

The Great Tribulation

Matthew 24:15-25

Pastor John Miller

This series, called The King's Return is in the Olivet Discourse. The reason it is called the Olivet Discourse is in verse 3. "Now as He..."—that is, "Jesus"—"...sat on the Mount of Olives..." So the teaching was given on Mount Olivet. That mountain was just to the east of Jerusalem. Leaving Jerusalem, going east down the Kidron Valley then up through the Garden of Gethsemane, you'll be at the base of Mount Olivet. Jesus found a place to sit and began to speak to the disciples, who came to Him privately. They said, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

I want to remind you to keep this in context. The Olivet Discourse is in Matthew 24-25, and in it, Jesus is answering the disciples' questions in verse 3. Some say they asked three questions—the second question having two parts—and some say they asked two questions. I want to point them out. The first question is, "When will these things be?" That question is a reference to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, which Jesus predicted in verse 2: "Not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down." That was literally fulfilled in 70 AD when Titus, the Roman general, came and destroyed Jerusalem and ransacked the temple. Not one stone was left on another. It's also interesting that in this great prophetic passage of Scripture, Jesus prophesized about something that would be fulfilled in their lifetime.

If I predict something that is to happen 2,000 years from now, we're all going to die before it happens, so how will we know that it's going to happen? Everyone Jesus was talking to would be gone before the tribulation and before His Second Coming. So how can we know that what Jesus says will happen is true? The answer is that He said the temple would be destroyed in just a few years, and it was destroyed. Jesus said He would be crucified, buried and that He would arise from the dead, and it did happen. Everything He says comes to pass; you can "take it to the bank." When He says He's coming back, we know for sure that Jesus Christ will come again.

The next question—or two questions—is "What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" That is very pertinent to today's text. Jesus is going to give us specific signs—first "the abomination of desolation" and then the tribulation, which will come just before the Second Coming and lastly, "the sign of the end of the age." The "end of the age" refers to the period of time or the epoch in which we now live, known as "the church age." Then the tribulation will occur, the kingdom age and then into eternity, often called "the new heaven and the new earth."

Last time, in verses 4-14, we saw that Jesus described for us the birth pains, verse 8. "All these are the beginning of sorrows." These "sorrows" are the divisions, the wars, the rumors of wars, the defamation, the killing and murder, the departure—"false prophets will rise up"—then "this Gospel...will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come."

These are general signs of the age that will intensify up to what is known as “the tribulation period.” There will be a seven-year period of the tribulation. Some say the last half of it is called “the great tribulation.” This is the 70th week of Daniel’s prophecy. Jeremiah calls this the time of “Jacob’s trouble,” indicating that it is a time of preparation for Israel to come to know Jesus as their Messiah, and they’ll see Him in the Second Coming in majesty and glory.

Now in verses 15-25 we move to specific events that will happen just before Jesus returns. As a matter of fact, after the “abomination of desolation” happens, Jesus will come back in another three-and-a-half years. So if you are here when that happens—and I hope you won’t be, because I believe the rapture will happen before the tribulation, when we will be caught up to “meet the Lord in the air”—and you survive the last half of the tribulation, you will know pretty close when the time will be. You won’t know the day or the hour, but you’ll know it’s pretty close when the Lord will come again. The Bible gives us that timeframe.

Verse 15 gives us the first of these two specific signs. “When you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place, (whoever reads, let him understand).” Verse 21 gives us the second sign: “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.”

So when the disciples asked, “What will be the sign of Your coming?” Jesus is now answering that question. These will be the signs of His coming.

First we have the sign of the “abomination of desolation,” verse 15. Jesus said, “When you see...”—there is going to be the universal preaching of the Gospel; it will be heralded throughout the whole world—“...the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand).” So He is giving us a sign.

“What will be the sign of Your coming?” He means the Second Coming; not the rapture.

So this event of the “abomination of desolation” will take place. It is a sign that Daniel prophesied. He said that when you see this event, know that His coming is near.

What is this “abomination of desolation” spoken of by Daniel the prophet? This subject is vast and is talked about in the Old Testament, in Matthew 24:15, in the epistles of Paul—specifically, graphically and in great detail in 2 Thessalonians 2—and in Revelation 13 in great detail. Daniel spoke about it in chapter 9:27; in 11:31; and in 12:11. In 9:27, Daniel puts the “abomination of desolation” off into the future. In 11:31, he makes it clear that it will be a historic event to happen very soon. And in 12:11, Daniel breaks down the time period from the “abomination of desolation” to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Many times Old Testament prophets will declare a prophecy that will have two parts to its fulfillment. It will have a closer, nearer historical fulfillment. But it will also have a future or what’s called an “eschatological” interpretation, and that is still future to us today. So it has two parts; it happens in history and then it would be fulfilled in future prophecy.

This first, historical fulfillment of the “abomination of desolation” happened in 168 BC, when a very wicked Syrian ruler named Antiochus Epiphanes, conquered Jerusalem and Israel. Josephus, the Roman historian, tells us about him. Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the Jewish temple. In his hatred of the Jewish people, Antiochus Epiphanes went into the temple, he sacrificed a pig on the altar and took the broth from this pig and threw it all over the temple, desecrating and polluting it. Then he set up an image of the Greek god Zeus. In defiance of the God of Israel, he commanded the Jewish people to change their religion and to worship the Greek god Zeus.

By the way, the Maccabean Revolt occurred when Judas Maccabeus and his brothers and family revolted against Antiochus Epiphanes and overthrew him. Then they cleansed the temple and reinstated the temple worship, and that is what the Jews call “Hanukkah,” that they celebrate today. That was when they lit the candles, and the candles miraculously stayed lit for seven days.

Now the “abomination of desolation” also has a future fulfillment during the time of the seven-year tribulation, specifically three-and-a-half years into the tribulation. In the middle of the tribulation, the Antichrist will go into the rebuilt temple. That means that the temple in Jerusalem will have to be rebuilt.

In 1967, Israel reconquered the temple mount, and they had the capacity, if they wanted to, to rebuild a third temple on that temple mount where they could worship. But right now, it is a Muslim holy site; it has the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aksa Mosque. It is a very holy site to the Arabs, so that’s why the Jews leave it alone.

But during the tribulation period, the Antichrist will rise. He will make a covenant with the nation of Israel for seven years. It will probably be an agreement to rebuild the temple and allow worship there. It is some kind of peace treaty.

In Revelation 6, Jesus comes on a white horse, He has a bow but no arrows, so He is coming in peace. The Bible says that they will say, “Peace, peace,” but then sudden destruction comes on them, as travail on a woman with child. It happens at the “abomination of desolation.”

During the last three-and-a-half years, all hell breaks loose on planet earth. You have the culmination of World War III, God pours out His wrath and then you have the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Daniel 9:27 talks about the end of the 70 weeks of Daniel. It says, “Then he...”—that is, the Antichrist, the man of sin, the “son of perdition,” “the little horn,” his mouth speaking great things —“...shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week he shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate.”

I believe the rapture happens before the tribulation. And it’s pre-millennial; the Second Coming of Jesus Christ happens before the kingdom age, the 1,000-year reign of Christ. That’s also

known as the “Davidic kingdom,” because God made a promise to David that his son would sit on his throne; that’s when it happens for 1,000 years.

The “abomination of desolation” happens in the middle of the tribulation period. Before this is the rapture of the church; we’re in heaven with Christ. Then we come back with Christ at the end of the tribulation, Revelation 19, at His Second Coming.

But in the middle of the tribulation, the Antichrist makes his covenant for seven years. He is going to erect an image of himself in a rebuilt temple. That makes it necessary for the Jews to rebuild the temple and for the restraining force against evil to pull back. The church has already been caught up and the Antichrist has been revealed.

There is all this talk about who the Antichrist is, but we don’t know. I don’t care, because I’m not going to be around to see him or to know who he is. There have been many down through history who have been called the Antichrist. During World War I, people thought it was the tribulation and the Antichrist was coming then. They thought Hitler was the Antichrist. He was antichrist, but he was not the Antichrist. So I believe we will be caught up “to meet the Lord in the air” before the Antichrist is revealed.

If you read 2 Thessalonians 2, it clearly explains that there has to come a falling away first, then the “son of perdition” can be revealed, and it describes this same event, the “abomination of desolation.” It does tie in with the 70x7 or the 490-year prophecy of Daniel, of which seven years are yet to be fulfilled.

Daniel 9:27 says, “Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week,” that’s one, seven-year period, but in the middle of that period, the Antichrist will desecrate the temple.

2 Thessalonians 2:4 says that the Antichrist, “opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.” Basically, what the Antichrist does is he comes into the temple, sets up an image of himself and commands everyone to worship it. He also commands everyone to get a mark on the right hand or the forehead. It’s related to the number of man, 666. It’s called “the mark of the beast.” You won’t be able to buy or sell without that mark.

The Antichrist actually becomes the world-ruling dictator. Out of Europe there will be 10 nations that will align, and he will come to power. It seems from the Scripture that the Antichrist will not be a Jew or a Muslim; he’ll be a Gentile. He will tell everyone that he is God. No good Jew or Muslim would say that. Yet everyone will follow after him, because he is going to bring peace to the world. He will solve the conflict in the Middle East. He will be a great peace negotiator with great oratory ability. He is going to have a companion known as a false prophet or religious leader. So he will align himself with religion. This false prophet will perform miracles and signs and wonders, and all the world will wonder after the beast. We read about it in Matthew 24 and in Revelation 13. He “opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he

is God.”

Satan has always wanted to usurp God and take His place. He wants to put himself above God. Isaiah 14:14 says, “I will exalt my throne above the stars of God...I will be like the Most High.” That is what the Antichrist will be like. You sell yourself to the devil, and he will give these things to you. So the Antichrist will be empowered by Satan. Satan gives him his power, his seat and his authority. It is really Satan wanting to get veneration and worship as God.

In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar was king in Babylon and the Jews were taken captive there. He set up an image of himself and commanded everyone to bow down and worship the golden image. If you didn’t bow down, you would burn in the fiery furnace. When the band struck up a tune, everyone was to bow down to his image. Everyone bowed down except for the three Hebrews—Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego. Daniel wasn’t there, but if he was, he wouldn’t have bowed down either. They wouldn’t bow, they wouldn’t bend so they wouldn’t burn.

Then the three were thrown into a fiery furnace heated seven times hotter than normal. Seven times—an interesting number. It was so hot that the slaves that threw them in were consumed by the fire. These Hebrews were bound with ropes. All that happened to them was that their ropes were burned off, so they were loosed and they walked around in the fire.

If I were throw into a fiery furnace and my ropes burned off, I’d be out of there right now! But they were just walking around in the furnace. Then Nebuchadnezzar said, “Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?” They said, “True, O king.” “Look,” he answered, “I see four men loose...and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.”

I believe that fourth man was Jesus Christ. I believe that Jesus left heaven, came down and went right into the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego. No wonder they were having a good time in there! Then “Nebuchadnezzar...spoke, saying...‘Come out, and come here!’ Then Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego came from the midst of the fire.”

Whenever you’re going through a fire, Jesus is with you. You may be going through a furnace of affliction right now, but Jesus said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

This is a picture of the “abomination of desolation.” Nebuchadnezzar raised up an image, commanded that he be worshipped, and if not, they would be put to death. Then there would be three-and-a-half years following that of the great tribulation when God’s wrath would be poured out on the earth.

So verse 15 is the event or the sign. Now notice the response in our text in verses 16-20. Verse 16 starts with a “then.” Verse 15 starts with a “when”—“when you see” this sign; verse 16, “Then let those who are in Judea...”—which is the area around Jerusalem—“...flee to the mountains.” It doesn’t tell us what mountains, but it’s assumed the mountains in the east down in the Jordan Valley by the Dead Sea, the mountains of Moab, where David fled to and hid from Saul. Verse 17, “Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are

pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath.” Everything we read here is talking about the holy land. It’s talking about the people of Israel. It’s all in the context of this tribulation period.

So the minute you see this desecration of the temple in Jerusalem by the Antichrist, flee, verse 16. In those days they had flat-topped houses with outside stairways to get to the top. They had flat roofs with a patio on the top. Jesus said not to even go down into your house to grab your belongings. Don’t pack your bags. Don’t get your medicines or money. Just flee immediately. If you’re out in the fields, verse 18, just leave directly from there urgently. Don’t go back and get your clothes. If you have children, it’s going to be difficult. If you’re a woman nursing a baby, it’s going to be difficult. Whenever I watch the wars we’ve had on the History Channel and see mothers with children, it breaks my heart. Jesus is actually saying “woe” not in condemnation but in concern.

During the time of the tribulation, which covers Revelation 6-19, many Jews will be persecuted and martyred. Many of them will turn to Jesus Christ, and many of them will be put to death for their faith. There will be 144,000 Jews sealed and will, no doubt, be a witness to others, so many Jews will come to Christ at this time. It will be the greatest time of anti-Semitism and Jewish persecution in history.

So from the “abomination of desolation” in verse 15 to the response, “flee,” in verses 16-20 to, thirdly, in verses 21-25, we come to the sign of the “great tribulation.” You have the sign of the abomination and of the tribulation. Jesus said, “For then....” In verse 15, we have “When you see...”; in verse 16, we have “Then let those...”; and in verse 21, we have “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. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened. Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible...”—the inference is that it isn’t possible—“...even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand.”

This is all prophecy, predictive and warnings. These are the signs. You want to know what the signs are of the coming of Christ and of the end of the age? Here it is: there will be a time of “great tribulation,” verse 21. It is my conviction—and there are good Christians who disagree with this position—that the rapture will happen before the seven-year tribulation begins.

Jesus talked about it in John 14:2-3. “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” That’s the rapture and not the Second Coming.

Paul talked about it in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15, 17: “But I do not want you be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and

remain...shall be caught up..."—or "harpodzo" in the Greek—"...to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words." That's the rapture.

We also read about the rapture in 1 Corinthians 15:51-55. "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye....For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality....Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?'" It will be the conquering of sin and death and the rapturing of the church.

Then after this time when the church is caught up, the Antichrist is revealed and comes on the scene. Then he will make a covenant for seven years. He breaks the covenant, declares himself to be God, desecrates the temple, persecutes and murders Jews and kills people who have turned to Christ and become tribulation saints during this period.

I want to make a distinction between different kinds of tribulation. Jesus said in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." The tribulation Jesus is referring to here is not the "great tribulation." The tribulation Christians get now comes from the world, the flesh and the devil. Christians have three enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil. But the great tribulation, the seven-year period, will come from God. So the two tribulations have different sources.

The Bible also says, in 1 Thessalonians 5:9, that "God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." Jesus took our wrath on the Cross, so we're not appointed to wrath. I believe we will be caught up to meet the Lord before the seven years of tribulation.

The tribulation will be a horrible time. During the tribulation time that Jesus mentions, there will be six seal judgments, seven trumpet judgments and seven bowls or wrath judgments. Revelation 6:12-17 describes what is under the sixth seal: "I looked when he opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'"

Notice that the source of the great tribulation is not Satan but is from God. It's the wrath of the Lamb. "For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" You can read the whole book of Revelation and see about all the plagues and all the persecution that is going to happen during this time.

So Jesus says, in Matthew 24:21, that there will be trouble like never before, “since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.” It will be God’s wrath poured out on a Christ-rejecting world. Then Jesus said, “And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened.”

Now understand that when Jesus said “the elect” in this verse, He’s not talking about the church. He’s talking about Israel, the chosen people of God. It also could include the tribulation saints, but I don’t believe it’s a reference to the church.

The days were then “shortened” or brought to a close. It doesn’t mean that this period of seven years is going to be shorter, or from the “abomination of desolation” to the Second Coming will be shorter than three-and-a-half years. It means that it will stop, that it will be terminated, that it will come to a conclusion. So the period of time will not be shorter, but He will stop it, lest the whole world be destroyed.

At the end of the tribulation, we will have World War III. The Antichrist and all his armies, the kings of the east—no doubt China and the Asian armies—will all come to the holy land, to the Valley of Megiddo, the plains of Jezreel. World War III will be going on, and then Jesus Christ comes back. He comes to save the day, riding on “a white horse,” His hair “white like wool,” “His eyes were like a flame of fire” and His feet “were like fine brass.” “Out of His mouth goes a sharp sword” in judgment. He has a vesture that has written on it “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

We sing the song, The Battle Hymn of the Republic:

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.”

Jesus Christ is coming back.

Jesus is saying here that those days have to be concluded or stopped, or all humanity will be wiped out. During the tribulation, at least half of the world’s population will be killed, billions of people.

Then notice verses 23-24: “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.” Again, it’s not possible, but it will be such a powerful illusion that if you’re not one of the elect, you’ll be led astray. Then verse 25: “See, I have told you beforehand.”

This subject is the “Grand Central Station” of all Scriptures. It was talked about by the Old Testament prophets. It was spoken of by Jesus in the Gospels. It was talked about and explained in the epistles of Paul. And we see it recorded in the book of Revelation.

You say, "Well, John, you just talked a whole sermon about something we're not going to experience. We're not even going to be here."

I hope you're not. If you haven't been born again, if you haven't trusted Jesus as your Savior, if you don't have the life of God in your soul, you will be here. The rapture will happen, but you'll be left behind. What a sad and tragic thing that would be. So I want to encourage you that if you don't know Jesus Christ, get right with God. The end is coming.

You know that sandwich-placard preacher who wears the sign "The end is near," has the message that is apropos today. We need to go out and tell people to repent. Jesus said that "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man." They were eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. They were going on like the world was never going to end, like life would be fine, everything hunky-dory. Life goes on. No; judgment is coming. They didn't know it until the flood came and swept them all away.

If you're not a Christian, you live every moment of your life in jeopardy of missing the rapture and of being here during the seven years of tribulation. You don't want that.

Turn to Jesus today and ask Him to forgive your sins. Get your heart right and be ready to go in the rapture.

Let's pray.