

Jesus Was Right!

¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

¹⁷ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house,

¹⁸ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.

¹⁹ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days!

²⁰ Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath.

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.

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.

²³ Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it.

²⁴ For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand.

²⁶ 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.

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.

²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

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.

³⁰ 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.

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.

³² "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.

³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Matthew 24:16-35

Was Jesus Wrong?

I WANT TO LAY OUT FOR YOU the seriousness of what is before us today. For decades people have been running to Matthew 24 in order to “prove” that Jesus didn’t know what he was talking about. The idea is that if you can demonstrate that Jesus blew his prophetic predictions, then you can prove that he was not really God. I think that logic works. The difficulty is proving it.

Jesus was convinced that something epic was going to happen to his generation. **Matthew 23:36** says, “Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.” Near the end of **Matthew 24[34]** he repeats the phrase again

saying, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” The question is, **what things?**

Liberals believe **Jesus is talking about his return on the Great Day of the LORD**, often called the *parousia*, throughout Matthew 24. They have held conferences to discuss these things. The most famous is probably the *Jesus Seminar*. It consists of a group of 150 “experts” in biblical studies. These scholars believe that Jesus did not die as a substitute for sinners, nor rise from the dead, but was simply a traveling sage who went around preaching a social gospel. A few years ago they produced a new color coded translation of the NT. The different colors represent the democratic process at work as each person used colored beads to vote for the things which they personally felt that Jesus may or may not have actually said or done as an historical figure. The whole thing was and remains *completely* arbitrary.

In this, however, they were keeping alive their father in the “faith” **Albert Schweitzer’s** (1875-1965) *Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1906). Schweitzer was a prototypical liberal who argued that of all the sayings ascribed to Jesus, the ones that we know *for certain* are his are his teachings in the Olivet

Discourse.¹ He drew the conclusion from this (or was this his *apriori*?) that Jesus believed in the impending end of the world (within a generation), that he was wrong, and that therefore he was not infallible or inspired or divine.²

The most famous atheist of the 20th century, **Bertrand Russell**, in his book *Why I Am Not A Christian* piggy-backed on Schweitzer and said, “I am concerned with Christ as He appears in the Gospel narrative... He certainly thought that his second coming would occur in the clouds of glory before the death of all the people who were living at the time. There are a great many texts that prove He believed that his coming would happen during the lifetime of many then living. That was the belief of his earlier followers.” He concludes that it would be a terrible error to follow a man like this who so greatly erred in his predictions about his parousia.

Jewish skeptics suggest that Jesus didn't finish the Messianic mission in the appropriate time as the prophets had said. So, they charge Christians with concocting the idea

¹ Strangely, the Jesus Seminar has come to the opposite conclusion. They arbitrarily decided that these are inauthentic teachings of Jesus.

² Schweitzer writes in the *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, "The whole history of Christianity down to the present day... is based on the delay of the Parousia, the nonoccurrence of the Parousia, the abandonment of eschatology, the process and completion of the 'de-eschatologizing' of religion which has been connected therewith."

of the “second coming” off in the future in order to cover up for Jesus’ mistake. Muslims too use this to prove that Christianity is a false religion.

Even the great **C.S. Lewis** got tripped up on this because he couldn’t understand that Jesus was answering *two different questions* in **Matthew 24** (see **vs. 3**). He argues with a person like Russell in “**The World’s Last Night**” that we can believe the Gospels because they tell the truth, even when it seems embarrassing. “‘Say what you like,’ we are told,’ the apocalyptic beliefs of the first Christians have been proved to be false. It is clear from the NT that they all expected the Second Coming in their own lifetime. And, worse still, they had a reason, and one which you will find very embarrassing. Their Master had told them so. He shared, and indeed created, their delusion. He said in so many words, “This generation shall not pass till all these things be done.” And he was wrong. He clearly knew no more about the end of the world than anyone else.” But Lewis immediately adds, “It is certainly the most embarrassing verse in the Bible [emphasis added].”³ Because he misunderstood the interpretation of the passage, Lewis tries to get out of the dilemma by saying that in just two verses Jesus admits that

³ CS Lewis, “The World’s Last Night and Other Essays, Harcourt Trade: 2002, p. 97-98.

not even he actually knows when he will return.⁴ At least this God admits his ignorance. “For a God who can be ignorant is less baffling than a God who falsely professes ignorance. The answer of the theologians is that the God-man was omniscient as God, and ignorant as Man.” he says.⁵

The problem with this line of reasoning is that we get no hint at all that Jesus doesn't know what he is talking about regarding the future until vs. 36. In fact, for 33 verses it is just the opposite. Jesus isn't claiming ignorance in vs. 34 about “this generation,” he seems to believe that in fact all of these very specific things will happen to that generation. Thus, because of a misunderstanding that I am trying to rectify this morning, it isn't just Atheists and Liberals who get into big trouble with this passage. It is great apologists like Lewis who has opened up a mighty Pandora's Box because of bad hermeneutics.

In order to get out of this obvious embarrassment (which occurs because people think the whole chapter is

⁴ It should be noticed that the Anglican Lewis did not have a Fundamentalist-Evangelical view of biblical inspiration. That doesn't mean his faith was fideistic. On the contrary, he was one of the great apologists of the 20th century. For some reason, however, he did not see the logic of Russell's analysis. I for one think that if Russell and Lewis are correct about Jesus, then Russell, not Lewis, has the right conclusion. What sense does it make to follow a man who within a couple of sentences admits he doesn't actually know what he is talking about?

⁵ Lewis, p. 99.

answering the question about the Second Coming), many of those who believe in the still future return of the Lord Jesus have felt the need to **change the obvious meaning of “this generation”** (referring to the people Jesus is talking to) to some future generation far away in the very distant future. Personally, I do not believe that this is a legitimate way to translate the Bible. Jesus was very clearly talking to the Disciples about the destruction of the temple (**Matt 24:2**). So, I believe “this generation” does refer to a generation alive at the time of Christ. **So was Jesus wrong?**

Josephus

The short answer is “**no.**” The long answer is why. To start off, I want to read a few snippets from those who were alive and saw the events that took place around 70 AD.

It had so come to pass, that our city Jerusalem had arrived at a higher degree of happiness than any other city under the Roman government, and yet at last fell into the sorest of calamities again. Accordingly, it appears to me, that the misfortunes of all men, from the beginning of the world, if they be compared to these of the Jews, are not so considerable as they were.

These words come from **Josephus** in the preface to his *Wars of the Jews*. Josephus was a Jewish priest who led a revolt against the Romans in Galilee. He was captured by the army in 67 AD. He was held prisoner until 69 AD. He returned with Titus to Jerusalem in 70 AD and became an eyewitness to the final siege of Jerusalem. **Who could be in a better position to report the events of those days than *this Jew*?** The Roman historian **Tacitus** wrote of this time period,

The history on which I am entering is that of a period rich in disasters, terrible with battles, torn by civil struggles, horrible even in peace. Four emperors fell by the sword; there were three civil wars, more foreign wars, and often both at the same time.

Josephus goes onto say,

The famine was too hard for all other passions... children pulled the very morsels that their fathers were eating out of their very mouths, and, what was still more to be pitied, so did the mothers do as to their infants... but the seditious [Jews] everywhere came upon them immediately and snatched away from them what they had gotten from others... they also

invented terrible methods of torment to discover where any food was (*Wars* 5.10.3).

Neither did any other city ever suffer such miseries, nor did any age ever breed a generation more fruitful in wickedness that this was, from the beginning of the world (*Wars* 5.10.4).

The [Romans] ran every one through whom they met with, and obstructed the very lanes with their dead bodies, and made the whole city run down with blood, to such a degree indeed that the fire of many of the houses was quenched with these men's blood (*Wars* 6.8.5). (My comment: They say that over 1,000,000 Jews were killed in the final siege of Jerusalem).

But for all the rest of the wall, it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it had ever been inhabited (*Wars* 7.1.1).

Brief Summary of the Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple

Those are but a few of the things that Josephus *says* of these things. Here is a **brief summary** of the events of those days:⁶

⁶ I am following "Brief Summary of the Destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD" by Jeff Randolph available online.

In 66 AD, the Jews, greatly troubled by the procurator of Judea, **Florus**, revolted against Rome. That same year, **Cestius Gallus**, governor of Syria, came upon Jerusalem to end the revolt, but for some reason withdrew and nearly lost his troops to the retaliating Jews.

In 67 AD, the Roman Emperor, **Nero**, sent General Vespasian to end the uprising. Vespasian marched through Galilee, where Josephus, the leader of that revolt surrendered and became captive.

In 68 AD, Nero committed suicide, and civil war ensued as four emperors took the throne between June 68 AD and December 69 AD. During this time **Vespasian**, the fourth emperor, was proclaimed Caesar by the army, and so decided to head for Rome, leaving the problems in Israel to his son **Titus**.

⁷By the spring of 70 AD, the Jews found themselves defying the Roman armies surrounding the capital city. Titus brought five legions of Roman soldiers, in addition to auxiliaries, engineers, cavalry etc. – some 80,000 men in all. He was there to force the Jews to submit and to try and preserve the city as a prize for Vespasian.

⁷ The following follows “The Siege of Jerusalem” by Jared Jackson available online.

But Jerusalem had walls and cliffs and the Jews would not submit. Only the north side was free of cliffs and Titus pointed his attack there. The war machine broke through the first of three walls in early May. Within five days, they were through the second.

Food rations were scarce inside the city. At nights, **some would sneak out** through hidden passages to steal food from the soldiers tents. Titus decreed that those captured were to be crucified. As one historian puts it, “**A forest of crosses littered the countryside as trees were stripped off the land to satisfy the orders for crucifying some 500 Jews per day).**” A rampart was built around the city to seal off the hidden passages. Hunger became so intense that the citizens became insane with famine, resorting to murdering one another over food and for food (i.e. cannibalism). Those who were not eaten were cast over the walls into piles of bides that remained unburied.

The campaign took longer that Titus expected. The soldiers were becoming difficult to manage. They could see Herod’s temple and all of its gold glittering in the evening. They wanted the spoils and treasures of the city. The army grew in rage. Those Jews who tried to escape had their

bodies ripped open and soldiers searched their stomachs for jewels and gold.

Gradually, the city was subdued. But the massive stone walls of the temple impeded their progress. The soldiers pressed on by burning down the enormous doors of the temple. Titus commanded his men to put out the fire and “spare the Sanctuary.” But the Jews attacked the army even as they were trying to put out the fire. The army retaliated and went berserk.

Suddenly, without command, a soldier launched a torch through the Golden Window of the temple setting the fabrics inside aflame. Instantly the entire temple was on fire. Titus again ordered that the fire be put out, but this time it was too late. Eventually the soldiers completely tore apart the compound, looking for rumored treasures. They plundered the city and extracted vengeance from the Jews who had resisted them so bitterly. Titus, having lost the treasure of the city, had it razed to the ground. As for the temple, not one stone was left upon another.

Synoptics Compared

It was necessary for me to tell you these sordid details in order to prepare you for Jesus’ prediction in **Matthew**

24:15-35. Before I get to this, I want you to look at the **insert you have in your bulletin.** It contains a parallel account of the three synoptic gospels. Here you can see the places where all three gospels are parallel. There are many verses from all three gospels, which makes what I am about to say very important.

Luke's account differs greatly from Matthew and Mark in that the later two are cryptic in their predictions. But Luke is very specific about things he says between those verses that parallel the other two. Specifically, Luke tells us all sorts of things about the destruction of Jerusalem.

Luke 21:20, “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies.” Then you have a **parallel (21:21a)** “Let those in Judea flee to the mountains.” **Luke 21:21b,** “Let those who are inside the city depart and let not those who are out in the country enter it.” Then you have a **parallel (21:23),** “Alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days!” Then you have another **parallel,** “For great distress shall be upon the earth” **(23b).** Then **Luke 21:24** says, “They will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” Then you have a **parallel (21:25-26, 27),** “The

sun, the moon, and the stars... and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

The point of this is obvious. Luke explicitly talks about the destruction of Jerusalem, *in language reminiscent of Josephus*. Yet, Luke continues to parallel Matthew and Mark throughout this discussion of Jerusalem. Yet, when you read Matthew and Mark, there is no explicit mention of Jerusalem at all. The conclusion I arrive at is that *what Matthew keeps cryptic and prophetic, Luke makes plain. But they are talking about the same thing!*

Let us now go through **Matthew 24:15-35** first taking a quick survey and then dealing with the difficult questions that arise. The quick survey ought to make it clear that the general thrust of Jesus’ sermon in Matthew has the same thing in mind that Luke records *and* that Josephus describes as an eyewitness 40 years later. In other words, **Jesus was not wrong!**

Matthew 24:15 – Abomination of desolation

As I argued last week, the abomination of desolation refers to the abomination of continual temple sacrifices,

indeed to the abomination of the temple itself, and to the armies standing in the holy place ready to put an end to national Israel when its decreed final end is poured out on the desolate. Luke's account parallels this cryptic saying by making it plain, "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near."

Matthew 24:16 – Flee to the mountains

Luke says that when see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then flee to the mountains. Matthew has the exact same language after discussing the abomination of desolation. But the question should be, how can people in a locked up city flee when it is surrounded by a vast army? The answer is they can't. What they need is sovereign intervention.⁸

This was given to the Jewish Christians (i.e. "the elect" in vs. 22) in the form of an inexplicable abandonment of Cestius Galius' army against Jerusalem in 66 AD. Josephus says the army left, "without any just occasion in the world"

⁸ Josephus (remember writing as a *non*-Christian Jew) writes of the sovereign intervention that follows, "It was, I suppose, owing to the aversion God had already toward the city and the sanctuary that He delayed from putting an end to the war that very day" (*Wars*, 2.19.6 539). The footnote in the Whiston edition of Josephus' Works notes another reason for God's sovereign movement in this affair that would have been recognized by Josephus were he a Christian; namely: Jesus' prediction to flee to the mountains when you see this happen so that you may be saved.

(*Wars*, 2.19.1-9). **They just left.** This gave the Christians just enough time to flee to the mountains, and in fact this is exactly what they did because they knew and listened to the words of their savior. According to the predictions made in **vs. 4-14**, these Christians had been prepared for the end by the fulfillment of each thing described in that list. Now they knew it was time to flee.⁹

Matthew 24:17-18 – Don't Doodle

In this vein Jesus continues, “**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.**” The point is, the **window of escape will be brief.** This is no time to doddle or to worry about earthly possessions. Your very lives will be at stake.

But perhaps the point is also that **it may look safe enough to stay.** When the Roman army abandoned Jerusalem, most of the Jews felt safe. So they stayed in the city. Only then it was too late. Before they knew it, another army had surrounded them and this time there would be no escape.

⁹ Josephus writes "After this catastrophe had befallen Cestius, many of the distinguished Jews abandoned the city like swimmers from a sinking ship" (*Wars*, 2.20.1 556) .

Matthew 24:19-22 – Terrible Days!

Jesus says, “Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days!” (vs. 19). I do not tell you what comes next to be salacious but to impress upon you the gruesomeness of those days and the utter perfection with which Christ predicted the future. Josephus again tells the horrific story of a woman named **Mary**, the daughter of Eleazar, and a family of great riches. Having been stripped of all her belongings and provisions by the soldiers, out of necessity and fury killed her own sucking child, and having boiled him, devoured half of him, and covering up the rest preserved it for another time. When they smelled the aroma, the soldiers were curious as to where she had gotten the food. They threatened to kill her. She replied that she had reserved a good part for them, then uncovered the relics of her son. Dread and astonishment seized them, and they stood stupefied at the sight (*Wars*, 6.3.4).

Jesus said, “Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath” (vs. 20). This would mean greater hardship would be placed upon the escaping refugees. Traveling with very young children would also hinder any family’s ability

to move quickly. Interestingly, I found a [date](#) for the [precise moment that Cestius left Jerusalem](#). It was a very cold time of year, [November 22, 66 AD](#).¹⁰ Even more interesting, it appears that this was a [Saturday](#)!¹¹

In Matthew and Mark we then hear a summary of the days to come, “[There will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. 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](#)” ([Matt 24:21-22](#)). These verses provide some difficulty to our understanding, so I will return to them later. For now, let me simply note the Lukian parallel, for this is one of those places where he talks about the same thing. He says simply, “[for great distress shall be upon the land \[ges\]](#)” ([Luke 21:23](#)). “[Land](#)” here can be taken [specifically](#) just as easily as the whole world. [Matthew 2:20](#) for instance talks about the “[land of Israel](#).” But the point I want to make from Luke is how his parallel word “[distress](#)” for “[tribulation](#)” ought to make us [think twice about this being a proper name of a future “Great Tribulation”](#) such as described in books like *Left Behind*. Undoubtedly, before Christ returns, things on earth will be very bad, as in the

¹⁰ <http://members.aol.com/FLJOSEPHUS/warChronology2.htm>

¹¹ <http://www.timeanddate.com/calendar/index.html?year=66&country=1>

days of Noah (cf. **Matt 24:37**), but I do not think Jesus has this in mind yet.

Also note that the elect in this passage has specific reference to the Christians living in Jerusalem in the days of the siege. This will not be the case later. Here, there may be some Gentiles, but surely most of the Christians are *Jewish*. This ought to show everyone who thinks the view I am advocating throughout this series about the Jewish nation being finally judged in these events is no way anti-Semitic. On the contrary, Jesus has given these Jewish Christians 40 years of warning about these things because he loves them with an electing love!

Matthew 24:23-28 – More Warnings

In **verses 23-26**, Jesus returns to some older themes. He tells them not to worry about false Messiahs who essentially say “This is the parousia, the end of the world, the return of Christ” (cf. **24:11**). So powerful would be the delusion that even the elect would believe it, were that possible. Of course, the point of this statement is to say that **it is not possible**, but it makes a grand point about how powerful and insidious false teachers and miracle workers can be.

Interestingly, Jesus talks about people who will say, “**He is in the wilderness.**” Many years earlier the Apostle Paul was confused with “**The Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness**” (**Acts 21:38**). Because they had rejected the True Messiah, many Jews would continue to look for a political savior who would free them from Roman tyranny. Perhaps providentially Josephus records, “**A false prophet was the occasion of these people’s destruction, who had made a public proclamation in the city that very day, that God commanded them to get upon the temple, and that there they should receive miraculous signs of their deliverance. Now, there was then a great number of false prophets suborned by the tyrants to impose upon the people, who denounced this to them, that they should wait for deliverance from God**” (*Wars*, 6.5.2).

Verse 25 is an important verse, because it demonstrates that **Jesus predicted** all of these things. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are not adding their own ideas “after the fact.” Anyone trying to interpret these things must come to grips with this fact. For the Christians that fled Jerusalem, it served as an exclamation point to the things they were seeing around them.

Now we come to **vs. 26**. What is interesting about **verse 26** is that it has a parallel in Luke, but not in Mark (Verses 26-28 are the only verses not in Mark). Yet strangely, Luke's parallel comes in a completely different chapter! Luke's context is (as I will argue next week with Matthew's parallel in **24:37ff**) about **the end of time**, the parousia, the physical return of Christ to earth.

So these verses seek to add to Jesus' warning not to believe the false prophets. Jesus says he return will not be anything like what these false prophets are saying. **“the coming (parousia!) of the son of man will be as lightning coming from the east and shining in the west.”** One writer says, **“In contrast with the so-called Messiah who has to be sought out in an obscure place and who needs authenticating signs to convince people of his claim, the parousia of the Son of Man will be as unmissable as a flash of lightning which blazes across the whole sky. In this way, you can easily understand why Luke would put this in a discussion so clearly about the end.”**¹²

The disciples were thinking that the two events must occur simultaneously. Hence, their double question is posed as a single question (vs. 3). **Not so, says Jesus. “The time of**

¹² France, *Matthew*, p. 917.

the siege and capture of the city will be characterized by the claims and counterclaims of those who pretend to a messianic role, but the parousia of the Son of Man will need no such claims or proofs; everyone will see and recognize it (as he will go on to spell out in vv. 36-44).” In this way, friends, “the mention of the second coming of Christ in this context is given precisely to distinguish it from the events currently being considered. Only after the subject changes in vs. 36 will Jesus return to this topic.”¹³

The last verse (28) about vultures recalls **Job 39:30**, “Where the dead are, there it [the vulture] is.” It is a **proverbial** saying perhaps meant to teach that when you see the imminent death of Jerusalem, and the Roman armies surrounding it like a vulture, take action. “Flee to the mountains.”¹⁴

Matthew 24:32-35 – The Fig Tree

Before I deal with **vs. 29-31**, I want to briefly mention the **parable of the fig tree**. It is mentioned in all three Gospel

¹³ Ibid., p. 918.

¹⁴ Some take the word *aetos* as referring to the “eagle” (rather than vulture). The Roman Army had the ensign of an eagle (Matthew Henry). But so also, the Chaldeans are said to fly as the eagle hastening to consume (**Hab 1:8**). Perhaps antitypically, Babylon is represented by a call to the birds of prey to come and feast upon the slain (**Rev 19:17-18**). In this way, Rome would surely stand as a type of Babylon which is to come.

accounts. Jesus says to learn the lesson from the fig tree. For you, it has been nearly four months since we saw Jesus curse the fig. But for the disciples, it was just yesterday! For the reader of the Gospel, it was just minutes ago.

When Jesus says, “Learn the lesson from the fig tree,” it must be fresh in their mind that he has just cursed a fig tree that gave no fruit. That curse signified that God was pronouncing final judgment upon the Jews because of their rejection of his Messiah. So here. When you see the tender leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things [that we have been talking about now for three weeks], you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Then comes the verse that has caused so many problems. “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Far from making a mistake which he had to correct two verses from now, Jesus actually establishes the validity of his words by swearing an oath upon heaven and earth. These are *covenantal words* used throughout the OT to confirm the permanence of God’s covenant faithfulness (Isa 51:6; 54:10; Jer 31:35-36; 33:20-21, 25:26). Interestingly, Jeremiah uses them to confirm the new covenant which the NT repeatedly says is cut in the

blood of Jesus. “My words will not pass away. I know what I’m talking about. I can predict the future, because I know the future. I know what will happen to Jerusalem. You have been warned.”

The Worst Tribulation Ever?

Now, before I finish, I must deal with **two sticky questions**. The first has to do with the idea of this event in 70 AD as being unsurpassed in horror. The verse says, “There will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.” Given the holocaust and Hitler’s great evil, **it seems almost absurd to even suggest that this could be talking about 70 AD**. Perhaps in anticipation to my answer, you might wish to remember just a few of the terrible things I have already told you as described by an eye-witness.

Then there is **the context** that we have looked at. It seems plain that “**this generation**” which will not pass away until all these things are accomplished has to be talking about something that is now long ago in our past. **Can we read the words about such a great tribulation literally if we are not willing to look at the generation literally?** Add to this Luke’s

parallel which very clearly refers this “*great distress*” upon the earth to a specific (“this”) people who will “*fall by the edge of the sword, be led captive among the nations; and Jerusalem will be trodden down until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled*” (Luke 21:24).

Then I should note the *language* that Jesus uses. He talks not only about what has occurred in the past, but will occur *in the future*. However, *if this is talking about the end of the world, then what sense does it make to talk about the future?* For there will be no more future for a fallen world in that case. That will be the “last day.” I should mention here that if it is talking even about The Great Tribulation, as many premillennialists believe, that even according to their own system, this is surely not as bad as things will be after the millennium when Satan is released. Jesus language possibly contains hyperbole (exaggeration for effect). Hyperbole is a common literary device in the Bible.

Finally, I would make the argument that even given the holocaust, this *was* the worst event in Jewish history. Though *not as many* Jews were killed (1 million compared to over 6 million), it was *every bit as gruesome* as the holocaust with the mass crucifixions, cannibalism, and carnage at the hands of Rome. Besides this, at this time the *Jews lost more*

than lives. They lost the very ability to practice their religion! Indeed, they lost the blessing of God upon them as a nation to be the light of the world. This is the lesson of the fig tree earlier that week. Without even admitting all of this, Josephus himself said “The misfortunes of all men, from the beginning of the world, if they be compared to these of the Jews, are not so considerable as they were” (*Wars*, Preface 4).

Matthew 24:29-31 – Apocalyptic Language and the Past Fulfillment of Prophecy

Finally, what are we to make of vv. 29-31? I skipped these verses because they seem to pose a difficult problem for this interpretation. They say, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and 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. 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.” How in the world could anyone in their right mind think that this refers to 70 AD? Before I

answer that, I want to note that many older interpreters have understood it this way, men like John Owen, John Gill, Isaac Newton and Thomas Newton.

Maybe the best way to explain this is by first noting **the change of Greek words** from *parousia* to *erchomai* here. Both words mean “coming,” but *parousia* is a more technical word for the return of Christ. Matthew has already discussed the *parousia* in **vs. 27**. He talked about it for the precise reason so as to differentiate Christ’s return from the events of 70 AD. Matthew will pick up the term again in **vs. 37** and **39**, when he will answer the disciples second question at length. In fact, he uses only that term to talk about the Second Coming.

But in these verses he does not use that term, though you couldn’t tell this from the English. This signals that he isn’t talking about the same thing. Instead, he uses the more general term for a coming. Indeed, Matthew uses this same term in several parallel verses throughout this gospel (i.e. **10:23; 16:28; 26:64**). I do not believe in any of these that the issue is the Second Coming, even though all speak about the “coming of the Son of Man.” The reason why will be made clear as we look at the OT.

The most important thing I can do to answer this question is to refer you to the OT. Once more, Scripture must interpret Scripture and here more than any other place in this discourse, Jesus goes to the OT to use the language of the prophets. When we study those references, it becomes quite clear that this not only does not have to speak of the second coming, it almost certain does not.

If I strung together Isa 13:10¹⁵; Isa 34:4; Dan 7:14; Zech 12:10-14; Deut 30:4; and Isa 27:13 for you, it would sound almost identical to Jesus' comments here. His language is dense with OT prophetic language. Since I don't have time to look at all of those verses in detail, all I can do is point out what is going on.

First, the language of Isaiah 13:10¹⁶ is the clearest parallel to Jesus' discussion of the stars, the sun, and the moon. There are several other prophets who use the same language (Amos 8:9; Joel 2:10, 30-31; 3:5; Ezek 32:7-8). In every instance, the immediate context is God's threatening judgment *on cities and nations*, both pagan and Israelite. Sometimes the judgment has already begun to come to pass. As RT France summarizes, "Language about cosmic

¹⁵ Jesus' words in vs. 29 follow the LXX of this verse almost exactly.

¹⁶ "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."

collapse is used by the OT prophets to symbolize God's acts of judgment *within history*, with the emphasis on catastrophic political reversals." Sometimes the nations are referred to as stars or powers. Think of Joseph referring to his father the sun, his mother the moon, and his brothers the stars bowing down to him for example. So France concludes, "If such language was appropriate to describe the end of Babylon or Edom under the judgment of God, why should it not equally describe God's judgment on Jerusalem's temple and the power structure which it symbolized?"¹⁷ Friends, this is one of the great concerns that I have about the contemporary splicing of the Scripture into the irrelevant OT and the relevant NT. There is a reason why bad interpretations abound in our day and one of them is that we don't know our OT's!

Second, **Daniel 7:14** is an almost exact parallel to **Matthew 24:30**. In Daniel's vision, the Ancient of Days "comes" *to heaven*, not to earth. Interestingly, the *LXX* uses the word *erchomai* for this "coming." If Jesus is – as we saw in **Matthew 16:28** – once more alluding to **Daniel 7**, then it is good reason to believe that the "coming" in mind here is his coming *to heaven* to be enthroned in great power and

¹⁷ France, p. 922.

glory. In Matthew 16, Jesus was referring to his coming in the power of the Spirit at Pentecost!

Simply put, there are different “comings” of Christ prior to the great coming back to earth. Another example is Christ “coming”¹⁸ is to the churches in Revelation (2:5, 25; 3:11; i.e. “I will come and remove your lampstand,” or “I am coming soon”). Greg Beale suggests, “Christ’s coming” [here] appears to be his conditional visitation in judgment of the churches, though an allusion to the second coming could be included.” In this way I told you months ago in preparation for today, as Leon Morris says, “The son of man comes in many ways.”¹⁹

Thus, quoting France again, “The time of the temple’s destruction will also be the time when it will become clear that the Son of Man, rejected by the leaders of his people, has been vindicated and enthroned at the right hand of God, and that it is he who is now to exercise the universal kingship which is his destiny. For that is how Daniel’s vision is to be fulfilled.”²⁰

The language of the tribes of the earth mourning is also OT language taken from Zechariah. Zechariah says “They

¹⁸ The word again is *erchomai* not *parousia*.

¹⁹ Morris, Matthew, p. 434-5.

²⁰ P. 924.

will look on the one who have pierced, and they will mourn for him.” These mourners are identified as the “house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (Zech 12:10). “Jesus’ words suggest that the people of Jerusalem will recognize what they have done to their Messiah, but their mourning will be prompted by seeing his eventual vindication and triumph, when it will be too late to avert the consequences of having rejected him.”²¹ This is not the mourning of repentance but distress. How will they “see” the vindication and enthronement of the Son of Man in heaven? By what is happening on earth as the temple is destroyed and the reign of the “Son-of-Man-in-heaven” begins to take effect in the gathering of his chosen people around the whole world. Thus, the “sign” (vs. 30) is not something preceding the second coming, but a visible manifestation of a heavenly reality already established, that the Son of Man is in heaven sitting at the right hand of Power.²² When Jerusalem and her temple are destroyed, the power of God is made manifest to the whole world that he is a covenant keeping God who stands enthroned above the cherubim.

²¹ P. 925.

²² P. 926.

Christ's enthronement sheds light on **vs. 31**. He sends out his angels to gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. Notice, that this "elect" is no longer just those believers residing in Jerusalem. Now, the call goes out to the whole world and the Gentiles will begin to be grafted into the vine, into the heavenly Jerusalem, Israel from above. This is what Jesus is getting at by alluding to **Isaiah 27:13**, "And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain at Jerusalem." In this way, these verses give the ultimate reason for the destruction of the temple: So that the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ, might be recognized as reigning King of the Earth from now and forevermore. They have nothing to do with the second coming of Christ.

Conclusion

My conclusion is very short this morning, but very powerful for your faith. I will give you **two** things to consider. Contrary to the skeptics, **Jesus did not get it wrong**. In fact, he got it *so right* that an unbelieving Jew

unknowingly confirmed dozens of details of Jesus' own prediction, much to his own unwitting shame. It is remarkable that a man could describe actual events that so closely parallel the words of our Lord, yet not believe in Jesus. That is something you must take very seriously this morning. **What more can Jesus do to prove himself to you?**

Secondly, if you come to see the text this way, rather than being consumed with speculations, you will **begin to see with greater clarity the *present rule* of Christ in his kingdom and Church.** This is very important, for we do not serve a wimpy dead sage, but a majestic reigning monarch who rules the entire earth with a rod of iron, and who laughs at the nations and dashes them all into pieces like a potter's vessel.

Will you, like Bertrand Russell and Albert Schweitzer make your own autonomous and arbitrary decisions about Jesus, pretending he got it wrong so that you can live your life however you see fit as god of your own path? Will you like the nations rage and plot a vain thing against the Lord and his Anointed? Or will you acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, his omniscience, his sovereignty and his kingship, humble yourself, and learn to think on him every moment of your life? Psalm 2 is perfect: Serve the Lord with fear, and

rejoice with trembling. **Kiss the Son**, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.