

CALLED  
TO  
WATCH  
FOR  
CHRIST'S  
RETURN

Martyn McGeown



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Reformed Free Publishing Association

1894 Georgetown Center Drive

Jenison, Michigan 49428

[rfpa.org](http://rfpa.org)

[mail@rfpa.org](mailto:mail@rfpa.org)

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I dedicate this book with much love to my family: my parents, Ernie and Sally; my siblings, Jason and Shelley; my brother-in-law, Michael; and my nieces, Anna, Lily, and Hope



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## Preface

This book began as a series of sermons that I preached in Limerick, Ireland, between August 2011 and January 2012, to the saints of the Limerick Reformed Fellowship.

I divide the material into two parts. The first, an explanation of Matthew 24:1–31, deals with the signs of Christ’s coming. The disciples asked for signs, and Christ gave signs to them and to us. The second, an explanation of Matthew 24:32–25:46, applies what Christ has taught in the first part of the Olivet Discourse. Christ never teaches us about the signs of his coming merely to satisfy our idle curiosity. The truth is practical, for it concerns our hope. Therefore, I have entitled the second part, “Watching for Christ’s Return.” If we know about the signs but do not live watchfully, we will be like the fools described in the parables toward the end of the discourse.

Let us watch and pray, therefore, and wait for that great day with a most ardent desire!





## Introduction



# THE APPROACH TO THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

**M**atthew 24–25 is called the Olivet Discourse, because Christ spoke these words from the Mount of Olives. The discourse is one of Christ’s longest recorded speeches in the four gospels, and it is his most detailed treatment of eschatology, or the subject of the last things. In this important speech, Jesus proclaims his second coming, an event with which history will come to a dramatic and sudden close. Some commentators have called the discourse a “mini apocalypse,” because it is parallel to the book of Revelation, given to John by the exalted Lord Jesus Christ on the island of Patmos.

Like every major eschatological passage—especially the book of Revelation and the important passages in Paul’s Thessalonian correspondence—the Olivet Discourse is the subject of theological contention and debate. To understand what Christ is teaching here, we need to know the context. Without a careful examination of the context, we will become mired in useless

questions, and we will miss the vital instruction and warning, which Christ gives his disciples and us about the signs of his coming.

There are three different approaches to the Olivet Discourse that reflect three different millennial schools of eschatology. If one has a certain conviction about eschatology, Christ's words will be interpreted to fit that position. Sometimes Christ's words will be forced into an eschatological and millennial mold that Christ never intended. The three schools of thought concerning Revelation and the Olivet Discourse are premillennial dispensationalism, postmillennialism, and Reformed amillennialism (the position that I will advocate in this book).

The millennium as such does not concern us here, because the term *millennium* only appears in Revelation 20 and is utterly absent from the Olivet Discourse itself. Nevertheless, millennialism will make a difference in one's interpretation of the discourse.

Pivotal to the discourse is the year AD 70. That was the year the city of Jerusalem and, more importantly, Jerusalem's temple were destroyed by the Romans. That date was a turning point in Jewish history, after which the Jewish nation for all intents and purposes ceased to exist. The unbelieving Jews were scattered, enslaved, and slaughtered in huge numbers. It cannot be denied that such a tragedy for the nation of Israel is part of the discourse, as well as part of the teaching of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ. For example, John the Baptist warned unbelieving Israel, "The axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire" (Matt. 3:10). The nation of Israel was hewn down with the Roman ax in AD 70. God, as John the Baptist warned, "is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham" (v. 9).

Moreover, Jesus both cursed the barren fig tree, which represented fruitless Israel (Matt. 21:19), and warned that fruitless nation, “The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (v. 43). Jesus even said about AD 70, “Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (Matt. 24:34).

To deny that AD 70, with its dreadful fall and destruction of Jerusalem, was part of Christ’s focus would be to deny the obvious. For one thing, that is exactly what the disciples asked. When Jesus warned, “There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down,” a clear reference to AD 70, the disciples anxiously asked, “Tell us, when shall these things be?” (Matt. 24:2–3).

However, the question that divides the premillennial dispensationalists, the postmillennialists, and the (Reformed) amillennialists, and especially the question that divides the postmillennialists from the (Reformed) amillennialists, is this: Does AD 70 *exhaust* the fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse? Is the discourse a prophecy about *only* the events of AD 70, or is there more here?

## The Postmillennial and Premillennial Dispensational Interpretations

Postmillennialism argues that the discourse, at least up to Matthew 24:35, is exclusively about AD 70. Some postmillennialists argue that the whole discourse, including the description of the final judgment in Matthew 25, treats exclusively the events of AD 70. This view is called *preterism*, a word derived from the Latin for “past.” A preterist view of Christ’s words sees them exhaustively fulfilled in the past. The reason postmillennialists find such a preterist view attractive, and even necessary for

their whole eschatological system, is that the discourse contains prophecies that do not fit a “positive” view of the future.

David Chilton is emphatic: “*Everything* Jesus spoke of in this passage, at least up to verse 34, *took place before the generation then living passed away.*” ‘Wait a minute,’ you say. ‘Everything? The witnessing to all nations, the Tribulation, the coming of Christ on the clouds, the stars falling...*everything?*’” Yes.<sup>1</sup>

Postmillennialism teaches that before Christ returns the church will enjoy a long period of unprecedented peace, prosperity, and growth. This period, known as the golden age, will last as long as one thousand or even countless thousands of years, during which time the world will be Christianized.<sup>2</sup> This Christianization will mean that the majority of the world’s population will become Christians, or at least will be culturally and morally Christian. However, the discourse does not paint a picture of a golden age, but quite the opposite. Christ warns of persecution and apostasy. Preterism very conveniently places all such persecution and apostasy (and other negative events) *in the past*. Therefore, they cannot interfere with the future golden age promised by postmillennialism. Gary North, another postmillennialist, expresses it this way:

The fact is, *the vast majority of prophecies in the New Testament* refer to this crucial event [the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70], the event which publicly identified the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Cove-

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- 1 David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1994), 86.
  - 2 David Chilton writes, “The ‘1,000 years’ of Revelation 20 represent a vast, undefined period of time. It has already lasted almost 2,000 years and will probably go on for many more. ‘Exactly how many more years?’ someone asked me. ‘I’ll be happy to tell you,’ I cheerfully replied, ‘as soon as you tell me exactly how many hills are in Psalm 50’” (ibid., 199).

nant, and which also marked the triumph of rabbinic Judaism over priestly Judaism, Pharisee over Sadducee, and the synagogue system over the temple.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, many postmillennialists uncharitably label (Reformed) amillennialists as “pessimillennialists,” as if we were pessimistic about the future. However, that we deny a future golden age—free from persecution, apostasy, and the anti-christ—and that we warn that these things are coming in our future does not make us pessimistic. We believe that Christ is the Lord of history and that he has successfully gathered, defended, and preserved his church from the beginning to the end of the world. Indeed, we echo Paul’s triumph, “We are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter,” yet “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Rom. 8:36–37). We overcome the world as Christians, not by taking over the UN, NATO, and the United States Congress, and not by massive revivals, but “by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of [our] testimony; and [we love] not [our] lives unto the death” (Rev. 12:11).

Premillennial dispensationalists generally view the Olivet Discourse the same way they interpret the book of Revelation. Both passages, they contend, speak exclusively of the future. The events promised in Matthew 24–25 do not in any sense concern the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. As dreadful as that was, Jesus does not speak of it here. Instead, argue many premillennial dispensationalists, the discourse concerns a *future* Jerusalem

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3 Gary North, publisher’s preface, in Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *The Beast of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1994), x; emphasis added. In that book, Gentry argues that the antichrist was the emperor Nero, and therefore, there is no future antichrist. This is a common view among modern postmillennialist theologians.

with a *future* temple. Everything prophesied in Matthew 24–25 is future not only to the disciples, but also to us. The signs were not for the disciples, or even for us, but for a future generation who will be alive when the Jews rebuild the temple in a restored Jewish state. That state, argue many premillennial dispensationalists, has been established—it is modern Israel—and now we await the promised temple, which will be built soon.

I will interact with these views throughout this study of the words of Christ in the Olivet Discourse.

## The Reformed Amillennial Approach

What then is the relationship between Christ's words, the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and the future coming of Christ at the end of history? How, therefore, do we view the Olivet Discourse?

We answer—typologically.

The two events, the fall of Jerusalem and the second coming of Christ, are related in the minds of the disciples and in the mind of Christ. They are related in this way. One is a type, or picture, that foreshadows the other. In other words, AD 70 is not the end of the world, but it is a type, or picture, of the end of the world. Christ illustrates the end of the world, which is in the distant future from the disciples' perspective, with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, which is in the near future from the disciples' perspective.

This explains several features of the discourse.

First, it explains Matthew 24:34, "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled." This is, without any exaggeration, the trump card of postmillennialism. With this verse postmillennialists explain that everything—including the abomination of desolation, the great

tribulation, and even the darkening of the sun and moon in verse 29—was fulfilled exhaustively in AD 70. We Reformed amillennialists, on the other hand, understand Christ’s meaning differently. All these things shall happen in one generation—we do not deny that—but they shall happen in historical type. We cannot push all these things into the distant future, as the disciples were tempted to do, and as the futurist premillennial dispensationalists do. The events around AD 70 do not exhaust the fulfillment of “all these things.” Jerusalem shall fall, the abomination of desolation shall be set up, and there shall be great tribulation, but these things will continue throughout the New Testament age. We can push them all neither into the past (postmillennialism) nor into the future (premillennial dispensationalism). We know this because “immediately after the tribulation of those days” (v. 29) Christ shall come, but he did *not* return immediately after the events of AD 70.

Second, the typological approach to the Olivet Discourse does justice to the disciples’ double-barreled question in Matthew 24:3: “Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?” The disciples had two questions, or one question with two parts. The postmillennial preterist approach addresses the first part of the question, “When shall these things be?” but neglects the second part of the question, “What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?” The premillennial dispensationalist futurist approach addresses the second part of the question, “What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?” but neglects the first part of the question, “When shall these things be?” The (Reformed) amillennial typological approach answers both questions, or both parts of the disciples’ double-barreled question.

Third, the typological approach to the Olivet Discourse provides an explanation for the Jewish flavor of Christ's presentation. Jesus addresses Jewish disciples in a Jewish city concerning the future of the Jewish nation. That is why in Matthew 24 he speaks of the "holy place" (v. 15), the mountains beyond Judea (v. 16), the flat roofs of Palestine (v. 17), and prohibitions concerning Sabbath travel (v. 20). Several Reformed amillennial commentators explain the significance of this:

In describing the brief period of great tribulation at the close of history, ending with the final judgment, Jesus is painting in colors borrowed from the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus was on the Mount of Olives speaking as God's final prophet, using the temple and the city of Jerusalem as graphic visual aids. Jesus spoke not only directly about God's coming judgment on the city and the temple but also to the church awaiting the great consummation and the end of the present age many years hence.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is proclaiming events in the distant future in close connection with events in the near future. The destruction of Jerusalem which lies in the near future is a type of the end of the world; hence the intermingling. The passage, therefore, deals neither exclusively with the destruction of Jerusalem nor exclusively with the end of

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4 William Hendrickson, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 847.

5 Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 158.



the world; it deals with both—sometimes with the latter in terms of the former.<sup>6</sup>

This feature of prophecy in general, and of the Olivet Discourse in particular, makes these chapters a challenge for the exegete. There are two threads in Matthew 24–25. One concerns the events of AD 70. The other concerns the events of the entire New Testament age leading up to and culminating in the second coming of Christ. However, these two threads are so expertly woven together that we find it difficult to unravel them. Indeed, we should not expect to be able to unravel them. Christ has woven them together for a reason. Matthew Henry writes,

This prophecy, under the type of Jerusalem’s destruction, looks as far forward as the general judgment; and, as is usual in prophecies, some passages are more applicable to the type, and others to the antitype; and toward the close, as usual, it points more particularly to the latter.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus, in the Olivet Discourse, is speaking as a prophet. Indeed, he is, as the Heidelberg Catechism teaches, “our chief Prophet and Teacher.”<sup>8</sup> One of the outstanding features of biblical prophecy is prophetic perspective, in which one event, the second advent, is described in terms of two distinct events, in this case the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the end of the world. In addition, we need to bear in mind the “two ages”

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6 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 149.

7 Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 5, *Matthew to John* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d.), 5:347.

8 Heidelberg Catechism A 31, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 3:317.

view of the New Testament—this age and the age to come. Many postmillennialists wrongly see “this age” as the pre-AD 70 Jewish age and “the age to come” as the post-AD 70 church age. Rather, this age is the New Testament age (the period of time from the first to the second advent), and the age to come is the age of eternity.

Let us then sit at the feet of the Master, as he instructs us about those things that must come to pass. Let us not fear, for these things concern our salvation.

Part One



THE  
SIGNS  
OF  
CHRIST'S  
COMING



## Chapter 1



# THE DISCIPLES' QUESTIONS ABOUT THE END

And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?—Matthew 24:1–3

Christ is coming. Do you hear his footsteps? Ever since he ascended to his Father in order to prepare a place in heaven for his church, he has been on the way back. In heaven, he is not simply sitting idly at the right hand of God, waiting for the signal to return, but he is actively moving all of history toward that certain end. The history of the New Testament is the preparation

for his return. The first coming was necessary so that he could set in motion events that bring about his second coming (Heb. 9:28). That coming will be sudden and unexpected for the wicked and for the professing church that is spiritually asleep. Therefore, we must be found watching and waiting.

Christ's disciples were interested in Christ's coming. They knew he had come as the Messiah; they knew he was the king of God's kingdom; and they knew that he would come again, but the details were fuzzy in their minds, so they asked him in Matthew 24:3, "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" They asked for a sign, but Christ surpassed their expectations by giving them not merely one sign, but *many* signs of his coming. These signs, which would begin to take place already in that generation, continue throughout the New Testament age and intensify just before the end.

### The Occasion

The disciples do not ask their question out of the blue. In the context of Matthew 23, the disciples had just witnessed Christ angrily denouncing the unbelieving Jewish leaders. He had pronounced no fewer than eight solemn woes against them. The apostate Jews of Christ's day had followed in the footsteps of apostate Judaism. Upon them, says Christ, shall come all the righteous blood that had been shed upon the earth from Abel to Zacharias (v. 35). In the Hebrew Bible, Genesis is the first book and 2 Chronicles (not Malachi) is the last book. Since Abel's death is recorded in Genesis, and Zacharias' death is recorded in 2 Chronicles, Jesus means all the blood of martyrs that had been shed throughout the Old Testament. The persecution of God's righteous servants was their greatest sin, and the Pharisees of

Christ's day showed that they followed in their fathers' footsteps by refusing to believe in Christ and by persecuting those who believed in him. Soon they would be guilty of the worst of all crimes: the murder of the Son of God, a sin for which God's wrath would fall upon them in terrifying intensity. The cross, on which Christ would die, would be proof of their opposition to God, as well as the great display of God's justice and mercy to his elect church.

Jesus commands the Pharisees to fill up the measure of their fathers (Matt. 23:32). In the history of the world, several cups must be filled. The first is the cup of iniquity. Sin, which has developed from a seed planted in the fall of man, has brought forth a bitter harvest. Various peoples have filled up their cups in history, but now it would be the Jews' time. Followed by the cup of iniquity is the cup of God's wrath: God will not pour out the fullness of his wrath until the wicked have filled the cup of their sins (see Gen. 15:16). Once her cup has been filled, God will destroy Jerusalem for her sins. He did that especially in AD 70 by means of the Roman invasion.

This greatest woe upon Jerusalem is something they welcomed. Christ will abandon them: "I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Matt. 23:39). That is really the desolation of Israel, for Christ leaves them.

Israel existed as a nation because God would keep his covenantal promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and then David, but with the coming of Christ and Israel's rejection of him, God had no further use for that nation. Remember his chilling warning in Matthew 21:43: "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." That new nation is the church of believing Jews and Gentiles in the New Testament (1 Pet. 2:9).

The temple, once called the house of God, was also abandoned. It had become an empty shell of mere formalistic religion. The worship of that place foreshadowed and prepared for Christ. Now that Christ had come the temple had fulfilled its purpose. For Christ to leave any people or any church is for that people and church to be desolate—a wasteland, a desert, a lifeless, empty shell. Accordingly, Christ's actions match his words. He leaves the temple and never returns. The woes of Matthew 23 are the last words Christ speaks in his last visit to the temple. Often he had taught there, but now he wipes the dust off his feet. The Jews heard God's word, but they rejected it. Accordingly, chapter 24 begins, "Jesus went out, and departed from the temple" (v. 1).

One can only imagine what troubling thoughts rushed through the disciples' minds as their beloved Master spoke such words to the religious leaders. As if to stop Christ in his tracks and maybe even to make him reconsider his judgment against the temple, the disciples call his attention to the grandeur of the temple buildings. You can almost hear them say, "Lord, look at the temple. Surely, you do not think all *this* could be left desolate, do you?" Mark 13:1 records their words: "Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!"

Most of Christ's disciples were Galileans (Judas Iscariot was a notable exception) who did not enjoy many opportunities to see the temple. They were understandably impressed by it. In fact, there was no greater structure in Jerusalem than the temple; it dominated the city. From whichever direction the pilgrims came, the temple could be seen. The temple was the glory of Jerusalem. It was the reason pilgrims flocked there. It was the center of Israel's worship. It was her boast. "We have the temple, and God dwells with us," they enthused. So long as the temple stood, Israel felt safe, indeed indestructible, but now Christ warns that the temple will be destroyed and desolate.



The temple in question was not the first in Israel's history. The first had been built from stone cut from the quarries and wood from the cedars of Lebanon, covered over with gold, in the glory days of Solomon. The Babylonians had destroyed *that* temple. Zerubbabel built the second temple after the Babylonian captivity. That temple was not as impressive as the first, but it was still a great structure. Antiochus Epiphanes (c. 215–164 BC) defiled it in the intertestamentary period. We will learn more about that wicked king when we study the meaning of the abomination of desolation (Matt. 24:15).

Herod the Great (c. 74–4 BC) built the temple that stood in Jerusalem during Christ's earthly ministry. He had spared no expense in making it the most impressive edifice in Jerusalem. Huge marble blocks, pure gold, and Corinthian brass were used in its design. The disciples call to Christ's attention the beautiful buildings of Herod's temple. "It was adorned with goodly stones and gifts" (Luke 21:5). Alfred Edersheim describes the glory of the temple that the disciples beheld:

Alone, and isolated in its grandeur, stood the Temple Mount. Terrace upon terrace its courts rose, til, high above the city, within the enclosure of marble cloisters, cedar-roofed and richly ornamented, the Temple itself stood out a mass of snowy marble and of gold, glittering in the sunlight against the half-encircling green background of Olivet. In all his wanderings the Jew had not seen a city like his own Jerusalem. Not Antioch in Asia, not even imperial Rome herself, excelled it in architectural splendor. Nor has there been, either in ancient or modern times, a sacred building equal to the Temple, whether for situation or magnificence; nor yet have there been festive throngs like those joyous hundreds

of thousands who, with their hymns of praise, crowded towards the city on the eve of a Passover...

[The] eight side gates, as we may call them, were all two-leaved, wide, high, with superstructures and chambers supported by two pillars, and covered with gold and silver plating. But far more magnificent than any of them was the ninth or *eastern* gate, which formed the principal entrance into the Temple. The ascent to it was from the terrace by twelve easy steps. The gate itself was made of dazzling Corinthian brass, most richly ornamented; and so massive were its double doors that it needed the united strength of twenty men to open and close them. This was the "Beautiful Gate."<sup>1</sup>

Christ is not impressed by architecture. Yes, the temple was splendid to behold, but it was a hindrance. The people trusted in it; they gloried in it. Their attitude was as it had been in Jeremiah's day:

4. Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, the Temple of the LORD, are these.
5. For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour;
6. If ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt:

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; repr., 1982), 28, 47.

7. Then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.
8. Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit.
9. Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not;
10. And come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations?
11. Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the LORD. (Jer. 7:4–11)

“Your house is left unto you desolate” might be open to misinterpretation, but Christ’s blunt response is not. Every stone would be thrown down. This speaks of a violent, sudden, and complete destruction, which literally occurred some forty years later. Christ’s prophecy is not that the temple would simply fall into disrepair. Rather, it would be thrown down, so that one stone would not be left upon another.<sup>2</sup>

Let us be clear that the temple Christ meant was the one the disciples were now admiring: “there shall not be left *here* one stone.” I emphasize this because in this book, as was explained in the introduction, we must interact with two erroneous but popular views of eschatology, premillennial dispensationalism and postmillennialism.

Premillennial dispensationalism understands Matthew 24 in terms of the distant future, a view often called futurism. For the

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<sup>2</sup> Some have argued that Christ’s prophecy was not fulfilled, because the Wailing Wall still exists in Jerusalem today. However, the Wailing Wall was not part of the temple proper but was part of an extension to the temple site constructed by Herod the Great.

premillennial dispensationalist, Christ's words really have nothing to do with AD 70. The premillennial dispensational scheme imagines that Christ is speaking of a rebuilt temple sometime in our future. *That* temple will be destroyed and in that temple antichrist will sit. This is necessary for the premillennial dispensational scheme because all of the horrors described in Matthew 24—especially the great tribulation—must not fall on the church, which will have escaped in the rapture. We will examine the subject of the rapture in later chapters. For now, let us understand that premillennial dispensationalism expects a *different* temple in the future.

Furthermore, premillennial dispensationalism is committed to the notion that Israel will build their temple again. It is necessary for their scheme, because all Old Testament prophecies concerning the temple must be fulfilled literally, a view that will be refuted later in this book.

The premillennial dispensationalists teach that the next thing on God's agenda is the rapture of the church. One day—it could be any moment—Christ will return invisibly and secretly and take all Christians to be with him, so that all Christians will disappear from the earth. Strictly speaking, that rapture comes without any signs, and there is no need to look for signs. When the disciples asked for signs of Christ's coming, they meant signs for Christ's coming at the end of the world, signs that have nothing to do with the disciples and have nothing to do with the church, which will be caught up in the rapture. The tribulation described here has nothing to do with us, therefore. This pertains only to a future time after the rapture when the antichrist will persecute those "left behind." But that explanation cannot be correct either. Why would Jesus answer his disciples' questions with irrelevant information about the distant future? That would be to mock them. Besides, the chapter makes clear

that Christ's contemporaries are meant. *These things! These buildings! There shall not be left here!*

Therefore, Matthew 24 clearly speaks of the temple of that day, the temple whose buildings the disciples admired and the temple that Christ had just left. Yet how inconceivable and unbelievable Christ's prophecy must have seemed to the disciples! This glorious temple destroyed? Who or what could or would destroy the Jews' temple? It had taken forty-six years to build it (John 2:20). Could it really be destroyed so utterly that no stone would be left on another? Would the Romans, the world power of that day, destroy it? The Romans had always been indulgent about the Jews' temple, and there was no open war between Rome and Jerusalem. Moreover, Christ would be sacrificed by Pilate to ensure a continuation of such peace:

47. Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles.
48. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.
49. And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all,
50. Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.
51. And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation;
52. And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad. (John 11:47-52)

Indeed, to speak against the temple in this way was blasphemous to the ears of a pious Jew. Remember how the Jews reacted to the accusation that Stephen had spoken *against* the temple (Acts 6:13). Yet the disciples believed Christ and were concerned to know more. They did not contradict Christ, but they needed further instruction, which Christ is pleased to give.

## The Significance

Such an earth-shattering prediction implies more than the end of bricks and mortar in Jerusalem. It implies the end of Jerusalem, and with it, the end of the nation of Israel. It also implies the judgment of Almighty God, for how could Israel be destroyed except God do it (Amos 3:3)? Had God not done this in the past? Would he do it again? It implies the coming of Christ to judge.

Because of this, and because the disciples know that Jesus speaks the truth of God, they ask him some urgent follow-up questions.

First, *when* shall these things be? How will they, the disciples, be able to recognize that these things are about to happen? The disciples, who understand the need to be ready, urgently seek an explanation.

Second, what shall be the sign of Christ's *coming*? That word, the Greek word *parousia*, means a presence or an arrival, usually the arrival of a great king or other dignitary. It refers to Christ's future, visible coming at the end of history.

Third, what shall be the *sign*? That word *sign* often means a miracle, something spectacular in the world, in the church, and in history by which we will see and know that the coming of Christ is near. The disciples wanted to be able to watch for the coming of their Lord.