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Matthew 24:29 - 24:31 (Part 2)



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 24:29-31 and its relation to other Biblical passages. He notes that the language used in this passage is similar to that used in Jeremiah 4:27-28, where the Lord is seen as acting through armies. The phrase "this generation will not pass" is repeated twice, possibly referring to the armies of Rome. Gregg also explores the definition of the word "angels" and how it is used in the Bible, suggesting that in some instances, it may refer to human messengers. Overall, Gregg's talk provides a thoughtful analysis of the symbolism and meaning behind this often-debated passage in the Bible.

Transcript

We are looking at Matthew chapter 24, and in our last session, I read verses 29-31 and began to comment upon them, but only got through about half the material. Let me read the whole passage again. In Matthew 24, 29, Jesus said, Now, as I said last time, this passage is usually understood and taught today, as if it is discussing the second coming of Jesus Christ at the end of this present age.

However, if you had lived a couple of centuries ago, you would have had a very different understanding of it, because Christians recognized in those days that this passage should be understood in its context, both the immediate context of the passage and also the context of the whole of the Bible. Now, certainly the language of it, much of the phrases sound as if they're talking about the end of the world and the second coming of Christ, but once we familiarize ourselves both with the context of the passage and the context of the whole Bible, we find that there are figures of speech being used that the Jews commonly used and the prophets frequently used. And Jesus is speaking as a Jew to a Jewish audience, as a Jewish prophet, using the same imagery that the prophets used.

He did this on more than one occasion, and it is my conviction he's doing so here. He said that the things he's describing would occur immediately after the tribulation of those days. Well, the tribulation of those days was discussed in verses 19 through 22 of the same chapter.

We saw by comparison of these verses with their parallels in Luke 21 that this tribulation of which Jesus spoke occurred in 66 through 70 A.D., which is the Jewish war, when the Romans came and attacked, and Israel fought with the Romans until the Romans defeated them and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and took the Jews captive and slaughtered a great number. That was the tribulation of those days, and Jesus said immediately after that the sun, moon, and stars are going to be darkened. Well, that happened too, not literally necessarily, but in the sense that the prophets frequently spoke of such phenomena.

In Isaiah 13.10 and Isaiah 34.4, in Ezekiel 32 verses 7 and 8, in Jeremiah 4, 27 and 28, these passages we looked at last time showed that the idea of the sun and the moon and the stars being darkened was a common figure of speech among the prophets. It was used to speak of the fall of Babylon in 538 B.C. It was used to speak of the destruction of Edom in the late 1st century B.C. It was used to speak of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. at the hands of the Babylonians. It was used to speak of the destruction of Egypt at the hands of the Babylonians.

These were not the end of the world, but they were the end of the world for those cities, and in the poetic language of the prophets in addressing these cities and speaking of their destruction, he always says that he's going to darken the sky, the sun and moon will be darkened, the stars will fall or the stars will be darkened, similar language to this. And we saw that Jesus is simply using the same kind of language that the prophets always used to speak of the fall of a great city. Jerusalem was a great city.

It fell in 70 A.D., and Jesus describes it in the same terms as the other prophets spoke of the destruction of other cities and even of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Now, in verse 30, we saw that the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and this happened. We don't know exactly what is referred to here, though I mentioned that Josephus, the historian of the period, does mention people looking up and seeing in the clouds armies of angels dressed in armor. Certainly that could have been the sign of the Son of Man seen in heaven.

It's also possible that just the very destruction of Jerusalem itself was the sign on earth that the Son of Man was now in heaven, vindicating himself upon those who killed him. The interpretation of this phrase, the sign of the Son of Man in heaven, is somewhat difficult. It does not say they shall see the Son of Man in heaven or in the heavens.

It just says they will see a sign that indicates the Son of Man is in heaven, and this could have been, of course, the armies of Rome themselves. It could be the armies that were seen in the clouds by some of the people. We're not sure which, but there's certainly no reason to suggest that this did not occur when so many things that could be the fulfillment did occur.

When Jesus said, Then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, I pointed out at the end of

our last session that the word earth in the Greek is the same word as for land. Same thing in the Old Testament. The word Eretz in the Hebrew means earth or land.

In the New Testament, the Greek word Ge means earth or land, and the words can be translated either way depending on how the context points. In this case, the phrase is the tribes of the earth or the tribes of the land. It could be either way.

Which makes more sense? Well, if it was speaking about all the people of the earth, it's much more common in Scripture to speak of all the nations of the earth, not the tribes of the earth. It's the nations of the earth. The land of Israel, however, has always been divided into 12 tribes, and therefore to speak of the tribes of the land is a very familiar expression in Scripture and much more likely to be the meaning here.

So that when Jesus said all the tribes of the land will mourn, he means all the Israelites will mourn at the destruction of their city, Jerusalem. Now, remember back in Jeremiah 4 when we were reading of Jeremiah's prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 B.C., the language of Jeremiah was this. In Jeremiah 4, 27 and 28, thus says the Lord, The whole land shall be desolate, yet I will not make a full land.

For this shall the earth, or we could say the land, mourn, and the heavens above be black. Now notice, he says, for this the land shall mourn, and the heavens above shall be black. Doesn't that sound like the same things Jesus is talking about? The tribes of the land will mourn, and the sun, moon, and stars will be darkened? Same thing, but there's no question that Jeremiah 4 is talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. In my mind, there's very little reason to question that Jesus is talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. using the same language.

All the tribes of the land will mourn. Now, Jesus says, and they will see, this is Matthew 24 30, They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Now, that certainly sounds like it's talking about the second coming.

Does it not? That they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory? Well, we need to be cautious here before we decide. Because, once again, Jesus is a Jewish prophet speaking to Jewish listeners who are acquainted with the Jewish prophets. And if you study the Jewish prophets, you will find that they frequently spoke of God coming.

The judgment of a people, when God was judging a nation, was spoken of as if God himself was visiting. It was called a visitation from God. Or sometimes just the terms God coming were used.

Let me give you a couple of examples. In Micah chapter 1, in verse 3, the destruction of the nation of Judah is being discussed. And this happened at the hands of the

Babylonians.

But Micah says this, in Micah 1 3, Behold, the Lord is coming out of his place. He will come down and tread upon the high places of the land. Now, God didn't physically come down, of course, nor was this a reference to the second coming of Christ.

It is talking about God's judgment on Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. But notice the language of the prophet. The Lord is coming out of his place.

He will come down and tread on the high places of the land. This is not literal, but it is typical of the Hebrew prophets' manner of speaking. Look at Isaiah 19 1. You'll see that here is a prophecy about the destruction of Egypt at the hands of the Assyrians.

The Assyrians conquered Egypt, and Isaiah predicted it. And in the language of the prophets, the non-literal figurative language of the prophets, Isaiah said this, In Isaiah 19 1, behold, he says the burden against Egypt. Behold, the Lord rides on a swift cloud and will come into Egypt.

Now, the fulfillment of this was really not God himself, but the Assyrian armies that God sent came to Egypt. But notice the prophets speak of God acting through armies. In Micah, it was the Babylonian armies.

In Isaiah, it's the Assyrian armies. In each case, a nation is visited by God and judged by an armed conflict that they lose. In both cases, we read, the Lord comes.

The Lord comes down. The Lord is riding on a cloud and comes to Egypt. Notice this riding on a cloud.

Jesus said in Matthew 24 3, then they shall see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven. Well, when Isaiah said that God rode on a cloud and came to Egypt, he was not talking about a visible appearing of Christ or of God. He was talking about the Assyrian armies coming.

Could not Jesus use the exact same imagery and refer to the Roman armies coming? Let me just give you another reason to think about this and consider it. In Matthew 16 and verse 28, Matthew 16 28, Jesus said, Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. Now, some of you standing here, that's the people he was talking to, shall not taste death.

They will not die until they see what? The Son of Man coming in his kingdom. Now, certainly it sounds like Jesus is talking about a coming of the Son of Man that would occur in the lifetime of those people. We read the same thing in Matthew 24.

They shall see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven. And then he goes on to

say in verse 34, this generation will not pass until all these things are fulfilled. Isn't that essentially the same prediction as he made in Matthew 16 28? They'll see the Son of Man coming.

This generation will not pass. Some of you standing here will not taste death until? These are the same prediction repeated twice. Now, what's interesting about this is that when Jesus said, Some of you standing here will not taste death before you see the Son of Man coming.

He can't mean his second coming because that didn't happen. But he was talking about something. I dare say he may have been talking about the destruction of Jerusalem.

Some people think he was talking about Pentecost or the transfiguration. But the point here is he says they will see the Son of Man coming. He does not identify exactly what form that will take.

But it must have happened in that generation. And if Jesus is wrong on that point, he can't be the Messiah. If he is right on that point, which is, of course, the case, then we have every reason to believe that when he speaks of the same thing in Matthew 24 and says they'll see the Son of Man coming, that he's not talking about the second coming any more there than he is in the other place.

He's talking about something that would occur in that generation. And as the prophets spoke of God coming, and whenever a nation was judged, God came, as it were, heading the armies and sending them against it, the most reasonable approach to take, it would seem, is that Jesus is speaking just the same way as the prophets did. The Son of Man is coming.

That is, he came with the armies of Rome. Invisibly, he didn't come to earth. This was not what we call the second coming.

That's still future. But he came in another sense, as he came frequently places in Scripture. You know, in the book of Revelation, there are seven letters to seven churches, and six of them are told that Jesus is going to come to them.

But it does not appear that any of them refer to his literal second coming. For example, the church of Ephesus. Jesus says, if you do not repent, I will come to you.

And he says this, I will remove your candlestick from its place. So Jesus coming to them was to remove the candlestick from its place, which is basically removing their church. Well, the church of Ephesus is gone.

It's been gone for centuries. There is not even a city of Ephesus anymore where it used to be. That church has been removed.

Its candlestick has been removed. Jesus came to them, as he said he would do. Notice, his coming to them was a coming of judgment in removing them from existence.

He threatened certain other churches to do that. He says, if you don't repent, I'm going to come to you. I'm going to fight with you with the sword out of my mouth.

So the idea, and by the way, most of these churches are gone now. There's only one or two of the seven churches that even exist today. And therefore, when Jesus told the others he was going to come to them and fight with them with the sword out of his mouth, he wasn't kidding.

He did it, and they have experienced judgment. These are the figures of speech recognizable in Scripture to any who study it out carefully. And once you recognize them, you can see them used by Jesus in this place as well.

It is not as we might be inclined to think, but we need to be less provincial in our thinking. We need to stop insisting that the biblical writers who were Jewish people living thousands of years ago must express themselves in the same way that we Westerners living in the 21st century would express ourselves. It's wiser if we wish to get the message of the Bible to recognize how they spoke, to recognize their frequently used figures of speech, just as it would be good for someone trying to understand you to recognize what figures of speech you use so they don't mistake your meaning.

So also, once we discover these figures of speech frequently used in Scripture and see that they're used here the same way, we have every reason to believe he is talking still as he was earlier in the discourse about the same judgment on Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Now what about verse 31? This one may seem to throw a wrench in this whole thesis. Jesus said in verse 31, And he will send his angels, and with the great sound of a trumpet they will gather together his elect from the four winds from one end of heaven to the other. Now the sending of his angels to gather his elect certainly sounds like something comparable to the rapture, doesn't it? Doesn't it sound like the elect are being gathered out of the earth? But it doesn't say they're gathered out of the earth, it just says they're gathered from, what's he say, from the four winds.

Well the four winds refer to the north wind and the south wind, the east and the west winds, the four compass points. Gathered from the four winds means they'll be gathered from all of the earth. Where? From one end of heaven to the other.

Now one end of heaven doesn't mean from the lower regions to the higher regions. It means from one of the visible horizons to the other horizon. From the whole world, in other words.

The elect will be gathered. But where are they gathered to? And who are these angels? Now we know of angels, of course, they are supernatural beings, they are ministering

spirits. Hebrews chapter 1 verse 14 tells us that minister to those who are heirs of salvation.

We know of angel messengers that came to inform the prophets or other individuals of things, to warn them of things, as Joseph was warned to take the child Jesus to Egypt or whatever. There are angels like this in the Bible. But you know the word angels here in the Greek is angeloi.

That's the plural of angelos. And angelos is in Greek the word that simply means messenger. Now it's true that many, many times, perhaps most of the time, when this word is used in the New Testament, the word angelos means a heavenly being, a spirit sent from God, a heavenly messenger.

But the word does not at all necessitate that interpretation. A human messenger can be called an angelos also. In fact, when John was in prison and he sent two messengers to Jesus, according to the Scriptures, the word angeloi, angelos, twice, is used of them.

Two angeloi, two angels. Actually angels is a strange interpretation in that case because we realize those are men. But the point is that the Greek word can refer to human messengers as easily as to supernatural ones.

The fact that more often than not angeloi means angels in the way we usually think of angels does not take away from the fact that sometimes the word angeloi, even in Scripture, means human messengers. What if we understood it so here? What if we understood angels here in terms of human messengers instead of divine beings? In verse 31 it would then say, Then he will send his messengers with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together his elect from the four winds. That is from the whole world.

Would that phrase not be possible to understand as the going forth of the gospel through the messengers, the apostles, the evangelists, the missionaries throughout all the world, gathering God's elect out of the world, not out of it physically, but gathering them by calling them to Christ and gathering them into his body, into the church. The wording, let me put it this way, it may be different than the way you've thought of it in the past, but there's nothing about the wording that would not as naturally be understood that way as whatever way you're more accustomed to. That he would send his angels out, his messengers, after the fall of Jerusalem, the messengers go out to the Gentile world.

Do you remember the parable Jesus told of the wedding feast? The Jews were invited first, they didn't come, and it says in Matthew 22, 7, but when the king heard about it, he was furious, he sent out his armies and destroyed those murderers and burned up their city, a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. But what happened immediately after that in the parable? Verse 8, then he said to his servants, the wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy, therefore go into the highways and as many as you find, invite them to the wedding. So those servants went out into

the highways and gathered together all whom they found.

Notice, after the king burned down the city of the rebels who rejected his invitation, he sent out his servants to evangelize the whole world and to bring them to the wedding. That is basically the order of events that Jesus predicts in that parable and he predicts it here too. The destruction of Jerusalem is followed by God sending his messengers out into all the world to gather the elect from the four winds, that is a Hebraism that means from all four corners of the world.

That is the east, west, north and south, not literal corners, but from the four, we could say the four quarters of the world. Over in Luke chapter 13, Jesus spoke of this and he was speaking of the evangelization of the Gentiles and he said in Luke 13, 29, they will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south and sit down in the kingdom of God. He's talking about Gentiles coming into his church, which has been happening.

They come from the four winds, as it were, from the east and the west and the north and the south. Even Caiaphas unknowingly prophesied of this event when he was high priest in John 11 and verse 50, well I could start at verse 49, John 11, 49 says, one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, you know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people and not that the whole nation should perish. Now John comments, verse 51, now this he did not say on his own authority, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, meaning the nation of Israel.

And then John says, and not for that nation only, and it was not for Israel only, but also that he would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad. That would be the Gentiles. Not only the Jews, but Jesus would also gather together the Gentiles into one body.

That is something that has been occurring for almost 2,000 years through the evangelization efforts of the church. But notice, you see, Jesus said he'll send his messengers out with the great sound of a trumpet and they'll gather together his elect, that would be his children. From where? The north, south, east and west, from one horizon to the other, one end of heaven to the other.

And this I take to be his meaning. And that brings us, by the way, to the end of this section, Matthew 24, verses 29 through 31. Remember how when we first read it, every line in it seemed to be about the second coming of Christ? But when we take each phrase and compare the way that that phrase is used elsewhere in Scripture and we get an idea of how the figures of speech were commonly used by the Jewish prophets, then it increases the likelihood that Jesus here is speaking of the same subject that he was speaking of earlier in the discourse and that he has not changed his subject here.

He is talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Yes, he uses the prophetic language of the Old Testament. Why should he not? The disciples were Old Testament Jews and they knew this language and thus they understood him. We Westerners, until we actually study the Bible more carefully, do not naturally understand those figures of speech.

But we can through better study. And that is what we have been attempting to do here. We will continue our study in the Olivet Discourse next time.

Please join us then.