



End Times Made Easy

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| Basic Framework: Matthew 24–25

What did Jesus Himself say about the last days, the end times, and about His own return and triumph? Matthew chs 24-25 give us a ‘basic framework’ upon which to build...

1 The ‘Olivet Discourse’

1.1 Background and Context

Matthew chs 24-25 are known as the ‘Olivet Discourse’ since Jesus taught these things to his disciples whilst they were sitting on the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem and its temple¹.

The passages begin with Jesus predicting the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (Mt 24:1-2). Later, his disciples come to him privately on the Mount of Olives and ask him: “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Mt 24:3).

Note the 3 questions asked by the disciples²:

1. When will this (ie the destruction of the temple) happen?
2. What will be the sign of your coming?
3. What will be the sign of the end of the age?

Jesus’s reply is his most complete statement concerning the end times, dealing with events that will precede his return, the nature of his return and events that will happen upon his return.

1.2 Overview of the Passages

Outline of Matthew Chapters 24-25		
Matt 24	4-14	Descriptions of events preceding the return of Christ

¹ Mark 13 and Luke 21 are parallel passages with Matthew 24

² In Mk 13:14 and Lk 21:7 the questions asked are “when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to be fulfilled” [“about to take place”]?

	15-31	Description of the final events of the end times
	32-35	Comments about the timing of these events
	36-51	Warnings/parables about remaining watchful and ready
Matt 25	1-30	Warnings/parables about remaining watchful and ready
	31-46	Description of the 2nd coming and the final judgement

2 Events Preceding the Return of Christ

In answer to the disciples' question: "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Jesus began by outlining a number of events and situations, which will occur before His return.

We will look at each of these in turn. Note that all these events are also described in Revelation or in other gospel or epistle passages.

2.1 False Christs, False Prophets and Deceptions

Jesus said that many will come in His name, claiming to be the Christ, and that many will be deceived ([Mt 24:4-5](#)); and that false prophets will appear and deceive many ([Mt 24:11](#)). We can anticipate a widespread deception of many people in the end times.

2.2 Wars and Rumours of Wars

Jesus said there will be wars and rumours of wars, with nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom.

2.3 Famines and Earthquakes

Jesus said there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. These, along with the deceptions and the wars and rumours of wars, will be "the beginnings of birth-pains" ([Mt 24:6-8](#)). That is, they will signify the onset of the time preceding His return.

2.4 Persecution

Jesus said that His disciples will be persecuted, put to death, and hated by all nations ([Mt 24:9](#)).

2.5 Increasing Evil

Jesus said that there would be an "increase of wickedness" in these end times ([Mt 24:12](#)), which will result in apostasy (see below). Along with the wide extension of the gospel will be a corresponding growth of evil and evil forces.

Paul describes "terrible times in the last day" in which people will be "lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of



pleasure rather than lovers of God - having a form of godliness but denying its power.” (2Ti 3:2-5). These words seem to describe our own day most aptly!

2.6 Apostasy

Jesus said that, as a result of the increasing evil, “many will turn away from the faith and betray and hate each other” (Mt 24:10), and that “the love of most will grow cold” (Mt 24:12). This widespread backsliding and falling away from God is known as ‘apostasy’.

2.7 World-wide preaching of the Gospel

Jesus said that the gospel of the kingdom will be preached “in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Mt 24:14). The great commission is to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:16-20). Just as John the Baptist prepared the way for the first coming of Jesus, so the church of the end times is to prepare the way for His second coming.

In these last days God’s purpose is that the gospel is spread to every race and people-group on the earth. This does not imply that everyone will be saved before Jesus returns; but it does mean that every nation will be exposed to the message of salvation. Elsewhere, Paul tells us that the ‘full number’ of both Jews and Gentiles will be saved before Jesus returns (see Rom 11:25-26); there will be widespread salvation of the Jews (through faith in Christ) before the end of the ages.

Tasker writes that Jesus’s clear message was that: “The end would only come, as He states explicitly in [verse 14](#), after world-wide evangelism; and that evangelism would be continually hampered by persecutions, martyrdoms, the hatred of the world for those who professed the name of Jesus, loss of faith, treachery of friends and the failure of love to endure in the face of widespread lawlessness – conditions which would call for the supreme quality of steadfastness.”³

On the basis of the material here in [Mt 24](#), Paul’s teachings in Thessalonians and John’s Revelation, together with some specific OT Scriptures (eg [Ez 38](#)), some commentators have tried to put together a ‘blueprint’ of the sequence of events and the necessary political, moral and religious preconditions (often including specific predicted international conflicts) which must (in their view) precede the return of Christ.

As we’ve seen, however, Jesus speaks rather of *general conditions* which we can expect to precede His return: religious apostasy, persecution of the church during a period of worldwide evangelism, wars and conflicts and disturbances in the natural order.

³ RVG Taker, *The Gospel according to St Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale, London, 1961, p254

3 Final Events of the End Times

Having stated a number of things, which must take place *before* the return of Christ, Jesus then gives more detail about the nature of the final events of end times. We can summarise his teachings as follows:

3.1 The “Abomination that Causes Desolation”

Jesus spoke of an “abomination that causes desolation”, which will be a sign of the imminence of the unfolding events ([Mt 24:15-16](#)).

What does this mean? Jesus refers us back to the prophecies of Daniel where an “abomination that causes desolation” is spoken of three times ([Dan 9:27, 11:31 and 12:11](#)). It is an event, which defiles the holy temple, which is the ultimate sacrilege, and which is truly “an abomination” to God, causing “desolation”.

These prophetic words by both Daniel and Jesus have already been partially fulfilled, although their ultimate fulfilment is still to take place:

- An initial fulfilment occurred when the Jewish temple was desecrated by the Syrian King Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC. Having plundered the temple, he sacrificed pigs to Zeus on the sacred altar.
- A further partial fulfilment took place in AD 70. When Jerusalem was being destroyed by the Romans, Emperor Titus brought his armies and their military ensigns (eagles) into the temple and offered sacrifices to them. Later, a statue of Titus was erected on the site of the temple. Note that the parallel passage in Luke does not refer to this ‘abomination’ but simply says (of the same events) “when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies.” ([Lk 21:20](#)).
- These blasphemous acts by Antiochus Epiphanes and Titus are ‘types’ and precursors of the final abomination. For elsewhere we read that the Antichrist will set up an image of himself and, exalting himself above God, will proclaim his deity and order everyone to worship him ([see 2Th 2:4, Rev 13:4-15](#)).

The future “abomination that causes desolation” will be an occurrence of abominable sacrilege, which defiles and mocks God with devastating repercussions.

3.2 The Great Tribulation

Jesus said that soon after the abomination described above there will a time of “great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now” (Mt 24:21). This time is referred to as the great “tribulation” (meaning trouble, distress, hardship, persecution, etc). Although a degree of ‘tribulation’ is an expected part of the Christian experience (see Jn 15:20, Jn 16:33, 2 Tim 3:12), Jesus is here describing a particularly intense time of distress.

The Great Tribulation is essentially the result of a pouring out of God’s wrath on the earth (see the parallel passage Lk 21:22-23 where the same events are described as a “time of punishment” and “wrath against this people”), in response to the ‘abomination’ (see above) and the general increase in wickedness. It is a judgement against unbelievers, and specifically against those who do evil and persecute the church (see 2 Th 1:5-6)⁴. Nevertheless, God’s people will have to live through those times. There is no suggestion in Scripture that believers will be removed from the Great Tribulation⁵; rather, they will live through it (Rev 7:14). But for their sake (“the sake of the elect”), these days will be cut short (Mt 24: 22).

3.3 False Prophets

Jesus again warned that there will be false prophets and false Christ’s during this time, performing great signs and miracles and thus seeking to deceive God’s people (Mt 24:23-25).

3.4 Darkness and Extraordinary Phenomena

Immediately after the days of distress [tribulation] there will be a physical darkness on the earth as sun, moon and stars will fail to give light (Mt 24:29). What are we to make of this?

The same event is described in Rev 6:12-16 where cosmic phenomena are depicted immediately preceding the return of Christ. Extraordinary phenomena and great darkness are also spoken of by Joel as a sign of the coming of the Lord (see Joel 3:14-15 and Acts 2:19-20).

⁴ Some believe that the Great Tribulation described in Mt 24 is quite different from the tribulation described in 2 Th 1:5-6. They see the latter as the wrath of God against those who have persecuted the church, but they see the former as being *Satan’s wrath against the church*. However, I believe that the description of the Great Tribulation found in the parallel passage of Lk 21:22-23 makes it clear that it is vengeance upon the enemies of God.

⁵ Some believe that the rapture will take place prior to the tribulation, thus removing God’s people from earth to heaven so that they are spared from going through these times.

Maybe there will be a literal falling of stars from the skies and a shaking of planets and stars? Maybe the brightness of Christ's presence will cause the sun to appear dark!? (1Ti 6:16, Rev 1:16, Ez 1:27-28). Perhaps we cannot understand these things with a strict literalism, since there are similar descriptions used in the OT to describe times of a great outpouring of the wrath of God (see Ezek 32:7-8, Zeph 1:15-16); such language was commonly used to describe historical nation-changing events of cataclysmic proportions. The essential point is that immediately preceding the return of Jesus we can expect events which have a terrifying impact on the earth and lead to great mourning (see below).

3.5 Mourning

Jesus said that "at that time" (the time of darkness) the "sign of the son of man" will appear in the sky and all nations on the earth will mourn. (Mt 24:30). This mourning appears to be a result of the terrible realisation that the Jesus who has been rejected is real and is returning.

3.6 Return of Jesus

Jesus said of His return: "They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory" (Mt 24:30, and also Mt 25:31). We will look at the manner and purpose of Christ's return in more detail in sessions 2 and 3. In the meantime, note that:

- His return will be literal and **physical**; we expect a return of Jesus *in person*. Just as Jesus ascended (physically, in person), so he will return (Acts 1:11).
- His return will be **public**; it will be very visible. Those alive "*will see the Son of Man coming*" (Mt 24:30); moreover "*as lightning that comes from the east is visible in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.*" (Mt 24:27, Rev 1:7).

Jesus said that upon His return He will send his angels to gather the elect (Mt 24:30-31). This is in readiness for the Final Judgement which he later describes (Mt 25:32ff, see below).

4 The Time of Jesus's Return

Following these statements, Jesus proceeds to make several comments about the time of His return (Mt 24:33-36).

We have seen that in response to the disciples' question: "when will this (ie: the destruction of the temple) happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Mt 24:3), Jesus describes several events which will occur.

In considering questions of timing, we must here note that Jesus was answering a two-fold question. He had been asked about two quite separate time-frames: (1) the *time of the destruction of the temple* and (2) the *time of his return and the end of the ages*.

In answering these questions, therefore, Jesus describes things, which we must understand on two levels. There was a partial fulfilment of his words in AD 70, when the temple was destroyed (see below). But there is yet to come a total fulfilment of his words at the 'end of the age'.

4.1 "This Generation..."

Having completed His description of the events preceding the end times, and His return, Jesus said: "When you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, *this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.*" (Mt 24:33-34).

What did Jesus mean by this? Was he saying that "all these things" (the events described, the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple *and the return of Jesus*) would happen during the lifetime of "this generation" (ie *those to whom he was speaking*)?

Since the return of Jesus did *not* happen during the lifetime of those disciples, we must conclude either that He was a false prophet, or that this is not what He meant! As Sproul says: "The charge of false prophecy against Jesus is not made lightly by sober men. The consequences...are too severe."⁶

⁶ RC Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, p12

Commentators have spent considerable time, therefore, trying to resolve this apparent dilemma⁷. There are several simple explanations:

- First, if “this generation” refers to those then present, then it is true that the events concerned with the temple destruction *were* fulfilled within 40 years (a ‘generation’). The disciples had asked Jesus when “all these things” concerned with the temple would take place (Mt 24:2-3 and see also Mk 13:4 where the additional questions about the return of Christ and the end of the age are not recorded). In reply Jesus says that “all these things” (concerning the temple) will take place within a generation.
- Second, it seems highly unlikely that Jesus was including His return in the “all these things” that were to happen within a generation since, just two verses later, he states that even He does not know about that day or hour (Mt 24:36, see below). Indeed Waldron makes the point that Jesus was deliberately and specifically drawing a distinction between the timing of (1) the destruction of the temple; and (2) his return. In other words, He was differentiating between the “all these things” of v34 and “that day and hour” of v36, because the disciples were in danger of confusing these two distinct events: the destruction of Jerusalem and the return of Christ. Whereas Jesus prophesied a time-frame for the first (“within this generation”); He gives no such prediction for the second (“no one knows...”).⁸
- Third, “this generation” could refer simply to ‘the generation of Christ’; those living in the ‘last days’ between the first and second comings of Jesus. In Matthew’s genealogy (Mt 1:12-17) we read that there were “fourteen generations from the exile to Christ” (v17), yet only thirteen are listed. There is in progress a ‘final generation of Christ’ - God’s people on the earth in these last days. All these things *will* be fulfilled before *this* generation passes away!

4.2 Partial Fulfilment in AD 70

As we have noted, these prophecies of Jesus were partly fulfilled when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. Prior to that destruction:

- There *were* many false Christs and false prophets circulating, seeking to deceive people;
- there *was* a persecution of believers;

⁷ These attempts include the suggestion that “generation” means “race” and that Jesus was referring to either the *human race* in general, or to the *Jewish race* in particular. Such an interpretation would be inconsistent with frequent other uses by Jesus of the phrase “this generation” where he refers simply to those alive and listening to him.

⁸ Samuel E Waldron, *The End Times Made Simple*, Calvary Press, 2003, p176



- there *was* an increase in wickedness and a resulting apostasy;
- there *was* widespread preaching of the gospel in the then-known world around Jerusalem ([Col 1:6,23](#)); and
- there *was* an abomination in the temple (see 4.1 above)

However, all that is said about Jerusalem - its destruction and desolation - refers not only to what actually happened in AD 70, but also to events that will take place before the return of Christ. That is, the events which happened in AD 70 are a precursor of the greater events still to come.

4.3 The Time Unknown

Finally, in regards to the timing of these things, we must take heed of Jesus's statement in [Mt 24:36](#) that "no-one" (not even the angels or Jesus Himself!) "knows about that day or hour"⁹. Only the Father knows! This is so important: Jesus is clearly stating that the knowledge of the time of His second coming is hidden from every intelligent creature - and from the incarnate Son Himself. The time of His return is not a part of the revelation that God has chosen to give to men in the His Word. As Waldron says: "no amount of scholarship or genius, not even a whole life-time of study of typology, numerology, or prophecy will ever find in Scripture some secret, figurative, mysterious revelation of the time-period of Christ's return. It has not been put in the Scriptures and no amount of searching will find it there."¹⁰

Other NT scriptures only serve to reinforce the fact that we cannot know the precise time of Christ's return. Eg, see [Acts 1:6-7](#), [1Th 5:1-4](#), etc. Speculation about the precise time of the second coming is therefore fruitless¹¹.

Although the unfolding of events and trends will be signs of the progress towards His coming, the last day will be as instantaneous and universal as a flash of lightening ([Mt 24:23-28](#)); thus, despite the descriptions of the 'signs' of his coming, the Bible also clearly speaks of an *unexpectedness* ([Mt 24:44](#)). We are called to be watchful and ready, and to live lives appropriate to the return of Christ (see below), but nowhere are we told to be concerned with anticipating the exact timing.

⁹ Some "date-setters" argue that although we cannot know the "day or hour", we can, nevertheless, know the week, month and year!

¹⁰ Samuel E Waldron, *The End Times Made Simple*, Calvary Press, 2003, p174

¹¹ Eg: The website www.virtualchurch.org (which describes itself as "Christian Resource Compendium") has a Special Report dated January 1999 which draws three conclusions "(1) God's Word clearly promises that those believers who are watching will know at least approximately, and probably very, very close as to when end-time events will take place. (2) There is strong evidence from the Scriptures that the Second Coming of Christ in power to rule may be in 2004 to 2007; plus, there are some fascinating biblical patterns that may reveal a major prophetic event, possibly the rapture, not later than the spring of 1999 or 2000. (3) The rapture could possibly be any moment before that time - perhaps today!". It is interesting to note that the website was last updated 29/11/02!



We are, however, commissioned to be part of the spread of the gospel, which (as we have seen) is a precondition for His return: by actively engaging in our mission we can hasten the day of His return.

| 5 Warnings About Remaining Watchful

Following these comments about timing, the Oliver Discourse then proceeds with a series of comments and parables about remaining watchful and ready for the return of Jesus. Jesus gave five specific illustrations, as follows:

- **Like Noah's Days (Mt 24:37-42)**. The return of Jesus will take people by surprise; as they are about their business some will be taken by Jesus and some will be left behind. The warning to us is: "keep watch!"
- **Parable of Thief (Mt 24:43-44)**. Jesus will return unexpectedly, like a 'thief'. We are warned to: "be ready!"
- **Parable of Master & Servant (Mt 24:45-51)**. Jesus said the Master will return at a time when the servants do not expect it; if the servants are not ready at his return they will be "assigned a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth". He warns us to be about the Master's business.
- **Parable of Ten Virgin Bridesmaids (Mt 25:1-13)**. The return of Jesus will not give people time to make last-minute preparations. The unprepared will be shut out of the wedding banquet. The warning is to "keep watch!"
- **Parable of Talents (Mt 25:14-30)**. We are to use our talents diligently, earning at least some interest on what has been entrusted to us. Those who don't will be thrown "into the darkness, where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." We are urged to use our talents wisely.

It is because of the unexpectedness of His return that Jesus calls us to be ready and watchful: again, we are not called to try and predict the exact hour or day; but rather to remain prepared *at all times*¹².

¹² A 'sign-of-the-times' mentality, together with a preoccupation with fulfilled prophecy, can easily become detached from a wider concern for God's will.

6 Return of Jesus and the Final Judgement

The last part of the Olivet Discourse deals with events of the second coming of Jesus and the final judgement. We can summarise Jesus's main points as follows:

6.1 The Nature of His Coming

Mt 25:31 again describes a glorious return: he will "come in glory" and sit on his throne "in heavenly glory". He will have his angels with him!

The heart of Biblical teaching on last things is – of course – the glorious appearing of the Lord. Three terms are commonly used to describe this event:

- *Parousia* is the most commonly used term for the second advent (eg **Mt 24:3, 1Co 15:23, 1Th 2:19, 2Th 2:1,8**); it means 'coming', 'arrival' or 'presence' (used, eg, to describe the visit of an emperor) and conveys the idea that His coming will be a *definite and decisive action* on His part. It will be the return of the King!
- *Apokalypsis* (eg **1Co1:7, 2Th 1:7, 1Pe 1:7**) means 'revelation' and reminds us that the return of Christ will be a time when Christ will be fully revealed to everyone and all that is hidden will be made known.
- *Epithaneia* (**2Th 2:8, Tit 2:13**) means 'appearing' or 'manifestation', and conveys the idea of drawing back a veil so that what is already there may be seen for what it is.

The Lord's return will be utterly climatic for existence as we know it, transcending all events in time and space hitherto experienced. His return will be "the final act of the unveiling of the Divine Presence, the culminating revelation of the majesty and transcending glory of the triune God."¹³

It will be the most decisive event of all time, for with it "the end will come" (**1Co 15:24**) for all men, whether they know or care.

6.2 The Purpose of His Coming

By His return, Jesus will bring to completion the redemptive work of God. That is, all His enemies, including sin, death and the devil himself, will be removed from

¹³ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, IVP, Leicester, 1982, p255

the world and a new order established in which God's original purposes for creation and mankind will be fully and finally realised ([2Pe 3:1-13](#), [Rev 22:1-15](#)).

The first and second comings of Jesus are therefore vitally linked. The work of Christ in His second advent is to implement the conquest and victory won decisively in the first ([Jn 14:3](#), [Rev 5:5-15](#)). Milne writes: "In principle nothing remains to be accomplished to bring [Christ's mission] to its full triumph. No intervening events can affect the Easter victory of Christ and so we can live in constant anticipation of his appearing."¹⁴

6.3 Gathering & Separation

In [Mt 25:32-22](#) Jesus says that all nations will be gathered before him and separated, the 'sheep' on his right and the 'goats' on his left. Jesus describes a preparation for judgement in which the righteous and the wicked will stand before Him and their fate determined. Note that the appointed judge is Christ Himself.

6.4 The Final Judgement

Jesus then describes the judgement which will then take place:

- The righteous will "take their inheritance"; the "kingdom prepared for them since the creation of the world"; they will go away to "eternal life" ([Mt 25:34,46](#)).
- The wicked will be sent away from Him, "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"; they will go away to "eternal punishment" ([Mt 25:41,46](#)). Note that here (as elsewhere) Jesus describes a very real and literal hell.

The reasons for the separation are concerned with acts of mercy shown during our lives ([Mt 25:35-45](#)). Such acts are the only real expression of our underlying faith and beliefs, since "faith without works is dead" ([Jas 2:14-19](#)).

Note that elsewhere Scripture tells us that the question of sin does not arise in the judgement of Christians (it has already been removed in the atoning sacrifice of Christ); rather, the judgement has to do with rewards for stewardship ([2Co 5:10](#)). For unbelievers, judgement will be in accordance with the absolute justice of God ([Ge 18:25](#)).

¹⁴ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, IVP, Leicester, 1982, p256

| 7 Summary

We can summarise the key events described in Matthew 24-25 as follows:

Time Events

- False Christs, False Prophets and Deception
 - Wars and Rumours of Wars
 - Famines and Earthquakes
 - Persecution
 - Increasing Evil
 - Apostasy
 - Worldwide Gospel Advance
 - The Abomination that causes Desolation
 - Great Tribulation
 - Darkness and Mourning
 - **THE RETURN OF CHRIST**
 - The Final Judgement
-