

Seven Reasons Why We Should Read Matthew 24-25 as A Prophecy About the Future and Not a Description of the Past

As one who teaches the subject of eschatology ('the study of the end-times') to young adults on a regular basis I treasure Matthew chapters 24-25. These two chapters contain Jesus' personal teaching to twelve young people who were confused about the subject of "the end of the age" and His second coming. These chapters are one sermon aimed at answering this primary question: "Tell us, when will [the destruction of Jerusalem] be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" (Matthew 24:3)

Unfortunately, it has become quite popular these days to read these chapters as history and not as prophecy. Many argue that the events described in them have already taken place. They believe that the Roman-led destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD was the fulfillment of these chapters and that Jesus was speaking metaphorically when referring to unprecedented global and cosmic disturbance. As a result they don't foresee a future hour of tribulation erupting from the ancient city of Jerusalem. Nor do they anticipate the future fulfillment of most of the trends and events contained within the chapter. They affirm the reality of the return of Jesus but challenge the legitimacy of extracting Biblical teaching about it from these two chapters.

One of the most prominent and articulate advocates of this approach to Matthew 24-25 (and Biblical eschatology in general) is N.T. Wright. He says that the apocalyptic language used by Jesus was merely "an elaborate metaphor-system" (*Jesus and the Victory of God*; pg. 96) arguing that those who anticipate an end-time fulfillment of these chapters "seem clearly to be looking for a let-out, a way of focusing not on what the passage refers to [history] but on something else [the end of the age]" (*Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*; pg 265-266).

In reference to Jesus' description of His return in 24:29-31 Wright says:

"When Jewish writers spoke of the sun and moon being darkened; when they spoke of angels gathering people from the four winds of heaven; when, in particular, they spoke of a Son of Man who would come on the clouds of heaven - in each of these cases they were using language in this metaphorical way. It is flagrantly absurd to think that Jesus, in saying that sort of thing, envisaged himself or anyone else literally flying around in mid-air on an actual cloud" (*Who Was Jesus?* pg. 55).

"...the 'coming of the son of man' does not refer to the [second coming] in the modern scholarly, and popular, sense of a human figure travelling downwards towards the earth on actual clouds...The 'coming of the son of man' is thus good first-century metaphorical language...." (*Jesus and the Victory of God*; pg. 359-60).

Wright's statements well represent the growing sentiment of many Christians in the West; which is nothing short of the distortion of Biblical truth and an erroneous worldview with serious consequences.

Below are seven reasons why we should read and proclaim Matthew 24-25 as prophecy about the future and not as a historical description about the past.

1. The Destruction of Jerusalem is an Eschatological Event in Biblical Prophecy with Limited Historical Foreshadows

The *sermon* of Matthew 24-25 was preached in response to the *question* asked in 24:3 in light of Jesus *statement* in Matthew 24:1-2 that the Temple would be destroyed.

To a Jew the pronouncement of the destruction of the Temple was *the* sign of the end of this age and the inauguration of the next. This is why at the mention of the decimation of the Temple the disciples asked Jesus about “the end.” It’s critical to understand this connection. It is a connection that is evident in nearly all the Major and Minor prophets. Though there is a wealth of Biblical evidence to draw from, let’s consider only a few examples from Daniel and Zechariah.

Daniel was told that the “time of the end” (Dan. 11:35, 40) and the “resurrection” of the dead (Dan. 12:1-3) would be *immediately* preceded by “a time of trouble” (Dan. 12:1) marked by an invasion of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple initiated by an event Gabriel called “the abomination of desolation.” Zechariah was shown that “all nations” would “surround” Jerusalem in a great age-ending conflict (Zech. 12) that would result in the death of two-thirds of the Jews in the land (Zech. 13:8-9), the collapse of the nation, the dividing up of Jerusalem and ultimately the physical bodily return of Jesus (Zech. 14:1-3). Though Jerusalem has been subject to many military conflicts through the centuries, these prophets described one final battle that is absolutely inseparable chronologically from the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. These events are bound together in the predetermined purposes of God.

Regardless of whether we believe the destruction of Jerusalem is an eschatological event, Gabriel did, the Hebrew prophets did, and the disciples most certainly did. So either Matthew 24-25 is Jesus’ attempt to *correct* this view and redefine what the prophets meant or to *reinforce* this view and expound upon that which the prophets had already established.

There has been a succession of historical invasions of the land of Israel and a number of “abominations” that have resulted in “desolation” in Jerusalem. But none of these satisfy the eschatological nature of the prophecies of Daniel and the rest of the prophets. The fall of Jerusalem in 70AD is clearly in view in Matthew 24 - but not as the complete fulfillment. The prophets, Jesus and the disciples all taught that this age will culminate with one last siege of the city of the Great King and the destruction of the Temple that will soon be rebuilt in our day. The destruction of the Temple is a historical event *and* a prophetic reality.

2. The Destruction of Jerusalem Jesus is Talking About Is a Sign of the End of the Age

One of the greatest weaknesses of the historical interpretation of Matthew 24-25 is the fact that the disciple inquire about “the *end* of the *age*.” Jesus’ answer is in keeping with *that* question. He was asked an eschatological *question* and He gave an eschatological *answer*. Acknowledging the obvious is a valuable exercise for the student of prophecy. Avoiding the obvious is his demise. Matthew 24-25, according to Jesus, is primarily about the end of the age - not history.

N. T. Wright however, argues that the disciples:

"....didn't expect the end of the [age]; merely the end of *the present way the [age] was run*" (Who Was Jesus; 56).

But does the text point in this direction? After the disciples inquired about “the end of the age,” they were then told about global disturbances (24:4-8), corresponding social pressures involving “all nations” (24:9-14), the penetration of the Gospel into every nation (24:14), a time of unequalled tribulation that will threaten the very survival of human beings (24:15-22), the shaking of the cosmos, the rapture of the saints, the return of Jesus (24:29-31) and the establishment of Jesus’ earthly rule where He will enter into judgment with “all nations” (25:31-32). To say that this sermon is about the “way the age is *run*” and not the way the age *ends* is in staunch contradiction to the plain language of the text and the over-arching message of eschatological consummation. Let us honor the Word of God by acknowledging the obvious.

3. The Destruction of Jerusalem Jesus is Talking About Culminates in His Physical Return

In 24:3 the disciples connect (1) the destruction of the Temple in 24:1-2 with (2) the end of the age and (3) Jesus’ return. Now either this connection pleased Jesus and was confirmed or displeased Him and was denied. The simple of fact of the matter though is that the siege of Jerusalem described in 24:15-22 culminates in the return of Jesus in 24:29-31. So both the initial question and the answer revolve around Jesus’ return.

Jesus said that Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies igniting what He referred to as “the great tribulation” that would conclude with His appearing in the sky and the gathering of the saints. These events are intended to be understood as connected chronologically.

To avoid the plain reading of the text, Wright and others suggest that (1) the description of Jesus’s “coming” in 24:29-31 is metaphorical, (2) isn’t to be understood as it naturally reads and that (3) it was fulfilled when Jesus ascended after His resurrection and judged Jerusalem through Roman invasion. (see Wright’s book *Who Was Jesus?* pg. 55)

Jesus wants us to understand that this age ends (24:3) with one final destruction of Jerusalem (24:15-22) and His bodily return (24:29-31).

4. The Destruction of Jerusalem Jesus is Talking About Involves All Nations and Affects the Whole Earth

The global and even universal language in Matthew 24-25 is extremely difficult to avoid. Jesus wasn't speaking of some isolated event in ancient history that only involved the Middle East. In keeping with the prophetic witness already established through Zechariah, Daniel and others, Jesus prophesies of an international crisis that will affect all nations, tribes and tongues.

In 24:7 Jesus speaks of "nations rising against nations." In 24:8 He says that His disciples will be hated by "all nations." In 24:14 He prophesies that the preaching of the Gospel will touch the "whole world" and will penetrate "all nations." In 24:22 He uses the phrase "no human being" referring to corporate humanity. In 24:30 He explains that "all the tribes of the earth" will see Him in the sky when He returns. In 24:31 He speaks of the "gathering of the elect from the four corners of the earth." In 24:36-40 Jesus refers to the global flood of Noah as an example of the hour of history He is describing. And in 25:31-46 He explains that this great tumultuous hour of history will culminate in Jesus judging "all nations" from His throne in the very city they leveled a siege against.

The siege of Jerusalem in 70AD was horrific. But it will be far eclipsed in severity by the "great tribulation" at the end of the age. This time all the nations of the earth will be involved in the drama.

5. The Destruction of Jerusalem Jesus is Talking About Results in the Decisive Punishment of the Nations Involved in the Invasion

Matthew 25 contains three parables. Generally when these parables are preached or taught in church they are removed from their context and divorced from the question in 24:3 that provoked Jesus to tell them. The result of this approach is misunderstanding the point of the parables. In 25:1-2 Jesus prefaces the parable of the 10 virgins saying "In that day...." Jesus is deliberately connecting the parable to the timeframe established in chapter 24.

With that said, the final parable in Matthew 25:31-46 is quite helpful as we wrestle with the nature of the prophecy. Here Jesus teaches that:

"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats....."

Notice the following three things within the text: First, this parable is about the second coming - not 70AD. None of the other parables explicitly include the coming of Jesus to the earth. This last parable is unique in its outright connection with the return of the Lord. Second, this parable is about judgment; namely, the judging of "all the nations." The judgment, as we later read, is decisive and punitive. Jesus actually condemns nations to eternal punishment when He returns.

And third, this parable is about the nations of the earth. We read that the judgment of the nations is based on how the nations treated “the least of [Jesus’] brethren.” Contextually, Jesus’ brethren are the Jews who will suffer under the heavy hand of the nations leveling siege against them and their land. Joel 3:1-16 and Zechariah 12-14 describe this hour of history in vivid and gut-wrenching detail.

We cannot deny the eschatological nature of this parable. The destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD simply does not fit.

6. The Destruction of Jerusalem Jesus is Talking About Occurs Alongside Global Disturbances

In Matthew 24:4-8 we read about global phenomenon that will escalate in the generation of the Lord’s return. These trends and events need to be understood as global in nature. If they weren’t meant to be understood as global in nature, Jesus did His people a real disservice by speaking of them as such. Note his language:

And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. (24:6-8)

These global events are but “the beginning.” These events have always occurred and will continue until the Lord returns. But what Jesus is saying is that there will be an eschatological escalation of these events that need to be Biblically discerned. What begins in wars and rumors of wars will culminate in the shaking of the cosmos and the bodily return of Jesus:

“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. 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. 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. (Matthew 24:29-31)

In Luke 21 Jesus refers to these trends and events saying:

“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:25-28)

Limiting Matthew 24-25 to antiquity undermines urgency in the face of global crisis. Instead of “raising our heads because [our] redemption is drawing near” we disengage with a “scoffing” spirit. The apostle Peter strongly urges us to resist this temptation calling it sin (2 Peter 3). The global crisis described in Matthew 24 are meant to be understood as timing indicators and, in the language of the disciples, “signs” of Jesus’ return. When the historical continuum of creation’s groaning crescendoes and reaches unprecedented extremes its imperative that we acknowledge it and respond accordingly.

7. The Destruction of Jerusalem Jesus is Talking About Is Historically Unequaled and Prophetically Climactic

One of the most important passages in these two chapters is 24:21-22 where Jesus describes the intensity of the crisis in the generation that precedes His return:

“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”

Jesus is saying that the “birth pains” (24:4-8), the corresponding social pressures (24:9-14) and the “abomination of desolation” (24:15-16) will be catalytic in initiating what Jesus referred to as “great tribulation” that will threaten the very survival of human beings. This language is quite persuasive.

Most importantly though, Jesus says that nothing in history past (“since the beginning of the world”) or in history future (“no, and never will be”) will match this hour of tribulation in severity. Some who hold the historical view of the prophecy are forced to declare 70AD as Jerusalem’s most horrific hour of crisis. But a volume of Biblical evidence points in the opposite direction. The prophets and apostles unanimously pointed to the end of the age as the hour in which Jerusalem would suffer her greatest affliction (Zech. 12-14; Isaiah 4:1-6; Daniel 12:1-2; Ezekiel 38-39; Joel 3:1-16; Jeremiah 30:6-7; Revelation 11:1-2; etc.). To miss this is to miss the prophets altogether. If the end of the age crisis is like a storm, Jerusalem would be the eye.

Conclusion

When Jesus says “This generation will be no means pass away” in 24:34 He wasn’t referring to the generation alive at that moment. He was referring to the generation that witnesses the global birth pains (24:4-8), the corresponding social pressures (24:9-14) and the international conflict over the city of Jerusalem marked by the “abomination of desolation” and subsequent unequaled “tribulation” (24:15-22). The generation that witnesses those trends and events will not die before seeing “the Son of Man” coming on the “clouds” to return and judge “all the nations.”

The destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD was a monumentally significant event in redemptive history. But it wasn’t the fulfillment of Matthew 24-25. It was a foreshadowing of what is yet to come.