

THE OLIVET DISCOURSE AND DISPENSATIONALISM

Exploring Current Issues Conference (ECIC), October 3–4, 2022

INTRODUCTION

- A. Title: The title and description of this study are as follows: “The Olivet Discourse and Dispensationalism” and “Matthew 24, particularly, has been a favorite of dispensational premillennialists. The emphasis of this lecture is upon how this text is often misused by dispensational premillennialists regarding sign-watching, as well as being a favorite text of ‘date-setters.’”
- B. Olivet Discourse: The so-called Olivet Discourse is a record of the extensive teaching of Jesus regarding the destruction of Jerusalem and the second coming (or end of the age). All the synoptic Gospels include this teaching, but Matthew provides the most extensive record of the three (Matt 24:1–25:46; Mark 13:1–37; Luke 21:5–36). The descriptor “Olivet” comes from the location whereupon Jesus spoke, namely, the Mount of Olives (Matt 24:3; Mark 13:3; cf. Luke 21:7).
- C. Overview: To limit the scope of this lecture, I will review a middle-of-the-road dispensational approach to the Olivet Discourse (rather than examine the range of interpretations), demonstrate its inadequacy and error, present a biblical exegesis of the Olivet Discourse, and highlight the practical implications of the Olivet Discourse as it relates to dispensational error and the hope of Christianity.

By the end of this study, you should be able to convey to dispensationalists, other Christians, and non-Christians the essential meaning of the Olivet Discourse and why it matters doctrinally and practically to them.

I. THE “TYPICAL” DISPENSATIONAL TAKE ON THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

- A. Approach: I have labeled this section, “The ‘Typical’ Dispensational Take on the Olivet Discourse.” But this description is a bit of a misnomer because a common interpretation by dispensationalists does not exist. The range of (mis)interpretation is broad. For the sake of brevity and so as not to attack a straw man, I will summarize and critique what I considered the most reasonable expression of the position—John MacArthur’s exposition of Mark 13. (His series is available on the “Grace to You” website. See the “Selected Bibliography” at the end of this outline.)
- B. MacArthur: MacArthur describes himself as a “leaky dispensationalist” but affirms unreservedly a future for national Israel and a millennial kingdom. He contends in his series “Why Every Calvinist Should Be a Premillennialist” that “the only people who work with the prophetic texts with precision and care and specificity are those who interpret the Bible literally and end up as premillennialists.” MacArthur consequently assumes a dispensational and premillennial approach to the Olivet Discourse (or Olivet Prophecy).

C. Summary: Details differ from dispensationalist to dispensationalist, but MacArthur's overarching outline and "timeline" of the Olivet Discourse seem to be (fairly) consistent with other dispensationalists. He reads Mark 13 thus:

1. Mark 13:1–2 // Matt 25:1–2 // Luke 21:5–6: Jesus foretells the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (AD 70), which accords with his preceding statement in Matt 23:38: "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!" (LSB; cf. 21:13 = "my house" versus "your house").
2. Mark 13:3–13 // Matt 24:3–14 // Luke 21:7–19: Jesus springboards into a discussion of the time between the destruction of Jerusalem and the Great Tribulation (i.e., the "Church Age"). MacArthur assumes that the disciples' questions are somewhat independent of Jesus's statement regarding the destruction of the temple and that Jesus addresses generic end-times (eschatological) concerns.

Though I disagree with his interpretation of the Olivet Discourse, I at least appreciate that MacArthur does not handle this section of the Olivet Discourse as other dispensationalists (or premillennialists). He does not urge his congregation to watch for the signs of Mark 13:3–13, since he recognizes that false prophets, wars, persecutions, and betrayals are ubiquitous and not indicative of the so-called "last days."

We can contrast the position of John MacArthur with that of Max Lucado, who in 2020 lobbied for a possible present fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse. Lucado said, "The signs are there. We could easily add to the list: the blood moons, the attempts at peace in the Middle East, increased apostasy in the Church. All of these add up to make us think this could be the generation ... of the rapture, the tribulation, and the second coming. Again, to be clear, I don't know. No one knows. But shouldn't we read the signs?" (Lucado 2020).

3. Mark 13:14–23 // Matt 24:15–28 // Luke 21:20–24: Jesus then allegedly identifies the "sign" of the end—the advent of the Antichrist (and the attendant tribulation). MacArthur identifies the Antichrist as the Muslim Messiah, the Mahdi, (and the false prophet with the Muslim Jesus). Regarding the specific identification of Judean location, MacArthur links the Olivet Discourse with Revelation and argues that the church will be raptured before the Great Tribulation and that the ones who need to escape Judea are 144,000 converted Jews.

(In his study Bible, MacArthur recognizes the overlap between the destruction of Jerusalem and the abomination of desolation in Luke 21:20 but suggests that "the sign of Jerusalem under siege was previewed in AD 70 but awaits its fulfillment in the future.")

4. Mark 13:24–37 // Matt 24:29–25:46 // Luke 21:25–38: Finally, Jesus promises his return in the clouds to end the tribulation, defeat the Antichrist, judge the ungodly, and establish his kingdom. The generation that will be present when he comes again will see the consummation of all these things, and the people of God—converted Jews and the raptured church—will reign with Christ. This generation must watch and pray (for salvation) because they do not know when the end will come.
- D. Critique: MacArthur may present a compelling case for those who already agree with his eschatology, but he does not deal fairly with the Olivet Discourse itself or with those who are not dispensationalists. (For instance, regarding his dealings with non-dispensationalists, he defines the common eschatological positions as “premillennial,” “postmillennial,” and “amillennial.” He then mockingly argues that so-called amillennialists are heretics because they deny the Scriptures because they do not “believe” in the “millennium” [i.e., do not believe that the Bible speaks of a millennium].) The major flaws in his dispensational approach to the Olivet Discourse are as follows:
1. Inconsistency: Dispensationalists, like MacArthur, employ an inconsistent hermeneutic in the Olivet Discourse. J. Michael Lester argues that dispensationalists are “committed to the literal, historical, grammatical method of understanding Scripture” and that they “look for a common-sense meaning” (Lester 2020, 28). Dispensationalists then assume that only a “literal” interpretation of prophetic literature is acceptable. Yet, for all that they claim, dispensationalists do not approach the Olivet Discourse (prophetic literature) according to this hermeneutic. They ignore statements that push the fulfillment of (at least parts of) the Olivet Discourse back into the first century AD and force a futuristic interpretation of most of the prophecy.
 2. Eisegesis: Dispensationalists overlay a predetermined eschatology upon the Olivet Discourse. In other words, they perform eisegesis. If dispensationalism were a valid model, harmonizing the Olivet Discourse with it would be necessary because of the principle of scriptural inerrancy, but dispensationalism is fraught with serious flaws. (See the other lectures in this series.) It is unnecessary to read the Olivet Discourse through the lens of dispensational eschatology.
 3. Disregard: Dispensationalists ignore (or reinterpret) important exegetical markers in the Olivet Discourse. According to dispensationalists, (a) Jesus only uses the initial questions of the disciples as a springboard for his end-times prophecies, (b) any Gospel parallels that suggest an immediate (i.e., AD 70) fulfillment need to be reinterpreted according to dispensational and premillennial assumptions, and (c) the time marker (Matt 24:34 // Mark 13:30 // Luke 21:32) cannot mean what it seems to mean. This is not a “common-sense” interpretation of these passages. (MacArthur tries to play off the significance of this time marker by suggesting that his

audience is too smart to be “tricked” into thinking that it is not talking about a now-future generation.)

The dispensational perspective does not work with the Olivet Discourse. (For additional reasons to reject the dispensational view of the Olivet Discourse, see Carson 1995, 494–95.) In the next section, I will present what I believe to be an accurate interpretation of the Olivet Discourse (primarily from the Matthean account). Not everyone will agree with the specifics of my exegesis, but I hope to demonstrate at the very least that the dispensational interpretation of the Olivet Discourse is erroneous. I will not expound upon Luke 17:20–37, though it contains language like that of the Olivet Discourse. My task is to address the Olivet Discourse. (I owe much of my present understanding of the Olivet Discourse to L. A. Stauffer, who himself acknowledges his debt to [postmillennialist] J. Marcellus Kik, and to Bob McPherson and Kyle Pope.)

II. THE OLIVET DISCOURSE IN ITS BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- A. Method: The so-called historical-grammatical method, lauded by dispensationalists (and by most conservative exegetes), is usually an appropriate way to interpret Scripture (or any other document). “This method suggests that the meaning of a text is the author’s intended meaning and that the author’s intention can be derived most accurately by observing the facts of history and the rules of grammar as they apply to the text being studied” (Virkler and Ayayo 2007, 76–77). Yet, the dispensational application of this method to prophetic literature, including the Olivet Discourse, is flawed. I will attempt to use it rightly to interpret the Olivet Discourse.
- B. Setting (Matt 24:1–3 // Mark 13:1–4 // Luke 21:5–7): Jesus has condemned the religious leaders (i.e., the scribes and the Pharisees) and announced the emptying (destruction) of the temple in Jerusalem (Matt 23:1–39; cf. Josephus, *A.J.* 20.166, 184; *B.J.* 6.304, 309). As he leaves the area, his disciples marvel at the temple complex. Jesus again predicts its destruction. His disciples come to him privately on the Mount of Olives to inquire about this cataclysmic event, which they assume will occur at the end of the age.

(I include my translation of Matt 24 not because it is especially well-done but because it highlights certain linguistic parallels that are not always clear in other versions. Brackets signal the insertion of words that are not strictly in the Greek text. These words are added for readability. The translation is made from NA²⁸.)

Matt 24:1 Then Jesus departed from the temple and was going away, and his disciples approached [him] so that they might show him the temple buildings.
2 But he answered and said to them, “Do you see all these things? Truly I say to you, not a stone here will by any means be left on another stone [but every stone] will be thrown down.”
3 Now as he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, his disciples approached him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what [will be] the sign of your coming and [the] end of the age?”

1. Temple: The temple (and Jerusalem) is the focus of the first part of the Olivet Discourse. Jesus has already announced the desolation of the temple: “Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!” (Matt 23:38 LSB; cf. vv. 37, 39; 26:64; Jer 22:5; Ps 118:26). As Jesus departs from the temple, his disciples admire the structure, but Jesus announces its future destruction. His disciples later ask him in private about this prophecy.

2. Question(s): The disciples assume that the end of the temple equals the second coming of Christ and the end of the age. They want to know when these things will occur. The parallel Gospel accounts relate the (mis)understanding of the disciples: “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?” (Mark 13:4 LSB), and “Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” (Luke 21:7 LSB). Common to the synoptic accounts is their concern over the timing (“when?”) and the sign (“what?”) of the “end.”
 - a. Timing: The disciples want to know when the destruction of the temple will be. Jesus answers their question(s) by highlighting the “when” that they can know and contrasting it with the “when” that they cannot know. The former “when” is linked to “these things” (Gr. ταῦτα). The use of ταῦτα (or πάντα ταῦτα) is significant. The word ταῦτα occurs in all the accounts of the Olivet Discourse and is associated with the temple and the events surrounding its destruction (Matt 23:36; 24:2, 3, 8, 33, 34 // Mark 13:4, 8, 29, 30 // Luke 21:6, 7, 9, 31, 36). The disciples want to know when “these things” will happen; Jesus answers, “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (Matt 24:34 // Mark 13:30; cf. Matt 23:36; Luke 21:31–32).

 - b. Sign: The disciples also want to know what will be the sign of Jesus’s coming and the end of the age. They assume a close connection between the coming of Jesus and the end of the age. (The phrases “of your coming” and “the end of the age” are governed by a single article [i.e., TSKS construction = τῆς σῆς παρουσίας καὶ συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος], suggesting that the disciples assumed them to be either closely connected or one and the same [Wallace 1996, 277–83].)

The disciples do not see the destruction of the temple as merely the end of the Jewish dispensation (“age”). They likely use the phrase “the end of the age” in the same way that Jesus uses it—of the end of the cosmos or the final judgment (Matt 13:39, 40, 49; cf. 28:20; Heb 9:26). The word translated “end” (Gr. συντέλεια) occurs six times in the NT (Matt 13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20; Heb 9:26). This is not the word translated “end” (Gr. τέλος) that Jesus uses later in the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:6, 13, 14 // Mark 13:7, 13 // Luke

21:9; cf. Matt 10:22).

The word translated “coming” (Gr. παρουσία = “visible presence”) finds its introduction to the NT in Matt 24. The NT occurrences of παρουσία consistently describe the first or second coming of Christ. (Παρουσία occurs in the following places in the NT: Matt 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Cor 15:23; 16:17; 2 Cor 7:6, 7; 10:10; Phil 1:26; 2:12; 1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1, 8, 9; Jas 5:7, 8; 2 Pet 1:16; 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28.) The disciples seem to assume that the παρουσία of Christ will occur when “these things” happen.

Jesus corrects the misunderstanding of the disciples, explaining the “when” and the “what” to them. He describes the “false signs” and the “actual sign” of his “coming” (not παρουσία) against Jerusalem and then the nature of his “coming” (παρουσία).

- C. Prelude (Matt 24:4–14 // Mark 13:5–13 // Luke 21:8–19): Jesus describes the time preceding the end (τέλος). He warns his disciples not to be deceived by false signs (e.g., false christs/prophets, wars, natural disasters, persecutions/betrayals). The end will not come until the gospel has reached the world.

Matt 24:4 Then Jesus answered and said to them, “Keep watch so that no one deceives you! 5 For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. 6 And [then] you will [soon thereafter] hear of wars and reports of wars. Keep on guard so that you do not become frightened! For it is necessary [for these things] to occur, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in [various] places. 8 But all these things are [the] beginning of birth pains. 9 At that time, they will betray you to persecution and will put you to death. Yes, you will be hated by all the nations because of my name. 10 And at that time, many will fall away, will betray one another, and hate one another. 11 Many false prophets also will arise and deceive many. 12 And because lawlessness will increase, the love of many will grow cold. 13 But the one who remains to [the] end, this one will be saved. 14 Now, this good news of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and at that time, the end will come.

1. Exhortation: Jesus opens with the command to “keep watch” (Gr. βλέπετε; Matt 24:4; cf. Mark 13:2, 5, 9, 23; Luke 21:8, 30) lest false prophets and false signs of the end deceive his disciples.
2. Misleading “Signs”: Jesus asserts that the “signs” that some today claim are harbingers of the end-times are misleading “signs.” Signs will not immediately precede the end (Matt 24:6b). Jesus uses the illustration of labor pains to show that the “signs” in the years between the then-present time and the end were only evidence of a then-future event (24:8). The “signs” include false christs/prophets, wars, natural disasters, persecutions,

and betrayals. Such “signs” have occurred everywhere and often since Jesus predicted them, but they surely occurred in the years between the death of Christ (AD 30) and the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70; Josephus, *A.J.* 20.188; *B.J.* 6.285, 290).

3. End: The word translated “end” (Gr. τέλος; Matt 24:6, 13, 14 // Mark 13:7, 13 // Luke 21:9) in Matt 24:6 is not the same word translated “end” (Gr. συντέλεια) in verse 3. The “end” that Jesus describes in verse 6 is the destruction of Jerusalem as it is associated with the Roman invasion of Palestine (Matt 24:13–14 // Luke 21:19–20). Jesus assures his disciples that—though the intervening period will be plagued with difficulties—the good news of the kingdom will reach the whole world (Gr. οικουμένη, “inhabited [world]”—perhaps the Roman Empire specifically; cf. Luke 2:1; Acts 24:5) before the end comes (Matt 24:14; cf. 28:19 = “all the nations [or gentiles]”; Rom 1:8; Col 1:6, 23). If they will remain faithful to the Lord and heed his warnings regarding the “end,” the disciples will escape the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt 24:13; cf. 10:21–23).

- D. Tribulation (Matt 24:15–28 // Mark 13:14–23 // Luke 21:20–24): The actual “sign” of the end is the abomination of desolation, which is clearly identified as the presence of the Roman armies. Christians ought then to flee from Jerusalem and Judea as the tribulation will soon commence. The “coming” (Gr. ἐρχόμενος) of the Son of Man in judgment against Jerusalem will not be like his “coming” (Gr. παρουσία) in final judgment.

Matt 24:15 Therefore, whenever you see the abomination of desolation that was spoken of by Daniel the prophet standing in [the] holy place—Let the one who reads understand!— 16 at that time, let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, 17 let the one who is on the housetop not descend to take away the things that are in his house, 18 and let the one who is in the field not return to take his garment. 19 But how calamitous [it will be] in those days for those who are pregnant and for those who are nursing [babies]! 20 But pray that your flight will not be during winter or on the Sabbath. 21 For at that time, there will be a great tribulation such as has never been since the beginning of the world until now—nor will there be by any means [such a tribulation again]! 22 And if those days were not shortened, no one would be saved. But because of the elect those days will be shortened. 23 At that time, if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here [is] the Christ!’ or ‘There!’ do not believe [him], 24 for false christs and false prophets will arise and give great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. 25 Behold, I have told you beforehand. 26 Therefore, if they say to you, ‘Behold, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out, [or] ‘Behold, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe [them]. 27 For just as the lightning comes from [the] east and flashes to [the] west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be. 28 Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

1. Definitive “Sign”: The foregoing “signs” do not announce the end (of Jerusalem but precede the definitive sign—“the abomination of

desolation” (Gr. τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως = “the detestable thing that causes desecration” [Friberg, s.v. “βδέλυγμα”]). The prophet Daniel speaks directly of an “abomination of desolation” when he describes the then-future tribulation under Antiochus Epiphanes (Dan 11:31; 12:11). Daniel uses similar language in 9:27, however, to announce the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70: “And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will make sacrifice and grain offering cease; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate” (LSB). Jesus seemingly refers to Dan 9:27 when he speaks of the “sign” of the end (Matt 24:15 // Mark 13:14). The parallel in Luke 21:20 identifies the “abomination of desolation” as the encircling of Jerusalem by the Roman armies. (Non-biblical sources, such as Josephus and Eusebius, do the same [Josephus, *B.J.* 6.288, 296; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.5.3–4].)

Though the phrase “holy place” (Gr. τόπος ἅγιος; Matt 24:15) usually refers to the temple itself (Acts 6:13; 21:28), the parallel Gospel accounts, along with the subsequent warning from Jesus, suggest that the abomination of desolation will initially be standing “in the presence of” or “in view of” the temple, not (yet) inside the temple (Mark 13:14 // Luke 21:20). The early Christians took this warning to heart and fled before the destruction of the city.

(William Whiston suggests that Jesus refers to the retreat of Cestius [AD 66]: “There may another very important, and very providential reason be here assigned, for this strange and foolish retreat of Cestius; which, if Josephus had been now a Christian, he might probably have taken notice of also; and that is, the affording the Jewish Christians in the city an opportunity of calling to mind the prediction and caution given them by Christ about 33½ years before, that ‘when they should see the abomination of desolation, [the idolatrous Roman armies, with the images of their idols in their ensigns, ready to lay Jerusalem desolate], stand where it ought not’; or, ‘in the holy place’; or, ‘when they should see Jerusalem compassed with armies,’ they should then flee to the mountains. By complying with which those Jewish Christians fled to the mountains of Perea, and escaped this destruction” [Josephus, *B.J.* 2.539, n. *b*; cf. *B.J.* 5.420–22].)

2. Local Tribulation: The tribulation is local, not universal, in character—confined to the circumstances of first-century Palestine. Jesus instructs believers in Judea to flee quickly from their rooftops and fields, which hardly describes the normal situation of modern Jews in Jerusalem. He also pities those whose flight will be hindered by their circumstances (e.g., pregnant and nursing women; cf. Luke 23:28–30). Jesus encourages his disciples to pray that the approach of the Roman armies may not occur when travel will be difficult in Judea (i.e., during the winter or on the

Sabbath). The “great tribulation” would be the worst that the nation of Israel (or the world) will have ever experienced, as it is the divine rejection of national Israel (Matt 24:21; cf. Dan 12:1). (Dispensationalists must either ignore the local nature of the prophecy or assume that it describes a future attack on Jerusalem.)

3. False Claims: Though he warns that false christs and false prophets will arise in the period before the tribulation, Jesus warns that the same will arise during the tribulation. He does not want his elect (Christians) to be deceived by them and think that his second coming has occurred before or is occurring with the fall of Jerusalem (Matt 24:23–28; cf. 2 Thess 2:1–12; Josephus, *B.J.* 6.285–88 = ψευδοπροφήτης, σημεῖον, τέρας). This is the first time that Jesus uses the term “coming” (Gr. παρουσία). Jesus affirms that his παρουσία will not be secret, as the false christs/prophets claim, but will be obvious. His “coming” in judgment against Jerusalem will not be literal and visible but symbolic and invisible.

- E. Judgment (Matt 24:29–35 // Mark 13:24–31 // Luke 21:25–33): Jesus employs common prophetic language to describe the destruction of Jerusalem. After the tribulation, the Son of Man will punish the wicked but gather his elect (Christians, not necessarily Jews). The destruction of the temple (i.e., judgment of Jerusalem) will certainly occur within a generation of the Olivet Discourse.

Matt 24:29 But 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 at that time the sign of the Son of Man will flash in heaven. And at that time 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 Then he will send his angels with a loud trumpet [blast], and they will gather his elect from the four winds, [that is,] from [one] end of [the] heavens to the other. 32 But learn [this] parable from the fig tree: Whenever the branch [of the fig tree] has already become tender and sprouted [its] leaves, you know that summer [is] near. 33 So you also, whenever you see all these things, know that it is near, [that is,] at the door. 34 Truly I say to you that this generation will by no means pass away until all these things have occurred. 35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will by no means pass away.

1. Timing: The disciples asked “when” (“these things”) and “what” (“sign”) questions. Jesus, though he does not explicitly connect his comments to his “coming” (Gr. παρουσία), identifies the timing of the sign of the Son of Man: “immediately after the tribulation.” (I see no reason to define “immediately” [Gr. εὐθέως] in any other way than its normal denotation that suggests a time soon after what precedes, but cf. Pope 2013, 856–58).

2. Language: The language of Matt 24:29 // Mark 13:24–25 // Luke 21:25–26 need not be seen as an “end-of-the-world” (eschatological) description. This cosmic, cataclysmic language of uncreation is typical of OT prophecies of judgment (e.g., Isa 13:10; 34:4 [LXX]; Ezek 32:7–8; Joel 2:10). (Dispensationalists claim to interpret Scripture literally but fail to appreciate the use of prophetic [symbolic] language here [and also do not accept the “commonsense” reading of the Discourse up to this point].)
3. Sign: The sign of the Son of Man is the Son of Man “coming” in judgment (i.e., “coming on the clouds of heaven” = again, common prophetic expression [e.g., Isa 19:1; Ezek 1:4; Nah 1:3; Matt 26:64]), which in part fulfills the prophecy of Daniel (Dan 7:13). (I acknowledge that the same verb, φαίνω [*phainō*, “appear; flash”], occurs in Matt 24:27, 30. Yet, the first occurrence describes lighting, which is an illustration of the second coming of Christ, while the second occurrence describes the sign of the Son of Man, which seems to apply contextually to the Jerusalem judgment.) This coming of Jesus will be “invisible,” but the visible sign will be the result of the foregoing abomination of desolation (i.e., the destruction of the city and the temple).
4. Response: The manifestation of the power and the glory of the Son of Man in 70 AD will cause the “tribes of the earth” (or possibly, the “tribes of the land” [Gr. αἱ φυλαὶ τῆς γῆς]) to mourn, which likely refers to Jews throughout the Roman Empire or throughout the land of Palestine. (The only other use of the word “tribes” (Gr. φυλαί) in Matthew refers to Israel [19:28].) The elect (Christians), however, will find consolation in their vindication and protection. (Though the “gathering” of the elect in Matt 24:31 resembles 13:41–42, the “harvesting” in the latter is reversed, angels removing the wicked instead of the righteous.)
5. Parable: The parable (illustration) of the fig tree emphasizes the recognizable (predictable) nature of the destruction of Jerusalem. (Not so with the second coming [παρουσία] of Christ!)
6. Generation: Jesus provides a specific answer to the disciples’ initial question (“When will these things be?”): “Truly I say to you that this generation will by no means pass away until all these things have occurred” (Matt 24:35 // Mark 13:30 // Luke 21:32). The word translated “generation” (Gr. γενεά) usually means the same as “generation” does in English; it is “the sum total of those born at the same time, expanded to include all those living at a given time and frequently defined in terms of specific characteristics,” or by extension, “the time of a generation” (BDAG, s.v. “γενεά”). Matthew consistently uses γενεά in this way (1:17; 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36; 24:34). Matthew 23:36 is a clear parallel to Matt 24:34. (It is also noteworthy that the time marker [i.e., the answer to the “when” question] links with the object [“these things”].)

7. Assurance: Jesus concludes his discussion of the destruction of Jerusalem with the assurance that what he has said will indeed come to pass.
- F. Second Coming (Matt 24:36–25:46 // Mark 13:32–37 // Luke 21:34–36): The “coming” of Christ on the final day of judgment contrasts with his “coming” in judgment against Jerusalem. No discernable signs will accompany the second coming. Christians must always be ready for that day.

36 But concerning that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of the heavens nor the Son—but only the Father. 37 For just as the days of Noah [were], so will the coming of the Son of Man be. 38 For as in those days that were before the flood, [people] were eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. 40 At that time, two [men] will be in the field, one will be taken and another left; 41 two [women will be] grinding at the millstone, one will be taken and another left. 42 Therefore, stay on the alert, because you do not know on what day your Lord is coming! 43 But know this: If the master of the house knew at what watch of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed on the alert and not allowed his house to be broken into. 44 For this reason, you also be prepared, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect. 45 Who, then, is the faithful and wise slave who the lord has put in charge of his household slaves to give them [their] food at the proper time? 46 Blessed is that servant whom his lord finds so doing when he comes. 47 Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. 48 But if that evil slave says in his heart, “My lord delays,” 49 begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, 50 [then] the lord of that servant will arrive on a day that he does not expect and at an hour that he does not know, 51 will cut him in two, and assign [him] his portion with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(I do not include a translation of Matt 25 because the relevant teaching for the present study is in Matt 24.)

1. Contrasts: The second coming (Gr. παρουσία) of Jesus will not be like his “coming” in judgment against Jerusalem. (Note the [light] contrastive δέ [“but”] in Matt 24:36 // Mark 13:32 // Luke 21:34.) Several clear contrasts exist between Matt 24:4–35 // Mark 13:5–31 // Luke 21:8–33 and 24:36–25:46 // Mark 13:32–37 // Luke 21:34–36:
 - a. The use of “these things” (Gr. ταῦτα) before the transition from the destruction of Jerusalem and its non-use after (see II.B.2.a)

(Luke 21:36, a summary statement of its preceding discussion, uses ταῦτα after the transition, but even it contrasts “escaping these things” with “standing before the Son of Man” in final judgment.)

- b. The description of a discernable sign(s) preceding the destruction of Jerusalem and the affirmation that no discernable signs will precede the final judgment

(Jesus reveals the “sign[s]” of the destruction of Jerusalem to his disciples in advance [Matt 24:25]. Not so with his second coming. No one, apart from God, knows [or can discern] when the latter will occur [v. 36].)

- c. The use of “(those) days” (Matt 24:19, 22, 29) before the transition and the use of “(that) day (and hour)” (24:36, 42, 50; 25:13; cf. 24:37, 38) after

(The use of “days” [Gr. ἡμέραι] in Matt 24:37, 38 describes the situation of Noah. The comparison is not to the word “days” per se but to the unpreparedness of the people in the time of Noah. Furthermore, the expression “that day” [Gr. ἐκείνη ἡμέρα] suggests final judgment [Matt 7:22; 2 Thess 1:10; 2 Tim 1:12, 18; 4:8; cf. 1 Thess 5:2; Jude 6].)

2. Illustration: The circumstances preceding the second coming (Gr. παρουσία) will resemble those preceding the flood (Matt 24:37–39; cf. v. 27; Luke 17:26–27; 2 Pet 3:3–7). Just as the flood was a universal, not local, judgment, so too will be the final judgment.) Most people will not be ready for the coming of Christ, that is, the end of the age.
3. Separation: The final judgment will involve the separation of the righteous from the wicked (Matt 24:40–41; cf. 13:24–30, 36–43; 25:31–36). (The figurative language [e.g., simile, parable] surrounding Matt 24:40–41 suggests that Jesus does not intend for his words to be taken literally [i.e., of the so-called Rapture].) The prepared and the unprepared will be engaged in the same kinds of daily activities when Jesus comes again, but only the former will be ready to meet Christ in judgment.
4. Exhortation: Jesus commands his disciples to be watchful (Matt 24:42). Though the language of vigilance and sobriety are similar in Jesus’s discussion of his judgment against Jerusalem and his judgment of the world, the intent in each section is different.

The first-century Christians need to “keep watch” (Gr. βλέπετε; Matt 24:4; Mark 13:5, 9, 23; Luke 21:8) and “keep on guard” (Gr. ὀρᾶτε; Matt 24:6) for the foretold “signs” so that they may escape the destruction of Jerusalem, whereas the post-AD-70 Christians—including us!—need to “keep watch” (Mark 13:33), “stay on the alert” (Gr. γρηγορεῖτε; Matt 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:35, 37), and “stay awake” (Gr. ἀγρυπνεῖτε; Mark 13:33) lest they be caught off-guard at the second coming and suffer eternal punishment.

5. Parables: The prophecy concerning the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt 24:4–35 // Mark 13:5–31 // Luke 21:8–33) contains only one “parable” (i.e., the illustration of the fig tree). The discussion of the second coming of Christ contains three (or four; Matt 24:45–25:30), all of which emphasize the necessity of constant readiness for the arrival of the Son of Man. Jesus will bless those whom he finds watching but punish those whom he finds lax. (The punishment for the wicked is a place of torment. The expression “weeping and gnashing of teeth” in Matt 24:51 and 25:30 is consistently associated with final judgment, not temporal judgment [e.g., destruction of Jerusalem; Matt 8:11–12; 13:41–42, 49–50; 22:13; 24:48–51; 25:30; cf. v. 46; Luke 13:28]. This suggests a parallel between Matt 24:36–51 and 25:1–46.) Jesus concludes with a “parabolic” description of the final judgment (Matt 25:31–46; cf. Rev 20:11–15).

G. Summary: In sum, Jesus answers and corrects the misunderstanding of the disciples. They assume that the destruction of the temple equals the second coming (Gr. παρουσία) of Christ and the end (Gr. συντέλεια) of the age. The destruction of Jerusalem will come with a discernable sign(s). When they recognize the impending doom of the city, the Christians are to flee. But the final judgment will come unexpectedly, necessitating constant vigilance. Examination of the Olivet Discourse through the lenses of its biblical and historical contexts does not advance a dispensational understanding. Rather, it implies a “final” punishment of national Israel in AD 70, a “new” elect (i.e., Christians), and an “amillennial” eschatology.

III. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE OLIVET DISCOURSE FOR CHRISTIANS— ESPECIALLY AS THEY CONVERSE WITH DISPENSATIONALISTS

- A. Dispensationalism: The Olivet Discourse dismantles the major tenets of dispensationalism. It affirms the failure of national Israel and implies its “replacement”—or better, its fulfillment—in the church (i.e., the elect; Matt 24:22, 24, 41 // Mark 13:20, 22, 27). It denies the erroneous teaching that Jesus will return to establish a kingdom in Jerusalem. Instead, it affirms that the second coming of Christ will be for final judgment, to deliver the (spiritual) kingdom to the Father. We ought to show dispensationalists (1) that national Israel failed and God has chosen spiritual “Israel” (i.e., the church = Jews and gentiles) to be his people, and (2) that the second coming of Christ will be Judgment Day.
- B. Sign-watching: The Olivet Discourse denies the need for “sign-watching.” Jesus only warned his disciples to watch for signs that would allow them to escape the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70). These signs occurred within a generation of his prophecy (Matt 24:34 // Mark 13:30 // Luke 21:32). No signs will accompany the second coming. We must be in a constant state of readiness and ought to help “sign-watchers” recognize that no signs will precede the final judgment.
- C. Date-setting: The Olivet Discourse invalidates the assumptions of modern “date-setters.” Certain dispensationalists (*contra* MacArthur) urge people to recognize

the “signs” of the end times. Some even claim to know when the rapture, the tribulation, and the second coming will occur.

Remember Harold Camping (1921–2013)? Camping was not a dispensationalist, but he was a popular “date-setter.” He claimed that the Judgment Day would occur on September 6, 1994, which he later changed to September 29 and then October 2. Camping thereafter claimed that the rapture would occur on May 21, 2011, which he changed to October 21. Around that time, a joke was going around that strikes home with regard to “date-setters.” It went like this: “Having trouble finding Harold Camping jokes? Don’t worry. It’s not the end of the world.” Camping rightly received public ridicule for his failed predictions. He was a false prophet. He and other “date-setters” tarnish the reputation of “Christianity.”

Jesus did not speak the Olivet Discourse so that people could divine the date of his second coming. Instead, he gave the Olivet Discourse to instill within us (Christians) a sense of sobriety and focus. Since no one knows “the day or the hour” and no signs will precede Judgment Day, we must be ready for (and warn others of) the persistent “nearness” of the second coming (Matt 24:42–44; cf. Rom 13:11; 1 Pet 4:7). We ought to show “date-setters” that “of that day and hour no one knows” (Matt 24:36 LSB; cf. vv. 42; 25:13 // Mark 13:32, 33, 35).

CONCLUSION

- A. Summary: The Olivet Discourse evidences the omniscience of Jesus, the rejection of national Israel, the election of spiritual Israel, the futility of “sign-watching” and “date-setting,” and the necessity of personal vigilance. This study demonstrates that the “typical” dispensational take on the Olivet Discourse is fundamentally flawed and that it contradicts the immediate and remote contexts of the Olivet Discourse. It also presented a plausible interpretation of the Olivet Discourse and its practical implications for modern Christians.
- B. Exhortation: I conclude that a scriptural view of the Olivet Discourse is not dispensational. The dispensational interpretation of the Olivet Discourse presents a foreign expectation for the future. Since the Bible affirms only “one hope” (Eph 4:4), we (Christians)—especially elders and preachers—must identify the false “hope” of dispensationalism, dismantle it, teach and preach the truth about biblical eschatology, and stand united in the hope of the gospel, for though “heaven and earth will pass away, ... [the] words [of Jesus] will not pass away” (Matt 24:35 LSB). “Therefore [let us] stay awake, for [we] do not know which day [our] Lord is coming” (v. 42 LSB).

Marshall McDaniel
Athens, AL
marshall.mcdaniel.02@gmail.com

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