

No One Knows No One Knows

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

No One Knows — No One Knows

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: Matthew 24; John 14:1-4; 1 Corinthians 15:58

Introduction to Series, "No One Knows"

The frenzy generated over the year 2000 and the so-called Y2K "bug" seems a distant memory. Yet, important lessons can be learned from that event. A certain magical fascination surrounded the number 2,000. But it wasn't the first time in human history that people became obsessed with the calendar. Similar anxieties arose near the year 1000. As if the power of chronology somehow shaped the future, prognosticators constructed elaborate scenarios for the end of the world through the setting of dates.

Followers of Jesus Christ expectantly look forward to his Second Coming. They have done so for 2,000 years. We want to affirm the hope heralded by that coming event. At the same time, we believe that the Bible offers a sane and balanced framework for guiding our understanding of the future. By contrast, human speculation and sensational claims do not offer hope, but fear instead. Through this new series we want to lay the groundwork for thinking about the future in Christian terms. Words like "prophecy," "apocalyptic," "eschatology," "millennium," "rapture," and "Second Coming" often appear in such discussions. We will try to clarifying these terms.

All of your questions will not be answered. It's clear that God keeps secret His counsels and reveals only as much as will benefit His creation. Embedded in one of the longest discourses Jesus ever gave about the future are the wise words: "No one knows" (Matthew 24:36, 42, 50; Mark 13:32) the exact date of his *coming*. He reiterated this caution in stronger terms in Acts 1:7, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons..." Jesus had his reasons for denying such privileged information about the future to his followers. Faced with "crystal-ball-like" prescience, the disciples might well have calculated the conduct of their lives around the future. In so doing, they would have lost their ethical edge and the moral courage to remain faithful under all circumstances and throughout all times.

Overly confident claims about how present-day events fulfill biblical prophecy leads to a spirit of curiosity, speculation and distraction from mission. Too often Christians take the attitude, "It doesn't matter what we do; the end is just around the corner. Why bother to save the environment, work for peace, feed the hungry, arrest disease, or seek justice? This whole world is headed for Armageddon and total destruction anyway. Save a few souls and get ready to be snatched from this world before any of the really bad stuff happens." Such thinking is not the product of serious biblical study. It originates, instead, from a patchwork of theories spanning the last two millennia. Dates for the Second Coming have been proposed hundreds if not thousands of times. Generations have repeatedly claimed to be the "last" one. "Naming the Antichrist" has become a human pastime, especially during times of crisis.¹

In our studies over the next several weeks, we'd like to shed some light on this broad topic. We do so in the interest of God's kingdom and the reign of His Son. Believing in the Second Coming should shape the direction of our lives and make us more faithful and diligent participants in God's kingdom project. At the same time, we should discourage trendy and eye-catching approaches to our Lord's coming. Learning to rightly interpret

¹ Robert C. Fuller wrote an insightful book on this topic, bearing the title, *Naming the Antichrist: An American Obsession*, Oxford University Press, 1996.

Scripture, using the best tools available, will always remain our goal. The language of the future is a special language, and we will learn to better understand and use it.

Introduction

Had we lived during the days of Jesus' earthly ministry, as Jews resident in the land of Israel, the pressing questions facing us would have been about survival, power, and "what happened to God?". These same perplexities faced the Hebrew nation for the previous five hundred years. From the writings of the prophets, we would have heard the uncertainty about how things were going to turn out for us in consequence of our two calamitous exiles at the hands of Assyria and Babylon. Like Daniel, praying to God in Daniel 9, we would want to know when to expect the *end of exile* and God's *return to Zion*.

Israel's future had its roots in a hopeful covenant which God Yahweh made with Abraham at the beginning of the second millennium B.C.E., some two thousand years before. If God and His people remained in covenant loyalty and faithfulness (the Hebrew idea of *hesed*) with each other, a goodly promise would one day reach fulfillment and bring blessing to the whole world. But for the moment the prospects for that fulfillment seemed remote. Had you asked anybody in Jesus' generation what Israel's situation looked like, this was the sort of answer you would have received:

1. Who are we? We are Israel, the chosen people of the Creator God.
2. Where are we? We are in the holy land, focused on the Temple; but ironically we feel like we are still in exile.
3. What is wrong? We have the wrong rulers; pagans on the one hand, compromised Jews on the other, or half-way between, Herod and his family. We are all involved in a less-than-ideal situation.
4. What is the solution? Our God must act again to give us the true sort of rule, that is, his own kingship exercised through properly appointed officials; and in the meantime, Israel must be faithful to this covenant charter.

Into such a world stepped Jesus of Nazareth, preaching "good news" and calling people "to repent" because something called "the kingdom of God" was coming. Change was on the way, as the prophet Isaiah wrote, "Prepare the way of the Lord" (Isaiah 40). "To repent" meant a radical change of agenda, giving up one's own view of the world and adopting Jesus' view. Jesus would have agreed that the wrong people were on the throne, and that power alone cannot bring in the kingdom of God. Yet, unlike Zealots or right-wing Pharisees or dissident Essenes, Jesus did not think the answer came from acts of violence or revolutionary reprisals. Instead, he called on people to love their enemies and do good to those who misused them. And if a Roman soldier asked you for your coat or demanded that you walk with him for a mile, you should double up the favor in return.

What did the concept, "kingdom of God," mean? Put simply, it meant that God was becoming king once again among His people. From his preaching and teaching, we hear Jesus saying that he himself *is* "God becoming king." If Israel wanted to experience God's royal rule, they needed to "follow" Jesus and become his disciples. What Jesus said and what Jesus did were signposts of God's presence in the world. The *coming* of God and the *coming* of Jesus were one and the same.

When the end of his earthly life approached, this same Jesus talked about bringing in the kingdom by going to the cross. That made no sense to his followers, and the outspoken leader of his disciples, Simon Peter, begged him--in fact "beseeched him"--not to walk that road, a path that seemed "unworthy" of a person wanting to be the Messiah, the deliverer of Israel (Mark 8:31-33; Matthew 16:21-28; Luke 9:22-27). Still, Jesus set his eyes on the cross, laying down his life in company with revolutionary criminals, those *lestes*, the resistance fighters. But once more, the unexpected happened. Through dying, Jesus lived again, beating the odds makers, pulling off the most remarkable *coup-d'etat* in human history. Evil imagined its triumph over Jesus by killing him. But Evil had it wrong. The resurrection of Jesus — in a renewed body — turned time on its head, bringing about in the present an event that was suppose to happen in the future when God finally returned to Zion.

The "end" had come ahead of schedule — or so it seemed. At least part of the end arrived early. This whole business of the future, the end, and a fresh new beginning belongs to what Bible scholars call *eschatology*, a fancy word packed full of meaning. In one sense, it's about the "end" since that's what the Greek word *eschaton* actually means. And it's about eschatology that this new series will concern itself for the next few weeks. What's tricky about this study is that people tend to think it's all about what happens in *our time* and they become obsessed with trying to figure out God's timetable as it applies to events on *our horizon*. One result is that students of "the end" become short-sighted, and due to either ignorance or impatience, focus their attention on finding newspaper headlines which support some purported prophecy they find in the Bible. Every time they happen to find a "match," they proclaim from the housetops that the "end is near" and that "all the signs" point to the soon return of Jesus Christ.

Our purpose in this study is not to wage war against such a viewpoint or against those who hold to it. Instead we intend to present a positive — though at times corrective — perspective. Jesus taught his disciples to embrace the future with hope, and he asked them to live their lives in light of his resurrection and of their own. He warned of false prophets and those who would manipulate historical events for their own purposes. He confidently taught that God was already in the process of returning to His people, and that He would do so in the person and work of Jesus himself. Nothing could be more optimistic than that.

Human beings have always been curious about the future, whether about things happening in history or about life after death. We might call this curiosity the *crystal ball* view of the future. Unfortunately, the practice of "divining" the future is roundly condemned in the Bible, as are sorcerers, witches and wizards who try to somehow engineer the future to their own "ends." Perhaps one of the persistent effects of modernity is the desire to *know about everything*, and thereby be "in the know" about the future. Christians in recent years have succumbed to the tantalizing prospect of mapping current events onto the pages of Scripture. Why would they want to do this? Perhaps it comes from a well-meaning desire to "prove" the Bible true because it accurately forecasts the future. Or, they do so in an effort to show that they have "the inside track" and *know* things as insiders that the outsiders *don't know*. In that regard they behave much like the ancient Gnostics who subtly borrowed Christian ideas but combined them with pagan ones, claiming to have special "knowledge"² which only they, the initiated, could access.

A fictional book series known as *Left Behind* presents such a view of the future. Events unfold in a strict, pre-determined fashion, as Christians are first taken from the world and those remaining must grapple with intensified evil in a world where God is largely absent and evil is lately rampant. The characters in this drama are both human and supernatural. Scripture is consulted for clues to unfolding events. The Jewish people figure prominently as they try to remain in charge of the promised land, while sinister forces threaten. Granted, the volumes in this series are fictional pre-creations of how things will take place. But decades ago, certain Bible teachers wrote similar books with dead-seriousness; books like *Late Great Planet Earth* which plotted the broad outline graphed on a timeline, leading to the Second Coming, Tribulation, Antichrist, Armageddon, another Second Coming, Millennium, another last battle, and finally a restored heaven and earth. At that time (1970) the writer assured his audience that the "end" was near.

Problematic for all such approaches to the Bible and the future is that *they have been tried before*. In a well-written work, *The Last Days Are Here Again: A History of the End Times*³, the author proves true the famous remark made in another generation, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."⁴ Kyle

² The Greek word *gnōsis* means "knowledge." Paul uses the word when criticizing those who claim to have special forms of knowledge — forms which Paul calls "false" *gnōsis* (see 1 Timothy 6:20).

³ Richard G. Kyle, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998.

⁴ George Santayana, from *The Life of Reason*, Volume I, *Reason in Common Sense*. This quotation has been replicated in several variations, including these: "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it." "Those who do not remember their past

makes the valid point in his book that generations in distress tend to produce their own versions of "end times," and tend to be ignorant of what has preceded them. One such version attaches itself to a form of Second Coming theology which promises a secret exodus of true Christians from the world just prior to the onslaught of unimaginable evils. Using this model, the Second Coming becomes a two-stage affair, consisting of a privileged event followed by a more general world-wide "revelation of Jesus Christ," visible to everyone. Does the Bible really teach this scenario? Questions like this one will receive attention in our study, as will a careful review of how Christians across the centuries have tackled eschatology — the study of "the end." Part of our goal will be to place this all-important theme in its historical framework.

The heart of this study is our conviction that human history purposely moves toward a grand climax when God will bring to completion His original creation project. Jesus Christ is at the very center of that project, having become God's answer to the human condition. By confessing that Jesus is Lord, Christians proclaim the Good News that all of creation — both heaven and earth — will one day be united in Jesus Christ. The last book of the Bible joyfully reveals "new heaven and new earth" and the appearance on earth of the heavenly city of God, the New Jerusalem (see Revelation 21-22). The study of eschatology must consistently keep that goal foremost. Further, we are already in the process of seeing the fulfillment of this grand vision. When Jesus rose from the dead, God launched His kingdom program anew, and, through the church — God's renewed Israel — He is even now unfolding His kingdom purposes in the world. Eschatology is not only about the future it's also about the past and present.

During the course of this series, we will examine certain texts which lay the groundwork for understanding biblical themes of the future. Some of these will come from the Old Testament where the original purpose of God is first put forward. Others appear in the Gospels where Jesus himself locates his own life and work within the eschatology of the Old Testament, bringing it to fulfillment in his death and resurrection. Standing with Jesus at the garden tomb, we will find ourselves experiencing the first day of God's new creation already begun. Then, throughout *Acts* and the letters of the New Testament, we gain sharper images of the kingdom's advancement into the Roman world to "the ends of the earth." Led by the Holy Spirit, the new Torah, Christians — both Jew and Gentile — take shape as the community of the end times, anticipating the arrival of the new times. Finally, through the powerful symbolic visions of *Revelation*, the quintessential "apocalypse," we gaze at God's new future through the eyes of a Christian prophet whose own experience in exile prefigured the end of exile and the inheritance of the whole world — God's new holy land.

Perhaps a fitting introduction to eschatology should include the clear affirmation of the early Christian creeds:

Apostles' Creed (2nd Century)

The third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from where he shall come to judge the living and the dead. ... the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.

The Nicene Creed (4th Century)

and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. ... and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Athanasian Creed (5th Century)

...rose again the third day from the dead; He ascended into heaven, He sits on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty; From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies; And shall give account of their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.

are condemned to repeat their mistakes." "Those who do not read history are doomed to repeat it." "Those who fail to learn from the mistakes of their predecessors are destined to repeat them."

Church of the Nazarene, *The Articles of Faith* (selections relating to eschatology)

II. Jesus Christ

He truly arose from the dead and took again His body, together with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature, wherewith He ascended into heaven and is there engaged in intercession for us

XI. The Church

God calls the Church to live under His rule in anticipation of the consummation at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

XV. Second Coming of Christ

19. We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ will come again; that we who are alive at His coming shall not precede them that are asleep in Christ Jesus; but that, if we are abiding in Him, we shall be caught up with the risen saints to meet the Lord in the air, so that we shall ever be with the Lord. (Matthew 25:31-46; John 14:1-3; Acts 1:9-11; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Titus 2:11-14; Hebrews 9:26-28; 2 Peter 3:3-15; Revelation 1:7-8; 22:7-20)

XVI. Resurrection, Judgment, and Destiny

20. We believe in the resurrection of the dead, that the bodies both of the just and of the unjust shall be raised to life and united with their spirits-"they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation."

21. We believe in future judgment in which every person shall appear before God to be judged according to his or her deeds in this life.

22. We believe that glorious and everlasting life is assured to all who savingly believe in, and obediently follow, Jesus Christ our Lord; and that the finally impenitent shall suffer eternally in hell. (Genesis 18:25; 1 Samuel 2:10; Psalm 50:6; Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2-3; Matthew 25:31-46; Mark 9:43-48; Luke 16:19-31; 20:27-38; John 3:16-18; 5:25-29; 11:21-27; Acts 17:30-31; Romans 2:1-16; 14:7-12; 1 Corinthians 15:12-58; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Revelation 20:11-15; 22:1-15)

Talking about God's Future

How do Christians talk about the future? The question of *language* is paramount to any discussion about God's future project for His creation. Theology has its own language, complete with special terms for talking about what it believes. One branch of theology is known as *eschatology*, a word we have already encountered in the introduction to this series. Normally, theologians distinguish between what happens to individuals after death and what happens to the whole world in the future. The result is 1) personal eschatology, and 2) universal eschatology. Put simply, eschatology is about how things *turn out in the end*. To review, *eschaton* refers to "the end" or the point of fulfillment, completion, or consummation. All of these terms focus on where history is finally going to *end up*. Besides the word *eschaton*, the Bible also uses the word *telos* which can also mean "end," but more specifically refers to the *goal* or *aim* of something.

That history is going somewhere is a Christian distinctive. Among the ancient Greeks, for example, history tended to be purely cyclical, and human beings appeared on earth as souls fallen from the heavens, living temporarily in bodies made of evil matter, and from which they sought liberation at death. Occasionally, writers would comment on the *ages* of earth: gold, silver, bronze, heroic, and iron.⁵ Within the Old Testament, this "metal-model" of history appears in Daniel 2 where the king of Babylon has a dream of a giant image with its head of gold resting on feet of iron and clay. When the prophet Daniel interprets this vision, he connects each metal to a successive kingdom, starting with Babylon. However, a day would come when the whole human political enterprise would be shattered by a kingdom which will fill the earth:

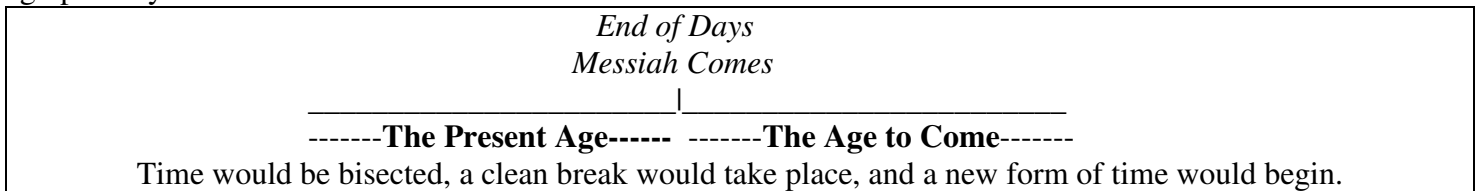
Daniel 2:34-35 ³⁴ As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. ³⁵ Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

⁵ Hesiod the Greek poet in his *Works and Days*, lines 109-201. The Roman poet Ovid tells of Four Ages in Book 1.89-150 of the *Metamorphoses*.

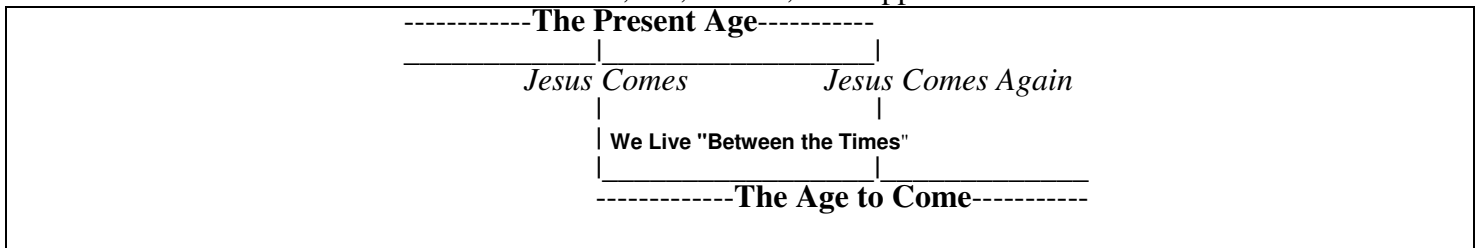
Daniel 2:44-45 ⁴⁴ And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, ⁴⁵ just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure."

Notice how the prophecy foretells the arrival of a kingdom that brings to an *end* the former succession of kingdoms and fills the world instead with "a kingdom that shall never be destroyed...it shall stand forever..." (2:44). That is, the metal cycle of human history comes to an end, even as God's unending kingdom finally arrives.

The changing of the *ages* was a prominent theme in Jewish literature.⁶ Between the Old and New Testaments, Jewish scholars began to reflect on many of the time themes discussed above. They came to believe that the whole of human history, as it pertained to God's chosen people, was reaching a critical turning point. Studying the prophets and thinking through the Hebrew Bible's understanding of time, they settled on a sort of diagram for thinking through this coming crisis. For them, history consisted of two ages: "the present age" (*olam hazeh*) and "the age to come" (*olam haba*). When Yahweh was ready, He would send Messiah and bring about the resurrection of the dead, "at the end of days". Once that happened, the present age would end, and the coming age would commence, accompanied by the righteous government of God (God's kingdom). To illustrate graphically:



However, the early Christian community saw it differently, because something quite unexpected happened. God did, indeed, send His Messiah, but not in the fashion Jewish people imagined. He came to die and rise from the dead, thus doing something that no one expected would happen until "the end of days". Time had undergone a radical transformation. **The age to come suddenly appeared in the middle of the present age, bringing with it future benefits.** The resurrection (of Jesus) took place "early" in the scheme, and the age to come was not a clean bisection of the time-line, but, instead, overlapped it:



What does this change in "time perspective" mean for the Jesus followers? For one thing, it suggests that we now live "between the times". Our lives were conceived and born in **the present age**, but once we encountered Jesus and became God's new creations, we became partners in **the age to come**. In so doing, we do not entirely leave the present age. We still have mortal bodies, capable of sickness, weakness, suffering and death. We are susceptible to temptation, and require daily cleansing from our sins. Our knowledge of the future is greatly limited by our finite minds. On the other hand, we have already received a new nature, the forgiveness of sins, the hope of eternal life, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and membership in the body of Christ. To put it concisely, to live "between the times" means:

We are living between the "already" and the "not yet".

⁶ An excellent treatment of this theme is Oscar Cullmann's *Christ and Time*, translated by Floyd V. Filson, Philadelphia, 1964.

1. The coming of Jesus is called "**the fullness of times**" (Galatians 4:4)
2. Christ's coming *again* will complete what he began at his first coming: "9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect **when the times will have reached their fulfillment**-- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:9-10).
3. The closer the present age reaches its end, the more dramatic the tension becomes: "The Spirit clearly says that **in later times** some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons" (1 Timothy 4:1). "1 But mark this: There will be **terrible times** in the **last days**" (2 Timothy 3:1). "They said to you, 'In **the last times** there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires'" (Jude 1:18).
4. Christ's first coming put in motion "the last days": "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at **many times** and in various ways, 2 but **in these last days** he has spoken to us by his Son..." (Hebrews 1:1-2). "He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed **in these last times** for your sake" (1 Peter 1:20).
5. The delay of the times before Christ's coming again has a distinct purpose: "19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that **times of refreshing may come from the Lord**, 20 and that **he may send the Christ**, who has been appointed for you-- even Jesus. 21 **He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything**, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:19-21).

What are the implications of this "time change" in practical terms? Clearly, we are living in the closing generations of the old age, passing away with time. Conversely, we live with our face to the coming age, with the promise of a resurrected body, freedom from the presence of sin, and full knowledge of God's purposes. Living between the times is tough sledding. We long for the fulfillment of what God has already begun, but not yet finished. The present age beleaguers us with its suffering and weakness, marked by failure and frailty (remember the Psalmist's reflections). Listen to Paul:

Now we see but a **poor reflection** as in a mirror; **then** we shall see **face to face**. **Now** I know **in part**; **then** I shall know **fully**, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

"I consider that our **present sufferings** are not worth comparing with **the glory that will be revealed** in us" (Romans 8:18).

Not that I have already obtained all this, or **have already been made perfect**, but **I press on** to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Philippians 3:12)

And to John:

"Dear friends, **now we are** children of God, and **what we will be has not yet been made known**. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Before his ascension to heaven, Jesus met privately with his apostles. During this last conversation, they interrogated him about the future, and wanted to know when the glorious kingdom of Israel would once more become visible in the world. Jesus' response provides one more perspective on time from the new vantage point:

"He said to them: "It is not for you to know **the times or seasons** the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7)

Luke's transcription of that conversation in Greek uses two distinct words for *time*:

1. "The times" (Greek: *chronos*). The connotations are "definite time, period, course of time, chronological time". The main ideas are sequence, duration, and continuity. We might simply call this the ordinary flow of time with its day-in-and-day-out existence. Events follow events, and our lives pass through them. Things happen, and they happen **to us** and **through us**.
2. "The seasons" (Greek: *kairos*). The connotations are "right time, season, opportune time, appropriate to the circumstances". The main ideas are periodic, seasonal, circumstantial, critical events, defining

moments, and opportune times. These are "turning point" events that shape history and direct its outcome. Some occur periodically, like the seasons. Others are remarkable and unexpected, catching us off guard.

What is Jesus saying? He tells his apostles that, tempting though it might be to know both the ordinary and extraordinary times which lie ahead of them, they are not to become entangled with these vicissitudes of time. Instead, as he instructs them in Acts 1:8, they are to embrace the power of God coming on them through the Holy Spirit, and move out into the world to shape its future with the message of the Gospel. They are not, he says, to be **gazers at time**, rather they are to be **shapers of time**. What God finally does when the present age reaches its climax, is entirely up to Him. What we do *now* lives and breathes with the power God gives us, and we must make the most of the time in doing it.

The Two Horizons: The New Testament's View of the Future⁷

Near-Term Horizon

When the New Testament tells its audience about the future, to *what future* does it refer? If we lived in the first century and heard Jesus talking about what was going to happen, we would assume, rightly so, that he was talking about *our future* within our own generation. As we shall see in Matthew 24 (also, Mark 13 and Luke 21), the disciples asked Jesus about what would happen *in their own time* during the not-too-distant future. Theologians call this perspective on eschatology the *preterist* viewpoint because it interprets Jesus' words about the future in terms of what was *about to happen* during the time *immediately* ahead of them — the immediate future, not the long-term future. Understood in this way, the future has to do with Jesus' first coming and the events immediately before, during and following that coming. If we put a fine point on it, future means 30-70 C.E., the generation following Jesus' ascension to heaven when he took his place at God's right hand and began reigning over his kingdom. We choose 70 C.E. because it marks the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple by the Roman armies, a watershed moment in Jewish history. We might correctly call it *the end of an age*.

The New Testament talks about this near-horizon future in terms of *God's return to Zion* through *the coming of Jesus* to earth as a human being. The parables of Jesus make frequent mention of someone going away and then coming back. That *someone* is God Himself. What is the temporal framework for those parables? It is the time Jesus was on earth, when Israel longed for God to come back to His people once more. Echoing the prayer in Daniel 9, the people wanted to know when God would finally end the exile, by dealing with Israel's sins and bringing the Messiah. Though the original exile to Babylon lasted some 70 years (roughly ten sabbatical years), Daniel is told by God's angel that Israel's exile would continue for 70 x 7 (or seventy sabbatical years). In effect, God tells the prophet to expect a continuing exile which would only end when Messiah arrived. Further reading of Daniel 9 reveals how Messiah would bring to an end the old order of things (Temple, city, land), and event which coincides with 70 C.E. Looked at as a near-term horizon, "the end" or *eschaton* means the 70 C.E. event, and the "coming" of Messiah would actually involve his coming in judgment on unfaithful *national* Israel whose Temple and city fell to the Gentile Romans that very year.

The same parables which speak of the return of God to Zion, also speak about His judgment on the unfaithful tenants of His land and vineyard. When Jesus rose from the dead and after forty days ascended to heaven, he was, in effect, *coming* into his kingdom. That is, his going back to heaven was, from *his perspective*, the *coming* of which the prophets and Jesus spoke. This was a coming, not from heaven to earth, but from earth to heaven. Therefore, we can speak about the *first coming* of Jesus in terms of his incarnation, while also speaking about his *coming again* in terms of his ascension and becoming King at his father's right hand, beginning his kingdom rule. This *coming again* of Jesus, spoken of in the near-term, has to do with his vindication as the rightful king of God's creation, after having undergone a horrific humiliation and death to take away the sins of

⁷ I have been especially grateful for the scholarship of Anthony Thiselton in his book *The Two Horizons*, Paternoster Press, 1980 [reprinted in the US by Eerdmans, 1993]. His concerns reach beyond our present theme but offer solid ways of thinking about the interpretation of Scripture, that is, about *hermeneutics*. His horizons model has been especially influential.

the world. Therefore, when Scripture speaks about "coming with clouds," it has in view initially, not the coming from heaven to earth, but the return from earth to heaven. If his first *coming* was his taking on human flesh and living among us as a God's Son, then going back to heaven was accurately called his *return*.

We emphasize the importance of getting this language clear. Before we can begin to talk about *our future* in the 21st century, it's essential that we understand *the disciples' future* as it unfolded during 30-70 C.E. Let's look at this from another angle. The issues facing the Twelve to whom Jesus gave Matthew 24 were *first century issues*. Failing to grasp this has led many Bible teachers to abandon the perspective of the Twelve altogether and impatiently look for a horizon that has nothing to do with the events immediately surrounding the early church. That approach is a fatal mistake, for it distorts the Bible by selfishly wanting all references to the future to apply to *us*, denying to the first Christians *their horizon*. And what a horizon it was! Did not Jesus struggle to explain to the Twelve the shape and purpose of his *first coming*, complete with his death and resurrection? Did not men like Peter resist the thought of a dying Messiah? Was not the resurrection of Jesus a painfully difficult concept for them to grasp? How in the world, then, could they grasp the idea of a *second coming*, far in the distant future, when they wrestled with all of the issues involved in the *first coming*?

For Jesus to speak about his going away meant his death. Then, for him to talk about his coming again meant his resurrection and return to heaven at his Father's right hand. Those were the key issues facing the Twelve, and they were the prominent themes of Jesus' parables and his other teaching about the future — the disciples' future. That, then, is the first horizon, the foreground for the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels.

Long-Term Horizon

Once the early church moved past 70 C.E. and the *end* of Second Temple Judaism, a new set of issues appeared. Jesus had already offered hope for a restored new world when he rose from the dead. But the task of bringing the Gospel to the *ends of the earth* (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8) was already commissioned at the time Jesus ascended to heaven. The *Our Father* also contained the petition, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," and that had definite relevance for the advancement of the kingdom *in the world*. Even in the giving of the *mission* to his disciples, Jesus was already spreading out before future generations the task of implementing the achievements of his cross and resurrection *in the world*. The farther the church moved beyond the events of 70 C.E., the more it began to wonder *how long* it would take to move forward to completion Jesus' kingdom agenda. In fact, this led to a *theology of delay* when talking about finishing the work Jesus commissioned. Christians have wondered about the delay *in each successive generation*. It was only natural that they would speculate about *when Jesus would appear a second time*. Among the early church fathers, the idea arose of a six thousand history for human beings (since Eden) and that the arrival of the seventh millennium would mark the *consummation* or completion of the kingdom.

In the New Testament, reminders appear that "a day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day" (2 Peter 3:8). Citing Psalm 90:4, Peter talks about time in this fashion to encourage his audience not to lose heart about the *coming* of the Lord. He foresaw a time when "the fathers fall asleep" (i.e. "die") and scoffers would question "the promise of his coming." Reading the full context of 2 Peter 3:1-13, we hear Peter describe the eventual "day of the Lord" (3:10) or "the coming of the day of God" (3:12) which will involve the judgment of the world by "fire" (3:10-12), to be followed by "new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells" (3:13). This sort of language pushes the horizon beyond 70 C.E. and into an unidentified period of time of some *lengthy duration* in human terms. In both the psalm and 2 Peter, the word "thousand" appears without the definite article "the" when applied to "years." This usage parallels the Hebrew use of the word "thousand" to refer to "a large amount" or "a large number" (Hebrew: *'elep*; Greek: *chilia*). Using the word "thousand," Peter anticipates an extended period of time stretching out into the future, suggesting the existence of a second, *long-term horizon*, the foreground for the church and the world until Jesus appears *the second time*, and when *new heavens and new earth* emerge from the fiery judgment of God's Day.

The New Testament also teaches this long-term horizon and sees the future in light of it as well. Once the first generation of Christians died, after the events of 30-70 C.E. slipped into the past, a fresh temporal situation appeared ahead the church. That situation came to be seen as "a thousand years," not because it would actually be a literal period of that length, but because it would be of *long duration*. The indefinite article "a" transforms this term into a qualitative rather than a quantitative expression. The nature of this *long period* would be the church *in mission* or, as some call it, "the church militant," since it does battle with evil and advances the kingdom of God on earth through spiritual warfare. We are living in this period and the future *for us* is this second horizon, the appearing of Jesus in final judgment and in new creation for the whole world. Peter further explains how this long period should function:

2 Peter 3:14-18 ¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. ¹⁵ And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. ¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. ¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

For us, a "thousand years" has grown to nearly 2,000, while the church continues to be God's people in mission. We are still called upon to "wait for" the Lord's appearing, and, in due course, to be "diligent" so that when he appears we might be "found without spot or blemish and at peace." We ought to "count the patience of our Lord as salvation," that is, we see God's delay as an opportunity to rescue more of His creation. Peter also warns that such matters easily lend themselves to gross misunderstanding when explained by "the ignorant and unstable" who "twist" them "to their own destruction." The study of the future can be perilous and risky business. In the handling of Scriptures about the future, we find ourselves tempted to be "carried away" by those who use such texts as pretexts to act in lawless and rootless ways (e.g. Waco).⁸ Because the Lord's future — on this long-term horizon — is of undetermined duration, we are to "grow in the grace" and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (3:18). When referring to *the end*, Peter makes a careful distinction between "now" and "the day of eternity" — whenever that might be. The interval *between now* and *the day of eternity* must be devoted to making visible on earth "the glory" of God in heaven.

Reading the New Testament today, we must keep these two horizons in careful balance. First, we must make certain we understand how the early church understood the future from the standpoint of *their horizon*. Since they were the first audience for the New Testament texts, we must patiently discover how that material applied to *their situation*, noting how they too experienced *the coming of Jesus* and *his return* in their own time. Throughout this study, we will endeavor to highlight the ways each text we examine is located on the *first century* horizon. We will note how events taking place during the first century appear in the parables and teaching of Jesus, as well as in the *Acts*, the letters and *Revelation* itself. Without question, the early Christians witnessed the *end of their world* in terms of Jerusalem's fall and the dismantling of Temple worship. The words of Matthew 24 (and parallels) point to those events as marking the *end of the age*, and as evidence that Jesus' own words were vindicated. Taken together, those events were the first fulfillment.

However, we will also see how there is considerable material "left over" even after accounting for the first century fulfillments. Finally, we must explain in what sense we can still speak about the "second coming" and the "end of the world" on *our horizon*. Certain events announcing the coming of the end seem to occur more than once throughout the two thousand year "millennium." Within the linear flow of history — which is the primary Jewish-Christian model — there are cyclical patterns not unlike those we discover in the Old Testament book of *Judges*. Confident expansion precedes spiritual awakening, but then is followed by unraveling and

⁸ In Peter's day — on his horizon — the Zealots used the Bible as an excuse to stage all sorts of violent acts against the Romans and even against their own Jewish kinfolk. During the last days of the Temple, armed Jewish militias attacked one another in such large numbers that more died in Jerusalem by Jewish hands than by the Romans. On Masada, every single Jew took their own life rather than face the Roman army. Faced with an uncertain future, persons of faith can become religious desperados.

crisis, each occurring in roughly generational timeframes.⁹ What we discover in the New Testament material is a secondary layer which applies the eschatology of the first century to later generations. The same sort of signposts appear in our time as were seen at the time of early church, and those signposts have made periodic appearances throughout two thousand years of church history. Every now and again, a generation sees itself as *the last generation*, and, to some extent, it is — against its own horizon. For example, if we examine the Millennial Cycle which followed the Second World War, four distinct generational "turnings" appear: 1) High: Boom-time (1946-1964); 2) Awakening: Consciousness Revolution (1964-1984); 3) Unraveling: Culture Wars (1984-2001); 4) Crisis: 9/11 and economic collapse (2001-??).

As we study the biblical texts, they also disclose *cycles within history*, yet also announce the grand movement of history toward its culmination in the appearing of Jesus Christ as the center of all history. For example, as we study the book of *Revelation*, this cyclical pattern can be seen in the pattern of a 4+2+1 event cycle, as illustrated in chapter 6. 1) Conquest, 2) War, 3) Famine, and 4) Death imprint the generational cycle. These four are followed by 5) consequences for the people of God, usually persecution; 6) judgment for the world, but finally, 7) gracious salvation from the hand of God. Looked at in this fashion, the biblical material provides what we would call a Philosophy of History, offering a perspective on how history unfolds and what we can expect in general terms throughout the full extent of time between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ. "Millennial" history — that long period of time — has the "seal" of God on it, and nothing takes places without His sovereign oversight.

Writing in the 5th century, St. Augustine of Hippo penned his monumental work, *The City of God*,¹⁰ which dealt with issues concerning God, martyrdom, Jews, and other aspects of Christian philosophy. Augustine wrote the treatise to explain Christianity's relationship with competing religions and philosophies, and to the Roman government with which it was increasingly intertwined. It was written soon after Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410. This event left Romans in a deep state of shock, and many saw it as punishment for abandoning their Roman religion. It was in this atmosphere that Augustine set out to provide an apologetic for Christianity, writing that, even if the earthly rule of the empire was imperiled, it was the City of God that would ultimately triumph.

The book presents human history as being a conflict between what Augustine calls the *City of Man* and the *City of God* (a conflict that is destined to end in victory of the latter). The City of God is marked by people who forgo earthly pleasure and dedicate themselves to the promotion of Christian values. The City of Man, on the other hand, consists of people who have strayed from the City of God. The two cities are not meant to represent any actual places or organizations, though Augustine clearly thought that the Christian Church was at the heart of the City of God.

The Olivet Discourse: Jesus and the Future (Matthew 24=Mark 13=Luke 21)

You are encouraged to read each of these accounts, inasmuch as they are parallel to each other. Because of its length, we will forgo printing the key text from Matthew 24, but ask that you keep your Bibles opened to that passage as you work through the following notes.

The setting for this passage is the Mount of Olives, also known as Olivet. Hence, this text is nicknamed "The Olivet Discourse." Jesus and his disciples had just completed their unexpected visit to Jerusalem and the Temple (Triumphal Entry=Palm Sunday: Matthew 21:1ff) during which Jesus symbolizes the end of the Temple by overturning the tables of the money-changers, denouncing them as *lestēs* — brigands. Following this symbolic Temple action, Jesus tells a series of parables which convey in no uncertain terms the coming

⁹ A thorough application of this cyclical model appeared in the publication of William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations*. New York: Quill, 1991. It was followed by their *The Fourth Turning*, New York: Broadway, 1997, and *Millennials Rising: The Next Generation*, Vintage, 2000.

¹⁰ See on James J. O'Donnell, *An Introduction to the City of God*, 1983, an unpublished manuscript available in electronic form.

destruction of Jerusalem. Then Jesus addresses the crowds and his disciples, denouncing the conduct of the Jewish leadership. He climaxes this criticism with a strongly worded prophetic saying, consisting of seven “woes” (Matthew 23:13-32). Each one announces judgment on the leadership for serious violations of God’s covenant with Israel and taken together constitute a covenant lawsuit. At the end of the “woe” sayings, Jesus proceeds to speak of coming judgment in the harshest of terms:

Matthew 23:33-36 ³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? ³⁴ Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, ³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. ³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Notice the use of the phrase “this generation,” pointing to the *immediacy* of Jesus’ predictions. It is evident that Jesus has the *first horizon* in view. The statement “sentenced to hell” translates the words *tēs kriseōs tēs geenmēs*, a reference to the judgment of God by using the image of Gehenna (or *Gēy Hinnōm*), the city dump located outside Jerusalem.

Then, filled with sorrow over what is about to befall Israel, he adds this lament:

Matthew 23:37-39 ³⁷ "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! ³⁸ See, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Jesus thereby emphasizes his ministry of “gathering” the lost children of Israel, their initial refusal, and the future possibility that some will one day welcoming the one they initially scorned. All of this lies in the background of the Matthew 24 text.

The Disciples’ Admiration of the Temple, Jesus’ Warning, and the Disciples’ Question (24:1-2)

Without question, the Temple in Jerusalem, rebuilt by King Herod (and at that time still under renovation), was a marvelous sight to behold, as Josephus, among others, described it.¹¹ The disciples corroborate that magnificence, speaking with admiration. Look at these incredible stones! And the disciples were not exaggerating. Josephus records the size of the stones: 25 x 12 x 8 cubits. Note: The cubit is the first recorded unit of measure and has roots in Egypt where the forearm (from elbow to wrist) is its symbol. Later societies utilized groups of fingers or palms to define the cubit which varied in length. At the time of Jesus, the Roman cubit was largely followed by the Jews and it was roughly 18 inches or 1 1/2 ft. Applying that to Josephus’ dimensions, renders these stones large indeed! And if large, surely, thought the disciples, hard to move! But Jesus responds with a prophecy: not a single stone will remain on another. In other words, this place will be taken apart, stone by stone.

All the more impressive was the place where Jesus spoke these words: the mount of the olives, know commonly as the Mount of Olives. It has an important history. The **Mount of Olives** (also Mount Olivet, Hebrew: *Har HaZeitim*; Arabic: *Jebel ez-Zeitun*, *Jebel et-Tur*, "Mount of the Summit") is a mountain ridge to the east of Jerusalem. It is named from the olive trees with which its sides are clothed. At the foot of the mountain is the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus stayed in Jerusalem, according to tradition. The Mount of Olives is the site of many important Biblical events.

In the book of *Zechariah* the Mount of Olives is identified as the place from which God will begin to redeem the dead at the end of days. For this reason, Jews have always sought to be buried on the mountain, and from Biblical times to the present day the mountain has been used as a cemetery for the Jews of Jerusalem. There are an estimated 150,000 graves on the Mount, including those of many famous figures. Just a few of these include the tomb of Zechariah (who prophesied there), Yad Avshalom, and a host of great rabbis from the 15th to the 20th centuries.

¹¹ *Antiquities*, xv. 380-425, Wars, i. 401, v. 184-247, *Against Apion*, i. 197-199.

The Mount of Olives is first mentioned in connection with David's flight from Jerusalem through the rebellion of Absalom (2 Samuel 15:30), and is only once again mentioned in the Old Testament, in Zechariah 14:4. It is, however, frequently alluded to (I Kings 11:7; II Kings 23:13; Nehemiah 8:15; Ezekiel 11:23).

It is frequently mentioned in the New Testament (Matthew 21:1;26:30, etc.). The road from Jerusalem to Bethany runs over the mount as it did in Biblical times. According to the Bible, it was on this mount that Jesus stood when he wept over Jerusalem.

Jesus is said to have spent a good deal of time on the mount, teaching and prophesying to his disciples (Matthew 24-25), returning after each day to rest (Luke 21:37), and also coming there on the night of his betrayal (Matthew 26:39). This mount, or rather mountain range, has four summits or peaks: (1) the "Galilee" peak, so called from a tradition that the angels stood here when they spoke to the disciples (Acts 1:11); (2) the "Mount of Ascension," the supposed site of that event, which was, however, somewhere probably nearer Bethany (Luke 24:51, 52); (3) the "Prophets," from the catacombs on its side, called "the prophets' tombs;" and (4) the "Mount of Corruption," so called because of the "high places" erected there by Solomon for the idolatrous worship of his foreign wives (I Kings 11:7; II Kings 23:13).

The Mount of Olives is also the site of the prophecy of Zechariah and Ezekiel's theophany.

The Mount of Olives breathes the air of "last things" (the *eschaton*) and becomes the place where Jesus discusses with the four disciples *eschatology* ("the study of last things"), making this entire chapter an *eschatological* discourse ("about last things"). Even the disciples sense the momentous nature of Jesus' words when they ask about the sign of the *telon*, the completion, the end, the goal and the fulfillment of "these things". They anticipate important things up ahead, and certainly it helped to be sitting on a peak which was more than 300 feet higher than Mount Zion. Being there had the effect of "looking down" on the Temple below, seeing it from a higher perspective. That was, of course, the whole burden of Jesus' earthly ministry: to raise the bar of Jewish vision--to see the kingdom of God as something much larger than the narrow, guarded artifices of the scribes and Pharisees. In this lofty place, Jesus is telling them plainly, there is nothing here to salvage: everything must be torn down. The coming Messianic kingdom is going to require not only the stepping aside of the Herodian rulers (as the Pharisees required), but the whole Temple establishment and its powerful symbol the Temple itself.

It would be good to interject here that eschatology for the disciples and their times did not lie far out into the future, as a *distant horizon*, but rather pointed to things close at hand, at least by the space of a generation. When Jesus says things like "Take care", "you will hear about wars", "watch out for yourselves", or "they will hand you over", he is not talking to a remote time and place, but to his own beloved followers who were facing this *eschaton* in their own time. And so when the disciples ask "When will these things happen?", Jesus does not put them off and say, "Don't worry about it...it's not going to happen for 2000 years". On the contrary, he uses the language of warning: "Beware" (the Greek: *bleptō*). Danger approaches and it will have a direct impact on you, Jesus is telling them. Your inquiry about "when" must not be an idle one intended to satisfy curiosity. The future will break into your lives and you need to be ready when it does. This is Jesus' burden at the very outset of the Olivet Discourse.

Abruptly, Jesus tells them that "not one stone" will remain piled on another at some time in the not too distant future. His words portend the coming judgment he has just announced to his audience in Matthew 23. That remark provokes a question from the disciples about the future. Which future? Clearly, *their future* is in view. If the Temple is going to be dismantled in divine judgment, the disciples had a significant stake in knowing *when that will happen*. In Matthew's account, these questions follow in rapid succession:

1. When will this happen?
2. What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?

Had the disciples imagined that Jesus' words pertained to some *far distant events*, they would not have phrased their questions with such *immediacy*. Nor does Jesus proceed to offer to them information about events which lie outside *their horizon*. In order for Matthew 24 to make any sense at all, it must be localized first of all within the period during and following the earthly ministry of Jesus, and certainly it must fall within the lifetime of the disciples themselves.

The disciples ask simultaneously about *when the Temple will be destroyed* and about *Jesus' coming*. With respect to the latter, they query Jesus about "your coming." Only Matthew's account actually uses the word "coming," while *Mark* and *Luke* simply inquire about "all this" (Mark 13:4; Luke 21:7). Since Matthew is the more "Jewish" of the Gospel writers, he attached special significance to the end of Temple and the "coming" of Jesus. The Greek word he uses is *parousia*, a term which is commonly applied by theologians to the "Second Coming" of Jesus, scheduled to take place at "the end of the age" and, in reference to *our horizon*, hidden in the future. The word itself means: 1) being present; 2) presence; 3) arrival; 4) advent. A few additional comments about the way *parousia* is used.

1. The Old Testament often speaks about the *coming of God* or the *coming of God's representatives* (see Isaiah 26:21; Daniel 4:23; Daniel 9:25; Micah 1:3; Malachi 3:1). There are frequent references to the "day of Yahweh" coming (see Joel 2:1; Malachi 3:2; Malachi 4:1). In each case what is in view involves God putting the world in order, sorting out the problems and restoring creation. *Judgment* is involved, but this includes both destroying evil and purifying what remains. God *comes* to judge the world (1 Chronicles 16:33; Psalm 96:13; 98:9) and this is a source of joy to those who live in it, since God's judgments are good, right and fair.
2. One relevant passage is from Daniel 7. The book of *Daniel* is an important background for the New Testament teaching about the future. Written during times of exile, it contains foreshadowings of God's future purposes for Israel and for the world. Matthew 24:15, as we shall see, directly quotes from *Daniel* when explaining the eschatological teaching of Jesus. From Daniel 7 we learn that God will judge the nations of the world, who are depicted as "wild beasts" which devour God's people (7:11-12). In a climactic vision, Daniel observes the following:

Daniel 7:13-14 ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.

Notice that the "son of man" figure *comes with the clouds of heaven* and that his *coming* is not *to the earth* but instead *to the Ancient of Days*, a reference of God Himself. This *coming* involves being *presented before him* in the sense that he *has a royal audience* with God. From God, and as part of this *coming*, the "son of man" receives "dominion," that is, "rule." This is in conjunction with "glory and a kingdom" such that *all peoples, nations and languages should serve him forever*. This parallels the text in Daniel 2 which we noted previously.

Read in context with Daniel's vision, the idea of the "son of man coming" translates into "the son of man coming to God where he receives the kingdom." Later in Daniel 7, the angelic interpreter explains to Daniel that the "son of man" has reference also to God's people who share in the kingdom which is given them by "the Ancient of Days."

The disciples ask a question about the "coming" of Jesus against this background. They are wondering when Jesus will *come before the Ancient of Days and receive the kingdom*. Such an understanding is consistent with general Jewish thinking about the "end of days." Israel awaited the time when God's Messiah would receive the kingdom and together with Israel would be vindicated by God, having come before Him.

When the disciples ask about "the end of the age," they are *not* asking *when the space-time world will end*. The Greek word *aiōn*, translated "age," has to do with the flow of history. As noted in our discussion above, "the

present age" will one day be supplanted by "the age to come," and it is with respect to this event that the phrase "end of the age" points.

What we must keep in mind is the *horizon of the disciples* when they ask these questions. Having seen Jesus enter the Temple on Palm Sunday and dramatically overturn the tables of the moneychangers — in the wake of his triumphal entry — they no doubt believe that Jesus would now *come* into *the presence* the heavenly court and receive authority to rule in his kingdom. Absent from their thinking is the full impact of Jesus' predictions about his coming death and resurrection which will be the *real coming before God and the means for receiving the kingdom*. The road to glory for Jesus passes through the cross. In the act of raising Jesus from the dead, God vindicates His Son and exalts Him to His right hand where he begins to reign over his kingdom. This is the primary fulfillment of Daniel 7. However, what Matthew 24 envisions — as stated in the disciples' questions — is also *coming judgment on Jerusalem and its Temple*. Much of what Matthew 24 tells us has to do with that history-making event.

Watch Out! (24:4-14)

Seeing the enthusiasm of the disciples, Jesus cautions them not to give in to end-time hustlers. If they are impressed by the outward appearances of the Temple buildings, they might be equally taken in by other glitzy religious types who cross their path. Deception at the hands of false Messiahs (those saying "I am the Christ") will be a trap to the disciples — one they must avoid. Indeed, a careful reading of Jewish history both before and after the time of Jesus will uncover several resistance movements led by would-be Messiahs intent on overthrowing Roman rule and declaring Israel's independence.¹² Jesus carefully distances himself from all of these, especially in rejecting their *means* for bringing about revolution.

Wars and "rumors" of wars, Jesus counsels the disciples, are also on the horizon but belong to the expected flow of history and in themselves do not point to any particular event of prophetic importance: "Such things must happen, but the end is still to come." The force of "must" (Greek: *dei*) lies in the *expected* nature of war in the course of human history, especially when resistance movements led by false Messiahs are on the move. Insurgency spawns counter-insurgency, and Rome along with its puppet Jewish rulers took decisive action against any and all who would attempt sedition.

A further note on the word "end" is in order at this juncture. Jewish people living at the time of Jesus did not expect an end of the space-time universe when they thought about the *telos* — the "end." This Greek word largely refers to where everything is moving. It is a term of *destination* not of *destruction*; of *consummation* not of *catastrophe*. Following the general outline of the Old Testament prophets, Jesus' contemporaries expected the present *age* to come to an end, followed by the inauguration of a new one. Note again 24:3 and the disciples' question about "the end of the age": *sunteleia tou aiōnos*. The word Matthew uses here is not the simple *telos* but the more colorful compound with *sun-* which emphasizes the convergence and climax of the *age*, not of the space-time world. The classical Greek writer Polybius used this word when referring to "the combination of efforts" or "the consummation of a scheme." We might speak about "a plan coming together," and in so doing communicate the same idea as *sunteleia*. God has a purpose which unfolds in the earthly work of Jesus and will reach a climax *for that generation* — *that horizon* — but the mere presence of false Messiahs and assorted wars do no represent the climax — yet.

When *ethnos* turns against *ethnos* (or as usually translated, "nation rises against nation"), accompanied by other political intrigues ("kingdom against kingdom"), bringing feminine in their wake, this is only the *beginning* of labor pains. Jesus does not want the disciples to make a false start when reacting to the ordinary course of human history. Tempting though it might be to brand this or that sequence of armed conflicts as "the end,"

¹² Included among these movements were Hezekiah (whom Herod killed), Judas the Galilean, Menahem, and his nephew Eleazar. See the excellent work of Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs*, Trinity Press, 2000.

Jesus refuses to do so and warns his followers against the hysteria which causes people to announce prematurely the coming of final doom.

The coming of persecution, death and hatred by the nations for being a Christ-follower presents its own threat. Pressured by such opposition, many disciples will “turn away from the faith,” “betray and hate one another,” and “become false prophets,” leading to deception and a substantial cooling of spiritual fervor. By drawing attention to these dangers, Jesus is refocusing the attention of the apostles away from the salient details and onto their mission at a time when it would be tempting to become enmeshed in speculation about when the end of the age will come. He specifically underscores these primary matters:

- 1. Stand firm to the end.**
- 2. Preach the Gospel of the kingdom in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.**

Jesus makes these exhortations against the background of Matthew 24:12 which affirms: "Sin will be rampant everywhere, and the love of many will grow cold." Finally, at this point in his discourse, Jesus makes the definitive assertion, “then the end will come.” This is an important concept within Jesus’ understanding of “the end” — the *telos*. As we noted regarding 24:3, "end" refers to the "end of the age," when the "present age" is supplanted by the "age to come" which overlaps in it (see the diagram above).

These crises would hound the early Messianic community during the nearly 40 years after Jesus dies and rises. Here is the coming trial of faith and test of the genuineness of the disciples. The labor intensifies around the Messianic sufferings in expectation that something new was about to be born in the world. Indeed, from old Israel will be born the New Israel, passing through its wilderness of 40 *years* as did the Israel of old, confronting the temptation of Satan as did Jesus for 40 *days*. The "Jerusalem above" was being formed, while the "Jerusalem below" waged war against it (see Paul's analysis of this situation in Galatians 4:21-31). Unwilling to lose its identity within general Judaism, the Messianic community faces ridicule, hardship, betrayal, and outright persecution at the hands of the authorities of the old order. This is what the coming *eschaton* looks like.

All of this is, of course, the beginning of the birth pains. What the Twelve would experience, and what the Messianic community would experience during the next generation would be an essential preparatory step for the survival of the Messianic movement into the future. In a sense, the prophetic word of Jesus comes out from the future and enters their present to give them guidance and encouragement to both *face their trials* and *fulfill their mission*. And there is a great deal of urgency here. They are on a rescue mission: to bring this good news to all the known world so that the Creator God might call out from all the nations a people for his name.

But why the urgency? The answer lies in the remaining verses of the chapter which we will discuss shortly. For now, we return to Jesus' opening words in Matthew 24: "Not one stone left on top of another." The disciples' mission is absolutely necessary because the old order embodied in Second Temple Judaism was now under divine interdiction and judgment. Jesus has served notice to every level of Jewish leadership that unless they return to the pure word of God, unless they abandon their nationalistic view of Messiah, unless they come in true repentance to the covenant God and his Word, and unless they reform the unjust institutions over which they preside — unless these things occur — judgment certainly will fall on the cities and towns of Judea and Galilee, and the much beloved and venerated Temple built by Herod will come crashing down around them with an incredible loss of life.

And so the little band of followers around Jesus are being entrusted with the mission of re-forming the people of God around the gospel. They are literally "given the kingdom." The creative power of the Holy Spirit will so infill their lives that they will actually stand up to the temporal rulers and the power structures of the old age and be a witness against them. This mission is critical. And it must be undertaken *soon*. Jesus needed to complete his work within a particular time-frame so that the disciples could get on with theirs. The clock of

history was ticking and the end of the old order was approaching quickly. The disciples needed to hold out patiently, faithfully and courageously until the end--until the great climax lying in the not too distant future.

But the Israel that clung to the Temple and its failed institutions — the priesthood, compromised by the Roman occupation; the Zealots who espoused violence as a means of social change — would face an uncertain future, demoralized by the loss of national identity, and, more importantly, the loss of the Temple, that great symbol of the abiding presence of God in their midst.

Where would the light of the Creator God now burn brightly if not in the holy place of an earthly sanctuary? Perhaps now the true meaning of Jesus' words — "You are the light of the world" — becomes clear. Jesus, in his teaching on the Mount of Olives that day is giving to his followers what they will need to be that light. His instruction will keep them from being naïve about the faltering world around them. It will protect them from false messiahs, and from the fear which comes from human and natural disasters. If anything, Jesus words in Matthew 24 were designed to prepare the Twelve to become the advance guard of the kingdom of God which Jesus announced since the very first day of his public ministry. In the face of principalities and powers, they would give a faithful witness (Greek: *martyr*) even when death hung over them. Their destination was the everlasting kingdom which one day would appear on earth, but which had already arrived in the world through the work and words of Jesus.

This is what eschatology is for: not to announce the future like a fortuneteller; not to satiate human curiosity about what lies ahead. On the contrary, eschatology is the good news that God is, "at last", bringing to fulfillment his promised word to restore all things, to redeem the human race, to begin the new creation and defeat all the powers of the evil one. In a surprising turnabout of events, the promised resurrection of the dead will take place in their lifetime--in fact, in just a few days when Jesus himself defeats the forces of the evil one and ends the monopoly of death. In this new story, *dead men do tell tales!* And those who witness this resurrected Jesus will bear that tale to the ends of the earth. When they do that, much of the prophetic scripture starts being fulfilled--in their time. And that fulfillment will ripple down through time to our own time.

"The Time Will Come When You Will See" (24:15-28).

Daniel's prophecy now has greater prominence in the Olivet Discourse. In this case, Jesus refers to something called "the abomination that causes desolation." With great intention, Jesus weaves into this next section a phrase familiar to his audience. Not all translations handle these words the same:

Version	Translated as
Tyndale (1534)	Abomination that betokeneth desolation
KJV,ESV	Abomination of desolation
RSV	Desolating sacrilege
BBE	Unclean thing which makes destruction
NAB	Desolating Abomination
NIV	Abomination causing desolation
NLT	Sacrilegious object that causes desecration
Greek NT	<i>To bdelugma tēs eremōseos</i>

The OT background for the phrase is Daniel 9:27, 11:31; and 12:11 where it referred to historical predictions, some of which were fulfilled during the Maccabean period. We have the evidence of 1 Maccabees 1:54 where the phrase "horrible abomination" applies to desecration of the Temple. The Hebrew phrase is *šiqqūš mēšōmēm*, generally translated "abominable idol which desolates". Those hearing Jesus use this phrase and Matthew's readers (note the instruction, "let the reader understand", an invitation to make the connection with the OT we are about to make here) would need to think about the history of Israel during the Exilic and Post-exilic periods. So must we.

During the Exile in Babylon, Daniel became court prophet to the kings of Babylon and their successors, the Persians. His story and prophecies are found in the book bearing his name. As the exile wore on, Daniel prayed to Yahweh seeking insight into the prophecy of Jeremiah which foresaw the seventy-year captivity. Daniel wanted to know when this captivity would come to an end, and when God would at last forgive his people and restore them to their land. That is the burden of Daniel 9 and spills over into the predictions found in 11:31 and 12:11.

God's response was to outline the rebuilding of Jerusalem, but would put a different twist in the tale. It is true, God says, that the seventy years are drawing to an end. Yet the future is not quite that tidy. The "70 years" will turn into "70 x 7" or 490 years during which time there will not only be rebuilding, but also coming tribulation. A mysterious ruler will arise who will place an "abomination which desolates" in the holy Temple and the result will be a catastrophic military "flood". Daniel 11 would place that series of events in a much broader historical context. Scholars of Jewish history see the end of that series climaxing with the story of the Maccabees. That period of Jewish history closely parallels circumstances facing Israel in the time of Jesus.

Following the return from exile (539-530 B.C.E.), the Jewish nation was a much diminished political entity. It was not until 516 B.C.E. that the Temple was finished. During most of that time, the spiritual leaders were men like Ezra and Nehemiah, Haggai and Zechariah. By the time the last prophet put his pen to his book, *Malachi*, the expectations for a glorious future had sharply declined. Apathy, half-hearted worship, and a sense of continuing exile filled the land. Although the Persians greatly aided the return from Exile, most Jews did not return to the land. By 331, the Greeks had formed their empire and once more the land of Judah lived under an occupation. To make matters worse, the somewhat friendly Alexander the Great dies and his empire is broken up, with Egypt and Syria vying for power in the Eastern Mediterranean. And Israel was in the cross-fire geographically. The nation had less to fear from Egypt than from Syria who wanted to Hellenize everything it ruled, which meant, in Jewish terms, to paganize it.

The chief offender in this regard was the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes who invaded Judah, desecrated the Temple in 168 B.C.E. by setting up an altar to Zeus on top of the altar of burnt offering. Then he proceeded to sacrifice a pig on that altar, decreeing that the practice of Jewish faith was illegal and sanctioned by the death penalty. Then in a startling turn of events, the aged priest Mattathias attacked Antiochus' puppet priests, and sends his five sons into the hills where they recruit and train an army of resistance against the Syrian occupation. Judas Maccabeus, the natural leader of this "band of brothers", mounts a series of successful battles resulting in the defeat of the Syrians and the rededication of a purified Temple in 164 B.C.E. (celebrated as the "feast of lights" or Hanukkah ever since) After some further struggles (extending to 162 B.C.E.), the little Hasmonean Kingdom of Judah expanded its borders to match those of Solomon's time, bringing relative stability for nearly 100 years. But then the Romans came.

In 63 B.C. the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem and incorporates Judea into the Empire. From that time forward, the nation is once more an occupied territory without independent sovereignty, ruled by puppet kings like Herod and crass governors like Pilate (26-36 C.E.) who would bear the guilt for the execution of the Son of God.

With the Roman occupation, the stage was being set for a replay of the Maccabean drama, but this time by a crowded field of Jewish leaders: Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Herodians, and Essenes. Into this socio-political milieu steps Jesus who in Matthew 24 now predicts a new abomination, like the one in Daniel's prophecy, like the one played out when the Syrians ruled Judah. Only this time, the occupying power is Rome and the language used by Jesus makes it clear that this crisis will far exceed what happened in the days of the Maccabees. Like old Mattathias, Jesus calls on his disciples to "flee to the mountains". In biblical terms this "flight" is commanded to avoid the judgment of God that will take place because of the "abomination which desolates". Recall the angel arriving in Sodom and seizing the family of Lot in order to flee the coming judgment (Genesis 19).

To remain in Jerusalem would mean certain death. But more significantly it would mean being trapped between the various warring factions intent on taking charge in the ominous fight with Rome. Flight precedes the final climatic "end". It means the opportunity to leave behind the old order and re-group as the remnant community of Jesus. And that is exactly what happened. The historian Eusebius, writing in the 4th century, left this account:

But before the war, the people of the Church of Jerusalem were bidden in an oracle given by revelation to men worthy of it to depart from the city and to dwell in a city of Perea called Pella. To it those who believed in Christ migrated from Jerusalem. Once the holy men had completely left the Jews and Judea, the justice of God at last overtook them, since they had committed such transgressions against Christ and his apostles. Divine justice completely blotted out that impious generation from among men. [*Ecclesiastical History* III.v.3]

Early in 66 C.E. some Jewish Zealot forces commenced battle with the 12th Legion under the command of Cestius Gallus, defeating it. But such victories were short-lived and only gave room for droves of Jews to flee. And they did, according to the record left by Josephus.

Then the ominous shadows of "the abomination which desolates" appeared in 40 C.E. For the Emperor Caligula planned to place an image of himself in the Temple, an intention documented by historians Josephus, Philo, and Tacitus. A delegation of Jews under Herod Agrippa protested and successfully turned back this provocation. Caligula is assassinated in 41 C.E. and the immediate threat passes. But Jews never forgot, nor did they imagine such a thing could not happen again. And so the Jewish War begins in 66 and rages until the final defeat at Masada in 73: seven years of tribulation which careful students of Daniel's prophecy could hardly mistaken.

During that period, Jewish hands would desecrate the Temple before finally Roman authorities would thoroughly paganize the city. Between 67 and 68 the Zealot party controlled much of the Temple, as Josephus vividly tells the story. They allowed horrible crimes to be committed, walking wantonly in the Holy of Holies, and killing their opponents. They then consecrated a clown Phanni as high priest, leading to the great lament of the high priest Ananus: "It would have been far better for me to have died before I had seen the house of God laden with such abominations and its unapproachable and hallowed places crowded with the feet of murderers" (*War*, IV.iii.10). The prophecy Jesus utters in Matthew 24 would be remembered by his followers as they would heed these warnings, making their perilous journey from the city to Transjordan, in the mountains where Pella is located, part of the Roman province of the Decapolis--one region Jesus visited in his ministry.

Flat roofed houses were common. The roof was a place for prayer at noon. Access was gained to it by an outside staircase. From the roof a person might see the events shaping up around him. Jesus tells his followers to identify the coming abomination, descend the stairs and leave. Similar language appears in the OT prophecy of Ezekiel 7:14-23. In preparation for the coming desolation of Israel by the Babylonians, Ezekiel utters these words of God: "the sword is without, pestilence and famine are within; he that is in the field dies by the sword; and him that is in the city famine and pestilence devour. And if any survivors escape, they will be on the mountains."

The instructions Jesus gives include care for pregnant and nursing mothers and vigilance during the winter months. Winter travel was not problematic because of cold or snow, but because of swollen streams from heavy rains. Josephus tells how in 68 such rains prevented residents of Gadara from crossing the Jordan in search of safety (*War*, IV. Vii. 5). Moreover, Matthew 24:21-22 distinguishes the disciples who flee and the men of Judea who will not avoid the coming judgment. The Greek phrase *pasa sarx* ("all flesh") parallels Jeremiah 12:12 where it clearly refers to the Judeans.

Verses 21-22 owe much to Daniel 12:1: ...And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in

the book. The so-called "a time of trouble" is translated in *Matthew* as "tribulation" (Greek: *thlipsis*, literally, "affliction"). Jesus uses language taken directly from Daniel to underscore the unparalleled nature of the event. History confirms the accuracy of his prediction. For not only will the Temple and the city be destroyed, but the national life of Israel will cease for nearly 2000 years. Even the Babylonians captivity ended with the return of the remnant and the rebuilding of both Temple and city. Not so with this event. By using the phrase "since the Creation", he no doubt alludes to the exile of Adam and Eve from the garden, but even in that case there was a recovery of civilization as the human race is given opportunity for redemption, even after the Great Flood some years later.

But in this case, it is the "elect" (Greek: *eklektous*, literally the "called out ones") who become the remnant who are saved from the destruction by Jesus' own warning and their continuing purpose to renew Israel once more. The shortening of the days points to the end of the Roman-Jewish war and the fact that not even the Romans wanted to press this campaign beyond the defeat of the Zealots and other pressure groups within Second Temple Judaism. Historians of the time tell us that during the events leading up to 70 C.E., when the Romans under Vespasian were about to strike the city, Emperor Nero dies and Rome is in chaos. This prompts General Vespasian to break off the attack, remove troops and withdraw for a time while he returns to Rome to become its Emperor. History reveals that this pause in military action enabled Jews and Christians alike to leave the city and seek safety elsewhere. It's hard not to see the connection. Though judgment was coming on Jerusalem, God's hand of protection so ordered the events of history, that the brief interruption allowed escape for many of His people.

The Old Testament prophets received from God a word of hope whenever they received a word of judgment. The way that "hope" was expressed took the form of "remnant theology". While God might destroy in judgment, not all would be destroyed.

- a. Remnant language is as old as Joseph and his brothers in Egypt, where he addressed them this way:
Genesis 45:7 But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.
- b. When Hezekiah, king of Judah, fears the fall of Jerusalem to the Assyrians, he still holds forth hope:
2 Kings 19:4 It may be that the LORD your God will hear all the words of the field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words the LORD your God has heard. Therefore pray for the remnant that still survives." This theme continues in 19:30-31 where it becomes a real promise from God.
- c. One additional passage from Isaiah will illustrate the pervasive "remnant" theme from the Old Testament:
Isaiah 10: 20 In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel. 21 A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God. 22 Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, only a remnant will return. Destruction has been decreed, overwhelming and righteous.
- d. Paul adds his own words to this in Romans 11:5-6:
So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. 6 And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.
He goes on to add that though Israel has "stumbled", it has not fallen without recovery, but God has taken opportunity to expand his people through including Gentiles among them. He then declares, "All Israel will be saved" (11:26), referring to both Jew and Gentile as part of the people of God.

If we compare verses 23-25 with the earlier words of Jesus in 24:4-5, we discover once more the warning against being deceived by false prophets. In the first part of the chapter, Jesus has been teaching about the "birth pangs" which create insecurity and the susceptibility to deception. Here, the "abomination which desolates" and the unparalleled "time of tribulation" invite similar false Messiahs and prophets who threaten to mislead even "the elect". Because of this threat, Jesus once more admonishes his disciples: "be on your guard" (24:25, Greek: *idou*, "beware"). He then explains his intentions: "I have told you beforehand (Greek: *proeirēka*) all this things." At the heart of his prophetic teaching is the future good of his followers. He wants them to

survive the coming disaster. Once more, history illuminates the text. At this point in our discussion, we need to tell the story of how these things unfolded in the history of Second Temple Judaism.

Josephus indicates that when the Jewish war began, the first decisive defeats of the Roman General Cestius took place at Bethoron Pass in late November, 66, and during this engagement, arrows were used, resulting in nearly 6,000 Roman deaths. These are the first stages of the war, instigated by the Jewish revolt with the promise of victory.

- a. The defeat of the Roman Cestius by the Jews led to a widespread outbreak of carnage, in the words of Josephus, "without a moment's delay" (compare with Matthew's use of the word "immediately" in 24:29).
- b. The newly established government in Jerusalem appointed regional commanders in Judea, Idumea, Perea, Galilee, and, of course, in Jerusalem.
- c. The unbroken *Pax Romana*, the promised security of the Empire, had been broken and for the next several years, from East to West, the Roman eagle would encounter one calamity after another, including its own civil war in Rome.
- d. The Jews, also, in spite of their new found courage against Roman soldiers, would be faced with internal discord and renewed attacks from the Greeks and Romans.
- e. Vespasian commands the Fifth and Tenth Legions, based in Syria, while his son Titus would assume command of the Fifteenth in Egypt which he would march overland to Israel. Vespasian's first objective is Galilee (67 C.E.) where he defeats Josephus who then becomes a diplomat seeking an end to the war. One by one the cities of Israel fall to Rome with heavy loss of life.
- f. Next, he attacks Judea (68-69 C.E.). Before he is able to finish the operation, Emperor Nero dies in Rome (either by his own hand or assassination, 69 C.E.). This ensuing suspension of military operations gives time for the Jewish Christians to leave, following Jesus' instructions to flee Jerusalem when they see the armies surrounding the city.
- g. Now it's Rome's turn to experience civil war, as three emperors (Galba, Otho, Vitellius) take power successively and then are killed. Finally, Emperor Vespasian (69-79 C.E.) is firmly in charge and commits the finishing of the Jewish war to his able son Titus.
- h. Before Titus resumes his operations, the battle for Kingship in Jerusalem begins. "Who will be king?" is the question of the day. Several factions vie for power, while at the same time, they are suppose to be preparing for the Siege of Jerusalem by the Romans:

Ananus son of Ananus	Former high priest; moderate leader of Jerusalem during the rebellion
Eleazar son of Simon	Leader of the Zealots, former Temple treasurer [same as Eleazar son of Ananias]
John of Gischala	Josephus' enemy in Galilee, who fled to Jerusalem and took control of the Zealots
Simon son of Gioras	Popular leader from the countryside who gained control of much of Jerusalem
The Idumaeans	Skilled soldiers from Idumaea, south of Judaea, who were strongly anti-Roman but found themselves manipulated by the factions

- i. Ultimately, three factions engage in bitter warfare until Titus arrives in early 70 C.E. to begin the fatal siege. When Passover comes, there is an attempt to celebrate it within the Temple. But the opportunity is seized by the radicals to eliminate the priests, leaving Simon of Gioras and John of Gischala to battle for power, and still to face the Roman siege.
- j. Jerusalem is shut up against the Roman assault, complete with its earthworks and catapults. No one leaves or enters without Roman permission. The food supply drops dramatically and human beings are left to the ravages of starvation.
- k. Josephus paints some of the most graphic pictures of that famine. He recounts how children took food from the father's mouths, and how parents did the same to their offspring. In one especially painful account, a woman kills her child and roasts it for food (*War*, Book VI.iii.4)

In this brief overview of the events which fulfilled Jesus' prophecy to his disciples, the reader of Matthew 24 can better understand why Jesus uses such language as "abomination which desolates" and "time of tribulation". A series of such events unfold across seven years (66-73 C.E.) corresponding to the prediction of Daniel 9 and the last of the 70 prophetic weeks revealed to him. As during the days of the Maccabean revolt and the war

with Syria, so now in their war with Rome, the leaders of Second Temple Judaism live the momentous "last days" of the age about to pass away. It is not the "end of *the* world" they face, but the end of *their* world — of Second Temple Judaism and its unrighteousness.

Signs and Significance (24:29-51)

We have been studying Jesus' answer to the questions put to him in Matthew 24: "When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?" Part of that response included general remarks about the "early birth pains" of war, famine, and the like. These would intensify in the form of persecution of the disciples by the Jewish and Roman authorities. But, Jesus told them, they must not overlook their mission: to bring the Good News to the "ends of the earth," that is *to the known world of their time*. In effect, the coming crisis was the "deadline" and Jesus admonishes them to "be on their guard" more than once throughout this passage.

However, the "birth pains" would climax with the appearance of the "abomination" causing "desolation", at which time the disciples of Jesus needed to leave for the mountains and not join the coming fight with Rome. Indeed, they needed to avoid entirely the civil war that would break out, pitting one Jewish faction against another inside the Temple courts. What's more, they must surely turn away from any false prophets or false teachers who would use these dire circumstances as an excuse to draw followers after themselves.

Much like Lot, Abraham's nephew, who found himself in the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Jesus tells his followers to leave the spiritual Sodom, *Jerusalem* (see Revelation 11:8 where Jerusalem is called both "Sodom and Egypt" because it crucified its Lord). Earlier, Jesus told his followers: "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise" (Mark 10:33-34). Jerusalem becomes the city who crucifies its true Lord.

And elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus would say things like this:

Matthew 23:29-39 You build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, 30 saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. 33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? 34 Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, 35 so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! 38 See, your house is left to you desolate. 39 For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Luke 23:28-31 But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' 30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' 31 For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Signs: End of the Age

Jerusalem, by Jesus' own words, had become a doomed city. That is why the following language is used in Matthew 24 to describe its coming judgment: 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." A Jewish reader of that time would immediately recognize these expressions taken from the Old Testament prophets. Consider some examples:

Isaiah 13:10 The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.

Ezekiel 32:7-8 When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. 8 All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord GOD.

Joel 2:10 Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine. 11 The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?

Joel 3:14 Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. 15 The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine.

To what did these passages refer? A careful reading of their contexts reveals that these texts refer to the judgment of God on Israel as it took place when the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple in 586 B.C.E. and sent Israel into exile. Sun, moon and stars were the rulers of the sky in the ancient world and were often used as symbols of all forms of political power and rule. When God's royal brightness shone forth in judgment, it made the brightness of the heavenly bodies seem dim by comparison. That is why the prophets referred to such events in history as "The Day of the Lord". As Joel phrased it, "The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?"

The darkening of sun, moon and stars is not a literal cosmic event taking place in the spatial heavens. Rather, this is metaphorical language used to reveal the actions of God; it is *apocalyptic* language, revealing the fact that God has become King once again. And He comes to judge His people in righteousness. Such language signals that God is about to do a great work in the world. In fact, after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, Peter would stand up on the day of Pentecost and make the following statements about the Holy Spirit who had just been officially "poured out" on the Messianic house of Israel:

Acts 2:16-21 16 But **this is what** was uttered through the prophet Joel: 17 "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; 18 even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. 19 And I will show **wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth** below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; 20 **the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood**, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. 21 And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Peter did not treat the words of Joel literally, but rather he grasped the meaning of such coded language as pointing to an "earth-shattering event" or to an "event of cosmic proportions", namely that God would pour out the Holy Spirit on the Messianic community in fulfillment of age-old prophecies. That event would mark a major shift in the way God would deal with Israel. The only fitting terminology to use to describe such an occurrence was the language of "sun, moon and stars" dimmed by comparison to the wonderful works of God now taking place in history.

Coming of the Son of Man

With reference to "these days", Jesus speaks about the "coming of the Son of Man" which occurs at the climactic point of these tribulation times. Several descriptive phrases appear in this passage:

1. Coming of the Son of Man
2. In Clouds
3. Power and great glory
4. Sending the angels to gather the elect from the four winds, from one end of earth to another.

To what is Jesus referring? Once more, we are indebted to Daniel, the prophet, for the Old Testament background to this text. Consider once more Daniel 7:

9 As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. 10 A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. 11 I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. 12 As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives

were prolonged for a season and a time. 13 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. 14 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.

God is here depicted as the Great Judge before whom all nations must one day stand. He is the "Ancient of Days" who appears in judgment and removes all illegitimate rule and power from the world. Before him "comes" the Son of Man who receives from God "dominion, glory and a kingdom" which will last forever. The "coming" of this One is "with the clouds of heaven". The "coming" of this One is to receive the kingdom of God.

And so when Jesus uses "coming of the Son of Man" language, his reader should be immediately drawn to the Daniel 7 passage and instantly recognize the connection Jesus is trying to make. This "coming" of which Jesus speaks in this instance is the "coming" of Daniel 7 in which he, Jesus, will come to God and receive from Him the kingdom which will last forever. This would, of course, imply the loss of the kingdom by the rulers of Second Temple Judaism. The fall of Jerusalem would signal the end of the old age and the fulfillment of Daniel 7. This was the same message Jesus conveyed earlier in Mark when he spoke of the unfaithful tenants who seized the owner's son and killed him:

What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. 10 Have you not read this Scripture: "' The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; 11 this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'" (Mark 12:9-11)

To whom does God, the owner of the vineyard now give the kingdom? Daniel 7 makes clear that he gives the vineyard to the "Son of Man".

What becomes evident from this reading of the text is that Jesus is not talking about his final coming from heaven when at last he raises the dead and brings in his everlasting, earthly kingdom. Matthew 24 read against the *first horizon* is not about the *Second Coming* in the usual sense of that phrase, but about a very real "coming" that took place at the climax of the events which Jesus predicted would take place within the disciples' life-time. To quote 24:34, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." It ought to be evident to any sane observer of history that the New Heaven and the New Earth brought about by Jesus' final revelation to the world has not yet taken place. The transformation of human life and the last judgment have not yet happened. And that is why we must be careful in our reading of Matthew 24 and its reference to the "coming of the Son of Man". Matthew does not here mention his coming *to earth* nor does he speak about the establishment of his earthly kingdom. However, he emphatically describes the day of judgment and the gathering of his people from all over the world into his kingdom. Of these events we can be quite clear. Here are two unmistakable signs:

1. The sun, moon and stars darkened over Second Temple Judaism because of its refusal to accept God's Messiah and because of the abominations committed in the Temple by those who would be Israel's leaders. Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem, laid siege to the city and reduced it to rubble in 70 C.E. The Temple was dismantled and burned with fire.
2. The gospel successfully drew people from the four corners of the earth into the kingdom of God. Matthew writes: "And then he shall send his *aggelous* (Greek: "angels" or "messengers") and he shall gather together his elect (Greek: *eklektous*, "called ones") from the four winds, from one end of earth to the end of heaven (Note: this is an idiom meaning "from everywhere", a bit like our "from sea to shining sea" metaphor to speak about the "whole country")." "To gather" is the opposite of "to scatter". Whereas Second Temple Judaism will be scattered, the Messianic Community will now gather around Jesus who has assumed his place as the King of God's kingdom. The use of "angel" language may mean one of two things: 1) the Greek *aggelos* can also mean simply "messenger". It is used here with the verb *apostolō* from which the noun "apostle" ("one who is sent") derives. In this case, God sends his apostolic messengers into all the world to gather together His scattered people. As John's gospel phrases it: "Jesus would die for the nation,

52 and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:51-52) Or, 2) the New Testament recognizes the special role of angels in the present time: And to which of the angels has he ever said, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"? 14 Are they not all ministering spirits **sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?**" (Hebrews 1:13-14). Jesus may well be referring to this assigned function of angels in gathering together the people of God.

Gathering the Elect

This act of "gathering" (Greek: *episunaze*, "gather together", from *episunagō*) has the same root behind it as the word "synagogue", the gathering place for Jewish worship. What is Jesus implying by this sort of language? Simply that with the end of the "Second Temple" form of the people of God, there comes into being a renewed "synagogue", brought together by God Himself from all over the world. The "called out ones" (*eklektoi*) are formed into "the gathered ones" (*synagogoī*). This, too, is second part of the sign for which the disciples are looking.

In summary, there is a scattering and there is a gathering. Both events are the **sign** that the "Son of Man" has come to the Ancient of Days and received the everlasting kingdom. To put it differently, this is the sign of heavenly "regime change". The fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. was an unmistakable and unprecedented event. By the same token, the remarkable gathering of the nations into the renewed Messianic community, gathered around Jesus, was yet another, still more wonderful event. And both events, said Jesus, would take place in "this generation", a claim we now must examine carefully.

Parables of the Coming

To illustrate his words, Jesus now uses two different parables: 1) the fig tree, and 2) the master of the house who goes away. Each parable underscores an important aspect of the predictions Jesus made to his disciples.

The parable of the fig tree (Greek: *sukē*) teaches a lesson, Jesus tells them. The clause, "learn this lesson", comes from a single Greek word: *mathete* from which the word "disciple" comes. "Allow the fig tree to disciple you", Jesus is telling them. "Pay attention to its leaves as a sign that summer is near, right at the door." Unlike other trees in Israel, the fig tree drops its leaves during the winter and delays showing signs of renewed life until later, in the summer. Lane adds additional significance to this fact:

When the fig becomes green, one is not only certain the summer is coming but that it is near. The Mount of Olives was famous for its fig trees, which sometimes attained a height of 20 or 30 feet. Assuming that Jesus gave this instruction just before the Passover, the fig tree would be in the condition described in the parable, its branches tender, its leaves sprouting. By calling the disciples to observe properly what was immediately at hand Jesus reinforced his exhortation to observe what was happening in Jerusalem and Judea and to recognize its significance.[*Word Commentary, Mark, 479*]

Over the course of the next several years, the followers of Jesus would no doubt look at many fig trees. Each time they did they would be reminded of Jesus' words: when the leaves are here, summer is near. Then they would make the connection with the events swirling around them. Once they see the fall of Jerusalem and see the gathering of Jew and Gentile together into the Messianic community, they would know that the end of the old age had arrived, and the Son of Man had finally received from God the everlasting kingdom as Daniel 7 said he would.

Then comes the startling claim. "This generation (Greek: *genea*) will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened." Just as the life-cycle of the fig tree must run its course once the leaves have appeared, so also the flow of history must move on to fulfillment once the signs Jesus identifies finally appear. Jesus uses firm, confident and unwavering language here: *Amēn legō 'umīn*: "Truly, I say to you" was the common formula Jesus used to introduce statements that are "oaths" in the truest sense of that word. If what Jesus said

did not take place as he affirmed here, then he is a liar and a false prophet. Worse, he has sworn an oath which proves to be untrustworthy. But we believe his words were true and meant in the very way he spoke them. He is asserting in no uncertain terms that the generation then living would witness the complete fulfillment of everything he predicted in Matthew 24. This was not the first time he spoke in this way. Consider these texts spoken by Jesus earlier in the gospels:

Matthew 23:34-36 34 Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, 35 so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Matthew 11:12-19 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. 13 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, 14 and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. 15 He who has ears to hear, let him hear. 16 "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, 17 "'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'" 18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."

Matthew 12:39-45 But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. 41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. 42 The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. 43 "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. 44 Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. 45 Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation."

Luke 11:47-51 Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. 48 So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. 49 Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' 50 so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, 51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation.

Mark 8:38 For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Luke 17:24-25 For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. 25 But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

Even Peter, as early as the day of Pentecost, grasped the significance of Jesus' words *for his own time* when he spoke these words to the people of Israel, gathered for the feast:

Acts 2:36-40 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." 37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 **For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.**" 40 And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation."

Peter's remarks are significant for several reasons. In them, he speaks about the call of God which summons Israel, Israel's children and *those who are far off*, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. Here he plainly speaks about the remnant of Israel whom Jesus predicted would start to gather around Jesus. But notice how he also speaks of the world-wide nature of this gathering: "those who are far off" which closely parallels Jesus' words about the gathering "from the four winds". Then, Peter contrasts this group with "this crooked generation" from which the faithful remnant were called to separate themselves.

It is to the *contemporary* generation that Jesus refers in Matthew 24:34. And, says Jesus, his words would outlast "heaven and earth", another wonderful hyperbole intended to say, Everything else may pass away, but not my words. And indeed, "the heaven and earth" of Second Temple Judaism would indeed pass away in 70 C.E., but the word of Jesus would prove true. His kingdom would be firmly established in the world and the four corners of the earth would flow into it.

Until this point in Matthew 24, Jesus has been largely dealing with the question, "What is the sign", a question which Jesus has more than adequately answered. He lastly turns to the issue of "when" these things will be fulfilled. No doubt the disciples wanted a precise dating of the ensuing events. They would not be alone, as many in our own day seek the same degree of exactness for Jesus "Second" coming. Jesus turns aside the question by reminding the disciples that the "day or hour" is not revealed to any, but is kept in the secret councils of God alone. Even the incarnate Jesus does not have that information. Put directly, "You do not know when that time will come" (24:36). Those are Jesus' own words. Whenever a false prophet appeared claiming the kingdom would come that day, the disciples could firmly respond: "You do not know!" And when would-be prophetic teachers today make similar claims, our response should be that of Jesus: "You do not know!" And why is that?

Once more the familiar refrain, "Keep watch" and "Be on your guard" appears in the text, as Jesus tells **the second parable about the master of the house who goes away**, leaving his servants in charge with specific assignments (John, you do this; James you do that; Mary, keep an eye on James and John!). What's the job of each? To find out in advance when their master will come back? No, but to fulfill their assigned tasks. There must be no clock watchers in the kingdom of God! Prophetic date setters are clock watchers, and if they are watching the clock they are not doing their assigned work. Recall the words of Jesus about the mission: The gospel into all the world! And even more so now that the disciples know that the fall of Jerusalem is accompanied by the gathering of God's elect from the ends of the earth.

And lest the reader imagines these words about "watchfulness" and "doing one's assigned task" apply only to the disciples, Jesus adds: "What I say to you (the four disciples), I say to everyone: "Be on your guard." For we have all been placed within the "household of God" and, in fact, we are the "building of God", His "Restored Temple" in which he has placed his holy name. There can be no greater task than to fulfill the assigned task given us by God in his Temple. Even as the disciples in the first century knew that the Son of Man would come suddenly to His Temple for judgment, so they also knew that they had a serious responsibility to be doing the work of the Renewed Temple God was raising up in the world.

Matthew 24 comes to an end with these admonitions. From a careful reading of the entire chapter, we walk away with some important understandings:

1. Jesus tells his disciples about their future so that they would pay closer attention to the special work he had given them to do and not be distracted by events taking place around them.
2. In his teaching, Jesus warns them against premature fear in the face of the ordinary events of human history: war, famine, and false prophets, which are but the early birth pains of things yet to happen.
3. Further, he calls for courage in the face of the persecution they would experience at the hands of both Jewish leaders and the Romans. They must rely on the Holy Spirit to give them the right words to speak at their trials.
4. A decisive moment will arrive when the holy Temple will be desecrated by unholy acts committed inside of it, abominations which would lead to its destruction and to the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans.
5. Jesus instructed his followers to leave the city when these things took place.
6. These horrible events, coupled with the re-gathering of the Messianic community from all over the world, would be **the sign** that the Son of Man was coming to the Ancient of Days to receive the everlasting kingdom.
7. These things would all take place in their lifetime and would befall their generation.

8. The disciples must avoid the temptation of staring at the prophetic clock and, instead, be about their Father's work in the newly restored kingdom of God.

Postscript to Matthew 24

The historical record has left behind for us even more detail about certain unusual phenomena that were seen by Jew and Gentile alike during the siege of Jerusalem and the Temple. Once more we are indebted to the eyewitness accounts of Josephus, particularly those found in *Wars of the Jews*, Book VI:

1. The Roman General Titus did not want to burn the Temple, but in fact sent his cohorts to extinguish the fires set by the Jewish rebels (VI.4.3).
2. So Titus retired into the tower of Antonia, and resolved to storm the temple the next day, early in the morning, with his whole army, and to encamp around the holy house; but as for that house, God had, for certain long ago doomed it to the fire; and now that fatal day was come according to the revolution of ages; it was the tenth day of the month of Loos [Ab], (Niese: Aug. 29, Capellus: Aug. 10) *upon which it was formerly burnt by the king of Babylon; although **these flames took their rise from the Jews themselves, and were occasioned by them;*** for, upon Titus' retiring, the seditious lay still for a little while, and then attacked the Romans again, when those who guarded the holy house fought with those who quenched the fire that was burning in the inner [court of the] temple; but these Romans put the Jews to flight, and proceeded as far as the holy house itself.[VI.4.5]
3. Josephus relates how Titus tried in vain to put out the fire, his orders drowned out by the noise of battle inside the Temple precincts and his own soldiers carried away by the heat of the moment.
4. Josephus marvels at the date when these events took place: "However, one cannot but wonder at the accuracy of this period thereto relating; for the same month and day were now observed, as I said before, wherein the holy house was burnt formerly by the Babylonians." [VI.4.8]
5. Our historian also chronicles the rise of false prophets while these events were taking place: 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 bribed by the tyrants to impose on the people, who announced this to them, that they should wait for deliverance from God; and this was in order to keep them from deserting, and that they might be buoyed up above fear and care by such hopes..[VI.5.2]
6. In contrast to the failed promises of the false prophets, genuine signs did appeared **before** any of these events took place, warning the people about the coming destruction: Thus there was a star resembling a sword, which stood over the city, and a comet, that continued a whole year. Thus also, before the Jews' rebellion, and before those commotions which preceded the war, when the people were come in great crowds to the feast of unleavened bread, on the eighth day of the month of Xanthikos [Nisan], (Niese: April 25, Capellus: April 8) and at the ninth hour of the night, so great a light shone around the altar and the holy house, that it appeared to be bright daytime; which lasted for half an hour. This light seemed to be a good sign to the unskillful, but was so interpreted by the sacred scribes as to portend those events that followed immediately upon it. At the same festival also, a heifer, as she was led by the high priest to be sacrificed, brought forth a lamb in the midst of the temple. Moreover, the eastern gate of the inner [court of the] temple, which was of brass, and extremely heavy, and had been with difficulty shut by twenty men, and fastened with iron-bound bars, and had bolts sunk very deep into the firm floor, which was there made of one entire stone, was seen to be opened of its own accord about the sixth hour of the night. Now, those who kept watch in the temple, came hereupon running to the captain of the temple, and told him of it; who then came up there, and not without great difficulty was able to shut the gate again. This also appeared to the common people to be a very happy prodigy, as if God thereby opened to them the gate of happiness. But the men of learning understood it, that the security of their holy house was dissolved of its own accord, and that the gate was opened for the advantage of their enemies. So these publicly declared that the signal predicted the desolation that was coming upon them. Besides these, a few days after that feast, on the twenty-first day of the month of Artemisios [Iyyar], (Niese: June 8, Capellus: May 21) a certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared: I suppose the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those who saw it, and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals; for, before sunset, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armor were seen running about among the clouds, and surrounding the cities. Moreover, at that feast which we call Pentecost, as the priests were going by night into the inner [court of the] temple, as their custom was, to perform their sacred ministrations, they said that, in the first place, they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise, and after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, "We are departing from here." [VI.5.3]

We also have the record left by Tacitus, a Roman historian: "Prodigies had occurred...In the sky appeared a vision of armies in conflict, of glittering armor. A sudden lightening flash from the clouds lit up the Temple.

The doors of the holy place abruptly opened, a superhuman voice was heard to declare that the gods were leaving it, and in the same instant came the rushing tumult of their departure" (*The Histories*, V:13).

Such accounts from both Jewish and Roman sources indicate the presence of visible signs which preceded and accompanied the series of events foretold by Jesus in Matthew 24. It only stands to reason that if the unfolding of these events had the earth-shattering significance attributed to them by Jesus, there should be attending signs. This is not a secret "coming" but one that was witnessed in numerous ways by those living at that time. If we were to draw the parallel between this "Coming" and the "coming of the Holy Spirit" at Pentecost, we would see once again the presence of signs. And Peter drew the connection by saying "this is that..." in his quotation of Joel's prophecy, complete with signs in the heavens above and on the earth below. When the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy took place, the evidence was unmistakable to those who witnessed it, as these supporting texts indicate.

Matthew 24 and Our Horizon

How did Matthew 24 (and parallels in *Mark* and *Luke*) affect the generations who lived *after the events* which the Olivet Discourse accurately predicted? Once the followers of Jesus moved on after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., how would they apply Jesus' words then?

We have spoken about *two horizons* for reading the material about "the end," and that eschatology has both a *near-term* horizon and a *long-term* horizon. If we trace the impact of Matthew 24 on the thinking of the church in the 2nd century and beyond, we observe that the second horizon takes a front and center role. Beyond the events of 70 C.E. lies the future of the church which includes its enlarged mission to an ever-enlarging world. Fresh challenges face the followers of Jesus as they settle into Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire. New events would challenge them, including fresh persecutions. Once Christianity became a legitimate faith within the Empire (under Constantine), the church would start thinking about what the world might look like were its rulers also followers of Jesus Christ. Needless to say these earthly dreams about a world-wide Christian kingdom did not materialize at their visionaries imagined. Instead, the church faced a new kind of enemy: compromise with power and with the world.

Furthermore, thinkers like Augustine realized that the battle for the kingdom of God remained a reality for true followers of Jesus. He wrote about the struggle between the City of God and the City of Man. Much of medieval theology after Augustine spiritualized the kingdom and ever-increasingly equated it not with the restoration of earth but with going to heaven at death. Still, the idea of a final judgment and the appearance of Christ at the end of the world remained firmly imprinted on the church's creeds and consciousness.

Even after seeing the truth of a *first horizon* reading of Matthew 24 (and parallels), theologians continued to speak and write about the Parousia and the Second Coming at the end of history. The notion of "millennium" factored into those considerations: a *long period* would follow the days of the early Christianity until finally the Lord would come again. Whether that millennium was a literally 1,000 years or whether it simply referred to the long but indefinite period of time "between the *comings*," the notion that Christ would finish what he began belonged to *second horizon* thinking. That is the position taken in these notes.

Just as the first century Christians experienced their own *apocalypse* and *coming* of Christ in judgment on Jerusalem at the end of *their* age, so also the people of God in the *future* will experience a final fulfillment of those inaugural events. If the events of Matthew 24 were a "little apocalypse," those surrounding God's restoration of all things in *our future* would constitute the "final apocalypse." In both cases, Scripture is definite in its affirmation that "No one knows" the precise date, timing or circumstances of the consummation. That being the case, we are to live our lives precisely as Jesus counseled his disciples: watchfully and evangelistically. At the same time, we are to avoid speculating about specific events in our history, resisting the temptation to foreclose on God's purposes and presume that "The Last Days" in the definite sense have arrived. We don't know that they have, and to claim otherwise is to contradict the clear meaning of Matthew 24:36:

³⁶ "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

Do Not Let Your Hearts Be Troubled (John 14:1-4)

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to where I am going."

Jesus did not want his disciples to be frightened about the future: *their* future. When Jesus spoke the words of John 14, he was on his way to the cross. The disciples had not yet left the upper room where Jesus had celebrated the Passover with them. After offering his instruction in 14:1-31a, Jesus would invite them to leave for his important date with destiny (14:31b, "Come now; let us leave."). Commonly, the words of John 14:1-4 appear in conjunction with Jesus' "coming again." We often hear them read at a funeral as a source of comfort to those who have lost loved ones to death. The "rooms" are typically interpreted as "places in heaven" where the departed Christians go to be with Jesus. Is that what Jesus meant?

If we apply *first horizon* and *second horizon* thinking to this text, we must initially ask the question, "How would the disciples have heard these words of Jesus?" Read in context, John 14:1-4 belongs to Jesus' conversation with Peter in 13:31-38, as well as to the questions of the disciples in the subsequent passage, 14:5ff. Let's carefully examine that context before deciding how the passage applies to us.

1. Jesus announces that "the Son of Man" — that is, *Jesus* — is in the process of being glorified (13:31-32). This glorification refers to Jesus' coming death and resurrection.
2. His remaining time with the disciples will be brief (13:33a).
3. Jesus is going somewhere where the disciples *cannot follow on their own* (13:33b). This has to do with the unique and *unparalleled* death and resurrection which God will accomplish in Jesus whereby Jesus will die for the sins of the world and be raised to life on the third day in vindication of his mission.
4. The absence of Jesus will require a new ethic on the part of the disciples: "Love each other as Jesus loved them" so that "all will know that you are my disciples" (13:34-35). This ethic would be the mark of Christians from that time forward.
5. Peter questions the meaning of Jesus' *going somewhere* such that the disciples *cannot follow him* (13:36a).
6. Jesus clarifies his statement by adding that they cannot follow him "now" (Greek: *nun*), but that they can follow him "later" (Greek: *husteron*) (13:36b). We notice an important distinction which Jesus makes between "now" and "later." For Jesus and the disciples, what happens *now* has to do with the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus: Jesus does into death and then comes back through resurrection. In the Jewish frame of reference, resurrection belonged to the future at the end of days. However, by rising from the death *now*, Jesus experiences the blessings of the future in the present. Theologians call this *inaugurated eschatology* because events belonging to the *future, already begin* in the *present*. For the disciples, however, death followed by resurrection *must await the future*, and their going away is not immediately followed by their resurrection as it is for Jesus.
7. Peter misses Jesus' point entirely, and he acts as if the death of Jesus is a disaster from which Peter must rescue him! "I will lay down my life for you" (13:37). Peter offers Jesus a parody of the true resurrection, in effect saying, "I will die so that you can continue to live." Jesus promises something more wonderful by saying that he will "go away in death" so that the Father can glorify him *now* and then glorify the disciples *later*.

With this as the *background* of 14:1-4, we proceed to examine what Jesus tells the disciples about *their future* in light of *his future*. "Trust" lies at the heart of the hope Jesus offers the disciples (14:1). What happens to Jesus in the immediate future requires trust in God. During the painful hours of Jesus' death and absence, the disciples will need to fasten their faith in God when the physical presence of Jesus is absent. Jesus has taught them how to trust in *God* by teaching them how to trust in *him*. His whole earthly mission has been focused on revealing the true nature of God. This God who seemingly had *gone away* in light of the exile has now *come back* in the person of Jesus. Hope and joy have marked that recent return of Yahweh to Zion in the mission of

Jesus. But seeming tragedy waits on the horizon: Jesus will die and leave the disciples. Will this mean the disciples are abandoned yet again to exile and despair? Will the crucifixion of Jesus mark yet another exile for his followers?

Jesus begins by talking about "my Father's house." What does this phrase mean? The popular perspective makes the Father's house mean the same thing as *heaven*, and its "many rooms" refer to personal residences for the souls of the righteous dead. Let's examine the biblical usage for this expression. (Luke 2:49; 16:27; John 2:16; 14:2; Acts 7:20

).

1. The Old Testament is rich in references, and in nearly every case the meaning is *one's family of origin*. In certain instances the actually physical place where one's father lives is in view (see Genesis 12:1; 20:13; 24:7, 23, 38, 40; 28:21; 31:14, 30; 34:19; 38:11; 41:51; 50:22; Leviticus 22:13; Numbers 18:1; 25:14f; 30:3, 16; Deuteronomy 22:21; Joshua 2:12, 18; Judges 6:15; 9:5, 18; 11:2, 7; 14:15, 19; 19:2f; 1 Samuel 2:31; 9:20; 17:25; 18:2; 22:1, 11, 16, 22; 24:21; 2 Samuel 3:29; 14:9; 16:21; 19:28; 24:17; 1 Kings 2:31; 18:18; 2 Kings 10:3; 1 Chronicles 21:17; 23:11; 24:6, 31; 28:4; 2 Chronicles 21:13; Nehemiah 1:6; Esther 4:14; Psalms 45:10; Isaiah 7:17; 22:23f).
2. Of these examples, there are some which connect being part of the "father's house" with sharing in the *inheritance* of the father (Genesis 31:14; Judges 11:2).
3. In one passage (Genesis 24:23), Abraham's steward asks Rebekah, the future wife of Isaac, if there is "room in her father's house" for him to spend the night.
4. Within the New Testament, Jesus refers to the Temple as "my father's house" (Luke 2:49; John 2:16), and in the case of the John passage, accuses the merchants of making the Temple a house of trade. Shortly thereafter (John 2:19), Jesus reorients Temple around himself, predicting that three days after his own death he will rise again. The resurrection of Jesus constitutes him as the New Temple.

Further, we need to understand the significance of the "rooms" in Jesus' saying. The Greek word used by John's Gospel is *monai*, the plural form of *monē*. The basic meaning is "dwelling place" or simply "dwelling." When the King James Version used the word "mansion" it was employing an Old English term which meant the same thing as the Greek, but did not have the connotation of a "palatial/expensive house." Some scholars point to the Aramaic word 'ōnā which can refer to a "night-stop" or temporary "resting place" for a traveler on a journey.¹³ A similar idea for *monē* exists in classical Greek. Origen, the church father, thought it referred to "stations on the road to God."¹⁴ As attractive as this perspective might be, the more likely meaning comes from John's own Gospel where the emphasis falls on "abiding," "remaining," or "residing" in both Jesus and the Father (see the next chapter, John 15). We see Jesus telling his disciples in 14:2 that he is "going to prepare a place," and John uses the Greek work *topos* to designate a *specific* place not a *temporary* one.

Jesus tells his disciples exactly what he means by this idea of *monē* and *topos* in 14:3b where it is equated with "be with me...where I am." The "where-ness" of Jesus includes not only the space called "heaven" but also the *resurrection body* in which Jesus will soon take up his permanent residence. Since Jesus already made the connection in John 2 between his body and the Temple as his Father's house, it only stands to reason that he would consistently use the same terminology here. What Jesus promises his disciples is that one day they will share in the blessings of his resurrection by also being raised to life. This is what he meant in 13:31 (see above): "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him." The language of *glory*, as applied to Jesus' future, has to do with his *resurrection*.

The promise of John 14 is that the dying and rising Jesus will one day return to raise believers to resurrection life. When that happens, they will at last fully share in their inheritance in the "father's house." The reference

¹³ Raymond Brown, *Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, Anchor Bible Commentary, Doubleday, 1970, 29A, p. 618ff.

¹⁴ Origen, *De principiis* II XI 6; PG 11:246.

to "many *monai*" likely refers to the resurrection bodies of the glorified people of God. Future life, taught by Jesus, is grounded in his resurrection life. Recall what he told Martha at the tomb of Lazarus:

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:23-26).

"I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (14:3b). Contained in this statement is the classic hope of what we commonly call "the Second Coming." The focus is that God's people and His creation may experience resurrection life. Again, to be "with me" means to share the life of the resurrection not merely go to heaven. For too long Christians have been taught to think that the only goal of salvation belongs to *another world*, while treating *this world* as a piece of trash destined for total destruction. Nothing could be further from the truth. When Jesus "comes back" he will "take" his followers *into the glory of the resurrection*. Once more they will be whole persons with real bodies made new. Unlike the pagans who taught the journey of the soul into the afterlife, Christians teach the transformation of the whole life — body, soul and spirit — into the very life of God Himself. What happened to Jesus on the first Easter morning will happen to us at the Second Coming when Jesus "comes back" and "takes us to be with him." And what happens to *us* will also happen to *the rest of creation* (see Romans 8:18ff).

Among the questions raised by the Corinthian Christians was the one about the future life. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, lays out a powerful scenario in which the believing dead are raised to life. He describes in some detail the order of events leading up to that grand result. In broad strokes, he teaches us about the flow of history now that Jesus already reigns in his heavenly kingdom. "He must reign," Paul writes, "until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (15:25-26). Much happens in the meantime "until" death is at last defeated. In fact, knowing that death will be defeated in the end is a great motivation for the work we do in the "meantime." As Paul puts it in 15:58,

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Why do we know that our labor is not in vain? Because a day is coming when it will be incorporated into the restored creation where Christ is the center and resurrection is the source of new life. And how will that restored creation at last unfold?

⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² 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. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:51-57).

That account is the classic description of the Lord's Second Coming, at the end of history when "death is swallowed up in victory." This should be the focus of eschatology and the future life. We do not look for the coming of the Antichrist, but for the coming of Christ. It is not the fear of Armageddon that motivates our efforts but the hope of resurrection.

Later, in 2 Corinthians, Paul answers yet another question about life after death. His explanation turns out to be a hopeful promise of life *after life* after death!

For we know that if the tent, which is our earthly home, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, ³ if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. ⁶ So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil (2 Corinthians 5:1-10).

When he tells the Corinthians about "a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens," he talks very much like Jesus in John 14 in his discourse on "many dwelling places" and the "place prepared" for his followers so that they might be with him. Notice how Paul places the emphasis on being at "home with the Lord." God has "prepared" (compare the language in John 14) a heavenly "dwelling" so that at death we might not be "naked." Part of receiving our new "clothing," that is, our resurrection body, involves standing before the "judgment seat of Christ" where our faithfulness "in the body" might be assessed. In the meantime, this side of the Second Coming, the "Spirit" becomes the security deposit (Greek: *arrabōn*) in *this life* on what God intends to achieve for us in *the life to come*. The "coming" of the Spirit into our lives *now* is preparation for the "coming" of Jesus with resurrection life *then*.

Concluding Thoughts

Two questions surround those passages in the Bible which speak about the future: 1) What did they mean for their first audience? 2) What do they mean for us today? Christian patience requires that we consider the first before we pursue the second. In a society driven by instant gratification, we are inclined to read the Bible in light of the news rather than the news in light of Scripture. Pushed off-balance by the latest crisis, teachers of prophecy may well treat Scripture more as foretellers than as careful scholars.

Our hope is that this study will strike the balance and honor the truth of God's Word without fear or fanfare. The Bible encourages a confidence in the Second Coming, *whenever that might happen*. Our spiritual forefathers weathered the storms of many "last days," without ever seeing the Lord's appearance in their lifetimes. Christians in places like cold-war China and Nazi Germany knew full well what Antichrist and tribulation meant on the landscape of their own horizons. To them the prophetic word was a source of light and comfort in times of deep darkness. So with us.

These counsels of Scripture remain *apropos* for our time:

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works (Titus 2:11-14).

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:1-3)

Waiting for "the blessed hope" shapes our spiritual formation as God's holy people "in the present age," even as we anticipate the completion of that work "when he appears." John's affirmation gives us food for thought: "Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure."

Glory to God. Amen.

Digger Deeper: *No One Knows — No One Knows*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *No One Knows — No One Knows*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. What books, other than the Bible, have you read which discuss the "end times," "prophecy," or the "Second Coming" of Jesus? What overall impression did they have on your thinking about the topic? What questions did they raise?
2. List some potential problems you have encountered when you study what the Bible says about the future.
3. Our first reading is Matthew 24 (and parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21). Carefully read this passage and divide it into main sections, noting where the main divisions begin and end, and provide titles for each one.
4. As background to this chapter, read Matthew 23 and especially take note of 23:33-39. What important event seems to be on the horizon as Jesus looks to the future? Who will be most affected by that event?
5. What key questions do the disciples ask Jesus in chapter 24, and what prompted the disciples to ask them?
6. Would you say the primary emphasis is *near-term* future or *far-term* future, based on the opening verses? What would we expect Jesus to talk about *next* in Matthew 24, based on this frame of reference?
7. Whose future is Jesus talking about in 24:4-14? What information does he disclose about the shape of things to come?
8. What should the disciples be doing according to 24:14? What dangers face them as they "weather the storm" which gathers on their horizon?
9. What very specific event is identified in 24:15-16? Based on the background found in Matthew 23:37-39 and 24:2, how do you think the disciples would have understood Jesus' words? Read Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11 for the Old Testament background. Also, review the *Background Notes* for the historical details.
10. What instructions does Jesus give his disciples in light of this coming crisis? (24:16-26).
11. The phrase, "Coming of the Son of Man," appears in 24:27. For background on this expression, read Daniel 7, paying special attention to 7:13-14, 26-27. According to Daniel where does the "Son of Man" *come*? Compare the language of Daniel 7 with Matthew 24:27-31. From the perspective of the disciples who first heard the words, is this about the Second Coming or another "coming" of Jesus?
12. As a result of Jesus' coming in 24:31, what do the angels do? To what does this refer?
13. What does Jesus tell his disciples about "this generation" in 24:34? What do you think he means? (Compare Matthew 11:12-19; 12:39-45; 23:34-36; Luke 11:47-51; 17:24-25; Mark 8:38).
14. How should the disciples view "that day or hour" according to 24:36, 42 and 50?
15. What important counsel does Jesus give the disciples in 24:44? What guidance does the parable in 24:45-51 offer them?
16. The second reading is from John 14:1-4. Be sure to read 13:31-38 as the prequel to this passage. What event do both Jesus and the disciples face? What does Jesus mean when he says that he is "going" somewhere? Where? How? Take note of the timeframe in which Jesus speaks these words: what happens next?
17. When you read about "the Father's house" (14:2), what comes to mind. Read Luke 2:49 and John 2:16-19 to see how Jesus used the same phrase. What does Jesus promise to do for the disciples when he "goes" away?
18. What does Jesus promise to his disciples when he "comes back"? In what ways does Jesus "come back" to the disciples? To us? Would you agree that this refers to the Second Coming of Jesus?
19. According to John 14:1, what is this teaching suppose to do for the disciples? Is that how people usually think about the future? Why can we think about the future differently because of Jesus?