

AN EXACT DATE FOR JESUS' RETURN

"Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." --Matthew 24.34

I. WHEN DID JESUS SAY HE WOULD RETURN?

Have you ever been disturbed or questioned your faith when reading the following verses? Many have, and in fact many scholars have used these verses to point to Jesus and the New Testament church being wrong about His return. If any of Jesus' own predictions did not come to pass, then He was a false prophet and certainly a false Messiah.

Matthew 10.23: "Truly I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."

Matthew 16.27-28: "Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom."

Matthew 24.34: "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."

Matthew 26.64: "But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

II. THE OLIVETTE DISCOURSE (MATTHEW 24, MARK 13, LUKE 21)

- A. WILL YOU BE LEFT BEHIND? Jerry Jenkins, Tim LaHaye, Hal Lindsey, and the general reading.
- B. GENERAL CONTEXT—Jesus Weeps over Jerusalem and their coming destruction (Luke 19.41-44); He curses the fruitless fig tree, which is symbolic of the people of Israel who bear no fruit and stand deserving of the coming judgment (Matthew 21.18-22, Mark 11.12-26); He enters the Temple to cleanse it, thus symbolically destroying it (Matthew 21.12-17, Mark 11.15-19); He pronounces woes and coming destruction on "this generation (Matthew 23.1-36.)"
- C. SPECIFIC CONTEXT—In Matthew 24.1 the disciples specifically point out the temple buildings, which Jesus says will be destroyed (v.2). Then in verse 3 they ask a question that is specifically related to the Temple, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" Notice the Greek translation there is 'close of the age,' not 'end of the world.'
- D. EXPOSITION—Let's walk through the passage together and determine if it could have been fulfilled within the very generation of people to whom Jesus spoke¹
 1. *False Christs, Wars, and Rumors of Wars* (v. 4-6). The historian Josephus reports numerous false messiahs during the period from 30-70 A.D: "The country was full of robbers, magicians, false prophets, false Messiahs, and impostors, who deluded the people with promises of great events." The apostle John reports similar findings (I John 2.18). In addition, wars raged during these times all over the Roman Empire, most notably in Germany, Africa, Thrace, Gaul, Britain, and Armenia.
 2. *Famines, Pestilences, and Earthquake* (v. 7). Scripture itself devotes much of its text to the famines during this time (see Acts 11.27-29, Romans 15.25-28, I Cor. 16.1-5). The Roman historians Josephus, Suetonius, and Tacitus confirm the widespread famine and pestilence throughout the Empire. Earthquakes were recorded in Crete, Smyrna, Miletus, Chios, Samos, Laodicea, Hierapolis, Colossae, Campania, Rome, Judea, Pompeii, and other places.
 3. *Persecution, Apostasy, and Lawlessness* (v. 9-12). Scripture describes these exact occurrences: Persecution (Acts 4.3, 5.40, 7.54-60, 8.1, 9.1, 12.1, 14.19; Col 1.24; II Cor. 4.7ff), Apostasy (Acts 20.29-30; II Cor. 11.13; Gal. 1.6, 2.4; I John 2.18-19), and Lawlessness (I Cor. 5.1-2, II Tim. 3.8-9).
 4. *Gospel Witness to all nations* (v. 14). The word world here often refers not to the universe but to the Roman Empire (see Luke 2.1 and Acts 11.28). Thus, Jesus is speaking of the witness of His

¹ Much of the following material was taken from Keith Mathison's *Eschatology of Hope* and R.C. Sproul's *The Last Days According to Jesus*. I highly recommend both books for anyone interested in this subject.

Gospel to the ends of the Roman Empire and to the nations contained therein. This is fulfilled by the apostles themselves, beginning with Peter's sermon to the nations at Pentecost (Acts 2) and noted by Paul (Rom. 10.18; Col. 1.6, 23)

5. *The Abomination of Desolation and the Flight of Christians* (v. 15-20). The abomination of desolation (see also Daniel 9.22-27) is the destruction of Jerusalem by pagan enemies, followed by pagan sacrifices in the Jewish Temple. Because such destruction is imminent, Jesus instructs His followers to flee during those days, to run to the hills so that they might escape, even if by the skin of their teeth.
6. *Great Tribulation* (v. 21-22). The destruction of the Temple would be an earth-shattering event. The Temple was the holy place where Yahweh was supposed to dwell, and if it were destroyed that would be a sign that either Yahweh Himself was defeated or that Yahweh had left His people. In addition, this destruction would be the culmination of a 42 month war (note the references to this time period specifically in Revelation) where the Jews were embattled, starved, crucified, and slaughtered.
7. *False Reports of Christ's Coming* (v. 23-28). This will not be a visible coming of Christ, but a coming of Christ for the purpose of judgment. Don't look for him in a room or out in the wilderness. This is confirmed by the dramatic language about lightning coming from the east and the vultures gathering around the corpses. The lightning indicates the direction of the approaching armies and vultures indicate the outpouring of the covenant curses upon the Jews (Deut. 28.26).
8. *The Sun, Moon, and Stars* (v. 29). This is apocalyptic imagery which is employed often in the O.T. to speak of the falling of world powers in judgment (see. Is. 13.9-12, Ezek. 32.7, and Amos 8.9).
9. *The Sign of the Son of Man* (v. 30). Notice the text does not say that the Son of Man will appear but His sign. Thus, the smoke rising from the war against Jerusalem would be a sign in the air that the Son of Man reigns in Heaven. It is also interesting to note that the historian Josephus reports numerous astrological anomalies during this time such as a shining light emanating from the Temple, a star above the Temple in the shape of a sword, and a comet (Haley's Comet).
10. *The Gathering of the Elect* (v. 31). The 'angels' are messengers (Matthew 11.10) who travel the world spreading the Gospel. This was fulfilled in Acts 1.7-8, 2.1-41, 28.28.
11. *The Lesson of the Fig Tree* (v. 32-33). Jesus is making the exact point that the disciples should look to these signs to know when His coming in judgment is near, "at the very gates."
12. *This Generation* (v. 34-35). Jesus guarantees the accuracy of His words by promising that all these things will come to pass in "this generation."
13. *Will You be Left Behind?* (v. 36-44). Jesus compares this generation to the generation of Noah who thought no great judgment would befall them. They were going about their normal business of eating, drinking, and marrying when the flood of destruction swooped in upon them unawares. Therefore, the one who is taken is not being taken in a rapture to heaven but taken away to judgment.
14. *An Exact Day*. In 66 A.D. the Roman General Vespasian began a siege against Jerusalem and in late August of 70 A.D. is the date when Jerusalem and the Temple finally fell to the invading hordes of Romans. Josephus records that 1,100,000 Jews were killed and another 97,000 taken prisoner. Thus, ended the Temple, its sacrifices, and the Jewish religion as we know it

III. FURTHER QUESTIONS

- A. WHAT IS OUR FUTURE HOPE? Isaiah 11.9; I Thess. 4.13ff; I Cor. 15; Rev. 21.1-7
- B. WHO IS THE ANTICHRIST?
- C. HOW DO WE INTERPRET REVELATION?
- D. WHAT ARE THE OTHER VIEWS OF ESCHATOLOGY?
- E. WHAT ABOUT THE 70 WEEKS IN DANIEL 9?
- F. HOW DO WE LIVE THIS?