

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 24:14 - 24:15



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg delves into Matthew 24:14-15, discussing the meaning behind the verse stating, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come." Gregg argues that the verse should not be taken in a purely literal sense, as the term "nations" in this context referred to all Jews living abroad. Additionally, he discusses the two phases of the tribulation period and notes that different interpretations are possible. Finally, he emphasizes the importance of understanding the context and language behind biblical passages to avoid being misinformed.

### Transcript

We've been looking at Matthew chapter 24, and what is usually referred to as the Olivet Discourse, the discourse that Jesus gave to four of his disciples who came to him privately, asking him about when Jerusalem would be destroyed and what sign there might be that it was about to happen. Jesus predicted that Jerusalem would be destroyed and that the temple itself would be leveled to the ground. This was obviously a matter of great interest to the disciples, and they said, when will these things be and what will be the sign that these things are about to happen? Now, in Matthew's Gospel, their second question is worded a little differently, but certainly has the same content.

And so he's telling them when these things would be and what sign there would be that they're about to happen. In telling them when these things would be, he later tells them very directly in verse 34, this generation will not pass before all these things are fulfilled. So he told them when those things would be, but what sign there would be that these things are about to be fulfilled, he has not yet told them in the record that we have read so far.

We've only really studied up through verse 13. There Jesus said that there would be false Christs, false prophets. There would be persecution of the believers.

There would be a falling away and the love of many growing cold. He said there would be earthquakes and famines and pestilences and wars and rumors of wars. What we saw

last time from history is that all those things did in fact happen.

There were a great number of earthquakes and plagues and pestilences. There were a great number of wars and great unsettled conditions in the Roman Empire as well as in Israel. There was even a war that led to the end of the Jewish age, and that war lasted for three and a half years before Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D. So there were certainly all those things that Jesus said.

He did say in verse 14, however, And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come. Now, this statement that the gospel will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come can be understood two ways. You might think it could only be understood one way, but actually there are two possibilities here.

One is that we take it quite in its literal sense, that every nation on the planet, and we might even go so far as to perhaps extrapolate, maybe that every person in every nation will have a chance to hear the gospel before Jesus comes back at the end of the world. It is on the basis of this understanding of this verse that many look to the modern missions movement as perhaps one of those things that will hasten the coming of the Lord. Because Jesus said that the end cannot come until the gospel has been preached to every nation, all the world as a witness to all nations.

And so that is happening now, of course, more than at any time in recent history previously. And some would say, well, see, we're very close to getting to the point where the gospel has been preached to all nations, and then the end can come. This is assuming that it means the end of the world or the end of the present order when Jesus comes back.

Now, it is possible that that's exactly what Jesus means. I will not rule this out. However, his discourse here is largely not about the end of the world or the second coming.

It is about 70 A.D., about the destruction of Jerusalem. The context makes that fairly clear when we see what Jesus predicted and what they asked him about. But if he is talking about the end of Jerusalem when he says the end will come, if he is talking about 70 A.D., then how would we understand this when he says this gospel will be preached to all the world as a witness to all nations? Certainly, we do not believe, do we, that the gospel reached all nations before 70 A.D.? Well, no, of course, we don't believe that all the nations as we know them were preached to.

Even to this day, there are nations that have not yet been preached to. And therefore, it cannot be that before 70 A.D., all nations had heard the gospel. But we need to take into consideration here the regular use in the Scripture of hyperbole.

Now, I'm not trying to water anything down because I'd be just as glad to take this verse

completely literally. But we have to compare Scripture with Scripture before we make our decision. And in Colossians chapter 1 and verse 6, Paul was, of course, writing prior to 70 A.D. His death probably occurred in 67 A.D. So all of Paul's epistles were written before 70 A.D. And in Colossians 1, 6, Paul said, well, let's start at verse 5. He says, the truth of the gospel, which has come to you as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth.

Now, notice Paul spoke of the gospel. He says it has come to the Colossians as it has also in all the world. Now, all the world must mean the whole Roman world, of course.

But even then, Paul knew of places that had not yet heard the gospel. Paul, for example, at this very time was hoping to go to Spain and preach the gospel there because it had not reached there. Paul knew that Spain had not heard the gospel.

He probably knew that Great Britain had not heard the gospel yet. There were probably areas in the Far East like China and India that had not heard the gospel yet. And therefore, when Paul said the gospel has come into all the world, he did not mean that in an absolute literal sense.

Likewise, later in Colossians 1, in verse 23, consider this, Colossians 1, 23, Paul said, If indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which, that is the gospel, was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister. Now, notice he's speaking the past tense, the gospel which was preached to every creature under heaven. Now, has the gospel been preached to every creature under heaven? Well, not literally, apparently, but if Paul uses that kind of hyperbole and does so naturally without expecting anyone to have any problem understanding him, then could Jesus not have used the exact same hyperbole or essentially the same hyperbole when he said this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world? Paul said the gospel had been preached in all the world.

As a witness to all nations, Paul said it had been preached to every creature, not only all nations, but to every creature. This kind of language is extremely common in the New Testament. It's the way the Jews spoke.

They often used what we would call hyperbole. And we have, for example, in Acts chapter 2, in verse 5, speaking of the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit fell upon the believers in the upper room, in Acts 2, 5, it says, Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and they all heard him in their own language.

Now, is it so that there were Jews in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven? Were there Jews there from China? Were there Jews there from North America? Were there

Jews there from Australia? Of course not. In fact, the Jews had not even ever reached those countries in all likelihood. They had not been scattered that far.

Every nation under heaven, therefore, must be restricted to those nations that had Jews living in them. And there were Jews from all those nations there in Jerusalem. That is to say there was a widespread international migration of Jews to Jerusalem at this time.

But the way it's worded in the language of Scripture is devout men from every nation under heaven. That's very similar to Paul saying the gospel has been preached to every creature under heaven, not literally. But, I mean, that's the problem.

People who insist that the Bible must be taken literally all the time, they're going to run into problems because the Bible does not always use literal language. The Bible uses figures of speech. The way to understand the Bible is the way the writers intended it to be understood, and the way the Jewish people and the early Christians would have understood it.

Now, if the Bible says that those Jews who came to Jerusalem were from every nation under heaven, if Paul said that the gospel had in his day been preached to every creature under heaven, and that the gospel in his day had reached all the world, then would it be possible that Jesus would say this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations, and then will the end come, and mean something very similar to what Paul meant? Now, Paul was saying this had happened in his own day. That was before 70 A.D. And, therefore, Jesus' comment could refer to that as well. That before the end of Jerusalem comes in 70 A.D., the gospel will be preached to all nations.

But, by all nations, he means that no more literally than Paul meant it when he said every creature under heaven, or when he said all the world, or when Luke in Acts 2 said every nation under heaven. This was not a literal statement. This was hyperbole.

Now, that does not in any way discredit the Bible. It simply instructs us how to understand the language that the Bible writers used. We might as well acquaint ourselves with it.

Writers of different cultures express themselves different ways, and if we just stubbornly insist that they have to express themselves the way we express ourselves, we can be stubborn and provincial if we want to, but we will not understand what was being said. And, therefore, while it is possible that Jesus' statement about the gospel being preached to all nations before the end comes could be literal, it could be that he's referring to the end of the world as we know it, and that before that happens, literally every nation in the world will be preached to. I would like to believe that is the case.

I have to, for the sake of loyalty to Scripture, say that there's a possibility that Jesus is

using the same hyperbole that Paul uses and that Luke uses and that other biblical writers use. And if he is, then he could here be referring to the end of Jerusalem, the very thing the disciples asked about and said, now before that happens, this gospel is going to go out to the Gentiles all over the place. Then in verse 15, he says something that is so widely misunderstood that I'm sure we will have to spend a good while looking at it.

In Matthew 24, 15, Jesus said, Therefore, when you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place, whoever reads, let him understand. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house.

And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days. And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath.

For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved. But for the elect's sake, those days will be shortened.

Now, let's stop there for a moment, because here we have encountered two expressions very commonly discussed in discussions about the end times. One of those is the expression, the abomination of desolation, which is mentioned here in verse 15. The other is, in verse 21, the reference to the great tribulation.

Now, Christians, by the way, of a certain ilk, are frequently referring to the tribulation and also to the great tribulation, and by that they are referring to, in their minds, a period of time at the end of the world. Just before Jesus comes back, a very common belief among Christians today is the dispensational view that there will be a seven-year period of tribulation just prior to the second coming. This seven years will fill up the space between the rapture of the church and the coming of Christ in judgment with His angels.

They believe, therefore, the coming of Christ is in two stages, where He comes for the saints in the rapture and comes with His saints in the judgment of the last day. But in between these two phases, there is a seven-year gap or tribulation period. The first half of this seven years, that is, the first three and a half years, is thought to simply be called tribulation.

The second half, the second three and a half years, is often referred to as the great tribulation. Now, the view that this is so, is so widespread that most Christians have never questioned whether the Bible teaches this at all. I taught it for many years myself, and I remember very well, many years ago, probably, I'd imagine, 20 years ago, a friend of mine who also taught this view and I were talking on the beach.

He said, Steve, where in the Bible do we actually find a reference to a seven-year tribulation? And at that time, I had not really thought it through that much. And I thought and thought and thought, and since then, I searched the Scripture diligently, and the answer is, it doesn't. There's no place in the Bible that mentions a seven-year tribulation.

There is, of course, a tendency of some to apply the tribulation, so-called, to the 70th week of Daniel. Daniel had a prophecy in Daniel 9, 24 through 27, about 70 weeks, each week represented by seven years. And there is the belief of some that the 70th week of Daniel has not yet happened.

This is certainly not very agreeable with what Daniel said, but it is what many Christians say today, that the 70th week is still future and it is identified with the tribulation. Well, since each of the weeks of Daniel are believed to be seven years long, the 70th week must also be seven years long. And if that is so, then if it is identified with the tribulation, then the tribulation is seven years long.

But everything about this reasoning is open to question. There's no reason in the world to refer to the 70th week of Daniel as the tribulation. Certainly, the Bible doesn't identify it as such.

Nowhere is that so identified. And nor is there any reason to believe the 70th week of Daniel is still future, any more than the 69th or the 68th or 67th week of Daniel is still future. There is no indication in Daniel that the 70th week would be still future this far out in history.

As a matter of fact, all 70 weeks were to run their course within about 490 years of the time that our exercise gave the order to restore and rebuild Jerusalem. And that's been a long time ago now. So the whole idea that the tribulation is seven years long, based on its identification with the 70th week of Daniel, is, to my mind, extremely irresponsible use of Scripture.

I used to use it, but I became more responsible when I got more fear of God in me about the way I handled the Word of God as I got older. The only other evidence that there'd be a seven-year tribulation is that in Revelation, there are five times when there is mention of a period of time about three and a half years. Sometimes it's called 1,260 days.

Sometimes it's called 42 months. Sometimes it's called times and the dividing of a time. But in every case, the period of time spoken of seems to be the equivalent of three and a half years.

Now, there are five references to this three and a half years. For some reason, some teachers have decided that there are two such periods, probably because they assume that based on their association of the 70th week of Daniel and times. And when they do that, they then say, well, these three and a half years, there must be two of them.

Now, the book of Revelation doesn't say there are two such periods. The book of Revelation always speaks of three and a half years. It never speaks of seven years.

And certainly the impression I have from reading Revelation without the glasses that were fitted for me by my earlier teachers is that the three and a half years in Revelation is always the same period of time every time it's mentioned. Well, there's perhaps other ways to see that. But let me just say there is, apart from these evidences, there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that there will be a seven-year tribulation in the future.

Now, where does the term great tribulation come from? It comes from Matthew 24, 21. Jesus said, for then there will be great tribulation. The only other place that speaks of this great tribulation is in Revelation 7, 14, which says, these are they who have come up out of the great tribulation, probably referring to the same one that Jesus mentioned, the great tribulation.

But when is this great tribulation? When was it or will it be? I'm going to suggest to you that it's not something that's seven years long and it's not something that will be looked forward to in our time. Jesus actually said, this generation, meaning the generation in which he was living, will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled. And therefore, I believe that the great tribulation of which he spoke occurred in his lifetime.

Or not his lifetime, because he died almost immediately after this, but his disciples' lifetime. Now, he also said that this would be something that his disciples, to whom he was speaking, would see. Because in verse 23 he says, then if anyone says to you, look here is the Christ, or there, then do not believe it.

Now, Jesus indicated that his disciples, the four men he was speaking to, would be able to respond to this crisis. And that they would see at that time when this great tribulation occurred, they would see people claiming to be the Christ, and he says, don't you believe it, don't you follow them. Likewise, the abomination of desolation, he said they would see that too.

In Matthew 24, 15 he says, therefore when you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, the reference is also from the 70 weeks in Daniel 9, verse 26 I think it is, mentions the abomination of desolation. It says on the wing of abomination shall come one that makes desolate. It's a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in Daniel, and that's what it is here too.

Now, how do I know that? Well, because I have other gospels to consult, like the gospel of Luke. In Luke 21, we can follow this discourse thought for thought. Just put Matthew 24 side by side with Luke 21, and go verse by verse, thought for thought, you will see the discourse progressing.

And at this particular point, where Matthew's gospel has, when you see the abomination

of desolation, Luke's gospel at the equivalent point says, when you see Jerusalem encompassed by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Did the disciples live to see that? They certainly did. It happened in that generation.

In other words, Luke tells us that the abomination of desolation, which is mentioned in Matthew, is Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, which happened in 70 AD. So the tribulation that occurred at that time happened within the lifetime of the disciples. And one needs only to read Josephus to realize that it is no hyperbole to say there's no greater tribulation before or after that.

I mean, one does not have to appeal to hyperbole to make that a true statement. The fact is that the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet is mentioned in Daniel chapter 9, in a passage about the people of the prince who would come, who will destroy the city and the sanctuary. That's the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

And it says, on the wings of abomination shall be one that makes desolate. That is an abomination that makes desolate, an abomination of desolation. This in Daniel 9 is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem after the Messiah was crucified.

That would be 70 AD. Now, Daniel the prophet used the term abomination of desolation and Jesus used that term. However, the writer Matthew says, whoever reads, let him understand.

Mark does the same thing. He quotes the actual words of Jesus, the abomination of desolation. Then he says, whoever reads, let him understand.

Luke, however, is writing to somebody who's not very familiar with the Jewish idioms, nor with Daniel the prophet. So instead of quoting the actual words of Jesus, abomination of desolation, and then saying in parentheses, if you read this, I hope you understand. Luke assumed his reader would not understand.

And so he simply paraphrased it and said, when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. That is the abomination that's going to cause its desolation. And so anyone can tell, if he wants to prove it to himself, just take Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, and one can easily prove to himself that the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet, by the way, you can look at it in Daniel also, Daniel chapter 9, verses 26 and 27, that that abomination of desolation is Jerusalem being surrounded by armies in 70 A.D. In Daniel, it's right after the Messiah has been crucified, we read of the judgment that comes on Jerusalem.

They kill the Messiah, he's cut off in Daniel chapter 9, and then we read of the people of the prince that shall come, the Romans, come and destroy the city, that's Jerusalem, and the sanctuary, that's the temple. And it's in that context that we read of the abomination



of desolation, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Why anyone misses this, you might wonder, how could they miss something so obvious? There are reasons, and we'll talk about them more, perhaps next time. At this point, we're out of time.

Do your own study, don't believe anything you're told by me or anyone else, just read the scriptures and believe that. You'll find it's very enlightening, at times, the light that the scriptures shed on the commentaries.