

## The Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21)

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### **Introduction**

The Olivet Discourse is a Bible passage scholars study with great interest and enthusiasm. The interpretation of prophecy, however, is not an easy task. There are only a few scholars united, most are divided in their exegetical opinions. Without regard to their disagreements, we will first try to accurately depict the Olivet Discourse as recorded in the three gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke. Then we will go into the argument between the adherents of the two basic camps “preterist” and “futurist” and offer a mediative solution to the matter. Finally, we will weigh the discussion against Jesus’ call for alertness and faithfulness.

## Harmony of the Accounts

The following chart provides an overview of the Olivet Discourse as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. We will study along this outline.

|                                   | Matthew     | Mark     | Luke     |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|----------|----------|
| Setting of the Discourse          | 24:1-3      | 13:1-4   | 21:5-7   |
| The Beginning of Birth Pains      | 24:4-14     | 13:5-13  | 21:8-19  |
| The (Abomination of) Desolation   | 24:15-28    | 13:14-23 | 21:20-24 |
| The Coming of the Son of Man      | 24:29-31    | 13:24-27 | 21:25-27 |
| The Time is near but unknown      | 24:32-41    | 13:28-32 | 21:28-33 |
| About Watchfulness & Faithfulness | 24:42-25:30 | 13:33-37 | 21:34-36 |
| The Son of Man's Judgment         | 25:31-46    |          |          |

Leaving the Temple, Jesus predicted its destruction. Together with his disciples he went on the Mount of Olives opposite the Temple (as he did in the evenings during the Passion Week; Lk 21:37), where Peter, James, John and Andrew asked Jesus the questions introducing the Discourse: (1) “When will ‘this’ or ‘*these things*’ happen?” – referring to the prediction. (2a) “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Mt 21:3b)<sup>1</sup> (2b) “What will be the sign that ...*they* are all about to be fulfilled? ...*they* are about to take place?” (Mk 13:4b; Lk 21:7b) The second question refers to the first which shows that the disciples related the destruction of the

Temple to the Second Coming of Jesus and to the end of the age, possibly thinking of Zechariah 14:2-9 that relates the gathering of the nations against Jerusalem with the Coming of the Lord. (Price 2003) Jesus' Coming, besides, is linked to the end of the age in several other gospel teachings, too.<sup>2</sup>

In all three accounts, Jesus first of all warns them against false Christs, which seems to be his main concern for the disciples. According to Luke, many will deceive the people by saying, "The time is near." (Lk 21:8) Jesus warned the disciples not to be alarmed by wars, because "such things must happen, but the end is still to come." (Mt 24:6; Mk 13:7) Jesus gives an answer about the 'end' rather than merely about the Temple destruction. But, "the end will not come right away." (Lk 21:9)

Jesus talks further about global conflicts, revolutions, earthquakes, famines and pestilences. The passage is then explained in Matthew and in Mark by Jesus' words, "These are the beginning of birth pains," which gives us the impression of a progressive development of events. The statement is not given in Luke. Instead, he already records 'fearful events and great signs from heaven' in verse 11 and repeats the theme in verse 25 as part of the portion which tells us about Jesus' Second Coming. But 'before,' there will be persecution. (Luke 21:12)

All three gospel accounts emphasize on the coming persecution. Jesus' disciples will be hated by all nations and even betrayed by their family members. Mark and

Luke add the teachings about the Holy Spirit and the wisdom that is given to them when they have to defend themselves before the governors and kings, standing in the local councils or in the synagogues. (Mk 13:11; Lk 21:14-15) In Mark, Jesus predicts the preaching of the gospel to all nations in this persecution context. (Mk 13:10) Similarly Luke states, “This will result in your being witness to them.” (Lk 21:13)

In Matthew Jesus additionally tells us about the coming apostasy. He repeats the warning about the false prophets and the coming deception, for “many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other.” (Mt 24:10) The wickedness will increase, and the love will grow cold. In short, the condition of the church will deteriorate and the Christian community purified. (Carson 1984, 498f.)

“But he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” (Mt 24:13; Mk 13:13) Luke’s record slightly differs: “By standing firm you will gain life.” (Lk 21:19) These words designate the end of this birth pain section in Mark and Luke. Matthew concludes with the well-known prediction about the preaching of the gospel in the whole world, “and then the end will come.” (Mt 24:14) Luke omits this point.

In Matthew and Mark, talking about the end is followed by the next section about the ‘abomination of desolation’ that Daniel spoke about.<sup>3</sup> Luke does not mention this term but starts the passage with the prediction about “Jerusalem being surrounded by armies.” (Lk 21:20) Darrel Bock<sup>4</sup> rightly contrasts Luke with Matthew and Mark:

“He does not mention that the tribulation in this period is the most intense ever to fall on humans; he does not mention that no human would have survived if the Lord had not cut short these days; he does not note that the time should not be in winter; and he does not discuss the ‘abomination of desolation,’ only ‘its desolation.’”

In Matthew and Mark Jesus tells the disciples about the time of great distress “when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation.’” (Mt 24:15; cf. Mk 13:14) No one would survive, but the time will be shortened. At that time false Christs and false prophets will continue to appear, then even performing signs and miracles to deceive. All three accounts warn the people in Judea to “flee to the mountains.” Only Luke adds, “they will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” (Lk 21:24)

In all three gospels the passage is followed by an account about the Second Coming of Christ.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to Luke, Matthew and Mark tightly connect the two sections with “Immediately after the distress” (Mt 24:29) and “following that distress” (Mk 13:24). All three gospels write about signs in heaven that accompany his Coming, Matthew and Mark quoting Isaiah. The angels will gather the elect, and men will see “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.” (Mt 24:30b; cf. Mk 13:26; Lk 21:27)

Jesus continues his Discourse with a “lesson from the fig-tree” that teaches about the nearness of the end “when you see all these things.” (Mt 24:33; cf. Mk 13:29; Lk 21:31) Though it is then near,<sup>6</sup> only the Father knows about the hour. (Mt 24:36, Mk 13:32) Jesus then points to the certainty of his words: “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” (Mt 24:34f.; Mk 13:30f.; Lk 21:32f.) In Matthew, Jesus compares the time “at the coming of the Son of Man” with the days of Noah. People will not expect Jesus’ Coming, and so “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” (1 Thess 5:2) Then, “one will be taken and the other left.” (Mt 24:40b; cf. Lk 17:34f.; 1 Thess 4:17) These words naturally lead to a call for alertness in Matthew that is also emphasised in the last verses of the Discourse in Mark and Luke.

To sum up, Jesus’ teaching in his Olivet Discourse covers a period of various trials, the abomination of desolation, a time of unequalled distress and his Second Coming. He taught his disciples that the end is still to come despite ‘such things’ (Mt 24:6; Mk 13:7; Lk 21:9), yet they should be alert because it is near “when you see all these things.” (Mt 24:33; cf. Mk 13:29; Lk 21:31) This tension is recognized in all accounts. Besides, the three gospel passages slightly but notably differ in structure and wording. Luke differs most, especially in regard to the desolation passage. Matthew is the

lengthiest account among them. His additional teachings about alertness, faithfulness and God's judgment will be discussed in the fourth chapter. First, we now have to deal with the tension just mentioned, concerning the time Jesus referred to.

### **Preterist vs. Futurist View**

Preterism is “an eschatological viewpoint that places many or all eschatological events in the *past*, especially during the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.”<sup>7</sup>

Adherents of the preterist view argue that the Olivet Discourse as a whole is fulfilled in the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. In its purest form they believe that the Second Coming of Jesus already took place. They write, “We believe Scripture teaches Christ would come again in that first century generation while some of His original disciples were still alive, to judge the living and the dead.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense they interpret Jesus' statement: “This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.”<sup>9</sup> (Mt 24:34; Mk 13:30; Lk 21:32)

Futurism, in contrast, places many or all eschatological events in the *future*. Some Futurists would disagree with the interpretation that the Olivet Discourse refers to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 or to the current age. (e.g. Ice 2006) Their opinion is often determined by their general viewpoint concerning biblical prophecy. Dispensationalists like John F. Walvoord deny that the passage addresses the church

but confine it to the Jewish nation, which in turn implies a radical dichotomy between Israel and the church. While he regards the events in Matthew 24:4-14 as 'signs of progress,' the following verses, we are told, relate to the end of the age that occurs after a pretribulation rapture of the church.<sup>10</sup> (Walvoord 1971, 116 and 214)

Both the preterist and the futurist viewpoint overshoot the mark. The Olivet Discourse refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. as well as further to the consummation of the age, which leads us to the interpretation that we can call the 'preterist-futurist view.' (Turner 1989, 5) Exegesis along the outline studied in the previous chapter will expose some difficulties the radical viewpoints carry along and confirm our standpoint.

Firstly, the question that introduces the Discourse asks for immediacy to some extent. The disciples sit on the Mount of Olives with the Temple in view and Jesus' prediction about its destruction in mind. An answer in which Jesus points to something yet remote and irrelevant for the disciples had been rather deceptive than helpful. (Carson 1984, 492) The events Jesus described as 'the beginning of birth pains,' on the other hand, designate a process that requires some time until the consummation of the age would come. It is difficult to imagine that such an extensive teaching about the end-time period would cover only a few decades. In particular, we do not follow the preterist viewpoint that the Gentile mission had been fulfilled before 70 A.D.<sup>11</sup>

The key term of the whole Olivet Discourse to analyze, however, is the ‘abomination of desolation’ the prophet Daniel spoke about. Preterists say this refers to the defilement of the Temple by the Zealots or the Romans during the Jewish war in 70 A.D.<sup>12</sup> Futurists say this would be a certain event that is still to take place in the future. The preterist-futurist approach combines both viewpoints. Whereas Jesus indeed talks about the sign of the end of the age, yet he also speaks to his contemporaries with the Temple destruction in view and warns them to flee when the time comes. In this sense, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. can be seen as a token of things yet to come. (Turner 1989, 13)

In comparison, scholars agree that the prediction in Daniel 11:31 refers to the ‘abomination of desolation’ set by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 168 B.C., yet Jesus cites Daniel with a future fulfillment in mind. If we take the fulfillment of Daniel as a token of the prophetic sign Jesus spoke about, we understand more about the nature of this ‘abomination.’ Epiphanes erected an altar to Zeus over the altar of burned offering and sacrificed a swine on it. (Carson 1984, 500) With this in mind, Randall Price defines the phrase ‘abomination of desolation’ as “a technical reference to the introduction of an idolatrous image or an act of pagan sacrilege within the Sanctuary that produces the highest level of ceremonial impurity, Temple profanation.” (Price 2003)

It is also noteworthy that Daniel spoke about a certain individual who will “put an

end to sacrifice and offering” (Dan 9:27) and then sets up an abomination that causes desolation. Such a person did not appear in the Temple to profane it in 70 A.D., and the sacrificial services continued to the end of the war.<sup>13</sup> (Price 2003) In my view we have to wait for the ‘man of lawlessness’ who is predicted in 2 Thessalonians 2:3f. (see also Wessel 1984, 748; Price 2003; Walvoord 1971, 320)

Because the third gospel is distinct from the others in this section and does not use the crucial term Daniel spoke about, we have less difficulties to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 while interpreting Luke’s account.<sup>14</sup> (Price 2003) At least in Matthew and Mark, however, the Jewish war has to be seen as a token for the ultimate fulfillment of Jesus’ words similar to other anticipatory fulfillments.<sup>15,16</sup> (Turner 1989, 12) Overall, the ultimate ‘abomination of desolation’ is still to come and will be the very sign the disciples asked for, in my opinion.

Jesus further speaks about the time of “great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – *and never to be equalled again.*” (Mt 24:21, emphasis mine) Such a distress must indeed be great if it is to be greater than the two World Wars humankind has experienced in the last century. Six million people died under Hitler, and twenty million under Stalin. A comparison with the Jewish war in relative terms does not really serve to support the preterist view.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Jesus teaches next that ‘those days’ will be cut short, and ‘immediately after the distress’ we

“will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds.” The shortening of days as well as Jesus’ Coming are linked with the time of distress which therefore must be a time at the end.<sup>18</sup> (Wessel 1984, 750) Because the time is called *unequaled*, it also appears difficult to think of a ‘double fulfillment.’ Thus, though we still admit some relevance in regard to the Jewish war, we are more in line with the futurists at this point.

Lastly, Jesus’ teaching about ‘this generation’ causes much controversy. Some scholars – especially preterists – interpret the phrase referring to Jesus’ contemporaries, others – mostly futurists – maintain the viewpoint that Jesus talks about the coming generation which will experience ‘all these things’ within their life time, an interpretation that derives from the context of the passage. (Price 2003; Ice 2006; Leifeld 1984, 1023; Walvoord 1972, 24) We tend to agree with those who refer to the past generation of Jesus’ time. However, even if ‘this generation’ did not pass away until those things (such as the Jewish war) had happened, the following generations are not excluded to see such things, too. (Carson 1984, 507; Wessel 1984, 751) Certainly we, too, should take serious the numerous exhortations our Lord gave ‘this generation’ in anticipation of his Second Coming and the consummation of the age.

In summary, though the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. is clearly a token of things to come, Jesus primarily speaks about the end of the age and only secondary about this token. Only Luke allows a clearer reference to the Jewish war.

### **Matthew's Version**

Emphasis on the application of the Olivet Discourse is introduced by the parable of the fig tree, an illustration from nature. (Walvoord 1972, 22) We observe the tree and expect summer. In the same way, we see all these things and expect Christ. The time of his Advent is near, and therefore we have to “keep watch.” (Mt 24:42) Though the time is near, no-one knows the exact hour, not even Christ himself but only the Father. The hour will come unexpectedly just as in the days of Noah. (Mt 24:37-41) Reasonably, Jesus warns the people to “keep watch” like an owner of a house who is ready whenever the thief comes, and to be busy like the faithful and wise servant who is expecting his master at any time. (Mt 24:43-51)

Jesus provides further material for admonition. In his parable about the Ten Virgins he again warns the people to be prepared for the bridegroom. (Mt 25:1-13) The foolish virgins had not prepared enough oil for their lamps and were for this reason excluded from the wedding feast. Likewise, we will be rejected by Christ if we are not prepared for his Coming. (Carson 1984, 511ff.) His next parable about the Talents teaches us faithfulness. (Mt 25:14-30) The Lord gave us talents, and he will come back to see and to judge about what we have done with these. Our works, here, are evidence and outcome of our faith in Christ and our expectation of his Coming. (Walvoord 1972, 210) If we really expect Christ, we are also faithful with his talents.

The Discourse ends with an illustrative teaching about the judgment we will face. (Mt 25:31-46) The final judgment at the end of the age is like an exclamation mark of Jesus' warnings he gave us before. It is significant that most of Christ's Discourse is exhortation and admonition. In Matthew, even a whole chapter is given to teach watchfulness and faithfulness in anticipation of Christ's judgment. It is careless to deny direct relevance for the church today as some dispensationalists tend to do.<sup>19</sup> Rather, we should take serious the words Jesus is talking to us today: "Keep watch." (Mt 24:42) Paul later repeats the reason: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." (2 Cor 5:10a)

### **Summary**

The Olivet Discourse is relevant for us today. It is not a prophetic time schedule for us to know the hour of Christ's Coming and to lean back until its near approach. On the contrary, Christ's Coming is imminent.<sup>20</sup> No-one knows the hour. The things Jesus taught about already happened in 'this generation.' Jesus' words are fulfilled, and we have to be ready. The thief might come this night, and the master is already on the way. Let us keep watch and not study a time table Jesus never gave us.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV) unless designated otherwise.
- <sup>2</sup> See Carson 1984, 497, with reference to Mt 16:27-28; 23:39; Lk 19:11-27.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11.
- <sup>4</sup> Cited by Price (2003).
- <sup>5</sup> Carson deals with the false interpretation which denies the reference to the Second Coming of Jesus. (1984, 492f.)
- <sup>6</sup> In contrast to the preceding birth pain passage, where Jesus says that “the end will not come right away.” (Lk 21:9b)
- <sup>7</sup> The definition was found at <http://planetpreterist.com/ency-term-51.html>; Internet, accessed in February 2006; the emphasis is mine.
- <sup>8</sup> From <http://www.preterist.org/whatwebelieve.asp>; Internet, accessed in February 2006.
- <sup>9</sup> The preterist movement started with J. S. Russell (1816-1895), who published a book in 1878 entitled “The Parousia.”
- <sup>10</sup> Carson discusses the dispensational view (1984, 494f.); see also Turner 1989, 5f.
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. Mt 24:14; Mk 13:10; preterists lean to Col 1:6, futurists reply with Rom 15:20.
- <sup>12</sup> Price (2003) refers to Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., “The Great Tribulation is Past: Exposition,” in Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), 46-48.
- <sup>13</sup> Price (2003) agrees with and refers to Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 741; Walvoord also denies a desecration of the Temple in 70 A.D. (1971, 317).
- <sup>14</sup> In particular, Luke does not connect the Second Coming of Christ with the time of distress as Matthew and Mark do. On the other hand, even Luke does not exclude an interpretation that sees fulfillment in the distant future. (Leifeld 1984, 1022).
- <sup>15</sup> See Price (2003) for a list of other events that would somehow fit the prediction.
- <sup>16</sup> If Daniel 11:31 is fulfilled in Antiochus Epiphanes, and if Daniel 9:26f. does refer solely to 70 A.D., Daniel 12:11 might well point to the end of the age. (Cf. Dan 12:9) If so, Jesus might indeed talk about two fulfillments. Unfortunately, so far I have not found any reference to Daniel 12:11 in the commentaries. Further study of the book of Daniel is recommended here.
- <sup>17</sup> Carson (1984, 501) compares the Jewish war with the two World Wars and says there has never been “so high a percentage of a great city’s population so thoroughly and painfully exterminated and enslaved as during the Fall of Jerusalem.”
- <sup>18</sup> Carson separates the ‘shortening of days’ in Matthew 24:22 from the great distress mentioned in the preceding verse. (1984, 502) In his view, the ‘great distress’ refers to the Jewish war. (1984, 499)
- <sup>19</sup> Walvoord repeatedly teaches a pretribulational rapture of the church and consistently emphasizes that only the remnant of Israel would be in view in the Olivet Discourse. (1972, 27, 101, 206) He then advocates a secondary application with regard to the rapture. (1972, 30, 32, 104, 206) The judgment in Matthew 25:31-46 relates to those who survived the great tribulation, in his opinion. (1972, 308)
- <sup>20</sup> For further study about the term ‘imminent’ see Carson 1984, 490.