

OpenTheo

Matthew 24:15 - 24:22



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 24:15-22 and the Olivet Discourse in his talk. He notes that while Luke paraphrases Jesus' words about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the allusion to Daniel chapter 9 would have been understood by Jewish readers. Jesus also warns of the terrible times ahead for the people of that generation, which was confirmed by historian Josephus. Gregg reminds listeners that the language used in prophecy is often hyperbolic and should be interpreted carefully.

Transcript

For several sessions now we've been talking about this interesting discourse in Matthew 24, the Olivet Discourse, where Jesus talks about things that were future from the point of view of himself and his disciples. But he did say that they would be fulfilled within their generation. He said in verse 34, this generation will not pass away until all these things are fulfilled.

Furthermore, the things he described, he said, when you see this and when you see that, and when they say this to you, we need to remember that you, when Jesus spoke, it was not us in the 20th century. You was the people he was talking to. And who were they? Four men.

According to Mark chapter 13, this was a private discussion between Jesus and four men, Peter, James, John, and Andrew. And when he said you, he meant them. All right? So to suggest he meant anything else is to refuse to take the scripture literally.

If we take it literally, we know that you means the people he was talking to, as it always means. Whenever you use the word you, it means the person you're talking to. Now, last time, I probably surprised many of our listeners by identifying the abomination of desolation and the great tribulation in Matthew 24 with the events of 70 AD, the destruction of Jerusalem then.

Now, this is a new thought for many people. However, it's the most natural thing to expect when we realize that the disciples asked Jesus, after he described the fact or predicted the fact that Jerusalem would be destroyed, they said, when will these things

be and what sign will there be that these things are about to take place? Now, two questions. These things, the destruction of Jerusalem, when not one stone be left on another, what will be the sign that that's about to take place and when will it be? Well, as far as when will it be, he said, within this generation.

As far as what sign there would be that it's about to take place, he answers that in verse 15. In Matthew, it says, therefore, when you see the abomination of desolation, however, in Luke 21, in the parallel verse 20, it says, when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, know that its desolation is near. Now, they'd asked, what sign will there be that this destruction of Jerusalem will be near, is about to take place, and he said, well, here it is.

When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, you know it's near. That's the sign that it's about to take place. Now, as I pointed out last time, Luke paraphrases for us what Jesus said, and Matthew and Mark give us his exact words, because in Matthew and Mark, in both places, it has Jesus saying, therefore, when you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place, whoever reads, let him understand.

Yes, both Matthew and Mark add that statement, whoever reads, let him understand. Now, apparently, it would appear that Matthew and Mark were quoting Jesus exactly. He said, when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place, and then the writers, Matthew and Mark, both interject this parenthesis, whoever reads, let him understand, because they wanted to make sure that the reader would recognize this is hard to understand, and they ought to put out some effort to understand it.

Luke has no confidence in the ability of his reader, Theophilus, a Roman, to understand this Hebrew allusion to Daniel chapter 9. And so, instead of saying Jesus' exact words and then exhorting the reader to understand what he means, Luke simply makes it easy and says, he paraphrases it, when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies. Now, I would urge any of my listeners who find this difficult to do the work yourself. Don't just reject it and don't just accept it, what I'm saying.

Go to the Bible, put Matthew 24 right next to Mark 13 and right next to Luke 21, and go through it thought for thought, you'll find that what I'm saying is true. The thoughts leading up to this verse and the thoughts following it prove that when Luke 21, 20 says, when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, it's the same statement as when Mark and Matthew say, when you see the abomination of desolation. Well, certainly some of his disciples did see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, and therefore, we have every reason to believe that it was fulfilled, what he said.

Now, in Daniel also, chapter 9, we find that it's a reference to the Romans coming and destroying Jerusalem. There can be no reasonable doubt to this, to someone who simply

takes the passage for what it says. Now, many people impose on Daniel 9 things that aren't there.

But if we just look at it, we see, for example, in Daniel 9, 26 and 27, after 62 weeks, the Messiah shall be cut off, but not for himself. That's a reference to the death of the Messiah. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city, that's Jerusalem, and the sanctuary, that's the temple.

And the end of it shall be with a flood, that's a dispersion in all likelihood or an invasion. And he says, until the end of the war, desolations are determined. Now, what war? Well, the war when the Romans come to destroy Jerusalem.

That's the only thing under consideration here. And it says, then he, meaning the Messiah, will confirm a covenant with many for one week, but in the middle of the week, he, that is, after three and a half years, he will bring to an end the sacrifices and offerings. What happened? Jesus died after three and a half years of ministry, and his death brought an end to the sacrifices and offerings.

And it says, and on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate. Now, that is, there will be an abomination that makes desolate, an abomination of desolation, even until the consummation which is determined is poured out on the desolate. Well, who is the desolate? The desolate is Jerusalem.

Do you remember in Matthew 23, Jesus said to them, your house is left to you desolate? And he walked out. The desolate is the temple in Jerusalem. It is desolate, and there's going to be something poured out on that desolate one, and that is judgment in 70 A.D. And on the wing of the many abominations there, there shall be one abomination that makes desolate.

What is that? It is Jerusalem invaded by pagans with their gods and their banners and all that stuff. That's an abomination to the Jews, but it would come, and it would make that city desolate because it was under the judgment of God. Now, Jesus continues there and says, then let those who are in Judea, we're in Matthew 24, 16 now, and 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 the house, and let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and those who are with nursing babies in those days, and pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath, for then will be great tribulation such as 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, several things here. He says, then when you see this happen, you who are in Judea

flee to the mountains. Make haste of it.

Don't even go back to your house to get stuff. Just go for it while you can, is what he's saying. Now, this flight of the believers in Judea to the mountains took place in 70 A.D. We know this because an early Christian historian named Eusebius wrote an early church history.

In fact, it's the earliest church history ever written besides the book of Acts, and it is still available. It is called Ecclesiastical History by Eusebius. In that book by Eusebius, he records how that the Christians in Jerusalem just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem actually fled to the mountains, as Jesus said to do.

I am referring, of course, to the words of Josephus in his Ecclesiastical History in Chapter 5, and I'll read directly from what he says. Did I say Josephus? Eusebius, of course, is who I'm referring to. Eusebius writes this, quote, The whole body, however, of the church at Jerusalem, having been commanded by a divine revelation, given to men of approved piety there before the war, removed from the city, and dwelt at a certain town beyond the Jordan called Pella.

And then further down, Eusebius says this, The abomination of desolation, according to the prophetic declaration, stood in the very temple of God, so celebrated of old, but which now was approaching its total downfall and final destruction by fire. All this, I say, anyone that wishes may see accurately stated in the history written by Josephus, unquote. Now, this is written about 70 A.D. This is talking about the last siege of the Jews after Christ in 70 A.D. And this is an early church history.

This was written in 325 A.D. And you notice that Eusebius refers to the destruction of Jerusalem as the abomination of desolation. He says if anyone doubts this, they can refer to Josephus' history. And he says that before this war took Jerusalem out, the Christians in Jerusalem were warned and fled and got away into the wilderness, into a city beyond, or a town beyond the Jordan, into the mountains.

And that's what Jesus told them to do. You see, what we're reading here in Matthew 24 happened. It's not future.

It's already happened. He said, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. And in verse 19 of Matthew 24, Jesus said, But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are with nursing babies in those days, and pray that your flight may not be in winter on the Sabbath.

Now, several things here. Woe to those who are pregnant and nursing mothers in those days. I've heard many people today say, well, you know, I don't want to have children because, I mean, the horrible things that are coming on the earth.

We don't want our children to be caught in all that. And they're referring to this. Jesus

said, woe unto those who have children in those days, as if having children is not a blessing.

Well, it isn't a blessing for the Jewish women in Jerusalem at the time that God judged it. And that's what he is referring to. As a matter of fact, that's not the only time he warned the Jewish women about that very thing.

If one wants to look over at the 23rd chapter of Luke, we find that Jesus, after he was condemned to die, we read these verses. In Luke 23, verse 27, it says, A great multitude of the people followed him, this is when he's carrying his cross out of Jerusalem to be crucified, and women who also mourned and lamented him. But Jesus turning to them said, Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but notice this, weep for yourselves and for your children.

For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed children. Then they will begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us and to the hills, cover us. For if they do these things in a green wood, what will be done in a dry? Jesus said.

Now notice this. Jesus said that these women and their children who were weeping for him had something to mourn for themselves about, not for him. Now why? Because these women and their children were in Jerusalem at the time of the siege, and it was a horrendous thing.

Woe unto those who are nursing mothers, those who have babies who are pregnant in those days. What a horrible time that was. One needs only read Josephus to realize how horrible it was.

When Jesus says, if they do these things to a green tree, what will they do to a dry tree? What he means is the Romans were at this time killing Jesus. A green tree, that is a living tree, a fruitful tree, but a dried old tree like Jerusalem, what are they going to do to it? If they do this to someone who is valuable and useful like Jesus, what will they do to a dead old tree like Jerusalem? And who are they? The Romans, the same people that did that to the green tree, Jesus did it to Jerusalem 40 years later. It was in that context that Jesus warned the women, Weep for yourselves and your children.

The time will come when you'll say, Blessed are the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never gave suck. The reason here is because the women in Jerusalem at the time of its siege were starving to death. In fact, according to Josephus, some of them even ate their babies because of the conditions.

That's a horrible time to be living. He's not talking about our times. He's talking about something that happened in that generation.

It affected those women and their children. And Jesus said it would happen in that

generation. So that's what he's referring to there.

Now, when he said, Pray that your flight may not be in the winter or on the Sabbath, this reference to the Sabbath has really encouraged a lot of people who are Sabbath keepers and say that Christians ought to keep the Sabbath because they say, Well, you see, why would Jesus say, Pray that your flight would not be on the Sabbath, if Christians did not have to consider the Sabbath? After all, he's talking to Christians. He's talking to his disciples. And he's talking about an event that would happen, you know, after Pentecost.

So they're not under the law, but they still obviously are concerned about the Sabbath. Pray that your flight will not be on the Sabbath. Well, first of all, I don't agree with the conclusions about this because if he means, Pray that your flight be not on the Sabbath so that you don't have to violate the Sabbath laws, then it doesn't make sense.

There were no Sabbath laws against flight. Now, it's true the Jews had a tradition. The rabbis had a tradition about a Sabbath day's journey that you couldn't go more than one mile on the Sabbath.

But that was a tradition of the elders. That wasn't in the law. Jesus would never expect his disciples to have to follow the Jewish traditions on that.

Jesus was continually violating the Sabbath traditions of the rabbis, and he didn't mind that his disciples did the same thing. So if he was referring to the Sabbath day's journey and the restrictions of the Sabbath on travel, it wouldn't make sense at all because there was no such restriction in the law of Moses. That was a human tradition that Jesus had no respect for.

The reason that Jesus said, Pray that your flight will not be on the Sabbath is the same reason he said, Pray that your flight will not be in winter. There's no law against flight in the winter. It's just inconvenient.

The Sabbath in Jerusalem would be a terrible time to try to make a flight. For one thing, the gates of the city would be closed. You'd have a hard time getting out.

Secondly, you couldn't buy provisions because no one was selling on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was not a normal day, and in a situation where you wanted to make a journey and you find that the gates of the city are shut and that you can't buy provisions, that's a very inconvenient time to make flight. Just like winter in its own way is inconvenient.

Jesus is not saying, Pray that you are not forced to make a flight on a day that would cause you to violate your Sabbath obligations because there are no Sabbath obligations for the believers. What he's saying is the Sabbath would be a very inconvenient time for this to happen, as would winter. Pray that it won't be in winter or in the Sabbath because of the inconvenience of it, because of the obstacles that presents to you and prevents you from making the flight.

And that is what he's referring to there. He's not referring to any obligation of the Christians to keep the Sabbath law. Now, in verse 21, very important.

For then will be great tribulation such as 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, there are many who believe this is talking about a future great tribulation, but Jesus said, No, then will be great tribulation. He's talking about the period of 70 A.D. He's already referred to the time when Jerusalem was surrounded by armies.

It was in 70 A.D. When the believers fled from Jerusalem, that happened. And he says at that time, there will be great tribulation. There was.

I mean, Josephus wrote a whole book about it. Josephus was a witness of that tribulation. He was in it.

He was a Jewish commander fighting against the Romans. Then he defected and became a translator for Titus, the Roman general, to try to persuade Jerusalem to surrender before it was destroyed. He was not a Christian.

Josephus did not know what Jesus said because he did not study Jesus. But Josephus documents for us the horrendous things that accompanied the siege and the overthrow of Jerusalem. It was as bad as any condition you'll read in any society ever in history.

Worse than most. If you read Josephus, you will have no trouble knowing why Jesus said that was a great tribulation. Such as has not been since the beginning of the world.

Until this time no nor ever shall be. Now, the reason that some people feel that this must be a future tribulation is because, one, they don't know very much about the history of the fall of Jerusalem. Shame on them.

The history has been in print for almost 2,000 years in the book of Josephus. But also they don't understand biblical language and prophetic language very well. For example, when he says since the beginning of the world until this time no nor shall ever be, it sounds like it's a unique event unlike anything else at any other time.

However, that language, to say that something is worse than anything before or anything after, is commonly used in a hyperbolic way. That is a way that's not quite literal in Scripture. It is an emphatic thing.

If someone said this is the worst day of my life, they're probably exaggerating, but they're getting their point across. They're saying it's as bad as any they could remember. It's the worst they could imagine.

But they're using a figure of speech. The worst day of my life. That's probably not really the worst day of their life.

There may be worse coming up. Who knows? But the point is, it is a hyperbole. And the Scriptures, the prophets use this all the time.

By the way, in Exodus, I believe it's in chapter 9 or 10, when it talks about the locust plague that came on Egypt. It says specifically, There never was a locust plague like that before nor afterward will there ever be. However, in the book of Joel, which happened later, another locust plague is described.

And it says again, This is a thing like never before or ever afterwards will ever be. Now, here we have two locust plagues, one in Egypt and one in Jerusalem in the days of Joel. Both of them are said to be the worst that ever was or ever will be.

Well, you can't really have that literally so. But they both are using the same hyperbole. Similarly, it is said of Solomon that he was wiser than any man before him or any man after him would ever be.

But that's the same kind of use of the figure of speech, because Jesus came along after him. He was certainly wiser than Solomon and even said so. He said, One greater than Solomon is here.

So the figure of speech used by the prophets needs to be taken into consideration. The disciples were familiar with it. We need to be familiar with the language of the prophets if we're going to understand what the prophet Jesus said.

He was more than a prophet, but he spoke the language of the prophets. In fact, there was an event very much like the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. that happened hundreds of years earlier. In 586 B.C., there was an event which was like it.

It was the destruction of Jerusalem. And Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in that case. And many of the same things happened in 586 B.C. when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, as happened in 70 A.D. when the Romans did.

And yet some of the prophets that you will read, I think Jeremiah would be one of them, that are predicting the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., they actually say God is going to do to Jerusalem something the like of which he has never done before or will never do afterward. The same kind of hyperbole. And yet he did something very much like it afterward in 70 A.D. This does not make God dishonest.

It makes God use the figures of speech that were recognized to the people of the time. And whenever you study a book that's written by someone in another culture, in another age, you are at a total disadvantage in understanding it unless you make an effort to understand what figures of speech they knew and understood. And from all the frequent

use of this figure in the Old Testament, we have every reason to believe that the disciples were acquainted with it.

And when Jesus said this time of tribulation will be greater than any before or any after it, he is using a common figure of speech. It may literally be true that 70 A.D. was as bad as any before or after or worse, but it doesn't have to be because the figure of speech is just that, a hyperbole. But if you wonder whether this is a universal thing, he said if those days were not shortened, all flesh, you know, no flesh would survive, that sounds like it's talking about a worldwide thing, doesn't it? But not necessarily.

You go through your Bible with a concordance and look up every time it says all flesh or no flesh, and as often as not, it's talking about within a geographical area. And really quite often it's a reference to Jerusalem, all flesh in Jerusalem or no flesh in Jerusalem. In fact, on the day of Pentecost, when the people in Jerusalem received the spirit poured out, it says this fulfilled the prophecy that God would pour out his spirit on all flesh.

Well, all flesh? There were only people in Jerusalem at that time. Well, all flesh there will do. You see, whenever the Bible speaks of all flesh or no flesh, you have to ask what is the geographical region being discussed? We can answer that easily by turning to the parallel passage in Luke 21.

In Luke 21, we have the same talk as we have in Matthew 24. And where Matthew 24 talks about the great tribulation, here's what Luke 21 says, beginning at verse 20. But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near.

Then let those in Judea flee to the mountains. Let those who are in the midst of her depart. Let not those who are in the country enter her.

And then he says, for these are the days of vengeance, that all things that are written may be fulfilled. But woe to those who are pregnant and those who are nursing babies in those days, for there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. The land is the land of Israel.

This people are the Jews. All flesh means in Jerusalem.