

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 24:32 - 24:28



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse on Matthew 24, Steve Gregg examines the possibility of impostors and false teachings that may arise before the Second Coming. He notes the importance of discernment in recognizing true prophecies and warns against blindly following those who claim to be the Messiah. Gregg suggests that the term "lightning" in the passage may refer to radiance or brightness rather than a sudden event, and highlights the significance of the desert as a place of spiritual testing. Overall, Gregg emphasizes the need to stay grounded in biblical truth and to remain vigilant in our faith.

### Transcript

Let's take another look now into Matthew chapter 24 and continue our study through the Olivet Discourse as recorded for us in Matthew 24. In verse 23, Jesus said, See, I have told you beforehand. Well, let's take a look at this in detail.

In Matthew 24-23, he says, Then, that is the first word in verse 23, then, which either means at that time or after that. Right? I mean, when you're narrating something or predicting something, you say, Then this will be. That either means then, meaning at that time this will be the case, or else then, like sequentially after that.

I think that here, then means at that time. That is what time? The time is the time recorded and discussed in the previous several verses. When the disciples to whom he is speaking see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, this happened in 70 AD, then, he says, there's going to be great tribulation.

He says that in verse 21, and certainly there was great tribulation, as Josephus and other writers of the period record. There was great tribulation, or as Luke puts it, great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. But at that time, there would be false Christs who would arise.

That is, during the siege of Jerusalem, when things were at their very worst, there were many leaders of factions of Jews inside the city. We read of this in Josephus, who claimed to be the Savior, claimed to be the Messiah, and got people to follow them. Jesus is saying, don't believe them.

If people arise and say, look, here's the Christ, or look, there's the Christ, he said, don't believe it. He says, false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect. We know that false Christs and false messiahs, or false prophets, have come along in modern times.

However, he is not talking about modern times. He's talking about then. That's the word he begins this with, then.

That is, at the time of the siege of Jerusalem and so forth. There were many imposters. There were many who claimed to have a word from God, or to be God's anointed one, who came to save their people.

Many of them did show signs and wonders. One of such people that we read of in the Bible who came earlier than this was Simon Magus, Simon the Sorcerer. He certainly showed great signs and wonders and claimed to be the Christ.

He was gone by this time, but in Jerusalem there were others who did similar things, according to Josephus. We'll take his word for it, since he's the historian who was there, an eyewitness. And so, Jesus said, See, I have told you beforehand.

Now, why does he say, See, I have told you beforehand? The reason he does is because if I tell you beforehand, then you are forewarned. And therefore, you will have no excuse if you follow these people. Now, he goes on, and he says, Therefore, if they say to you, Look, he is in the desert, do not go out.

Or, Look, he is in the inner rooms, do not believe it. So, he's saying you could be deceived by people who are going to say, You know, the Messiah, he's around. He's out in the desert.

I actually knew of a, well, some of you may have encountered people who, they called themselves the Jesus family, I believe, if I'm not mistaken. And they were a cult. They may still be around.

I haven't seen them for ages. But they were a cult in the 70s and 80s who followed some leader that they thought was Jesus. And lo and behold, he was out in the wilderness.

He was out in the desert, they said. And they always wanted to invite you to come out and meet him. Well, how interesting that is, because Jesus specifically said, If anyone ever says to you, Look, the Messiah is out in the desert, Jesus said, Don't even go out.

In fact, I was asked once, Would I be willing to go out and see this guy? Now, generally speaking, I enjoy hearing cultic leaders because I like to refute them. And I like to hear what they have to say so I'll know specifically what needs to be refuted. But as a matter of fact, when Jesus said, Don't go out if they say this to you.

So I have never gone out to see that particular guy because Jesus said, If they say he's in the desert, don't go out. But anyway, in verse 27, Jesus says, For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Now, the coming of the Son of Man, this term is used a variety of ways in Scripture.

For example, in Matthew chapter 10, when Jesus sent out the disciples two by two to go into various villages, he said, If they reject your word in a certain village, just stamp off the dust of your feet. If they persecute you, flee to another city and do the same thing there. He says, For you will not have reached all of the villages of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

It's not clear exactly what he means by before the Son of Man comes. But it seems likely that he's talking about something other than his second coming. He could be referring to, I mean, he certainly has given them plenty of time by now if his second coming is in view.

There's been plenty of time to reach all the villages of Israel, but he's suggesting that there will be a shortage of time. There's different opinions as to what he means by before the Son of Man comes. I have my own opinion.

We don't have to go into that right now. The only point I want to make is that it does not refer to the second coming. Likewise, in Matthew 16, 28, when Jesus said, Some of you standing here will not taste death before you see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

There's many opinions as to what he meant. Some people think he means the Transfiguration. Some think he means Pentecost.

Some think he means 70 A.D. And some may have another opinion than that. But one thing seems very clear to the Christian is he wasn't talking about his second coming because he said some of you standing here will not taste death before you see the Son of Man coming. Whatever he meant by seeing the Son of Man coming, it was not his second coming.

It was some other thing, and there's several possibilities. The point is that the Son of Man coming does not always refer to the second coming. It can mean other things.

Remember, Jesus wrote in Revelation 2 to the church of Ephesus. He said they'd left their first love, and he said, If you don't repent, I will come to you. Now, what do you mean by that? Is he talking about the second coming? No.

He said, I will come to you, and I will take your lampstand out of its place. He's referring to the destruction of the church or the removal of his presence from the church. This happened.

The second coming has not yet happened, but this happened to the church of Ephesus.

There is neither a church in Ephesus nor is there even a city of Ephesus anymore in the region where it used to be. That lampstand is gone.

Jesus came and did what he said he would do. You see, we need to be cautious when we read of the coming of the Son of Man that we don't always refer it to the second coming. On the other hand, we can't say that it never refers to the second coming.

And one has to ask, What about this case? And we need to go case by case and say, What is the evidence? What's the likelihood? Well, here Jesus said, As the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Is he talking about his second coming or something else? Well, one could argue both ways, really, because the disciples in this case had asked, What will be the sign of your coming? And in both Mark and Luke, we read that what they really meant was, What shall be the sign of his coming and judgment on the temple, which he had predicted would be destroyed? He was not talking about, they were not referring to his second coming, which, by the way, they had no notion of. When they asked him the question, they had never heard of his second coming, nor did they even know he was going away.

So, they were referring to his coming and judgment on the temple, which he had himself predicted a few verses earlier. And that happened, of course, in 70 A.D. Since they asked about it in those terms, it's possible that he's referring to that here. When he says that his coming will be like lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west.

On the other hand, it could be a reference to the second coming. It's entirely possible. There's nothing about this verse that could not be.

Even if the Olivet Discourse is a discourse about 70 A.D., there would be room here to interject a statement about the second coming. Because, Jesus says in this passage, if they say the Messiah has come, don't believe them. Because when the Messiah really does come, it will be like lightning flashing from the east to the west.

And, in other words, everyone will see it. So, he could, by way of interjection here, say, listen, the real second coming will be like this. Don't believe people in 70 A.D. telling you it's already happened.

Because the real one will be like this. And then, now back to our discussion of 70 A.D. That is entirely possible. He could be talking about his second coming.

But the question I think we need to consider, and that very few people seem to ever give much consideration to, is what does he mean that as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. Now, we think of lightning. Well, whenever we use lightning as a comparison of something, what are we referring to in our western culture? Well, we're referring to a bolt of lightning.

And we're specifically usually referring to speed and suddenness, aren't we? When we

say, it hit me like a bolt of lightning. Or, you know, he runs like a bolt of lightning. We're talking about how rapid lightning is, how sudden it is.

The speed of light, it travels. Now, that is the way we use the metaphor of lightning. And therefore, actually this is a simile, for instance, like lightning.

But when we use lightning as a simile, we are referring to suddenness and quickness. And therefore, when we read this, we have often assumed that that's what Jesus is referring to. When he talks about lightning flashing, that's how his second coming will be.

We think of him saying that it's going to be sudden and quick. Now, indeed, I do believe the second coming will be sudden and quick. Jesus said elsewhere, not Jesus, excuse me, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15, that it will be in a moment in the twinkling of an eye.

Certainly, that suggests a sudden and quick transaction. And I do believe in that. However, I'm wondering, is that what Jesus was trying to say or was he trying to give us some other information here? The question, of course, hinges on what did Jesus mean by lightning? He said his coming will be like the lightning.

Now, again, just because we consider the most important or obvious thing about lightning is its quickness, it's not at all clear that that's the only feature of lightning that could be considered. And if Jesus is saying his coming is going to be like lightning, let us see whether we can understand precisely how he meant it is going to be like lightning. Well, look at what he says.

He says, as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. Does that mean he's going to come from the east and cross the sky to the west? Well, possibly, but not necessarily. What I was troubled by for many years reading this passage was, why did Jesus say, and he said it as if it was a given, as if everyone already understood this, why did Jesus say lightning flashes from the east to the west? Now, Jesus was not giving some kind of revelation about that.

He was using that as a known fact. Everyone knows that. And as that is true, so also shall the coming of the Son of Man be.

And yet it seemed to me not at all self-evident that lightning flashes from the east to the west. In fact, I would think most observers would be inclined to suggest that lightning flashes from up to down, that the motion of lightning is not vertical across the sky, at least not primarily so, but its more obvious direction is, did I say vertical? It is not horizontal across the sky, it is vertical. Lightning comes down.

And every time I've seen a lightning bolt, rather than suggesting that it's going from east to west, I would be more inclined to say it's coming from up to down. It's coming down. It's hitting something down here from a cloud or something.

Now, what I'm saying is, it is not at all obvious to me, and I doubt if it's been obvious to anyone in history, that the direction of lightning is from east to west. In fact, I dare say it isn't always so. Lightning may be almost entirely vertical in its direction, or it may move in a slightly westerly or easterly or northern or southern direction.

It is not, in other words, a given that lightning goes from east to west. And yet Jesus refers to it as so, as if that's obvious, as if it's something no one would dispute and that everyone is acquainted with. As the lightning flashes from east to west, so shall the Son of Man's coming be.

It occurred to me a long time ago, this is many years ago now, that maybe when he said lightning, he didn't mean what we think of as lightning. Now, I don't like to be innovative, but I do like to make sense of the Scripture as best as it can be done. And I remember meditating on this passage once many years ago, more than 20 years ago.

And I remember thinking, well, what if lightning doesn't mean a bolt of lightning, as we think of it? What if it means lightening, sort of like this lamp in my room lightens the room? The radiance of the lamp is a lightening of the room. If I turn off the light, the room will be darkened, and there will be a darkening of the room. But, you know, I wondered whether the word lightning could simply mean radiance or a shining, you know, that which removes the darkening of a room or of a place.

Well, you know, I don't just come up with those hunches and then run with them, but I remember wondering that so profoundly that I went and I researched it in the Greek reference books available to me. And I'll tell you what I found out. It's quite interesting.

The word lightning here is the word *astrape* in the Greek. And if you look up *astrape* in a lexicon or in Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words or in some other Greek reference work, you will find what I found. The word *astrape* used here of lightning means two different things.

One is lightning, as we think of it, and another is bright shining. Yes, it's true. The word *astrape* means bright shining.

In fact, in another place in the Gospels where the same word *astrape* is used, it means bright shining, and it does not mean a bolt of lightning at all. In Luke chapter 11 and verse 36, Luke 11, 36, Jesus said, If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, the whole body will be full of light, as when the bright shining of a lamp gives you light. Now, the meaning of his statement is somewhat obscure, but I just want to point out to you, he speaks of as when the bright shining of a lamp gives you light.

The words bright shining are from one Greek word in the original, *astrape*. So, Jesus said, as when the *astrape* of a lamp gives you light. Clearly, he didn't mean *astrape* in the sense of a bolt of lightning.

He's talking about simply the lightening of the room. It is the bright shining of a lamp that is spoken of here. Now, it's very clear it has to be translated that way in this context.

It cannot mean a bolt of lightning. What if we translated astrape the same way in Matthew 24, 27, as it is translated and must be translated in Luke 11, 36? In other words, Jesus' statement in Matthew 24, 27 would read like this, For as the bright shining comes from the east and flashes to the west. Would that make sense? Would that be a sensible thing? Would it be as sensible or more sensible than the word lightening? After all, the word astrape can be translated either way.

Let's try it both ways. As the lightning flashes from the east to the west. Okay, how about this? As the bright shining comes from the east and flashes to the west.

Well, the second instance makes perfectly good sense because Jesus would be speaking of a well-known phenomenon. There is, in fact, a bright shining that comes from the east and flashes to the west. Is there not? Are you aware of what it is? It's the sunrise.

Every day, the bright shining comes from the east and shines to the west. It moves toward the west, does it not? And, therefore, to translate astrape in this place as bright shining, as it is translated in Luke 11, 36, bright shining, gives us a very different idea of what Jesus is saying, but one that makes more sense generally. I do not think it likely that he intended to say that a bolt of lightning typically goes from east to west, but that a bright shining of some kind goes from east to west is a universally observed phenomenon that no one would deny, and it is the sunrise.

And if that is what he said, then what is he said? He did not compare his coming to a bolt of lightning. He compared his coming to a sunrise. As the bright shining comes from the east and shines to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.

Now, in what way is the second coming of Christ like a sunrise? Well, perhaps just in that everyone can see it. That seems to be the point he's principally making here, that if someone says, oh, the Christ has come, but you missed it, he's out there in the desert. Come with me, he's over in this room here.

You know, don't believe him, because when he really comes, it's going to be like the sunrise. Well, what's the sunrise like different than that? Visible to all. No one could miss it, unless they're blind.

And therefore, he is, in my opinion, saying his coming is like the sunrise. His second coming would be like the sunrise, not necessarily like a bolt of lightning. Now, that doesn't take away from the suddenness of the catching up of the saints in the twinkling of an eye, but it does give us a new picture.

If you thought of the second coming of Christ being like a bolt of lightning, you may have

misunderstood what he was saying. But if you say his coming is like a sunrise, then there are many, many places in Scripture that liken it to such. One of those places seems to be in 2 Peter 1, verse 19.

And it says, You do well to take heed to the Scriptures, as unto a light that shines in a bright place, until the day star, that's the morning star, arises in your hearts. Until the day dawns, he said, and the day star arises in your hearts. There's quite a lot about a sunrise.

Isaiah 60, Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. There's a great deal. It says in Proverbs chapter 4, The path of the righteous is like the light of the dawn that grows brighter and brighter until the full day.

Hey, you can go a lot of places with this. I challenge you to do your own study. But I'm saying that the likelihood is greater in my judgment that Jesus likened his coming to a sunrise than that he likened it to a bolt of lightning.

Now, in verse 28, Jesus said, For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together. Now, in saying that, Jesus was actually alluding to something in the book of Job. It had become apparently a proverb or a proverbial saying in his days.

In Job 39, verses 27 through 30, it's talking about the eagle, and it says, Where the dead are, there they are, meaning the eagles. And Jesus uses that proverb here to suggest that the city of Jerusalem is now spiritually dead and rotten. Having rejected the Messiah, having persecuted those that were sent to her, she is now dead and a rotten old corpse, and the eagles can be expected to gather around her.

These eagles were very probably a reference to the fact that the Romans who came and destroyed Jerusalem carried banners which on the top of their banner poles had incense of eagles, that is, little statues of eagles. It was the Roman emblem. And here come the eagles swarming in upon the carcass of rotten apostate Jerusalem.

And that I take to be Jesus' meaning here. He's talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and he says it's like the proverb, Where there's dead bodies, there's eagles swarming. Well, here come the Roman eagles coming down on the dead body of Jerusalem.

We'll continue our study in the Olivet Discourse next time, and we'll come to some of the most interesting and perhaps difficult verses in the whole discourse, but we will take that next time because we're out of time today.