

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 24 (PART 4)

Matthew 24:21-22

The destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD was a major sign pointing to the end of the age. Things were not going to be the same from that event. While there are many layers of the theological meaning of this moment, for our context in Matthew 24, it was a definitive sign that Jesus' was a true prophet and that his people should be alert and awake for his coming.

However, it would be clumsy to not address the fact that Jesus *did not* return after this event. Some at the time surely would have been anticipating his appearance immediately after the stones of the temple toppled. And so this brings us to the second part of the original question of this chapter:

Matthew 24:3 - As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things happen, **and** what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

It also helps us understand why Jesus will speak what he does right after the talk of the destruction of Jerusalem in light of its connection to pointing to his return.

Matthew 24:23-28

v. 23-26 - False Christs & Fake Outs - If there is great deception and intentional misleading going on, knowing the real thing is a critical part of not being duped by a counterfeit. We need to know who Christ is and the nature/details of his return so that we don't follow with anyone thinking or teaching that he has come when he has not.

I think one of the details of these counterfeit narratives is that it is hidden secretive. "He's in the wilderness", "he's in the inner rooms" (v. 26) imply some secret knowledge/meaning or a hidden way that Jesus returns. This is clearly contrasted by Jesus' own description: "like lightning flashing in the sky from east-west", THAT'S how the coming of the son of man will be.

And fear not, even for those who are "blind", thunder *always* accompanies lightning. From NOAA National Severe Storms Laboratory answering the question: "Is it possible to have thunder without lightning?"

No, it is not possible to have thunder without lightning. Thunder starts as a shockwave from the explosively expanding lightning channel when a large current causes rapid heating. However, it is possible that you might see lightning and not hear the thunder because it was too far away. Sometimes this is called "heat lightning" because it occurs most often in the summer. (Source: nssl.noaa.gov/education/svrwx101/lightning/faq/)

Q - what do you think of this contrast between those who will mislead, implying that there is a secret or hidden return of Jesus as opposed to Jesus' own words?

Corpses & vultures - Jesus is using commonly understood norms from creation to illustrate the function of the signs of his coming. When you see vultures circling, you should know that there is a dead animal below. You might not see the dead animal from your vantage point, but the visible presence of the vultures points to the fact that there is a scavenger meal below. There may be some double meaning to this vulture metaphor in that there will be death as his coming nears, but I think the usage of this example is to comfort his disciples with the truth that they may not know every single thing going on "on the ground" but they will see the signs clearly enough to know what is happening/coming.

Review: What are the signs to look for before his coming? (The birth pangs & tribulation based on Matthew 24:1-28):

- Destruction of the Temple: not one stone left on another (v. 2)
- Widespread deception: false messiahs, false prophets, and false signs and wonders misleading many (v. 4-5, 11, 23-26)
- Wars and rumors of wars (v. 6)
- Nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom (v. 7a)
- Famines and earthquakes in various places (v. 7b)
- Persecution of believers, including tribulation and martyrdom (v. 9)
- Many falling away from the faith, with betrayal and hatred increasing (v. 10)
- Lawlessness increasing and love growing cold (v. 12)
- Gospel of the kingdom preached to all nations as the faithful endure (v. 13-14)
- Abomination of desolation standing in the holy place (cp. Daniel 9 & OT pattern) (v. 15)
- Great tribulation, unmatched in severity (v. 21)

All of this will happen and point to the fact that Jesus is coming again, and soon. But yet, up until now in the chapter, he has not yet returned.

Matthew 24:29-31 - The Coming Of Christ & The Gathering Of His People

There is much in these verses which we will look at next week. But in summary, the return of Christ will be clear and obvious - being accompanied by celestial activity, trumpet blast, angelically assisted gathering of the faithful and more. There are Old Testament and prophetic connections to much of this as indicated by the NASB's use of ALL CAPITAL LETTERS for 1/3rd of the verses.

But for today, I want to take some time to address an important theological topic that these verses give clarity on. We have already heard Jesus tell his disciples not to be misled as if his return will be unclear or hidden. Remember, the return of Jesus will be like lightning, not like a secret meeting in the desert. Here Jesus tells us that at his coming major indications will be a part of his triumphal return.

I want you to focus on a few key phrases to this section:

24:29 - "But immediately after the tribulation of those days"...

24:30 - "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky...and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory.

24:31 - "And He will send forth His angels...and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect..."

These phrases relate to the timing of his coming. So here is a question for all of us to answer:

Q - In relation to the **tribulation** we have already read about in this chapter, does the coming of Christ and his gathering together of his people occur *before or after* the tribulation (based on Matthew 24:29?)

The answer is clearly that the return of Jesus Christ, which is when the elect are gathered together and/or raised from the dead (cp 1 Cor. 15:23, 1 Thes. 4:16) happens *after the tribulation* described by Jesus in Matthew 24.

Now why take time to belabor a fairly obvious truth from Scripture? Because many sincere Christians have been taught something different. (In fact, I used to believe something very different about the return of Christ myself!). We're going to meditate on this for a bit.

First, you may have heard the term "**rapture**," which many Christians use when talking about the return of Christ. The word itself does not appear in our English Bibles. It comes from the Latin word *rapiemur* (meaning "to be caught up"), drawn from 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where believers are described as being "caught up" to meet the Lord. So when many people speak of "the rapture," they are referring to the biblical idea of believers being gathered to Christ, even though Scripture does not use that specific word. So for some, "rapture" is a shorthand word meaning "the return of Christ" or "the gathering of believers to Christ."

Many people today believe that Jesus Christ will appear *before* a time of great tribulation and secretly gather His church, removing believers from the earth so they will be spared from the worst period of suffering. This view is often called the "**secret rapture**" or **pre-tribulation rapture**. According to this perspective, Christ's coming for the church will be invisible, spiritual in nature, and marked by a sudden, global disappearance of believers, while the world continues on into chaos and judgment.

Historically, the dominant Christian understanding for the first eighteen centuries of the church was that Jesus would return once, visibly and gloriously, after a period of tribulation, resulting in the resurrection of the dead, the gathering of believers, and final judgment. Early church writers such as Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and later figures like Augustine, Luther, and Calvin all interpreted passages about Christ's coming within this single-return framework. While Christians have differed on certain end-times details, none taught a doctrine of a secret, pre-tribulation removal of the church separate from Christ's public return.

The idea of a secret rapture began to appear in the early 1800s through the teachings of John Nelson Darby. Darby proposed a new way of organizing biblical prophecy that divided history into distinct eras and made a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church. Within this system, he taught that Christ would first return quietly to remove believers from the earth, and only later return publicly to establish His kingdom. This system of Bible interpretation became known as “dispensationalism,” the belief that God relates to humanity through distinct periods (*dispensations*) of history with separate plans for Israel and the Church.

The teachings of Darby, were first spread through his own preaching tours in the UK & North America, but would become especially influential through the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909. The Scofield Bible was not the first study Bible per se, but this Bible did something unprecedented at the time. It placed extensive theological notes directly alongside the biblical text, presenting Darby’s interpretive framework as an assumed guide for understanding the text. The placement of these notes gave a sense of authority to many readers.

Scofield’s Bible went on to sell millions of copies and became one of the most widely used study Bibles in American evangelicalism. It was adopted by Bible colleges, seminaries, pastors, and everyday Christians, and its notes quietly shaped how large numbers of believers read the passages about Christ’s return.

In more recent decades, the pre-tribulation rapture view has been spread largely through Christian media and popular culture. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the *Left Behind* novel series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins sold tens of millions of copies and became one of the best-selling Christian fiction series in history, later spawning films, children’s books, and study guides. These stories presented a dramatic, narrative version of a pre-tribulation rapture, giving many Christians their primary mental picture of how the end times will unfold. Because the theology was absorbed through story rather than direct biblical study, the series ended up shaping expectations about Christ’s return for an entire generation. **Stories can be powerful, but they are never a substitute for Scripture.**

In addition, many modern study Bibles and church teaching materials simply assume this view, reinforcing it through repetition. As a result, many believers today have inherited the pre-tribulation rapture idea more through cultural exposure than through direct, careful study of Scripture. The pre-tribulation rapture view feels longstanding and mainstream, even though historically it is quite recent.

Our task, then, is not to ask what we have heard most often, what is most popular, what we have inherited, what we want or hope is true, but what Jesus actually says. And here’s what Jesus says:

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days 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 will be shaken. 30 Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, 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. 31 And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Mt. 24:29-31 (ESV))

I believe many who hold this view genuinely love Jesus and want to be faithful to Scripture (maybe even some who are reading this right now). At the same time, I am convinced that the Bible does **not** teach a secret, pre-tribulation return of Christ, and that this framework is a relatively **recent** development in church history rather than the historic understanding of the Christian faith.

In addition, I believe there are a number of problems that flow from the "pretrib rapture" teaching.

1. It separates the return of Christ, the resurrection of believers, and the gathering of the saints, even though Scripture presents them as one unified event.

The New Testament consistently links Christ's coming, the resurrection of believers, and the gathering of the saints as one coordinated event (Mt. 24:29–31; 1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thes 4:16–17). Pre-trib teaching separates these into different moments & introduces 2 distinct comings of Christ, even though Scripture presents them together. Jesus returns *once*, not *twice*.

2. It contradicts Scripture's consistent presentation of a single, visible return of Christ after tribulation.

Jesus explicitly places His coming and the gathering of the elect "*immediately after the tribulation*" (Matt. 24:29–31). The New Testament repeatedly describes Christ's return as public, visible, and climactic. Pre-tribulation teaching requires dividing this single event into a hidden coming and a later visible coming, a distinction Scripture never clearly makes.

3. It lacks support from historic Christian teaching.

For most of church history, Christians expected a single return of Christ after tribulation. The pre-tribulation rapture framework appears in the 19th century and is not found in early church writings. While we root our beliefs from Scripture, the fact that no one in the early church believed this is significant.

4. It can weaken biblical calls to endurance and create fear in the lives of Christians.

Jesus repeatedly prepares His followers to expect suffering, perseverance, and faithfulness through tribulation (Matt. 24:9–13; John 16:33). When believers are taught to expect a guaranteed escape, suffering can feel like a sign that God has failed rather than a context in which He is present. Additionally, dramatic rapture scenarios can cultivate anxiety about being "left behind," rather than confidence in Christ's promises and faithfulness.

So where does all of this leave us? Not fearful. Not obsessed with timelines. Not divided over charts. But anchored in Jesus and rooted in Scripture. If nothing else, today reminds us how important it is to read, study, and wrestle with the Bible for ourselves. Many of us have inherited

ideas about the end times (and other subjects) without ever examining where they came from or whether Scripture actually teaches them.

I understand how easy it is to lean on what trusted teachers have already said rather than doing the slow, sometimes difficult work of studying Scripture on our own. But God invites every one of us to open His Word for ourselves, to test what we hear, and to let Scripture shape our convictions. God invites His people to be Bereans, testing what we hear, opening the Scriptures, and letting His Word shape our beliefs.

Our hope is not in escaping hardship, but in belonging to Christ. Our confidence is not in having every detail perfectly mapped out, but in knowing the One who holds the future. Jesus' repeated call in Matthew 24 is not "figure it all out," but stay awake, endure, remain faithful, and do not be misled. And when He does come, it will not be hidden, it will not be secret, and it will not be missed.

Though the days may grow dark and evil may increase, there will never be a time when God abandons His creation or withdraws His presence from the earth. God continues to pursue humanity with mercy, calling all people to repentance and life, even to the very end.