

# Glad Tidings Church Life Group

Leader: Dan Thomson

## Study of the Gospel of Matthew

Study Guide for Meeting on November 26, 2020

Please read Matthew Chapter 24. We will take 2-3 weeks to cover these topics.

The notes attached give an overview of the themes we will be touching on.

The themes are:

- Seeing things in Context
- Is the Kingdom to be established
- The Temple to be destroyed – when?
- The disciples 3 questions
- “The end” is not yet
- Flight on the Sabbath
- Still not the sign
- All of these things
- “no one knows”
- What are we to “watch”
- Jesus Point

Having read the chapters during the week, we will be discussing the themes outlined and I will have a series of questions prepared to focus our discussion.

*Read, study, meditate, pray – the road to enlightenment.*

## BIBLE PROPHECY: WHAT MATTHEW 24 TELLS US ABOUT "THE END"

D.A. Carson, a New Testament scholar, begins his commentary on Matthew 24 with the following words: "Few chapters of the Bible have called forth more disagreement among interpreters than Matthew 24 and its parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21. The history of the interpretation of this chapter is immensely complex" (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 1984, volume 8, page 488).

Carson's statement underlines the difficulties people have encountered when trying to interpret Matthew 24. As we try to understand what Jesus was saying in this chapter, we would do well to approach it with caution and avoid simplistic views and dogmatism.

### Seeing things in context

Studying Matthew 24 in the larger context of preceding chapters will help us avoid interpretation pitfalls. We may be surprised to learn that the background to Matthew 24 actually begins at least as far back as chapter 16:21. There, we are given the following summary statement: "From that time Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

By his comments, Jesus set the stage for what appeared to be a showdown in Jerusalem between himself and the religious authorities. He continued telling his disciples about this imminent conflict as they made their way to Jerusalem (20:17-19). During the time Jesus was explaining that he was to suffer at Jerusalem, he took Peter, James and John up a high mountain. There, they experienced the transfiguration (17:1-13). This must have made the disciples wonder whether the establishment of the kingdom of God was close at hand (17:10-12).

Jesus also told the disciples they would sit on 12 thrones judging Israel "when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne" (19:28). This sparked additional questions about the time and manner of the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus' talking about the kingdom even prompted the mother of James and John to ask him to give special positions in the kingdom to her sons (20:20-21).

Then came the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, in which Jesus rode into the city on a donkey (21:1-11). This fulfilled what the prophet Zechariah had spoken, and which was thought to refer to the Messiah. The entire city was stirred, wondering what would happen. In Jerusalem, Jesus overturned the moneylender's tables and took other actions to demonstrate his messianic authority (21:12-27). "Who is this?" people asked in response (21:10).

Next, in 21:43 Jesus told the chief priests and elders of the people: "I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit." His audience knew he was talking about them. Jesus' statement could have been taken as an

implication that he was ready to establish his messianic kingdom, but the religious leaders would not be a part of it.

## **Is the kingdom to be established?**

The disciples who heard this must have wondered what was going to happen. Was Jesus ready to announce his messiahship? Was he ready to put down the Roman authority? Was he on the verge of bringing in the kingdom of God? Would there be a war, and what would happen to Jerusalem and the temple?

We now come to [Matthew 22:15](#). Here the scene begins with the Pharisees laying plans to trap Jesus by asking him a question regarding the paying of taxes. They hoped to use his answer as the basis for accusing Jesus of rebelling against the Roman authority. But Jesus answered cleverly, and their plan was foiled.

That same day the Sadducees also had an encounter with Jesus (22:23-32). Not believing in the resurrection, they asked him a trick question about seven brothers marrying one woman. They asked, Whose wife would she be in the resurrection? Jesus answered them indirectly by telling them they didn't understand their own Scriptures. He pointed out that there is no marriage in the kingdom, so their question was meaningless.

Next, the Pharisees and Sadducees together tested Jesus on the meaning of the greatest commandment in the law (22:36). He answered by quoting [Leviticus 19:8](#) and [Deuteronomy 6:5](#). Then Jesus asked them a trick question about whose son the Messiah was to be (22:42). They fell into his trap, and "no one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions" (22:46).

Chapter 23 shows Jesus criticizing the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. Toward the end of the chapter, Jesus talked about sending them prophets, wise men and teachers whom they would flog, pursue, kill and crucify. He placed the responsibility of all the slain prophets on their shoulders. The tension was mounting, and the disciples must have been wondering about the meaning of these hostile encounters. Was Jesus about to take control as Messiah?

Then Jesus spoke of Jerusalem's house as becoming desolate. This is connected to his cryptic comment: "You will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (23:39). The disciples must have become puzzled, curious and anxious. Was he about to proclaim himself?

## **Temple to be destroyed**

After these things, Jesus left the temple. As he was walking away, his breathless disciples pointed to its buildings. In Mark's words, they said, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" (13:1). Luke says the disciples remarked how the temple was "adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God" (21:5).

Think of what must have been going through the disciples' minds. Jesus' comments about Jerusalem's desolation and his confrontation with the religious leaders both frightened and excited the disciples. They must have wondered why he was speaking of impending doom on Judaism and its institutions. Wasn't the Messiah coming to glorify both? By their comments about the temple, it seems as if the disciples were thinking, Surely, nothing can happen to this beautiful temple in which God dwells!?

Jesus then made the disciples more curious and frightened. He brushed aside their lavish praise of the temple. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" (24:2).

This must have been shocking to the disciples. They thought the Messiah was going to save Jerusalem and the temple, not allow both to be destroyed. As Jesus spoke of these things, the disciples must have thought about the end of Roman rule and the glory of Israel, both which are prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. They knew these events would occur at "the time of the end" (Daniel 8:17; 11:35, 40; 12:4, 9). The Messiah would then appear or "come" to usher in the kingdom of God. This meant Israel would arise to national greatness as the spearhead of that kingdom.

## When will this happen?

The disciples, who believed Jesus was that Messiah, were anxious to know if the "time of the end" had come. There was great expectation that Jesus was about to announce that he was the messiah (John 12:12-18). It's not surprising, then, that the disciples pressed Jesus about the nature and timing of his "coming."

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately to get some inside information. "'Tell us,' they said, 'when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'" (24:3). They wanted to know when the things Jesus said about Jerusalem would take place, for they associated these with the end of the age.

When the disciples asked about his "coming," they didn't have a "second" coming in mind. In their thinking, the Messiah would come and immediately establish his government in Jerusalem, and it would last "forever." There would be no "second" coming – only a first.

Matthew 24:3 summarizes the content of chapter 24.

Let us repeat the disciples' question, italicizing some important words: "Tell us," they said, "when will *this* happen, and what will be the *sign* of your coming and of the *end of the age*?" (24:3).

## Disciples' three questions

Perhaps they didn't realize it, but the disciples were asking three questions. First, they wanted to know when "this" would happen. "This" could refer to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, which Jesus had just described. Second, they wanted to know what the "sign" of his

coming was, which (as we shall see) Jesus finally gave them in 24:30. Third, the disciples also wanted to know when the “end of the age” would occur. Jesus told the disciples they could not know that (24:36).

In Matthew 24 are three questions, and Jesus answers each one. If we separate out the three questions, and see how Jesus answered them, we can clear up a number of misinterpretations associated with Matthew 24. Jesus was telling his disciples that Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed in their day. But the “sign” they asked about would be associated with his coming, not with the destruction of the city. As to the disciples’ third question, no one could know when he would return and “the end” of the age would occur.

Let us see how these questions play out in Matthew 24. First, we note that Jesus didn’t seem particularly interested in talking about the circumstances of “the end.” It was his disciples who asked the questions, and Jesus obliged them by providing some comments.

Almost certainly, the disciples’ questions about “the end” were based on a wrong conclusion — that all the events would occur almost immediately, all at the same time. So it’s not surprising that they thought Jesus’ “coming” as Messiah was very close, within days or weeks. Still, they wanted a physical “sign” of his coming as a confirmation. With this private and secret knowledge, they would be able to place themselves at the most advantageous position when Jesus made his move.

We should see Jesus’ comments in Matthew 24 in that context. In short, the disciples initiate the discussion. They think Jesus is about to assume power, and they want to know exactly when this will happen. They want a preparatory sign. But the disciples totally misunderstood Jesus’ mission.

### **“The end” is not yet**

Rather than answering the disciples’ questions on their terms, Jesus used the occasion to teach them three important things. One, he taught them that the scenario they were asking about was much more complicated than their simplistic notions. Two, they could not know when Jesus would “come,” or as we would say, “return.” Three, they should worry about or “watch” their relationship with God and not worry about “watching” world or local events.

Let’s notice how Jesus’ conversation with his disciples unfolded, keeping these principles and the prior discussion in mind. The first thing he did was warn the disciples not to be deceived by traumatic events that might make it appear as though “the end” was near ([Matthew 24:4-8](#)). Tumultuous things would happen in the world, but “the end is still to come” (verse 6).

Next, Jesus told his disciples that they would be persecuted and put to death (24:9-13). How shocking that must have seemed! They must have wondered, “What is all this talk about persecution and death?” The Messiah’s people would be triumphant and victorious, not butchered and destroyed, they thought.

Jesus then began talking about a gospel to be preached to the whole world. After this, “the end” would come (24:14). This must have also been confusing to the disciples. They probably thought the Messiah would “come” first, then establish his kingdom. Only after that would the word of the Lord go forth to all the earth ([Isaiah 2:1-4](#)).

Next, Jesus seemed to backtrack and forecast a dire warning for the temple. The abomination of desolation would be seen in the holy place, and those in Judea would have to flee to the mountains (24:15-16).

These would be dreadful times for the Jews. “For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now — and never to be equaled again,” said Jesus (24:21). Things would get so bad that no one would survive if those days weren’t cut short.

Though Jesus mentioned what would happen in the world at large, Jesus was talking primarily about what would happen in Judea and Jerusalem. Luke uses the phrase “there will be great distress in the land” to describe the context of Jesus’ comments ([Luke 21:23](#)).

The temple, Jerusalem and Judea were the focus of Jesus’ warning, not the entire world. The warning Jesus gave about impending doom was primarily for Jews in Jerusalem and Judea. The events of A.D. 66-70 confirmed this.

## **Flight on the Sabbath?**

It’s not surprising, then, that Jesus said, “Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath” (24:20). Since the Sabbath is no longer a concern for Christians, why would it be mentioned as a significant problem?

The Jews believed it was wrong to take long journeys on the Sabbath. They had a measurement for the maximum distance that could be traveled on this day, which was called a “Sabbath day’s walk” or journey ([Acts 1:12](#)). In Luke’s example it was the distance between the Mount of Olives, on the perimeter of Jerusalem, and the city itself. But Jesus said that people who were in Judea would need to flee far away into the hills. A Sabbath’s day walk would not get them out of harm’s way. Jesus knew that those listening to him believed you should not do the kind of traveling that his warning required.

This explains why Jesus told his disciples to pray that their flight would not have to occur on the Sabbath. He gave this admonition in the context of their current understanding of the Law of Moses. We can paraphrase Jesus’ thought in this way: I know you don’t believe in traveling long distances on the Sabbath, and you won’t do it because of what you think the law demands.

So if the things to befall Jerusalem fall on the Sabbath, you will be caught and killed. I can then only offer you this advice: You better pray that the need to flee doesn’t occur on the Sabbath. Even if they did choose to flee on the Sabbath, the restrictions imposed by other Jews would make escape difficult.

We can understand this part of Jesus' explanation to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred in A.D. 70. Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who still kept the Law of Moses ([Acts 21:17-26](#)), were caught up in these events and had to flee. They would have had to deal with their belief about the Sabbath regulations, if circumstances demanded a flight on that day.

### **Still not the "sign"**

Meanwhile, Jesus continued with his discourse, which had the purpose of answering the disciples' questions about when he would come. So far, all he has done is tell them when he will not come. Jesus has separated out the calamity to occur at Jerusalem from the "sign" and the coming of "the end."

At this point, the disciples must have thought that the destruction in Jerusalem and Judea was the "sign" of the end they were looking for. But they were mistaken, and Jesus pointed out their error. Jesus said, "If anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it" (24:23).

What were the disciples to make of this? They must have wondered, We asked when Jesus would establish the kingdom and we asked him to give us a sign of this event, and he keeps talking about when the end is not, and everything that looks like a sign he says isn't a sign. Nevertheless, Jesus continued to tell the disciples when he would not come or appear. "If anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it" (24:26).

Jesus was driving home the point that his disciples should not be deceived either by world events or by people claiming to know when the "sign" of "the end" had occurred. Perhaps he was telling them that the fall of Jerusalem and the temple were not the harbinger of "the end."

Now we come to verse 29, where Jesus began telling the disciples about the "sign" of his coming, which was the answer to their second question. The sun and moon would be darkened and "stars" would fall from the sky (24:29). This has been understood in various ways, from astronomy to atmospheric disturbances, to code words for political upheaval.

Finally, Jesus gave the disciples the "sign" they were waiting for. He said: "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory" (24:30).

Basically, the "sign" of Jesus' coming, as he gave it, was his coming! There is no advance sign of Jesus' coming for us to be able to predict. He comes when he comes, and the people who are then alive will know it when it happens.

## “All these things”

Next, Jesus asked the disciples to learn a lesson from the fig tree (24:32-34). As soon as the tree’s twigs got tender and its leaves came out, they knew summer was near. “Even so,” said Jesus, “when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door” (24:33).

What are “all these things”? Are they only wars, famines and earthquakes in various places? No. These are only the beginning of sorrows. There are many other sorrows as well before “the end.” Does “all these things” end at the appearance of false preachers and the preaching of the gospel? No, again. Is “all these things” fulfilled with the distress in Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple? No, it is not. What, then, must “all things” include?

Before we answer, let us digress a moment to describe what may have been an after-the-fact lesson that the church of the apostles’ day had to learn, and which the synoptic Gospels talk about. The fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the destruction of the temple, and the death of many Jewish religious leaders (and at least some of the apostles) must have been a surprise to the church. It’s almost certain the church believed that Jesus would return right after these events. But he didn’t return, and some Christians must have been disturbed by that.

However, the Gospels show that much more had to happen than just the destruction of the city and temple before Jesus would return. The church should not assume that because Jerusalem fell and Jesus did not return that it had been misled. The Gospels repeated Jesus’ thought for the benefit of the church: Until you see the “sign” of the Son of Man appear in the sky, do not listen to those who say he has already come, or is about to come.

## “No one knows”

We now come to the real lesson that Jesus wanted to get across in the dialogue of Matthew 24. That is, Jesus’ discourse in Matthew 24 is not so much to be taken as a prophecy, but as a Christian living lesson. Matthew 24 is Jesus’ warning that his disciples always need to be spiritually ready precisely because they cannot know when he will return. The parables in Matthew 25 continue that same theme.

In [Matthew 24:36](#), Jesus said, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” This is Jesus’ plain statement that he did not know when the end of the age would come. That may seem shocking, since he was the Son of God, but nonetheless it is clear.

Accepting this point clears up a lot of confusion about chapter 24. It tells us that Jesus was not meaning to predict the specific time of “the end” or of his return, since he did not know when it would be. Matthew 24 was to be a lesson in spiritual awareness, not awareness of world events.

What we see in subsequent history is that Jerusalem has been the focal point of many turbulent events and times. For example, in A.D. 1099, the Christian Crusaders surrounded Jerusalem and

massacred all the inhabitants. During World War I, in 1917, British General Allenby took the city from the Turkish empire. Jerusalem and Judea continue to play a central role in the strife between Jews and Arabs.

Jesus told his disciples that the answer to their question about when the end would come was: “You can’t know it, and not even I know it.” That seems to be a difficult lesson to learn. After his resurrection, the disciples still pressed Jesus on the matter. They asked: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” ([Acts 1:6](#)). Again, Jesus told them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority” (verse 7).

Despite Jesus’ clear teaching, many Christians throughout the centuries have repeated the mistake of the apostles. Many have tried to predict when “the end” would come, and have almost always said it would be “very soon.” But history has proven Jesus right and every prognosticator wrong. Quite simply, we cannot know when “the end” will come.

### **What are we to “watch”?**

So what are we to do in the meantime, while we await Jesus’ return? Jesus gave the answer to his disciples, and it is our answer as well. He said: “Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.... So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (24:42, 44).

Watching world events is not what Jesus was speaking about here. What all Christians must “watch” is their relationship with God. They are always to be ready to meet their Maker. Jesus then went on to describe in the rest of chapter 24 and throughout chapter 25 what is really important to “watch.” In the parable of the faithful servant, Jesus told his disciples to avoid worldly sins and the threat of being overcome by the attractiveness of sin (24:45-51). The lesson? Jesus said, “The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of” (24:50).

In the parable of the ten virgins, Jesus repeated his theme (25:1-25). Some of the virgins are not ready when the day of reckoning comes. They are shut out of the kingdom. The lesson? Jesus said: “Keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour” (25:13).

In the parable of the talents, Jesus spoke of himself as going on a journey (25:14-30). He was probably referring to his stay in heaven before his return. In the meantime, the servants are to be faithful with the things they have been entrusted.

In the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus spoke of the shepherding responsibility the disciples would be given during his absence. Here he switched their thinking from the “when” of his return to the consequences of that return on their eternal life. His coming and the resurrection would be judgment day for them. That is the time when Jesus will separate his sheep (his true followers) from the goats (the evil shepherds).

Jesus presented the parable in terms of the disciples' relationship to his physical needs. They fed him when he was hungry, gave water to him when he was thirsty, invited him in when he was a stranger, and clothed him when he was naked. The disciples were surprised, and they said they never saw him in any of these needy states.

But Jesus had a lesson in shepherding in mind. He said: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (25:40). Who is a sibling of Jesus? One of his true followers. Jesus was telling his disciples to be good stewards and shepherds of the flock — the church.

Thus ends the long discourse in which Jesus answered the disciples' three questions: When will Jerusalem and the temple be destroyed? What would be the "sign" of his coming? When would "the end" of the age occur?

### **Jesus' point in brief**

Let us summarize the discussion. The disciples are concerned by Jesus' teaching that the temple buildings will be destroyed. They ask when this will happen, and when "the end" and his "coming" will occur. They probably thought that Jesus would then and there take the mantle of messiahship and inaugurate the kingdom of God in all its power.

Jesus warns them against such thinking. There will be a delay before "the end." Jerusalem and the temple will be destroyed, but the life of the church will continue. Future times will be characterized by violent persecution of his followers and terrible tribulation in Judea.

The disciples are shocked. They think Messiah's disciples will be immediately and eminently victorious, the Promised Land easily conquered and the worship of God restored. What is this talk about the destruction of the temple and the persecution of his followers?

But there is more shocking teaching. The only "sign" that the disciples will have of Jesus coming will be his actual coming. This "sign" will have no predictive value because it comes too late. Jesus' point leads to his discussion that no one can predict when "the end" will occur or when he will come. Not even Jesus knew the time. Only the Father did.

Jesus has taken the disciples' wrong-headed concern and turned it into a spiritual lesson. In the words of D.A. Carson: "The disciples' questions are answered, and the reader is exhorted to look forward to the Lord's return and meanwhile to live responsibly, faithfully, compassionately, and courageously while the Master is away (24:45-25:46)" (ibid, page 495).

"Amen, Come, Lord Jesus" ([Revelation 22:20](#)).

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