

Matthew 24:21–22

Jesus now goes onto make a comment about the severity of this great tribulation. He says that “unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.” What does Jesus mean here? This is one of those passages that the proponents of the pre-wrath rapture view use. The pre-wrath rapture view places the church in the tribulations and teaches that the rapture of the church will occur around, not the beginning (pre-trib view), middle (mid-trib view), or end (post-trib view), but around 3/4 of the way through the seven-year tribulation period. If we have time later in the semester, we will briefly highlight this aberrant view.

What is significant about this passage is the use of specific Greek tenses in combination. The Greek text uses the aorist tense for the first part and the future tense in the second part. The rendering is ... “Unless those days had been cut short ... those days will be cut short.” It is proper to see the use of the aorist tense here to describe a clearly future event as prophetic in nature. Why? Jesus is telling us about **future** events (no matter what your eschatological view) but he is using a past tense verb ... as if an event has already taken place. We know that occasionally in prophetic portions of scripture, the past tense will be used to highlight the assurance of a prophecy coming true. For example, Jeremiah describes the Babylonian desolation of Jerusalem as if he is looking at Jerusalem after the siege has happened. This is called the use of the prophetic past tense.

Here in Matthew 24:22, we have something slightly different. Jesus depicts the length of the tribulation period as if that length has been predetermined to be a little shorter than it could have been. Who determines the length of the tribulation period ... before it even begins? God does. God the Father, in planning the length of the tribulation period, recognized in eternity past that if He did not limit the extent of the tribulation period, “no life would have been saved.” Showers¹ explains:

Jesus was teaching that God in the past had already shortened the Great Tribulation. He did so in the sense that in the past He determined to cut it off at a specific time rather than let it continue indefinitely. In His omniscience, God knew that if the Great Tribulation were to continue indefinitely, all flesh would perish from the earth. To prevent that from happening, in the past God sovereignly set a specific time for the Great Tribulation to end.

The question of whether all life is to be understood as referring to the remnant Jews who will be saved at the end of the tribulation period or whether it means all human life. Those who see the meaning in the first view will appeal to the subsequent phrase “for the sake of the elect” to bolster their position. I tend to see all human life here as the meaning of the term as this is the most consistent use in other passages of the Bible. What about the “elect?” What is the meaning here for “the elect?”

In the immediate context of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus uses the term three times. Here in 24:22, in verse 24, and finally in verse 31. Since Daniels framework sees those who are rescued as surviving to the end of the tribulation period, it seems natural to use the term “the elect” here as meaning those Jews who will be saved. The context of the coming false Christs and prophets also hints at the Jewish flavor of the elect. After the Second Coming, Christ will gather His elect to Jerusalem (where He is at the Second Coming). This also favors “the elect” being saved Jews. Jesus is saying that, for the sake of those Jews (as well as all the rest of mankind) that the Great Tribulation period was shortened in eternity past so there would be Jews alive to save; i.e., they would not all be destroyed before they could be saved. Recall that this is one of Satan’s main goal for the Jewish nation during the tribulation period; to destroy the nation of Israel so there are no Jews to repent at the Second Coming. In trying to destroy the nation of Israel, Satan believes he can prevent the Second Coming (and his own destruction). However, God in His omniscience has laid out the plan to cut short the Great Tribulation so there would be Jews alive to repent.

Matthew 24:23–26 False Christs and False Prophets

Jesus then goes on to describe a truly chilling set of circumstances. False Christs and false prophets will arise. How are these false Christs different that those described back in verse 5 and how would a Jew alive at the time know not to believe these?

¹ Renald Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1995)

These are interesting questions that deserve a little discussion. Verse 23 – “Behold, here is the Christ ... there He is.” What Jesus is saying here is that some will manifest as the Christ **during** the tribulation period. What do we know of the return of the Son of Man? It will occur at the very end of the tribulation period. Anyone that comes along during the tribulation is not to be believed. Also, note that someone else is declaring the position of the Christ. Someone who is not the Christ will proclaim one of the false Christs to be the Christ. This is an important part of the deception. When the Son of Man comes in the clouds of heaven, no one will have to tell us “There is the Christ.” He will not need a herald to proclaim His coming.

What will make this time especially difficult for Jews is that in verse 24, Jesus mentions that these false Christs (and false prophets) will display great signs and wonders. What is meant here? Great signs and wonders are miraculous in nature. These will be able to perform miracles, and there is no indication in the text that these are somehow **fake** miracles. What would be the impact of performing miracles? When we get to Revelation, we will find that the false prophet and the antichrist will possess incredible powers that have Satan himself as their source. Just think about some of the miracles that they will be able to perform: the antichrist will rise from the dead, fire coming down from heaven, gives life to an idol ... those are some pretty powerful miracles. Its no wonder many will be deceived by these false Christs and prophets. People today seek signs and wonders. In fact, these signs are so convincing, Jesus says that if the elect were able to be deceived, they would be. His preface “if possible” tells us that the elect will not be deceived ... but if they could be, these miracles that the false Christs and prophets will perform are going to be very convincing.

Verse 26 tells us that while those Jews alive during these events, recall they were instructed to flee to the mountains, there will be some who will lure those Jews out of their hiding by claiming the Messiah has come. They are not to believe reports that the Christ has been found in the wilderness or in the inner rooms. They are not to go looking for the coming Messiah. Why? The Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ will not be secret or hidden at all.

Matthew 24:27–28

Jesus then goes on to highlight the universal witness to His coming. “As the lightning comes from the east and flashes event to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.” His coming will not be secret, at this point in the tribulation period it will not be delayed either. Why the lightning imagery? Have you ever sat on the porch on a pitch-black night during a thunderstorm, and the entire neighborhood lights up for a moment with a lightning strike nearby? To go from not being able to see across the street, to seeing everything for a brief moment as if it were daytime, is what the sight of the Second Coming will be like. It will not be a secret coming in the wilderness, it will not be a localized coming in an inner room, it will not be disguised in the coming of the Roman army to destroy Jerusalem in 70 AD; it will be a worldwide sudden event that the entire world will witness.

Then Jesus makes a most unusual statement. “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.” What is He talking about here? We need a little help from a Greek lexicon here. The word rendered “corpse” in the NASB is the Greek word *πτῶμα*. From the earliest Greek writings this word has the meaning of body, but was usually combined with the adjective *νεκρός* meaning “dead.” Over time, the adjective was removed and the word by itself came to mean “dead body.” Consider the uses in the NT in the following verses: Matt. 14:12, Mark 15:45, Mark 6:29, Rev. 11:8–9. So the meaning here is clearly talking about dead corpses.

What about the word *ἀετός* translated vultures in the NASB (eagles in some other translations)? What is the essential meaning of this word? Well, it is used a few times in the NT but its translation is varied. When the passage is highlighting the flight characteristics of a great bird, it is usually rendered eagle; when a passage is highlighting the birds propensity for dead flesh, it is rendered vulture or raven. The word *ἀετός* is the usual Greek term for the Hebrew word *נְשֹׁר*. One of the passages that is most revealing is Job 39:27–30. Recall the context ... God has appeared in the whirlwind and is quizzing Job for understanding. The last verse in this passage is the critical one. “where the slain are, there he is.” I wonder if Jesus was not paraphrasing this Job verse here in Matthew 24. The full point is this, toward the end of the tribulation period, there will be corpses for the vultures to feed on. I.e., it appears as a result of the Second Coming that many will be killed. It turns out, when we study the Second Coming in Revelation 19, John states ...

¹⁷ Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds which fly in midheaven, "Come, assemble for the great supper of God, ¹⁸ so that you may eat the flesh of kings and the flesh of commanders and the flesh of mighty men and the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them and the flesh of all men, both free men and slaves, and small and great."

Matthew 24:29–31

The pinnacle of the tribulation period is now brought into focus by Jesus in the next few verses. He says "immediately after the tribulation of those days" there will be certain cosmic signs associated with His coming. Notice that He begins His discussion on His return at the end of Daniel's seventieth week by quoting from Isaiah 13. Isaiah 13 is a mixed prophecy concerning God's judgment on Babylon, but it also includes His final judgment during the Day of the Lord. Consider the characteristics of the prophecy that are highlighted in Isaiah 13: vs. 9 – He will exterminate sinners, vs. 10 – Stellar object will go dark, vs. 11 – Punish the world (not just Babylon) for its evil, vs. 11 – Put an end to the arrogance of the proud, vs. 12 – Make mortal men more scarce than gold, vs. 13 – heavens tremble and the earth shaken from its place.

This doesn't sound like what happened in 70 AD does it? Then the "sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky ..." What is this sign? It may be that the sign of the Son of Man IS the viewing of the Second Coming by the entire planet. But it may also be something totally distinct from His coming. There is nothing in the text that hints at what this sign might be, only that it occurs after the cosmic signs and the powers of the heavens being shaken. Then we have the tribes of the earth mourning. What would this refer to?

Given the language, Jesus is certainly referring to Zechariah 12:9–14.

⁹ "And in that day I will set about to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. ¹⁰ "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn. ¹¹ "In that day there will be great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the plain of Megiddo. ¹² "The land will mourn, every family by itself; the family of the house of David by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself and their wives by themselves; ¹³ the family of the house of Levi by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the Shimeites by itself and their wives by themselves; ¹⁴ all the families that remain, every family by itself and their wives by themselves.

One of the major prophetic events that will come to pass at the Second Coming will be the conversion of the remaining Jews to the Lord Jesus as their Messiah. When they look upon Him at the Second Coming, they will suddenly realize that it is Christ Himself who is their Jewish Messiah, that they have pierced Him when they crucified Him on the cross, and they will then mourn as they realize they have rejected their Messiah for all these years ... that entire generations of Jews have been lost due to unbelief, and they will as a nation and people repent and mourn over this sin of rejecting their king ... and that mourning will be like a mother losing a first born son. Revelation 1:7 gives us one more detail concerning this Second Coming of Christ ... "every eye will see Him." This is why the remnant Jews are not to go looking for the Christ among those who are false during the tribulation, because His coming will be a world-wide event. Every person alive at the time (and I believe every person who has died) will see Jesus Christ at His second coming. This puts the final nail into Preterism. Every eye did not see Him in 70 AD, the Jews did not repent in 70 AD, they did not mourn over Him in 70 AD; they were scattered and have remained in unbelief to this day. This event will be with "power and great glory." Recall the angel that came to the tomb, his mere presence caused a massive earthquake (Matt 24:2). Imagine the power of the risen Christ descending to earth in His second coming. The brilliance of that appearing will be reminiscent of the Transfiguration.

Matthew 24:31 Jewish Regathering

The final thought from the Olivet Discourse to His disciples is the regathering in verse 31.

And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER THE TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

Many well-meaning believers do take this verse as proof of the post-tribulation rapture ... namely, Jesus comes in the clouds in His second coming, then raptures the elect. They would see the elect as church saints here. If this view is correct, it would

mean that the church would go through the entire seven-year tribulation period; which would be a direct contradiction of 1 Thessalonians 5:9 ... "For God has not destined us for wrath ..." where the wrath in this passage cannot mean 'hell,' it must refer to the wrath associated with the Day of the Lord (the context of 1 Thess. 5).

What could this gathering of the elect refer to? Several factors lead us to conclude the elect are the remnant Jews who will be saved at the Second Coming. The term elect, as we have previously noted in Matthew refers to elect Jews. It is a fact of Scripture that the term 'elect' is not a strictly NT construct that refers to elect Christians, for church saints. Many passages in the OT teach that national Israel is God's elect. Consider, for example, Deuteronomy 7:6 ...

"For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

The word translated "holy" here means "set apart, consecrated." Many places in Deuteronomy established that God had chosen the people of Israel over all the other Gentile nations to be His people. In Isaiah 45:4 God calls the nation "Israel My elect," (KJV), but rendered 'My chosen' in some other translations. Paul, in Romans 11:28–29, stated that although Israel had disobeyed and rebelled against God, Israel was still His beloved, elect nation. The question of whether Israel is still elect of God is a point of debate among Christian scholars. Yet the Abrahamic covenant established Israel as God's elect nation for all time.

Jesus description of the gathering of the elect "from the four winds" would be recognized by Jews for several reasons:

First, because of Israel's continued rebellion, God has promised to scatter the Jewish people ... consider the judgment declaration by Ezekiel in chapter 5 ...

¹⁰ ... for I will execute judgments on you and scatter all your remnant to every wind. ¹¹ 'So as I live,' declares the Lord GOD, 'surely, because you have defiled My sanctuary with all your detestable idols and with all your abominations, therefore I will also withdraw, and My eye will have no pity and I will not spare. ¹² 'One third of you will die by plague or be consumed by famine among you, one third will fall by the sword around you, and one third I will scatter to every wind, and I will unsheathe a sword behind them.

Similar depictions are taught in Ezekiel 17:21 and Zechariah 2:6. The 'four winds' is an apt depiction of the four cardinal directions on a map, thus indicating that this scattering by God would be over the entire world. This is one of the main judgments that God promised to bring upon Israel for disobedience. God has scattered the Jewish people throughout the entire world to this day. In fact, there are more Jews living outside Israel than within it today.

Second, God promised to gather His nation Israel in the future. In Isaiah 43:5–7, He promises to gather Israel from the east, west, north, and south, "from the ends of the earth." In the context of this promise God calls His people "His chosen," (Isaiah 43:10,20).

Third, Jesus declaration that His angels will gather His elect "from one end of heaven to the other." Moses also foretold this gathering in Deuteronomy 30:4–5 ... ⁴ "If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. ⁵ The LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers."

Finally, Jesus indicated His elect will be gathered from the four corners of the earth in conjunction with the blast of a great trumpet. Isaiah predicted this ...

¹² In that day the LORD will start *His* threshing from the flowing stream of the Euphrates to the brook of Egypt, and you will be gathered up one by one, O sons of Israel. ¹³ It will come about also in that day that a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were perishing in the land of Assyria and who were scattered in the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD in the holy mountain at Jerusalem.

Do you see why the study of the OT is critically important to eschatology. Without these passages on the gathering of Israel at the sound of the trumpet, we would be tempted to associate this trumpet with the "last trumpet" that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 15 concerning the rapture of the church. Indeed, this is how these alternate views of eschatology are introduced; with a faulty theological method that begins in the NT.