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Matthew 24:29 - 24:31 (Part 1)



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this study, Steve Gregg continues his analysis of the Olivet Discourse delivered by Jesus in Matthew 24. Gregg notes that the destruction of the Jewish temple system in 70 A.D., led by the Roman general Titus and the subsequent rebuilding, are well-documented historical events that align with Jesus' prophecies. He further examines the context and timing of the events mentioned in the passage, such as the mourning of all tribes on earth, and interprets them as a societal end and coming judgment of God, rather than the literal end of the world.

Transcript

Today we're going to be continuing our study in the Olivet Discourse, which is that discourse Jesus gave in Matthew 24. And I've been taking an approach that is not really the most popular approach today to this discourse. In these days, the most common approach to this discourse is to see the references that Jesus makes to wars and rumors of wars, to famines and pestilences and earthquakes in diverse places, and all of these things that Jesus speaks of, the tendency is to see them as related to the end times, to the times just prior to the second coming of Jesus, perhaps to a seven-year tribulation period.

However, I don't believe that that is the best way to understand them in the context, and it might surprise you to learn that in the ancient, well, not even the very ancient past, but just a few centuries ago, biblical commentators often understood this very differently. For example, Eusebius, who was the earliest church historian other than Luke in the Book of Acts, who wrote a church history called Ecclesiastical History in the year 325 A.D., Eusebius applied all of this discourse to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and so did most scholars, it would seem, for much of church history. It was only in the past century or so that it became more popular to apply it to the end of the world.

Now, what I've been suggesting to you is that regardless of what's been the most popular view, the context itself suggests that Jesus is describing the end of the Jewish order. He is describing the end of the age that is of the Jewish age. It came to an end with the destruction of the Jewish temple system in 70 A.D., when the Romans under

Titus, the general, came and destroyed Jerusalem's temple, and it has never been rebuilt.

The religious order of Judaism came to an end at that time, and that was a God-ordained order. It was not a minor transition. It was something that God had done and blessed and ordained for 1,400 years.

Now it came to an end, because God had now brought in a new order in the Messiah, who is Jesus Christ and His kingdom. Now, that being so, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple in the lifetime of some of His disciples. He said that not one stone would be left standing on another, and they asked Him, when will these things be? And He answered, well, this generation will not pass before these things are fulfilled.

So He described a destruction of Jerusalem that would occur within that generation. It did. He uttered the words in 30 A.D. The destruction came in 70 A.D., just 40 years later, within that generation.

And so all through this treatment of this passage, I've been trying to show you that everything that Jesus said would happen, did happen, before 70 A.D. The historians of the period have documented all of this. However, we now come to a portion that is much more difficult for modern readers to apply to 70 A.D. than those passages we've read up to this point. We're looking at Matthew 24, verses 29 through 31.

Jesus said, immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from the heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

And he will send his angels with the great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. Now, this passage certainly lends itself to an interpretation that would apply it to the second coming of Jesus. There is reference to the sign of the Son of Man appearing in heaven.

There is reference to the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven. There is reference to him sending his angels to gather his elect. There are evidences of a global event here in view, because he says that all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of it.

In fact, it even sounds as if it's a cosmic event, not just global, because it says the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken. So this sounds much more cataclysmic, much more global, much more cosmic than something that occurred back in 70 A.D. with the destruction of Jerusalem. And it has language in it that certainly turns our imaginations toward a picture of the second coming of Jesus.

But the question we need to consider is, is this what Jesus was talking about? I want to go on record, in case you have not heard me say so before, I do believe in the future second coming of Christ. Don't anyone mistake me on that point, please. I do anticipate in the future the second coming of Jesus, just like you do.

However, I do not believe these verses are talking about that event. Now, how could I say such a thing in view of such abundant evidence that that is what it's talking about? Well, let me talk to you about it, if I could. The context, the timing of these events is given to us in verse 29.

Jesus said, immediately after the tribulation of those days. So, the events he's talking about here happen immediately after the tribulation of those days. Now, what days are we talking about here? What are those days? Well, back in verse 19, Jesus said, Woe to those who are pregnant and those who are nursing babies in those days.

In verse 22, he says, Unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved. But for the elect's sake, those days will be shortened. And right in the middle of that, he says in verse 21, For there will be great tribulation.

So, we've got those days mentioned three times in verses 19 and 22, and in the midst of it, in verse 21, a mention of tribulation. So, in verse 29, Jesus says, Immediately after the tribulation of those days, he can hardly be speaking of some other tribulation or some other days than those of which he has just spoken using the same language. So, what is the tribulation of those days? Well, we don't have time to go over this again.

I did last time or the time before, but by comparison, verse by verse comparison between this passage in Matthew 24 and its parallel in Luke 21, it becomes clear that the tribulation of those days was when the Roman armies came against Jerusalem, when they leveled it to the ground, but before they did that, they besieged the city and starved out the population so that the people were eating each other and killing each other and so forth. It was a horrible time. Josephus describes it in great and grueling detail in his history of the period he was there.

And so, that was 70 A.D., was the tribulation of those days, according to the parallel passages in Luke 21, verse 20 and following. Now, if that's true, then these events of which we read in verses 29 and following must happen immediately after that, immediately after the tribulation of those days, and that would place it right at 70 A.D., the end of that siege. Now, what's supposed to happen immediately after the tribulation of those days? Several things.

One thing, it says, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Now, if this is true and literal, now that literal is a big if, if this is literal, then we're reading about nothing less than the dissolution of the universe, the stars falling, the heavens shaken, the sun

and the moon being darkened. If this is the end of the universe, then it certainly must be the end of the world and the end of the present age, and therefore the second coming of Christ would be alluded to here.

However, there is reason to question whether this is how Jesus means us to understand it. Remember, Jesus and his disciples were Jewish, and their Bible, the only Bible they knew, was the Old Testament. It may surprise some of our listeners who are unfamiliar with the Old Testament to know that the reference to the darkening of the sun and the moon and the stars is a common figure of speech in the Old Testament, and it applied not to the end of the world or the end of the universe, or certainly not to the second coming of Christ, but in the Old Testament this figure of speech was always used in association with the destruction of some great empire, some great kingdom, some great city, some great society, and the reference to darkening the sky and making the sun and the moon and the stars dark overhead and so forth, these expressions were probably comparable to our modern expression that I'm going to put your lights out.

It means essentially I'm going to kill you, or I'm going to knock you out, I'm going to do something that is so disastrous that you'll be seeing stars of another kind. Now, when God tells a society that the sun and moon and stars are going to be darkened over them, that means, of course, that that society is coming to an end. It may not be the end of the world for the world at large, but it's the end of the world for that society that is coming under that judgment from God.

There are many examples of this in the Bible. For example, in Isaiah chapter 13 and verse 10, it says, For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light. The sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine.

Okay, here we have reference to the sun and the stars and the moon all being darkened. What is the event being predicted? Well, it's the destruction of Babylon, which occurred in 538 B.C. You see, it begins in verse 1, The burden against Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw. Now, this isn't some future Babylon that's going to be destroyed in the future.

This is ancient Babylon that was destroyed by the Medes and the Persians. How do I know that? Because it says so. In verse 17, it says, Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them.

And so this is a talk about the destruction of Babylon by the Medes. And, of course, the Persians were involved too. But the point here is, this event occurred almost 500 and something years before Christ.

And yet it says of it that the sun and the moon and stars will be darkened on this occasion. Well, for Babylon, they were. They were not objectively darkened.

They didn't come to a literal end. But it came to an end as far as Babylon was concerned. Another example of this kind of language is in Isaiah 34.

Now, Isaiah chapter 34 talks about the judgment of a number of nations. One of them is Edom. It says in Isaiah 34.5, For my sword shall be bathed in heaven, indeed it shall come down on Edom.

Later, in verse 6, it says, For the Lord has a sacrifice in Bezra and a great slaughter in the land of Edom. So here we have the destruction of the nation of Edom. Now, what is Edom? Edom is no longer.

The nation of Edom ceased to exist in the first century A.D. The last known Edomite was Herod the Great. And that means, of course, that this is not a future judgment on a nation because this nation has ceased to exist 2,000 years ago. It will never exist again.

There are no Edomites. And therefore, whatever is predicted here must have already occurred hundreds or thousands of years ago now. And yet, in connection with this destruction of Edom, God makes these comments.

In Isaiah 34.4, He says, That means the stars shall be dissolved. And the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll. All their hosts, the stars, shall fall down, as the leaf falls from the vine and the fruit falling from a fig tree.

So here we have a description of the falling stars and the rolling up of the heavens like a scroll. That's the end of the heavens. That's the end of the universe.

But not really. That's just the end of the universe for Edom. That's the end of their career.

They are finished. And for them, it might as well be that the heavens were rolled up and the stars had fallen and the universe had burned out. Because they are burned out.

It's the end of their career. And that is the figurative language of the prophets, frequently used. How frequently? Well, we find it again used of Egypt.

If you'll turn over to Ezekiel 32, you'll find that the same language applies to the judgment of Egypt. And this prophecy is addressed to the pharaoh, the king of Egypt. And it says to him in Ezekiel 32, verses 7 and 8, When I put out your light, I will cover the heavens and make its stars dark.

I will cover the sun with a cloud and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of the heaven will I make dark over you and bring darkness upon your land, says the Lord God. So there we have it again.

We've had it in connection with Babylon, in connection with Edom, and connection with Egypt. And this judgment on Egypt occurred when Babylon conquered Egypt. Again,

ancient history.

These were not literal darkenings of the sky. It is a poetic device used by the prophets frequently. It's what we could call apocalyptic imagery.

The end of the world for one great nation is spoken of as if it's the end of the literal universe. In Jeremiah chapter 4, we have the same thing said about Jerusalem. Jerusalem was destroyed twice in history.

It was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and then again by the Romans in 70 A.D. And on the first occasion, the first time Jerusalem was to be destroyed by the Babylonians, Jeremiah predicted it. And one of the things he said in predicting this destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, which occurred in 586 B.C., he said, Now notice, with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, God says, I'm going to make the heavens above black. But what happened to the sun, moon, and stars? Apparently they're darkened because the heavens are black overhead.

So we see in connection with many great nations or cities that seem to have very long histories and very important histories, when they fell, when they were destroyed, it was likened to the end of the universe itself. Perhaps because these cities were considered to be so permanent that it was as if they were as permanent as the heavenly bodies and that the end of them would be as surprising or as cataclysmic as if the sun, moon, and stars themselves ceased to shine. It's not clear exactly why the imagery is used the way it is, but there's no question that it is used and that it was commonly used by the prophets.

Now, Jesus was a Jewish prophet as well as being the Messiah of the whole world. But when he was predicting the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred in 70 A.D., he used language that was not different from the way Jeremiah described it. When he described the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., the only difference between these two historic events is in 586 it was the Babylonians who destroyed Jerusalem.

In 70 it was the Romans. The events were otherwise quite similar to each other. And Jeremiah had spoken of that event in his day as God darkening the sky over them.

Jesus speaks of it this way, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light. That's like these other passages in the Old Testament. And then he says the stars will fall from the heavens and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

That agrees with what God said about the destruction of Edom back in Isaiah 34. The stars were shaken and fallen and so forth. This is apocalyptic imagery.

This is not literal. It's never used literally in the Old Testament. And there's no reason to believe that Jesus started a new fad of using this kind of language literally, which the prophets had always used figuratively.

Therefore, when Jesus says immediately after the tribulation of those days, that is the Jewish war and the siege of Jerusalem, when he talks about the lights being darkened over Jerusalem, the sun, moon, and stars, he is speaking just as the other prophets did of the destruction of the city. This destruction occurred in 70 AD. Now what about the verse 30 then? Matthew 24, 30.

How is it to be understood? Jesus said, then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn. And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

What's that mean? It sounds like the second coming of Christ to me. However, is it? Well, let's see. What does it mean they will see the sign, or he says the sign of the Son of Man in heaven will appear? There is a sign that would appear that confirmed that the Son of Man was in heaven.

This sign no doubt occurred on earth, since men cannot usually go up into heaven to see what signs may be taking place there. This is a sign, a visible sign, visible to men, that confirmed that the Son of Man is in heaven. We have to remember that Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem at the behest of the Jewish leaders.

Until they were punished in 70 AD, there was still an unsettled score between the king of kings and those who killed him. And Jesus predicted that great judgment would come upon them in their generation. When Jesus ascended to heaven, he then was ruling and has been ruling at the right hand of God.

But that's an invisible reality. Very few people have seen that. However, one of the signs that he has been so elevated and has been so vindicated and is in heaven at the right hand of his Father and is in power now is the fact that he was able to send the Roman armies against those who killed him and vindicate his own name and his own blood against those murderers.

And so some have felt that the very destruction of Jerusalem itself was a sign, a sign on earth that the Son of Man was in heaven. And when Jesus said, Then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven, it is thought to mean that the very destruction of Jerusalem was the sign on earth that the Son of Man was now reigning in heaven and had taken power and had vindicated himself against those who had murdered him. That is one way to understand it.

There's another interesting possibility, and that is to consult Josephus, the historian of the period. Josephus, you know, was an eyewitness of this war. He was a contemporary and actually a general in the war.

And so he later wrote a history of it as an eyewitness and as one who got other accounts from eyewitnesses. And one of the things that Josephus reported was that during the

Jewish war, there was a time when the Jews looked up in the clouds overhead and they saw in the clouds, as Josephus put it, soldiers in armor running about in the clouds. Now, Josephus doesn't really give an interpretation of this except that he sees it as a portent of the doom of the city.

But Christians would be perhaps inclined to see that as people were seeing the angels of God dressed for battle, as if they were about ready to be executioners of the judgment of God. You know, before Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians, Ezekiel the prophet in Ezekiel chapter 9 saw a vision of angels. He saw six of them with slaughter weapons in their hands and one with an ink horn.

And the one with the ink horn was told to go out and make a mark on the foreheads of those who sighed and cried over the abomination of Jerusalem. And those were to be the righteous and they were to be spared. And then after he did this, the six angels with slaughter weapons were sent out to slaughter everybody.

Well, this slaughter, of course, occurred not at the hands of angels but at the hands of the Babylonian armies. But in Ezekiel's vision, it was seen as a judgment from God and the angels of God were seen symbolically involved in it. Likewise, though the judgment of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. occurred by the hands of Roman armies, it was actually a judgment of God.

And that some might have seen the angels of God in heaven, in the clouds, dressed in armor as an emblem of God is sending His troops to make war against this corrupt city that had killed His son and killed the prophets before, and all the blood of them was coming upon that generation of Jews, is not unthinkable. Seeing the sign of the Son of Man in heaven could be a reference to the fact that many of them, in fact, did see, as Josephus reports, these soldiers in the clouds, no doubt angels. Now, we have some more to talk about, but we're running very rapidly out of time for this session.

Let me just take one other point here, and then we'll take the rest next time. Jesus said, all the tribes of the earth will mourn. Now, that sounds as if it's global, if all the tribes of the earth are mourning.

However, you should become aware, if you're not already, that in the Greek language, there's one word for earth and for land. It is the Greek word *ge*. In the Old Testament Hebrew, it's the same way.

One word, *eretz*, can be translated earth or land, and every time you find the word earth or land, it is this word. In other words, the translation of earth or land depends on context, not on the use of a different Greek or Hebrew word. In this case, it could as justly be translated, all the tribes of the land, meaning the land of Israel, will mourn.

And that's more likely. If he's talking about a global phenomenon, you'd expect him to

say all the nations of the earth. But he says all the tribes, and Israel has always been known as the twelve tribes.

So, he's talking about the tribes of Israel will mourn at the destruction of Jerusalem, and well, they might, because it was the end of their commonwealth and the end of their religion. We'll have to take a break here and come back next time to take the remainder of this passage and try to explain how I understand it in the context to be understood.