

Keys to Our Lord's Prophetic Discourse, Matthew 24-25

(An excerpt from my self-study course on Matthew)

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Some of these keys are adapted from Alva McClain's book, The Greatness of the Kingdom. The title Christ has been changed to its equivalent Messiah.

Matthew 24–25 is the fullest record of our Lord's longest and most important message predicting the future. The same message is recorded more briefly in the other Synoptic Gospels: Mark and Luke. (Luke has some important differences.) He spoke it to a small group of disciples just after He finished His public ministry. They were sitting on the side of a mountain just across the narrow valley east of Jerusalem. Since the place was the Mount of Olives, the message is often called "The Olivet Discourse." It has to do mostly with the delay before the Lord finally comes back to set up His kingdom.

1. Background to this discourse. By the time of this discourse, the nation of Israel had rejected Jesus as Messiah, that is, the promised King. They had rejected Him both informally (Matt. 11–12) and formally (Matt. 21–23). In contrast, Jesus' disciples had confessed Him as Messiah (Matt. 16:16–17). After they confessed, He repeatedly assured them that He will eventually come to sit on His glorious throne and rule (Matt. 16:27; 19:28; 20:20–23). As He had said earlier, He will bring an end to this present evil age and inaugurate the glorious age to come, the kingdom age (Matt. 13:39,43).¹ But first He must suffer.

This discourse comes right after Israel's formal rejection of the King, recorded in Matthew 21–23. Those chapters begin with Jesus publicly presenting Himself to Israel in His Royal Entry (21:1–11) and taking charge of the temple (21:12–16). Next they relate His public debate with the leaders of Israel, in which (a) they challenge His authority; (b) He tells three parables against them, in part predicting that God will take the kingdom program from them and destroy their city; (c) they ask three questions designed to trap Him; and (d) He asks a question pointing to the Messiah's deity.

In short, Matthew 21–22 show that Israel's leaders had formally rejected their Messiah (Jesus) and that He had rejected them. He fully stated this situation in His final public discourse (Matt. 23). In it He pronounced seven or eight "woes" upon the leaders and a terrible judicial sentence on "this generation" (23:34–36). He closed with a lament (23:37–39) showing Him to be the God of Jerusalem and of history. His purpose to save Jerusalem's children (Israel) had been refused by Jerusalem ("you were not willing"). That purpose would not be fulfilled until His Second Coming ("You will not see me again until"). Instead, Jerusalem's "house," referring at least to the temple, would be left desolate.

These events and predictions had upset Jesus' disciples. As they took their final leave of Jerusalem, they wanted Him to tell them more about the temple's future (24:1). Wasn't their glorious temple a wonder of the world? Think of its vast size—an area half again as large as today's St.

¹ "This age" is contrasted with "the age to come" not only in Matthew 12:32 but also—years later—in Ephesians 1:21. This means that "the age to come" had not come when Paul wrote. It still has not come.

Peter's Square in Rome. Think of the enormous blocks of white marble in its walls and columns, the lavish use of gold and gems. Jesus' response was that not one stone would be left on another (24:2); destruction would be complete. Stunned, the disciples walked silently with Jesus to the Mount of Olives. But once seated there with Him, opposite the temple, they asked Him some questions.

2. The disciples' questions, 24:3. See also Mark 13:3–4 and Luke 21:7. Matthew records two questions, as follows.

Their first question: "When will this [Greek, these things] happen?"

Their second question: "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

NOTE: This question about the sign is just one question, for the Greek has only one article for "coming" and "end."²

Mark 13:3–4 and Luke 21:7 also record two questions but state the second question differently from Matthew: "What will be the sign that they [Greek, these things] are all about to be fulfilled [Luke, to take place]?" At first glance this second question in Mark and Luke seems quite different from the second question in Matthew. According to Matthew, the sign they request is for the Lord's coming and the end of the age. According to Mark/Luke, it is a sign for when "these things" of the first question will take place. Can these two versions of the second question mean the same? Yes they can, if the disciples assumed **that the Lord would come in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem.** If so, we can paraphrase their two questions like this:

Their first question: Lord, you have said you will return to put an end to the present evil age and set up your kingdom. But you have also said that Jerusalem and the temple must first be destroyed. How long will it be before these things—this destruction and your return—take place?

Their second question: What else will happen to show us that the time of that destruction and your return to rule are near?

In other words, the disciples apparently saw a close connection between the predicted destruction of Jerusalem and the Lord's coming in His kingdom. Possibly they had in mind Old Testament prophecies like Zechariah 14:1–4, 8–9, 12, 16–17. These picture the nations assaulting Jerusalem just before the LORD God comes to save His people and set up His kingdom. But history did not turn out that way in the first century. Jerusalem and the temple were indeed destroyed in A.D. 70; yet the Lord did not return and still has not returned. Were the disciples or the prophecies mistaken? Not if the fulfillment is **contingent** (depends) on other factors and/or the Lord Jesus' answers refer to more than one destruction of Jerusalem.

3. The "birth pains," 24:4–14. See also Mark 13:5–13 and Luke 21:8–19. In the first part of His answer, the Lord primarily warned the disciples not to let anyone deceive them into thinking that the end has come near. There are many things that "must happen" (Matt. 24:6, *dei*

² The Greek word here for "coming" (*parousia*) is used only four times in the Gospels, all of them in this chapter (vv. 3, 27, 37, 39). Here it clearly refers to the Lord's promised return in glory to rule. A Bible student must decide if in the Epistles it sometimes refers to a separate and secret coming.

genesthai—as in Daniel 2:28, 29; Rev. 1:1; 4:1; 22:6) according to God's plan. Among these things are false Messiahs, wars, famines, and earthquakes. But such things do not mean that the end will come immediately. Rather, they will be the beginning of birth pains (v. 8) that will continue until the end.

It is possible—but unclear in the text—that the birth pains do not begin until verse 7. In that view the “wars and rumors of wars” of verse 6 are local whereas the “nation against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” of verse 7 is worldwide. A different possibility is that the birth pains of verses 4–14 do not start until just before the final “great distress” (Great Tribulation) described in verses 15–28.³ However, birth pains may begin long before the actual birth, gradually becoming more intense and more frequent. So Matthew 24:4–14 need not refer specifically to the Great Tribulation.

Does the expression “birth pains” suggest that a new world will come forth? Possibly so—and we know that the Lord promised such a new world (Matt. 19:28).

In connection with these birth pains, there will be persecution of Jesus' disciples (24:9–14).⁴ These will need to “stand firm to the end” (24:13) of their lives and ministries as they preach “the good news about the kingdom” (Greek, 24:14). By standing firm they show that they are God's elect, who will share in the salvation of His coming kingdom (19:23–30). Such endurance is the mark of the elect, not the cause of their election. In other words, God does not choose them because they endure, but they endure because God has chosen them.⁵

Both Matthew 24:14 and Mark 13:10 indicate that this good news (Matt., about the kingdom) must be preached to all the nations before the end comes. This is the same gospel (good news) Jesus commanded us to preach “to all creation” (Mark 16:15). Our message concerns both “God's grace” (Acts 20:24) and His “kingdom” (Acts 20:25). It says that (a) Jesus is the King and (b) mankind's hope is to share with the King—by God's grace—in His future kingdom. To preach this good news is the main purpose of our being left in this world in Messiah's absence.⁶

³ Isaiah 13:6-8; 26:16-18; and Revelation 6 describe such events in connection with the Tribulation.

⁴ Dr. McClain (p. 364) says that after the reference to birth pangs, Luke 21:12-24 is a “literary parenthesis.” It starts “*before all these things*” ...already referred to which will mark the beginning of the “end.” Then Luke (and no other Gospel), says McClain, “answers the disciples' question about the judgment of Jerusalem and the temple... in A.D. 70.” It jumps from that occasion to the end in one verse (v. 24), then rejoins the other Gospels. Only by this section with “no exact parallel,” says McClain, “can we distinguish generally between what has now become history and what is still future” (p. 363). McClain's suggestion is worthy of detailed study.

⁵ This section about persecution has principles that often apply. Therefore, Matthew has included much of it in Jesus' instructions about the mission, in 10:17-21.

⁶ Some take Matthew 24:14 to mean that the Lord will not return with the kingdom until we complete our preaching. Perhaps so—but why then did Luke not mention that preaching? Others apply this preaching activity—and even the entire prophecy—to Israel of the end time. Some of them wrongly assume that the *ekklesia* (church), Messiah's “body,” is basically different in character and hope from future redeemed Israel. It is true that Messiah did not begin to baptize with the Spirit and form His body until the Day of Pentecost (1 Cor. 12:12-13; Acts 1:5). But it is equally true that the same baptism was first promised to Israel. When that nation finally repents, Messiah will add it to His body.

4. The Great Tribulation, 24:15–28. See also Mark 13:14–23 and Luke 21:20–24. In Matthew 24:21 the New International Version uses the expression “great distress.” However, we will stick with the equivalent “Great Tribulation,” which is better known in prophetic studies. As described in verses 15–28, this will be a time of trouble so great that no human would survive were it not cut short (v. 22). In fact, various Scriptures show us that it will last only three and a half years. During that time false messiahs and false prophets will practice the strongest of deceptions on the world, though they cannot deceive the elect (those God has chosen, vv. 23–26).

How will believers in Messiah know that this tribulation is about to begin? By seeing “standing in the holy place [the temple in Jerusalem] the abomination that causes desolation, spoken of through the prophet Daniel” (24:15). They should immediately flee from around Jerusalem to the mountains, probably the mountains across the Jordan Valley to the east.

The expression “the abomination that causes desolation” comes from the Greek version of Daniel’s last recorded prophecy (Daniel 10–12). The expression is used in Daniel 11:31 and 12:11. In 11:31 it refers to something done by Antiochus Epiphanes—as also recalled in Daniel 8:11–13. Antiochus was an evil Syrian ruler (in one division of the Greek Empire). In 167 B.C. he put an end to Jewish sacrifices and introduced an idolatrous worship into the temple. This worship, long before Jesus’ ministry, was the “abomination” that produced much desolation.

Yet Daniel used the same expression to refer to another event that is still future. After predicting in 11:31 what Antiochus would do, Daniel’s prophecy jumped to “the time of the end” (11:35). Here the prophecy merged the figure of Antiochus into that of a final willful king in the end time. “At that time,” Daniel said (12:1), there will be an unparalleled “time of distress” (the Great Tribulation) for Israel. That distress will lead to deliverance, resurrection, and an eternal kingdom (12:1–3). It is in connection with that final distress that Daniel once more mentioned “the abomination that causes desolation” (12:11–13). This time he clearly referred to the last days. Thus, in Daniel’s last prophecy (chs. 10–12) the “abomination” refers to two events widely separated in time, events similar but separate. The first took place long before Jesus’ birth. The second, still future, is the one Jesus referred to in Matthew 24:15.⁷

Having revealed the sign of the tribulation, Jesus emphasized (a) the severity of the tribulation and (b) the danger of deception in contrast to the openness of His Second Coming. No one will have to be told when He comes; it will be as evident as the lightning.

5. Messiah’s coming, 24:29–31. See also Mark 13:24–27 and Luke 21:25–28. These verses describe the Lord’s coming “with power and great glory” (v. 30; cf. 16:27; 25:31) and having His angels “gather his elect from the four winds” (v. 31). This will take place “immediately after” the tribulation (v. 29).

NOTE: We know from 1 Thessalonians 4:17 that both living and dead believers will be raptured (caught up). Will that happen on this occasion when angels “gather his elect” (Matt. 24:31)? Some teachers say no, that the rapture will be earlier. Such teachers usually claim that there will be basic differences between redeemed Israel and the

⁷ Although it uses different terminology, the prophecy in Daniel 9:24–27 refers to the same future event.

church. Based on those differences, they believe that the Lord will come secretly for believers before the tribulation. As you see, Matthew speaks of only one future coming of Messiah. There is no evidence there that He will also come secretly. This is true in all the other Gospels. (There is no indication that even the coming in John 14 is separate.) Any evidence of a secret coming must be found in the Epistles, if at all.

“The sign of the Son of Man” in verse 30 is probably the Lord Himself. In addition to this sign are the heavenly signs listed in verse 29 (darkening of sun and moon, falling of stars, etc.). Some of this language may be figurative, referring to disruptions of order, as it does in the Old Testament sources. For example, the same expressions are used in Jeremiah 4:23–28 and Ezekiel 32:7–8. These passages describe figuratively, but not literally, Nebuchadnezzar's punishment of Jerusalem and Egypt.

6. The time for the signs, 24:32–41. See also Mark 13:28–31 and Luke 21:29–33. This section records the following promise (emphasis added), often misunderstood:

“**This generation** will certainly not pass away until **all these things** have happened.” (24:34)

Some interpret this to say that all the signs and the Lord's coming would take place soon, before the death of the Jews then living. If it meant that, then the prophecy was faulty; because the Lord did not return. To avoid such a conclusion, some conservative interpreters have suggested two other meanings for “this generation” in 24:34 (instead of Jesus' generation):

- the future generation that sees the signs of the end begin. This view assumes that the signs (including the “birth pains” of vv. 4–14) did not begin soon. Instead, they will take place only in or just before the tribulation period.
- the Jewish race, destined to survive forever. They understand the following words to mean “will certainly not pass away even when all these things have happened.”

Neither of these alternate meanings, however, can be supported in Matthew. “This generation” is used five other times there, always by Jesus (see 11:16; 12:41, 42, 45; and 23:36; cf. 12:39; 16:4; and 17:17). Each time it means the Jews of Jesus' day, usually in contrast with earlier generations. Consider its use, along with “all these things” (NIV, “all this”), just before this prophetic discourse. Jesus had labeled Israel's leaders as “snakes” and “brood of vipers” (23:33), who would persecute more of God's servants, as their forefathers had done (23:34). This happened during the Acts period. Therefore, they would be punished for “all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth” (23:35). “**All this**,” He had said, “will come upon **this generation**” (23:36). And it did, when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in A.D. 70.

There is no need to avoid this usual meaning of “this generation” in 24:34, because Jesus was not predicting the time of His coming.⁸ By “all these things” He meant events leading to that coming, but not including it. The preceding verse (24:33) makes precisely that distinction: “When you see **all these things**, you know that it [“the kingdom of God,” Luke 21:31] is near, right at

⁸ Apparently only the Father knows that time: “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matt. 24:36 and Mark 13:32).

the door.” And that is what happened. The earliest believers were right not to expect the Lord immediately (Acts 3:21); because none of the signs had taken place.⁹ But quite soon—during the transitional Acts period—they began seeing the signs. For this reason, New Testament writers from the earliest to the latest expected the Lord to return soon. Here are some examples, beginning with the writer usually considered the first:

- James 5:8, 9 – “The Lord’s coming is near...The Judge is standing at the door!”
- 1 Peter 4:7 – “The end of all things is near.”
- 1 John 2:18 – “This is the last hour...we know it is the last hour.”
- Revelation 1:3; 22:12, 20 – “The time is near.” “I am coming soon!” “Yes, I am coming soon.”

These writers all expected the Lord to establish His kingdom when He comes: “Messiah Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead...in view of his appearing and his kingdom” (2 Tim. 4:1, cf. v. 8). Apparently they considered the signs (“these things”) of Matthew 24:33 to have been fulfilled enough for His coming and kingdom to be near.¹⁰ How could they think so before the Abomination of Desolation had taken place (Matt. 24:15)? Or before the sun and moon are darkened and the stars fall (24:29)? Probably because “all these things” did not mean every detail or exclude figures of speech.

However we interpret it, Jesus’ prophecy was more complex than it seemed. Like Old Testament prophecies, it could hide gaps of time and be fulfilled in stages. Thus, no one should set dates. We do well to heed Jesus’ warning that no one but the Father knows exactly when Messiah will come (Matt. 24:36). Most will be completely surprised (vv. 37–41).

7. Be ready for Him to come, 24:42 to 25:30. See also Mark 13:32–37 and Luke 21:34–36. With several comparisons and parables the Lord exhorts us to be prepared for His return. Be ready

- like a houseowner expecting a thief (24:43–44)
- like a faithful and wise servant left to care for others (24:45–51)
- like wise virgins prepared in advance for the inevitable (25:1–13)
- by investing for the Lord the means He has given (25:14–30)

Faithfulness will be rewarded with joyful responsibility, unfaithfulness with utter loss.

8. The judgment by which the King inaugurates the kingdom, 25:31–46. In previous lessons we have often referred to the great prediction in these verses. In it once more the Lord reminds us that He will return to earth to rule in glory. Once more it says that the King will judge. Once more, that the eternal life He will give is to inherit the kingdom. Once more, that the criterion for entering is faith in Him demonstrated in deeds. How have the heirs showed that faith? In love—without even realizing it—that cared for the King’s brethren.

⁹ Certainly none of “these things” happened before Pentecost. Therefore, it is evident that the kingdom was not near and did not come on that occasion.

¹⁰ Remember, however, that the kingdom could be “near”—and remain near—without being “present.”