “sign” will be recognized by the nations of the world as an indication of the end. Because they have rejected Christ and followed the false Christ(s), they will mourn when they see it.
- Then, following the appearance of the “sign,” Jesus himself will appear in the clouds. The words “power and glory” indicate that he will not appear as the earthly Jesus, but as the resurrected Christ. His description is given in Revelation 1:12-18. This event will occur in the clouds, and all flesh will see it. Everyone will see and understand what is happening, that Christ has returned, together.

### **Verse 31**

***“And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.”***

- This process is more fully explained in 1 Thessalonians 4:16. There it says that when Christ comes in the clouds
  - +The archangel, Michael, will shout with a loud commanding voice.
  - +A trumpet, literally a shofar, will sound.
- +The elect, the Christians, will ascend to meet him in the sky. First those who have died before the coming of Christ will be resurrected to meet him and then those who are still living on earth will join him. Paul explains that all of the faithful will join Christ in the clouds at this time in response to the call of the archangel and the sound of the shofar. They will remain with him forever.

### **Verse 32-34**

***“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.***

- Jesus’ point is that we know the seasons are about to change as we observe certain events in nature, like the greening of the trees. The same thing is true when it comes to the end of time. The signs that he has given will warn us of its coming.
- Jesus promises that the generation which is alive when these last signs begin will not pass away until he comes. This is the generation which sees “the abomination which causes desolation” standing in the temple.

### **Verse 35**

***“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”***

- Jesus is saying that his words, about this matter and also about every other matter, are more reliable than the universe. It will happen, just as he said.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Little Apocalypse: The Sign of the Son of Man*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)