The Olivet Discourse

Introduction and Outline

The Olivet Discourse is one of the five major discourses in Matthew's Gospel. This same material is also found in Mark 13:1-37 and Luke 21:5-37. Here is a basic outline for Matthew's discourse, which is what we'll be studying. *We study this discourse because it is found in all 3 synoptic gospels and it is one of the most misunderstood of all gospel passages.*

24:1-2 – Completion of Jesus' judgments against Jerusalem/temple. These verses serve as a climax to the previous section and a transition into the following discourse.

24:3 – The disciples ask Jesus two questions concerning the destruction of the temple and the end of the age.

1. When will this happen (destruction of the temple)?
2. What are the signs of your coming and the end of the age?

24:4-35 – Jesus' answer about the temple's destruction.
24:4-14 – warnings against premature expectation
24:15-28 – the coming crisis in Judea
24:29-35 – climax of the crisis within this generation

24:36-25:46 – Jesus' answer concerning the end of the age and his 2nd Coming.
24:36-44 – the unknown and unexpected time of Christ's 2nd Coming
24:45-25:30 – three parables (24:45-51; 25:1-13; 25:14-30) about awaiting Christ's imminent arrival and being prepared so we are not caught unawares and punished.
25:31-46 – a judgment scene describing the basis of God's final verdict.

Various Interpretations

Not everyone agrees with the outline provided above. Here are three ways to interpret this passage.

A. Some people believe it all refers to the church age and the 2nd Coming. **This interpretation is wrong; do not follow the teachings of anyone who believes this.** No recognized scholars hold this position.

B. Some people believe this entire passage refers to the destruction of Jerusalem. **This is more acceptable than the previous interpretation, but it is not the best way to interpret this passage.**

C. The understanding held by most NT scholars today is that it deals with both …

1. the destruction of the temple and Christ's 2nd Coming –
    a. the destruction of temple in 24:4-35 and
    b. the 2nd Coming/final judgment in 24:36 - 25:46.

This is the best way to interpret this passage. Two phrases that help with this interpretation are "this generation" and "hour unknown."

Matthew 24:1-2

In chapters 21-23, Jesus prophesies against the Pharisees, the temple and Jerusalem (representing Israel as a whole, but especially the religious leadership). He has repeatedly predicted that a time was coming when God would punish Israel for her sin and rebellious rejection of the Messiah.

His prophecy that Jerusalem's house will be desolate (23:38), followed by his leaving Jerusalem (24:1-2), speaks as much to God abandoning the temple as it does to its coming physical destruction. *The physical destruction is only the outward completion of God's rejection of the temple.*

24:1-2

These two verses serve as the climax to the whole section 21:23-23:39 (which depicted Jesus in the temple). Having entered the temple dramatically and controversially (21:23-16, *cleansing of temple, healings and "Son of David"*), he now leaves it with an equally emphatic and more far-reaching statement about its future.

He (and therefore God) is abandoning the temple, *never to return*, and after that *it has no future except to be destroyed*. What has up to now been the earthly focus of God's presence among his people is so no longer. Jesus says to Israel that this "house" is **not** God's house but **is** "your house", that it is "left to you desolate" … empty of God, without the Presence. The "house" which is now being deserted (by God and by Jesus) is ripe for demolition, to make way for "something greater than the temple" (12:6).

In 24:1-2 Jesus and his disciples leave the temple, not only geographically and physically but spiritually and symbolically. **The glory of God's presence has departed** (in fulfillment of Ezekiel 10:18-19; 11:22-23 where God's glory/presence leave through the eastern gate of the city). They cross over the Kidron Valley and climb up the western slope of the Mt. of Olives. There, as they look back over the valley at the magnificence of the temple in full view, the disciples approach Jesus with a question (see also Mk 13:1; Lk 21:5-6; **the question and Jesus' remarks were made publicly**).

caused by Jesus' words in 23:38. His statements were shocking because of the grandeur of the temple complex and because most Jews of that day believed the temple was indestructible. *This latter belief is part of why Jews associated the destruction of the temple with the end of the age* (many felt they were still in exile and wouldn't fully return until the establishment of God's kingdom in the new age).

Matthew 24:3

The disciples wait for the privacy of the Mt of Olives before asking Jesus to explain his statements. Where Mark and Luke provide us with one question, Matthew divides it into two questions in order to distinguish between the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of this age at the 2nd Coming of Christ.

The Jews of that era believed in two "ages" – the current age in which evil rules the world, and the coming age in which God would rule this world. Their belief in the end of this age and the inauguration of the age to come is ***not* the same** as our belief in these things.

They didn't believe in the end of the space-time universe followed by the creation of a new heavens

and a new earth. They believed that the present **world order** (in which pagans held power and God's covenant people, the Jews, did not) would come to an end when Messiah came in his judgment. He would then introduce a new age (**still very much this-worldly**) in which God's people would rule and perfectly follow torah. **This is not a belief in new creation**.

Jesus' disciples were looking for the fulfillment of the Jewish hope, not for a 2nd Coming of Jesus in the future – they believed that the destruction of the temple would usher in the "age to come" (the concept of a future coming wasn't part of their thinking at this stage). They were asking when Jesus would be enthroned as king, judge the nations and inaugurate this new age.

Many Jews believed that part of this judgment included the destruction of the temple and power structure in Jerusalem – both of which they believed to be tainted by evil earthly powers (the current temple was built by a non-Jew and the Jewish ruling class was heavily influenced by Greco-Roman culture).

Though the disciples at that point did not understand exactly who Jesus was and what he was doing, Matthew phrases the questions in such a way as to allow answers that would *differentiate between* …

1. the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and
2. the 2nd Coming of Christ at the end of the age (by the time this Gospel was written the belief in Christ's 2nd Coming existed and was a normal aspect of Christian teaching).
3. **By the time this Gospel was written the word "*Parousia*" had become a technical term for Christ's 2nd Coming, and Matthew uses it four times in this passage**.

Conclusion - Introduction and Outline

Here are some things that we'll be covering in the next few pages:

Wars and natural disasters are a normal part of this life and should not lead us to believe that we are at the end of the age. Jesus said that these are just the beginnings of birth pains (both for the immediate Jewish context and for us when looking for his 2nd Coming).

Everything included in 24:4-35 happened during 33-70 AD. This was God's judgment against **this generation** of Jews for their refusal to accept Jesus as Messiah; God was punishing them for their rebellion and for their persecution of his Son.

24:29-31 is not a description of Christ's 2nd Coming.

We **do not know** when Christ is coming back (24:36). All we can do is be prepared for his imminent arrival.

A defining mark of the Christian life is taking care of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ (25:31-46).

The Destruction of Jerusalem – Part 1

(Matthew 24:4-28)

The material in 24:4-35 can be divided into three main sections:

A. 4-14 contains *warnings about speculating* when the end will occur. The situations mentioned are part of normal life, not signs of the end. These events occurred before (and during) the siege of Jerusalem.

B. 15-28 contains material related to the siege of Jerusalem. People are warned to flee when they see the advancing army because there is no hope for the city.

C. 29-35 presents the actual destruction in terms of its theological and symbolic importance – Jesus is *vindicated* as Messiah and King. This section also affirms that all the preceding material *will occur within a generation*.

In this section we will briefly overview vv. 4-28 and their explanation.

The Prelude to the Catastrophe (24:4-14)

4 Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. 6 You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 7 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are the beginning of birth pains.
9 "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. 10 At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, 11 and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. 12 Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, 13 but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. 14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

These verses are designed to prevent premature excitement and speculation about when the events of verse 3 would occur. "Don't jump to any hasty conclusions," says Jesus.
The main point is that these are *not* signs of the impending destruction of Jerusalem nor are they signs of Christ's Second Advent.
These events are only the beginning of birth pains.
They serve no purpose at all in telling us when or how soon Jesus is coming back.
They are events which will characterize the period AD 33 to 70 (as well as the rest of history).

The events mentioned are not grouped in chronological order, they are arranged topically. Here is a list of the "false alarms" about which Jesus warned his disciples. The first three (vv. 4-7) deal with *life in general* while the final four (vv. 9-14) relate specifically to *the church*. ….

LIFE IN GENERAL …

1. Religious impostors and Messianic pretenders (vv. 4- 5).See Acts 5:36-37; 8:9-10; 13:6; 21:38. Josephus, a Jewish Historian who lived during the 1st c., reports that during the reign of Nero deceivers and false prophets were arrested on a daily basis. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius (AD 263-339) refers to the prevalence of false messiahs in this period. These false prophets and Messiah figures will appear again in vv 23-26.

2. Military conflict and political upheaval (vv. 6-7a). The period 33-70 AD witnessed countless military and political disturbances.

There were Jewish uprisings in Caesarea, Scythopolis, Alexandria, and Damascus. During some periods they lived in a state of fearful anxiety over imminent war with Rome and were in such distress that they even neglected to till the land.

The Jews also fought amongst themselves and massacred each other!

In addition to the Jewish uprisings, there were also conflicts in Germany, Africa, Thrace, Parthia, Gaul, Britain, and Armenia.

The "end," *here* (v. 6), refers to the end or termination of Jewish national existence; the end of the city; the end of the temple. *It has no reference to the end of all things*. Immediate context makes this explicitly clear.

3. Natural disasters (v. 7b). The famine described in Acts 11:28 occurred in AD 44. Three other famines occurred during the reign of Claudius (AD 41-54). The Roman historians Tacitus and Seutonius both mention the prevalence of famines in this period of history (in particular the widespread famine in Rome in AD 51). Earthquakes were also common. There were recorded earthquakes in Crete, Smyrna, Miletus, Chios, Samos, Apamea, Campania, and Rome. The cities of Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae were devastated by a quake in 60 AD.

THE CHURCH …

4. Persecution, Martyrdom and Abandonment (vv. 9-10). We see fulfillment of persecution and martyrdom in Acts 4:1-18; 5:17-40 (synagogues); 12:1; 23:24; 24:27 (governors and kings). See also Acts 8:1. The reality of v. 10, abandonment, is caused by the pressures and pains associated with the events of v. 9.

5. False prophets (v. 11). One need only remember that much of what we read in Galatians, Colossians, 2 Corinthians, 2 Timothy, 2 Peter, 1 John, and Jude was written to counter the activity and influence of false prophets in the early church. See especially Paul's warning in Acts 20:29-30; Rom. 16:17-18; 2 Cor. 11:13; Gal. 2:4; and Peter's in 2 Pt. 2:1; and John's in 1 John 4:1.

6. Religious insurrection and indifference (v. 12-13). This wickedness points to a lifestyle of living outside the Law of God. The cooling down of love marks the end of effective discipleship – a love which is cold is like a fire that has gone out.

In response to outward threats (vv. 4-8) and the destabilizing of the discipleship community (vv. 9-12), the only remedy is **deliberate, sustained faithfulness to the values and demands of God's Kingdom** (v13).

"The end" *here* refers to remaining faithful for as long as it takes. It is a promise of spiritual safety and security rather than physical.

7. "Worldwide" preaching of the gospel (v. 14). How could this possibly have occurred in the period AD 33-70? ***Note*** two important facts: The word translated *whole world* literally means "an inhabited area", which was a standard term at that time for the Greek world, then for the Roman empire, and subsequently for the then known world.

Prior to AD 70 the inhabited earth had indeed heard the Gospel (Rom 1:8; Col 1:6b, 23), precisely in fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 24.

As verse 8 makes clear, all of these catastrophes are *part of normal life*, not specific signs of the destruction of Jerusalem or the end of the age.

Flee Before the eruption of hostilities (24:15-28)

The Need for Speed (24:15-20)

15 "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand— 16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 17 Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. 18 Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. 19 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! 20 Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath."

Verse 15 is the sign that the destruction is imminent. Both Matthew and Mark (13:14) speak of the abomination that causes desolation (in the OT "abomination" = an object of disgust, hatred, something that causes revulsion; an idolatrous offense or affront to the true worship of God). To Jewish readers this phrase would immediately call to mind the desolation of the temple by the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes.

In 168 BC Antiochus slaughtered 40,000 Jews and plundered the temple. He sacrificed a pig on the altar of burnt offering, sprinkled broth from the unclean flesh all over the holy grounds as an act of deliberate defilement. He then erected an image of Zeus above the altar. *It was a sacrilege of indescribable proportions indelibly imprinted on the minds of the Jews in Jesus' day*.

This prophecy was probably recognized when the Romans began their invasions of Judea in A.D. 66. Though they were pushed back, they returned again a few years later and eventually drove all the way to Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. *Wise readers would have recognized that the invasion by the Romans would eventually end with the desecration and destruction of the temple and Jerusalem just like the earlier Syrian invasion.* Thus, they would have fled when the Roman Legions began their march through Judea. Luke 21:20 says, "when Jerusalem is surrounded by enemies," because he was writing to a gentile audience that would not be familiar with the Abomination of Desolation in Daniel.

"Let the reader understand" is probably an editorial addition to the text. It would have called the reader to understand Daniel's references to this abomination (9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Since the Scriptures were read publicly through most of Church history, this may also have been an opportunity for the reader or preacher to provide a short explanation of the Daniel passages.

The disciples are told by Jesus ***not*** to stay and fight for the city of Jerusalem. No mistaken sense of loyalty should cause them to try to bring the **Kingdom of God** about through military conflict. Rather, they are told to flee with whatever they have on them at the time this begins to take place because:

1. Those in the countryside of Judea must take to the hills as the Romans come to ravage farmlands and villages (this is, in fact, precisely what occurred; pillaging/killing was widespread).
2. Jewish houses within walled cities were flat-roofed structures that often formed a continuous terrace extending to the outer walls of the city, making it possible to quicken one's departure by following this "elevated highway" to the gates of the city.
3. Working men will have to get by with the clothes they have on. There will be no time to go home and pack.

They are also told to pray that this destruction wouldn't happen during winter or on the Sabbath because:

1. Nursing mothers and pregnant women are obviously ill-prepared for hasty escape.

2. In Palestine during the winter, roads were practically impassable because of mud; harsh weather and cold temperatures would slow down one's journey and make mountain hideaways unbearable.
3. On the Sabbath, gates would be closed; it would be difficult to obtain provisions (Jews prohibited anything more than a one-day's journey [less than 1 mile] on the Sabbath); buying and selling were not permitted; one travelling on a Sabbath would receive no assistance from the Jewish populace.
4. While these instructions were given to the disciples, it's safe to say that they were also intended for any of the residents of Judea who heard them.

Ain't Nothing Left (24:21-22)

"[21]For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. [22]If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened."

The Jewish wars of A.D. 66-70 were terrible times which intensified the hostilities between Jews and Romans that had been growing for years. During this time Jerusalem was filled with thieves, zealots, murderers and all those seeking a final refuge against the conquering Romans. Because of the hostility of those filling the city Jerusalem was the focus of Rome's most brutal rage.

But the inhabitants of the city had to worry not only about the Romans, but also about the **warring factions within the city itself**. **Jerusalem was full of civil war from multiple factions** during this entire period of time. In one of the worst of these conflicts, over 12,000 of the city's Jewish nobles and leading Jewish citizens were tortured and killed by the Jewish zealots.

Josephus published a book in A.D. 75 detailing the wars and the condition of Jerusalem during this period. The people of the city had no food, no place to bury their dead and no way of escape. The atrocities the people committed against themselves are horrendous to read. In addition to that, by the end of the siege over 1 million Jews had died and over 100,000 were sold into slavery (not including those who were part of the victory march in Rome or those who died in the gladiatorial arenas). The destruction of the city and its people were complete!

The siege was "cut short" in that it lasted only five months. For the ancients, this is a fairly short siege (besieging a major city could last for over a year). God cut short the time of this siege because there were still Christians in the city; thus, the favor he showed them spared many non-believers in the city.

Don't Be Fooled (24:23-28)

"[23]At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it.[24]For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. [25]See, I have told you ahead of time. [26]So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. [27]For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. [28]Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather."

Jesus tells his disciples ***not*** to look for his 2nd Coming in the chaotic events surrounding Jerusalem's fall. Such troublesome times would prove to be a golden opportunity for false prophets to lead people astray with false expectations of the Messiah's appearance. But Jesus says, "Don't be swayed by their miracles or their message." Divine miracles can be *counterfeited* – Acts 8:9-11; 2 Thess 2:9; Rev 13:13-14; 16:14) and Jesus won't come in a secret or secluded place when he returns.

Rather, Christ's 2nd Coming will be clearly visible to everyone – there'll be no way to miss it! Just as you know there's a carcass by the sight of vultures, so you'll **know** when the Son of Man returns.

Conclusion - Part 1

Jesus himself stated that much of what occurred before and during the siege of Jerusalem *is a normal part of life in this sin-cursed world*. If the disciples couldn't use these types of events to predict then destruction of the temple, then *how can we expect to use them to predict Jesus' 2nd Coming?*

We cannot allow ourselves to be fooled by false teachers and false prophets who claim to have secret knowledge. Jesus is not coming back in a secret or secluded event. Rather, when Christ returns everyone will know it (just like everyone knows when lightening fills the sky).

Our focus and responsibility are to remain faithful to God. Whether we struggle against false teachers/prophets, against state persecution, or if our struggle is against the despair that comes when people abandon the faith; our obligation is to fight through to the end – however long that takes. And God is faithful, for he will vindicate and reward us for our faithfulness to him.

The Destruction of Jerusalem – Part 2

(Matthew 24:29-35)

In Matthew 24 Jesus was speaking to a people saturated by Old Testament language, concepts, and imagery. From the earliest days of their lives, they memorized and were taught the OT. Thus, when Jesus spoke to them of things to come *he used the prophetic vocabulary of the OT which they would instantly recognize*, including certain kinds of figurative language. Figurative language refers to figures of speech, that is, word pictures or picturesque speech, such as metaphors, similes, and so forth.

This included what is called "*catastrophic figurative language*." The catastrophic figurative language that specifically refers to "the heavens" - sun, moon, stars - is called "*collapsing universe*" language. It is found numerous times in the OT in reference to the fall of empires, end of epochs, and beginning of new eras. The authors never meant this kind of language to be taken literalistically and it was never understood by NT readers or listeners literalistically. It was always intended and always understood to be figurative language.

Again, catastrophic means using this picturesque speech to describe some kind of catastrophe that would have far reaching consequences. It was especially used to describe the fall of nations, the destruction of empires, the end of an epoch. *It signaled an end to one era forever, and the beginning of a new era.*

Consequently, if we are to understand the meaning of Mt. 24:29-31 (and the prophetic sayings of the rest of the chapter) we must read and interpret them through a biblical (i.e., OT) lens.

vv 29-31

Cosmic Catastrophes

29"Immediately after the distress of those days, 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its

light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

The first phrase, "immediately after…those days," lets us know that Jesus is speaking about the period following immediately after the siege described in *vv* 15-28. As we have previously discussed, and as will be explained below, this passage is concerned with the destruction of Jerusalem, not the 2nd Coming of Christ.

In the OT, this type of poetic prophetic language was used to portray *not* what is actually going on in the heavens *but what is actually happening on the earth*. Natural disasters, political upheaval, turmoil among the nations, etc., are often described figuratively through the terminology of cosmic disturbances. In other words, **astronomical phenomena are used to describe the upheaval of earthly dynasties as well as great moral and spiritual changes**. This is catastrophic figurative language / collapsing universe language. *One era is about to end forever, and a new era is about to begin.*

In *v* 29 Jesus is quoting directly from Isaiah 13:10 and 34:4. While he is quoting only two passages, there are a multitude of other prophetic passages with similar wording. Most often the events being described in these passages were the destruction of a major world power (by "world power" we mean the known Mediterranean world of the time). Here are some examples: …

1. Isaiah 13:10 is a prophecy of the destruction of Babylon …
   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.

2. Isaiah 34:4 is a prophecy of the destruction of Edom
   All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree.

3. Ezekiel 32:7-8 is a prophecy of the destruction of Egypt
   7 When I snuff you out, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light. 8 All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you; I will bring darkness over your land, declares the Sovereign LORD.

4. Joel 2:10 is a prophecy of the destruction of Judah
   Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine.

5. Amos 8:9 is a prophecy of the destruction of Israel
   "In that day," declares the Sovereign LORD, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.

In each of these texts figurative language - cosmic language / collapsing universe language - is used to describe the end of one nation's rule and power. For the people involved these judgments were enormous life-altering events, *which is why poetic language was used to describe them*.

Did all of these nations fall, epochs end, and new eras begin? YES. Did any of those cosmic events literally happen? NO. Why? … Because they were poetic heavenly descriptions of real earthly events. None of the original authors or recipients ever expected them to literally happen. When we read passages like these we should ***not*** expect a literalistic execution of these judgments; rather, *we should*

seek to understand the religious, cultural, and political significance of the event(s) being proclaimed.

Riding the Clouds

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

The primary source for this verse is Daniel 7:13-14:

13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

In this passage Daniel has just witnessed the 4 great beasts that were oppressing and destroying the people of God (Israel). In contrast to this he then sees "one like a son of man" (representing Israel) **coming *into* heaven** to receive vindication and authority from the Ancient of Days. This was a promise from God that his people would be delivered from the oppression of evil empires and that they would be free to worship him and to proclaim to all nations his glory and salvation.

Jesus takes the phrase "Son of Man" as a description of himself. Whereas the Jews read this passage as pertaining to them, Jesus now says that he is the true Israel and everyone who wants to become part of the people of God now find their way to God through him.

One important thing to note is that in the Daniel passage **the Son of Man was *not* coming from heaven to earth, *he was coming from earth to heaven***. This is a critical distinction because it alters we way we interpret every reference to this passage, both in Daniel and the NT. *This is always the direction of the Son of Man's transit in every reference to this passage*.

With this distinction in mind ,we can clearly see that when Jesus referred to Daniel 7 he was not speaking about his 2nd Coming (from heaven), he was speaking about his coming ***to*** the Father (in heaven) to receive vindication and authority. Jesus had already received this authority upon his ascension, but the **sign** of vindication was important because it was a sign **on earth** of what had already transpired in heaven. This was a sign to all

The destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple in fulfillment of Christ's prophecy was a sign to Christians and to the Jewish world that Jesus was a true prophet and the Messiah (cf. Acts 2:36). For orthodox Jews, a prophet wasn't a true prophet unless his prophecies were fulfilled. Add to this the severity and scandal of Jesus' prophecy and it was vitally important that ***that*** **generation of Jews receive a sign vindicating him as a true messenger from God.**

The "seeing" that takes place here does not refer to visible sight, it refers to spiritual perception. When these things happen (destruction of the temple, Jerusalem, etc.), the disciples and the Jewish community will see/understand that Jesus is vindicated and enthroned in heaven.

The phrase "in the sky" is better translated as "in heaven" and is best understood as being a visible symbol on earth of Jesus' receiving his vindication and authority in heaven. When we read the phrase in this way it means that **the destruction of Jerusalem is the sign** that in heaven (right now) Jesus is vindicated, exalted and has received his authority to rule this world.

As for "all the nations mourning," the word "nations" is better understood as "all the tribes of Israel." **The primary OT reference for this phrase is Zechariah 12:10-14**. The Zechariah passage clearly relates to all the tribes of Israel/Judah, so it is better to understand Jesus' statement as to referring to the Jewish people as well (especially since this was a sign **to them** that he was God's Messiah and prophet). This phrase points to the mourning that will take place throughout the Jewish world after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple – the center of God's presence with them on this earth.

The Trumpet in the Sky

"[31]And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other."

The gathering of God's people from the ends of the earth is a recurrent theme in the OT (Deut 30:4; Psalm 107:3; Isa 43:5-6; 49:12). And this theme was also part of the worldview of the Jews of Jesus' day – *they believed that at the end God would call his scattered people back to worship him in Jerusalem*. The call was symbolized by a supernatural trumpet blast because trumpets were often used to call people into the city.

In Matthew, the gathering of God's people isn't into one central location (i.e., the temple) to worship him. Rather, the gathering is calling people into his kingdom. By the time this Gospel was written, the concept of the People of God, the Church, as the final end-time temple of the Holy Spirit, was understood by all followers of Jesus. The Church - the People of God - had been marked by the Fire and Wind of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and forever after as the Dwelling place of God's Presence. The Apostles clearly proclaimed that God's People / the Church were the Temple of God (1 Corinthians 3 and 6; 1 Peter 2:5, etc.). It was through the Church - the People of God - that humans met God, encountered his Presence and Salvation.

The imagery of the angelic messengers blowing the trumpet signifies the supernatural power behind the preaching of the Gospel. Though we have the responsibility to preach the gospel, it is the power of the Holy Spirit that enables it to reach and change the hearts of nonbelievers.

Summary

These three verses (25:29-31) explain the significance of the destruction of Jerusalem. …

1. It was a sign of Jesus' vindication, enthronement and authority in heaven.
2. It was God's judgment against this generation of Jews – the ones who rejected and killed God's Messiah.
3. It symbolized his abandonment of the temple as the center of his presence among his people.
4. It inaugurated the church age, in which God's people/elect will be gathered from every tribe and nation (not just ethnic Israel and converts to Judaism).
5. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was a very important event in God's plan of salvation history – it was a visible sign of a spiritual change that had already occurred *(through the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost).*

vv 32-35

[32]"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.[33]Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. [34]I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. [35]Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Concerning the question "when will these things happen," *(that is, Jerusalem's destruction)* **Jesus' final response is three-fold:**

1. As surely as summer follows spring, you may be sure that the events I mentioned will lead directly to the end (32-33)
2. It will all be over before this generation is finished (34)
3. You can rely on my prediction (35)

While none of these statements adds to the substance of the above material, they do serve to clarify the implications of his prophetic language, especially the question concerning "when?"

As Surely As…

The reason Jesus used the fig tree for this example is two-fold. *First*, the Mt of Olives had an abundant amount of fig trees, so it was very simple for Jesus to reach out and touch one of the trees (or even point to one very near). *Second*, the fig tree began to blossom late in the spring and served as a notice that summer was imminent. When these two facts are taken together it is easy to see why Jesus chose to use the fig tree as a metaphor for the accuracy of his predictions.

This would also impress upon the disciples the immediacy of Jerusalem's destruction following the events Jesus' just described to them (especially the sign in 24:15).

This Generation

The best way to interpret "this generation" is the simplest and most natural reading of the phrase – a normal human generation of people. Thus, people living at the time of Jesus would see these things happen.

Some teachers want to change the meaning of this phrase because its natural usage doesn't fit into their incorrect interpretation of this entire passage (24:4-35). Since they believe these verses are concerned with the 2nd Coming, it appears that Jesus was wrong about when his 2nd Coming would take place. Therefore, they attempt to find other ways to interpret "this generation" so that they can maintain their view without Jesus appearing to proclaim a false prophecy. But they are wrong in their initial interpretation.

The best way to interpret this passage, the way the original hearers understood it, is that it foretells the destruction of Jerusalem and that Jesus declared that this destruction would happen *within a generation after his death*. The great majority of Christian scholars believe this, increasingly so in Pentecostal and Evangelical circles.

Trust Me

The statement "heaven and earth may pass away but…" is a proverbial saying used often within Jewish writings and teachings (Isa 40:8; 51:6; 54:10; Jer 31:35-36). It is used to affirm the permanence of God's covenant faithfulness as contrasted with the impermanence of creation. Jesus is not saying that heaven and earth will literally pass away; instead, he's emphasizing the absolute and total reliability of what he's just told them about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. In other words, "Even if heaven and earth pass away, my words will remain secure."

Conclusion - Part 2

The destruction of Jerusalem was the earthly sign to that generation – the one that rejected and killed the Jesus – that Jesus was the true Messiah. It symbolized his vindication over the Jewish establishment that rejected him. It showed that he had received authority from God to enact judgment upon enemies of the true Kingdom. It was a sign on earth of what was already a heavenly reality.

It also symbolized the inauguration of a new people of God and a new way to the Father. From this point forward God's people would be a spiritual people, encountering and carrying God's presence everywhere to the nations instead of focusing God's presence on one particular earthly location.

In summary, Jesus told his disciples that they ***could*** determine when Jerusalem would be destroyed by watching for the abomination that causes desolation. When they saw that sign they knew the destruction of Jerusalem would follow immediately. And they also knew that this would be the sign that he was vindicated and enthroned in heaven. But, as we shall see in the next section, even though a definite sign was given for Jerusalem's destruction, no such sign will be given for his 2nd Coming.

The *Parousia*

(Matthew 24:36-25:46)

Introduction

In the previous sections we've covered Jesus' answer to the first question the disciples asked in Matthew 24:3, "When will this *(the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple)* happen?" We saw that Jesus provided them with a specific time frame (within this generation) and a specific sign (abomination of desolation) that would tell them the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was imminent.

In 24:36-25:46 Jesus answers the second question, "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Some scholars believe that the second part of this discourse continues to deal with the destruction of Jerusalem/temple and that is possible, but most commentators believe it is concerned with the 2nd Coming of Christ. Many aspects of 24:36-25:46 indicate Jesus has transitioned from speaking about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple to speaking about his 2nd Coming.
Here are some reasons why we believe this:

1. The Greek phrase *peri de*, which translates "but about" or "now about," is frequently used in the NT to transition from one topic to another (Mt 22:31; I Cor 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).
2. Jesus transitions from the plural to the singular when speaking about "that day" *(he previously used "those days" four times in 24:1-35.)*.
3. It makes no sense for Jesus to give specific times and signs for an event and then immediately say that no one except the Father knows when it will happen.
4. In these verses he tells them that there is **no sign to warn of his 2nd Coming**. Rather, his followers are to live in a state of constant readiness for his return (not waiting to see a sign and then "repent" right before he comes).
5. His answer can be broken down into five basic sections:
   A. His statement (v36) that only God knows when he will return followed by …
   B. Several general statements describing the **suddenness** of his return (24:36-44).

6. Finally, there are three parables that flesh out what it means to live in constant readiness:
   A. The slaves (24:45-51),
   B. The wise and foolish girls (25:1-13),
   C. The talents (25:14-30).
7. Jesus concludes his statements concerning his *parousia* by discussing the final judgment (25:31-46)

Below is a brief explanation of the material included in this passage.

Father Knows Best (24:36-44)

Jesus begins this section by stating very clearly, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." While the destruction of Jerusalem/temple can be discerned by a sign, the return of the Son of Man will be *completely unexpected*. There will be no time to prepare after the announcement of his arrival because his arrival will be sudden and immediate. Therefore, he expects us to live in a state of constant readiness.

He follows this introductory statement with several smaller statements further describing the *suddenness* and *surprise* of this return. He first uses the story of Noah and flood to show that people will continue going about the normal duties of life: working, eating and drinking, marrying, right up until the day of flood. He says the same thing will occur with his 2nd Coming – people will continue doing these normal activities right up to the day of his return.

After the story of Noah, he tells a story about people going about their jobs just like any other day. Suddenly one will be taken and the other left. Again, there will be no warning. And as for the taking, we don't know who was taken – the one for judgment or the one for reward. According to uses of this word in the preceding passage *it probably refers to those being taken away for judgment*. That is what happened in the story of Noah: Everyone not in the Ark was taken away in judgment.

The final verses in this pericope talk about the coming of a burglar. There was a genuine fear of burglars during this period, especially among those who were poor or defenseless. Burglars don't announce when they're going to come because then you would be prepared for them and would attempt to fight them off.

As for the command to "keep watch" found in v 42, it is best understood as being constantly ready for Christ's return. The following parables will explain this more fully, but the idea is introduced here. The focus of Jesus' teaching is ***NOT*** for us to watch for signs of his return – especially if that takes away from the normal aspects of Christian life – *but for us to live in such a way that we are ready for his return at any time*. The following parables help to explain what this type of living looks like.

The Slaves (24:45-51)

In this parable the consequences of the behavior of a good slave during his master's absence is contrasted with the consequences of the behavior of a bad slave during the master's absence. If the slave does what his master orders him to do, then when the master returns and finds him *faithfully working at his tasks* he will reward him by putting him in charge of many more things (a position of higher honor, power and pay). But if the slave does not do what the master orders because he expects to have time cover up his disobedience and abusive behavior, he will be severely punished.

It is important to note that the good servant was rewarded for doing his duties, ***not*** *for waiting by the window watching for his master's return*. He faithfully watched over his master's property and followed his master's orders. This type of behavior is what is expected of us as Christians because just being part of a Christian community is not enough (just as being part of Israel itself was never enough to make one a part of God's true people).

The Ten Girls (25:1-13)

This parable describes a group of girls waiting to do their part in a wedding ceremony. The girls all arrive and await the coming of the groom, but his delay causes all of them to fall asleep. At his sudden appearance they awake, and the wise girls soak and relight their lamps. The foolish girls, who were not prepared in advance, are left without any oil and have to leave in search of oil. But by the time the foolish ones find oil and return they have been shut out of the wedding banquet and are denied admittance.

Again, the call to keep watch in v 13 ***does not mean*** to watch for signs of Christ's return. Nor does it point to the wise girls receiving a reward for staying awake while the foolish ones fell asleep (all 10 girls clearly fell asleep, as v 5 indicates). **Rather, this phrase is *a call to BE PREPARED* for Christ's return, even though it is delayed (according to our timing and patience).** The wise girls were prepared because they *brought enough oil to last even if the bridegroom was delayed*; they prepared themselves ahead of time.

The Talents (25:14-30)

The parable about the talents is often misinterpreted in English because of the different meanings we have for the word "talent." But the Greek word ***talanton*** means a sum of money (usually a large sum of money). Thus, in this parable, a master is giving three servants varying degrees of money (depending on their aptitude) in order for them to invest and make a profit on that money during his absence. The two who were responsible with his money and made something of it, each received a reward upon the master's return. The one who did nothing was punished because he did nothing with what he was given.

For us this means that God will give each person varying amounts of opportunities depending upon our aptitude. *The focus is **not** who has more opportunities, but **whether each person does something responsible with the opportunities given to them**.* For those who do nothing with what they've been given, punishment is the only possible outcome.

In this parable Jesus is *again* encouraging his disciples to live lives of readiness in expectation of his return. Not all of us will be given the same chances in life, but God does expect us to use what chances we are given. For those who prove faithful, the return of the master will be a glorious and rewarding event; for those who do nothing, it will be a time of punishment for their lack of obedience and readiness.

The Final Judgment (25:31-46)

Jesus as the universal judge of all nations is the primary focus of this pericope (again referencing Daniel 7:13-14). The opening verse describes Jesus enthroned in heaven and surrounded by the heavenly court (surrounded by angels, like the images we saw in Daniel 7 and Revelation 4-5). Just as Jesus was shown to have authority to judge Jerusalem in the first part of this large discourse (24:4-35), we now see that he has the authority to judge all men (Joel 3:1-12).

Here we see Jesus answering the challenges of the elders and chief priests in 21:23 ("by what authority?" and "who gave you this authority?"). *He tells his disciples, again, that he is the Son of Man who will come into the presence of YHWH and will receive from him dominion, power and the authority to judge the nations.*

The criterion by which people are judged is how they responded to Jesus' disciples in this life. The phrase "the least of these brothers of mine" is Jesus' way of describing Christians and the Christian community. So, in these verses Jesus is not saying that philanthropy in general is the mark of a true disciple, but that *caring for the needs of fellow disciples is a mark of a true follower of Jesus.*

Just as the righteous are rewarded for their compassion and caring for the needs of fellow disciples, the wicked will be judged for ignoring and mistreating Jesus' disciples. The nations will be judged according to how they treated Christians *because these disciples are Christ's representatives to them*.

NOTE: This understanding of "the least of these brothers of mine" and of the judgment of the nations is BY FAR the best understanding of these verses and is the perspective of the overwhelming majority of Christian scholars. *This is how Jesus ALWAYS uses these terms, especially the word "brothers" (10:40-42, 12:48-50, 18:5-6, 18:10-14, 28:10).*

Conclusion - The Parousia

THERE WILL BE NO SIGN …

Though Jesus provided the disciples with a clear sign of when the temple and Jerusalem would be destroyed, he said that there would be no sign(s) announcing his return. His disciples (past, present and future) are expected to live in such a way that they are constantly ready for his return, not needing an advanced warning so they can straighten out their lives before he comes.

THERE IS TENSION BETWEEN DELAY and IMMINENCE …

Though there is a tension between delay and imminence, this is the state in which we must learn to live. We must prepare for a long life on this earth; but we must live each day being ready for his return. This readiness relates to the spiritual and ethical condition of our lives. We must do our best to live obediently to Christ's teachings and commands.

WE MUST BE FAITHFUL, GROWING, and PRODUCTIVE …

We must also do our best to be productive members of his people, making the most of every opportunity he gives us for ministry and growth. This means taking a long-term view of stewardship, growth, and discipleship.

WE MUST FAITHFULLY SHOW COMPASSION to OUR LOCAL CHURCH FAMILY ….

And we should also show great care and compassion to our brothers and sisters in Christ (first those in this congregation and then those in other congregations around the world).

Only by doing these things can we be assured of living in a state of constant readiness for his return.