

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 24:15, 24:21 - 24:22, 24:34 - Terminology



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this presentation, Steve Gregg discusses the terminology used in Matthew 24, particularly the phrase "this generation will not pass away until things are fulfilled." He explains that this type of language is common in Semitic Hebrew expressions and cites Daniel 9:26-27 as an example of dual fulfillment expected in prophecy. Gregg also references Eusebius' warning to Christians in Jerusalem before the Roman armies destroyed the city and discusses the significance of the reference to "land" as Israel in Luke's version. Overall, Gregg provides a thought-provoking analysis of apocalyptic language and its contextual meanings.

### Transcript

In the last several sessions we've been talking about the Olivet Discourse. In Matthew 24, I have presented a view which I think today would be considered the minority opinion, although there certainly was a time in church history when everybody believed this view. There was a time when it was presupposed, for example, that this discourse was about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. We found that Eusebius, the church historian, writing in the year 325 A.D., took it for granted and assumed his readers also took it for granted that Jesus in this discourse was describing the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, which occurred in 70 A.D. There's good reason for him to have thought this, because Jesus, in fact, introduced the discourse by predicting the destruction of Jerusalem.

And when the disciples asked when this would take place, he gave this as the answer. So, obviously, since the answer was fulfilled in 70 A.D., it's not surprising that for centuries Christians understood this discourse to be about that. However, something has changed in the mood of biblical, I almost said scholarship, though I'm not sure that scholarship is the right word for it.

I just say biblical interpretation. We live in an age where there's a strong expectancy that Jesus is coming back very soon. And if this is true, it's very desirable for us to know whether there are signs of his soon appearing.

And that desire to find signs tends to impose a certain interpretation on almost all prophetic passages. There are many passages in the Old Testament that don't have a word to say about the second coming of Christ, and yet popular Bible teachers apply them to the second coming of Christ. I heard a preacher say on the radio not too long ago that the most commonly discussed doctrine in Scripture, he said, is not the new birth, is not repentance, he gave some other things that it's not.

And he finally said the most frequently discussed doctrine in Scripture is the second coming of Christ. Well, that simply, of course, is not true. The second coming of Christ is discussed in the Scripture, and it's discussed many times, but certainly it is not discussed more than, let's say, Christology, doctrines about who Christ is.

And it's not discussed more than soteriology, which would be doctrines about salvation. Doctrines about salvation, doctrines about Christ are much more commonly discussed in Scripture than the particular doctrine of the second coming of Christ. But the reason a preacher was able to say that is because he interprets almost all prophetic passages as if they are describing the second coming of Christ.

Now, this is not always a valid thing to do, and it was not always done in biblical scholarship. There was a time, a couple centuries ago and forever before that, that the prophecies were interpreted in light of their context and were applied to those things that they predicted. But today there is an apocalyptic fervor that characterizes much of popular prophecy teaching.

And when these popular prophecy teachers read the Bible, every time they find some kind of prediction of judgment, some kind of prediction of evil, some kind of prediction of anything futuristic, they tend to assume this is about the end times and the second coming of Christ. This assumption has also been imposed on the reading of Matthew 24. Now, there's not really any exegetical reason for doing so.

The things that Jesus described in Matthew 24, he himself said, this generation will not pass away until all these things are fulfilled. Now, if we wonder what he meant by this generation, we need only to turn back to Matthew 23, the previous chapter, and show that he said that all the righteous blood of all the righteous who have been slain, from Abel until Zechariah the priest and prophet who was killed in the temple, he says all the blood will come upon this generation. He's referring, of course, to that Holocaust that came in 70 A.D. upon that generation as a judgment for all the times that they had killed the prophets and even for killing Jesus.

So this generation, when Jesus discusses it, is his own generation. And when he says in Matthew 24, this generation will not pass until all these things be fulfilled, he was correct. It did happen within that generation.

What I think characterizes a lot of biblical teaching today is a tremendous ignorance of

history, an unawareness that the things that Jesus said here actually did occur. But there's something more that makes it difficult, and that is an ignorance of biblical expression. Now, what I mean by that is this.

The biblical writers lived in a different culture than our own. They lived, they were Orientals. Most of us listening to this radio broadcast are probably European-American Westerners in our culture, having much more influence from the Graeco-Roman culture than the disciples ever knew, or than Jesus or the prophets ever knew.

The disciples were Semitic people. Jesus was a Semitic person, an Oriental. And the Oriental modes of expression, especially the Semitic Hebrew forms of expression, were commonly used among them.

And we are 2,000 years removed from, and many thousands of miles removed from, the culture that this came from. Now, this should not be discouraging. It should not make us think, oh my, well then I guess we'll never understand what the Bible means.

Far from it. We can learn the cultural expressions of the Hebrews 2,000 years ago very easily by reading what they said, and reading the language of the prophets that they were referring to. And the prophets of the Old Testament used the very kind of language Jesus was using here many times.

And we just need to become acquainted with the figures of speech that were common among them. When we read, for example, in verse 15 of Matthew 24, when you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by the prophet Daniel. Well, it's necessary that we look back at the prophet Daniel and see what he was talking about.

We know from Daniel chapter 9, in verse 26 and 27, that the abomination of desolation was the Roman armies coming to destroy Jerusalem after the death of the Messiah. Well, the Messiah died in 30 A.D. The Romans came in 70 A.D., within a generation, and wiped them out, and took them into captivity. Even by comparison of parallel accounts, we can come to this conclusion, because Matthew and Mark record Jesus saying, when you see the abomination of desolation, but Luke, in the very same passage, paraphrases and clarifies and says, when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, know that her desolation is near.

Furthermore, another failure to recognize Hebraisms is when modern prophecy teachers talk about verse 21. Matthew 24, 21 says, 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. Now, that statement, such as never has been from the beginning of the world, until this time, nor shall ever be, is a phrase that is frequently used in the Old Testament.

It is a figure of speech. It is, in a sense, a hyperbole, because it makes it sound as if the thing described is unique in terms of its intensity. And yet, we saw, I think it was in our

last session, that there are many times this kind of expression is used in the Bible of things that are not unique.

In fact, in Exodus, the locust plague in Egypt was said to be unique in just this way. This was such a locust plague as had never come before or would ever be after. And yet, a different locust plague at a later date, referred to in the book of Joel, is so described also as one that is worse than any before and worse than any after.

In other words, both of them are said to be the worst ever. And, you know, they can't be entirely literal, but one who reads the Old Testament carefully finds that this kind of language is used, and it's a figure of speech. It's a hyperbole.

Essentially, it means this thing is terribly bad, and in comparison to almost anything else you could imagine, it is worse. Now, that is true of the destruction of Jerusalem, and it's interesting that so many people have thought that the tribulation that Jesus speaks of is something that is still future, especially since Jesus said his generation would not pass until it came about, and also in view of the fact that everything up to this point that we've studied in Matthew 24 points directly to the Jewish war and the events that led up to it and the destruction of Jerusalem at the end of it. The Jewish war was three and a half years long.

It began in 66 A.D., and it ended in 70 A.D. These things happened within that generation that Jesus spoke to, just as he said they would. Anyone can prove this to himself easily enough by reading the works of Josephus, who was...Josephus was not a Christian. He did not know about the Olivet Discourse.

He did not try to report things in such a way as to connect them to anything Jesus said. He simply was an eyewitness of the Jewish war and a participant in it, and he wrote details about it which will certainly adequately convince any reader that the things Jesus predicted actually did come to pass. And so...and by the way, the church historian Eusebius, whom I mentioned a moment ago, who wrote in 325 A.D., just about three centuries after Christ uttered these words, Eusebius confirms the same things.

So all one needs to do is acquaint himself with the ancient historians, and they will know that these things actually happened that Jesus said. And, you know, why...you know, a lot of people then say, well, maybe there's a second fulfillment. Maybe it was fulfilled in 70 A.D., but is it possible that there's a dual fulfillment here? I can't...I could not count the number of times this question has been presented to me, and I'll tell you what I always answer.

I do believe that some prophecies in Scripture have a dual fulfillment, but not very many. The only ones that I know of that do have a dual fulfillment, the reason I know it is because the Bible tells me of a dual fulfillment. In 2 Samuel 7, a prediction is made that sounds as if it is fulfilled in Solomon, but in the New Testament we are told that it has a

fulfillment in Christ as well, and therefore it must necessarily have dual fulfillment, partially in Solomon and later in Christ.

There are other examples like this. In Isaiah chapter 7, there's a reference to a woman having a child, and it seems to have a short-term fulfillment in Isaiah chapter 8 with the birth of Isaiah's child. But Matthew chapter 1 tells us that it has a secondary fulfillment in Christ.

So we see dual fulfillment. There may be other cases of this, but the point is we never know that a dual fulfillment is to be expected unless the New Testament tells us so. When Jesus predicted to his disciples that the chief priests would deliver him over to Pilate, and they'd crucify him, and on the third day he'd rise again, this actually happened.

We don't have to look for a secondary fulfillment of this. It's not going to happen again. When this prophet says that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem, well, that happened.

We don't look for another birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem. We don't look for a second fulfillment because there is one fulfillment that is adequate and has fulfilled everything that was predicted. Now, the only reason we would ever look for a second fulfillment of any prophecy is if we were directed by Scripture to look for an additional fulfillment after the first one.

We do not have any such direction in the Scriptures concerning the Olivet Discourse. The Olivet Discourse, Jesus predicted things would happen within his generation. They did, and there's nowhere in the Bible that says they're going to happen again.

And for that reason, we need to go back to the Scriptures, and we need to throw out half the, if not 90 percent of the prophecy books we've ever read because they're so full of speculation, and they simply are following one another. By the way, let me just tell you this. You might think, well, Steve, if what you're saying is true, then certainly some of these prophecy teachers would have noticed that.

You would think so, wouldn't you? Well, as I said, you can read the historic commentators before this modern age of last days' furor, and you'll find that ancient commentators always understood this about the Olivet Discourse. This is not something that I dreamed up. This is something that the text itself teaches, that history demonstrates, and that commentators have always known until recent times.

What is happening today is that there is a great deal of money being made convincing people that these passages are talking about our times. Now, I hate to be cynical. Well, I do, I truly do hate to be cynical, but I am a little cynical.

Back in 1970, Hal Lindsay wrote the book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. He popularized in that book these ideas, that these passages are talking about the end times. Now, Hal

Lindsay was not the first person to think this, nor even to say this, but he popularized it in a big way.

By big way, I mean there were over 20 million copies of his book sold. Now, that's a big, mega bestseller. Shortly after his book became such a bestseller, a whole bunch of copycat books came out.

I was there, I remember. A whole bunch of guys said, hey, there's something to be done here. There's a big market for these kinds of books.

So a whole bunch of guys began to write books about end times and followed exactly the same ideas that Hal Lindsay had taught, and basically flooded the market with it. The flood of these books began to seem to confirm one another. People began to say, well, Hal says this, and this guy says that, and this other guy says that, not realizing that they're all piggybacking on each other's ideas.

And now it's an extremely common thing. There are people making millions of dollars on novels about the end times, on allegedly nonfiction books about the end times, and they are all following the same ideas. The problem is they all influence each other, they all piggyback on each other, and none of them seem to be in touch with the historic understanding of this passage.

And to my mind, that's a weakness in all of their interpretations. Now, I don't claim that I know everything. I'm simply saying that anyone who wishes to do the work, to do the research, will convince himself beyond question that the things Jesus predicted here did happen.

One needs only to compare Scripture with Scripture, and Scripture with history. Now, let's have a look at verse 22. Jesus is talking about the Great Tribulation, which occurred probably during the Siege of Jerusalem.

And he said, unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved. But for the elect's sake, those days will be shortened. Now, what days? We're talking about the days of the Tribulation.

These days must be shortened, or else no one, namely, even the elect, would be saved. Now, for the elect's sake, that is, for the sake of the Church, God shortens the days. Now, how were these days shortened? The Jewish War was three and a half years long.

If you want to shorten something, you can either take some time off the beginning of it, start it later. You can take some time off the end, that is, end it earlier. Or you can take a chunk out of the middle.

But one way or another, to take a piece of time out of a given piece of time is how you shorten it. Now, for the elect's sake, this was shortened, the Siege of Jerusalem. Let me

tell you what actually happened.

Vespasian, the emperor, or actually, he was not yet emperor. He was actually a general at this time. He later became emperor.

Vespasian came against Jerusalem in the midst of his campaign in the Jewish War, and he besieged Jerusalem. The city was doomed, it would seem. However, developments in Rome caused him to leave.

You see, Nero had committed suicide, and there was a great civil war in Rome with three different contenders for the throne who each took position for a few months at a time before they were assassinated. Finally, the Senate of Rome appointed Vespasian to be the new emperor. Well, here he was out in the trenches outside Jerusalem.

Now that he was the emperor, he was not going to sit there and rot out there in a foxhole, so he withdrew from Jerusalem. He went back to Rome. He received his commission as emperor, and he sent his son, Titus, back to Jerusalem to besiege it again, and Titus eventually destroyed Jerusalem.

Now, between the time that Vespasian besieged Jerusalem and the time that he left and Titus came back and besieged it, there was a window of opportunity. There was a time taken out of the siege, and that time allowed for the Christians to leave and to escape. We read in an earlier broadcast the words of Eusebius the historian, who said that all the Christians in Jerusalem were warned by God to leave, and they did leave, and they all escaped to a town across the Jordan called Pella in the mountains, and that's exactly what Jesus told them to do.

He says, when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, you who are in Judea, flee to the mountains. That's what happened. You see, they were given an opportunity for the elect's sake to save the church that was in Jerusalem.

God shortened the days. The siege of Vespasian could have been continuous and could well have resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem immediately. However, because he was called back to Rome and there was a window of opportunity, the church in Jerusalem was able to escape.

The days were shortened. Now remember, when the Bible says all flesh or no flesh, as in this passage it says, if the days were not shortened, no flesh would be saved. All flesh and no flesh have to be taken within the geographical boundaries of the discussion, and one can do his own interesting research on this.

I've done it long ago. You can do it for yourself. Just look up in the Old Testament all the times that the Bible talks about all flesh, or when it talks about no flesh.

Those expressions are found frequently enough in the Old Testament, and you will find

that in the context of each use, it is talking about all flesh or no flesh in a particular geographical region, usually Israel. Now you can do your own study on that, but in this case it's very clear that he's talking about all flesh and no flesh in a geographical region, Israel, by the fact that we can turn to the parallel account in Luke 21, and it settles it beyond question. Because in Luke 21-20 through 23, Jesus said, and this is the parallel of these verses we're looking at in Matthew 24, Jesus said, but when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near.

Now just on the side, this is parallel to Matthew and Mark saying, when you see the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place. Next verse, 21, Then let those in Judea flee to the mountains. He's talking to his disciples, as we saw they did.

Let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. For these are the days of vengeance. Now as I read this verse 22, this is Luke 21-22, be aware.

What we are here reading in Luke is the parallel to the verse Matthew 24-21, which says, then there will be great tribulation. That's what Matthew's version says, there will be great tribulation. Here's what Luke's version of the same statement reads, For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which 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. That's the equivalent of the great tribulation, okay? There will be great tribulation in Matthew. Here there is great distress in the land.

Now the land, whenever it doesn't speak of any particular land other than that, is always a reference to the land of Israel. There will be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people, meaning the Jews, the people he was speaking to and in the midst of. So there will be great tribulation, Matthew 24 says.

The same statement in Luke reads there will be great distress, but it qualifies in the land, that is Israel, and wrath upon this people, that is the Jews. And it goes on in Luke 21-24, and they will fall by the edge of the sword. They did when the Romans came in.

They will be led away captive into all nations. That did happen in 70 A.D. And Jesus says, and Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles. It was and has been.

And he says, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. That time has not yet been fulfilled, it would seem. But nonetheless, that until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled seems to encompass the whole period of time from the destruction of Jerusalem until whenever that time may yet end.

Now this is how I think we would responsibly look at the Olivet Discourse. We would look at all the references to it, all of the records of it in the Gospels, so that we might let the unclear passages be interpreted by the clear passages. Luke's version is obviously more



clear.

It uses fewer of the Hebraisms than Matthew's uses. And that's because Matthew is writing to Jewish readers who would understand Hebraisms. That's Hebrew idioms.

Luke is writing to a Roman individual named Theophilus, and he does not expect this man to understand the Hebraisms. And so he paraphrases and makes clear what is meant. And that is why for us, who often do not understand the Hebraisms very well either, it is necessary to study the whole thing.