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# The Signs of Christ's Coming—part 1

## The Background

(24:1-3)

# 1

**And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He answered and said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.”**

**And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (24:1-3)**

Jesus' message in Matthew 24-25 is commonly known as the Olivet discourse, so named because it was delivered to the disciples on the Mount of Olives. The theme of the discourse is Christ's second coming at the end of the present age to establish His millennial kingdom on earth.

The message was prompted by the disciples' question in 24:3, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” The answer Jesus gave is the longest answer given to any question asked in the New Testament, and its truths are absolutely essential for understanding His return and the amazing

events associated with it. It is the revelation of our Lord, directly from His own lips, about His return to earth in glory and power.

The teaching of the Olivet discourse is much debated and frequently misunderstood, largely because it is viewed through the lens of a particular theological system or interpretive scheme that makes the message appear complex and enigmatic. But the disciples were not learned men, and Jesus' purpose was to give them clarity and encouragement, not complexity and anxiety. The intricate interpretations that are sometimes proposed for this passage would have left the disciples utterly dumbfounded. It is preferable to take Jesus' words as simply and as straightforwardly as possible.

### PROPHETIC EXPECTATIONS IN JUDAISM

In order to understand better the disciples' question on this occasion it is necessary to know something of the basic hopes and aspirations of the Judaism of that day. As always, the historical setting is an important key to the context. Throughout history people have had a strong desire to know the future, and few societies have been without their seers, mediums, fortune-tellers, and other prognosticators. By various means, all of them deceitful and many of them demonic, such futurists have offered gullible inquirers purported revelations of what lies ahead. Although the Mosaic law strictly forbade consulting mediums and soothsayers (Deut. 18:9-14), Israelites had frequently fallen prey to them, the most prominent instance being that of King Saul's consulting the medium of Endor (1 Sam. 28:3-25; see also 2 Kings 21:6).

There is no evidence that many Jews of Jesus' day were guilty of Saul's offense, but they did have an intense interest in the future. They were tired of being under the domination of pagan oppressors and were eager for the divinely-promised deliverance of their Messiah. The Jews were a noble, highly intelligent, and highly gifted people who, humanly speaking, were entirely capable of competent self-rule. Yet for many centuries they had been subdued by one foreign tyrant after another. The northern ten tribes had been conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C., and the southern two tribes fell to Babylon in 586 B.C. Following that were conquests by the Medo-Persians, the Greeks, and finally the Romans.

In their own minds, however, the Jews had always been their own people and had never truly been subjugated to any foreign ruler. It was that abiding and sometimes arrogant spirit of independence even in the midst of oppression that induced some of the Jews to declare before Jesus in the Temple, "We are Abraham's offspring, and have never yet been enslaved to anyone" (John 8:33). They knew all too well, of course, that outwardly they were indeed enslaved, and freedom from that enslavement was the overriding passion of most Jews. Although the majority of them

were not associated with the militant Zealots, they all yearned for Rome to be overthrown and for Israel to become a free nation once again.

The Jews knew intimately the many Old Testament promises of future blessing, deliverance, and prosperity. They knew God had promised to vanquish all the enemies of His chosen people and to establish His eternal kingdom of righteousness and justice on earth. They knew that the Lord's Anointed One—His Messiah, or Christ—would come and establish the rule and reign of David again on earth, a reign of peace, prosperity, and safety that would never end. Their great longing was to see that day when God restored the kingdom as He had promised.

The Jews therefore had great hope for the future. They exulted as they read, "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this" (Isa. 9:6-7). They thrilled at the promise that "a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (Isa. 11:1-2).

Israel took immense encouragement from the words of Jeremiah: "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I shall raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, "The Lord our righteousness"" (Jer. 23:5-6; cf. 30:9-10). They longed for the day when the spoil taken from them would be divided among them (Zech. 14:1), when "living waters [would] flow out of Jerusalem" (v. 8), and "there [would] be no more curse, for Jerusalem [would] dwell in security" (v. 11). They rejoiced that "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people . . . but it will itself endure forever" (Dan. 2:44).

By the time of Jesus, the Jews had formed in their minds a very clear scenario of how they believed those predicted events would unfold. To understand what the Jewish expectations were, it is helpful to read their literature from that time. In his *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* ([Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1893], pp. 154-87), Emil Schuer gives excerpts from numerous extrabiblical Jewish writings of that era which reveal those expectations.

First, consistent with the teaching of Zechariah 14 and other Old Testament prophecies, they believed that the coming of the Messiah would

be preceded by a time of terrible tribulation. Just as a woman experiences intense pain shortly before the delivery of a child, so Israel would experience great torment shortly before the Messiah arrived.

2 Baruch 27 reported,

And honour shall be turned into shame,  
 And strength humiliated into contempt,  
 And probity destroyed,  
 And beauty shall become ugliness . . .  
 And envy shall rise in those who had not thought aught  
 of themselves,  
 And passion shall seize him that is peaceful,  
 And many shall be stirred up in anger to injure many,  
 And they shall rouse up armies in order to shed blood,  
 And in the end they shall perish together with them.

According to another source, there would be “quakings of places, tumult of peoples, schemings of nations, confusion of leaders, disquietude of princes” (2 Esdras [4 Ezra] 9:3).

The Jewish *Sibylline Oracles* declared,

From heaven shall fall fiery swords down to the earth. Lights shall come, bright and great, flashing into the midst of men; and earth, the universal mother, shall shake in these days at the hand of the Eternal. And the fishes of the sea and the beasts of the earth and the countless tribes of flying things and all the souls of men and every sea shall shudder at the presence of the Eternal and there shall be panic. And the towering mountain peaks and the hills of the giants he shall rend, and the murky abyss shall be visible to all. And the high ravines in the lofty mountains shall be full of dead bodies and rocks shall flow with blood and each torrent shall flood the plain. . . . And God shall judge all with war and sword, and there shall be brimstone from heaven, yea stones and rain and hail incessant and grievous. And death shall be upon the four-footed beasts. . . . Yea the land itself shall drink of the blood of the perishing and beasts shall eat their fill of flesh. (3:363ff.)

The Mishna anticipated that just before the coming of Messiah,

arrogance increases, ambition shoots up, . . . the vine yields fruit yet wine is dear. The government turns to heresy. There is no instruction. The synagogue is devoted to lewdness. Galilee is destroyed, Gablan laid waste. The inhabitants of a district go from city to city without finding compassion. The wisdom of the learned is hated, the godly despised, truth is absent.

Boys insult old men, old men stand in the presence of children. The son depreciates the father, the daughter rebels against the mother, the daughter-in-law against the mother-in-law. A man's enemies are his house-fellows.

Second, the popular eschatology of Jesus' day held that in the midst of that turmoil would appear an Elijah-like forerunner heralding the Messiah's coming. It was for that reason that so many Jews were drawn to John the Baptist. Jewish oral tradition maintained that the ownership of any disputed money or property would have to wait "till Elijah comes" before being finally settled.

The third event of that eschatology was the Messiah's appearance, at which time He would establish His kingdom age of glory and would vindicate His people.

The fourth event would be the alliance of the nations to fight against the Messiah. The *Sibylline Oracles* declared,

The kings of the nations shall throw themselves against this land bringing retribution on themselves. They shall seek to ravage the shrine of the mighty God and of the noblest men whensoever they come to the land. In a ring round the city the accursed kings shall place each one his throne with the infidel people by him. And then with a mighty voice God shall speak unto all the undisciplined, empty-minded people and judgment shall come upon them from the mighty God, and all shall perish at the hand of the Eternal. (3:363-72)

In 2 Esdras [4 Ezra] is the prediction, "It shall be that when all the nations hear his (the Messiah's) voice, every man shall leave his own land and the warfare they have one against the other, and the innumerable multitude shall be gathered together desiring to fight against him" (13:33-35). In other words, unbelieving mankind will interrupt all its other warfare in order to unite against the Messiah.

The fifth eschatological event would be the destruction of those opposing nations. Philo wrote that the Messiah would "take the field and make war and destroy great and populous nations." The writer of 2 Esdras declared that the Messiah "shall reprove them for their ungodliness, rebuke them for their unrighteousness, reproach them to their faces with their treacheries—and when he has rebuked them he shall destroy them" (12:32-33). The book of Enoch reported that "it shall come to pass in those days that none shall be saved, either by gold or by silver, and none shall be able to escape. And there shall be no iron for war, nor shall one clothe oneself with a breastplate. Bronze shall be of no service, and tin shall not be esteemed, and lead shall not be desired. And all things shall

be destroyed from the surface of the earth” (52:7-9). All the vast armaments and defenses of the nations will be useless against the Messiah.

Sixth would be the restoration of Jerusalem, either by renovation of the existing city or by the coming down of a completely new Jerusalem from heaven. In either case, the city of the great King would henceforth be pure, holy, and incorruptible. In the book of Enoch, Jerusalem was envisioned as having “all the pillars . . . new and the ornaments larger than those of the first” (Enoch 90:28-29).

Seventh, the Jews scattered throughout the world would be gathered back to Israel. Many Jews today still utter the ancient prayer “Lift up a banner to gather our dispersed and assemble us from the four ends of the earth.” The eleventh chapter of the Psalms of Solomon gives a graphic picture of that regathering:

Blow ye in Zion on the trumpet to summon the saints,  
 Cause ye to be heard in Jerusalem the voice of him  
 that bringeth good tidings;  
 For God hath had pity on Israel in visiting them.  
 Stand on the height, O Jerusalem, and behold thy children,  
 From the East and the West, gathered together by the Lord;  
 From the North they come in the gladness of their God,  
 From the isles afar off God hath gathered them.  
 High mountains hath he abased into a plain for them;  
 The hills fled at their entrance.  
 The woods gave them shelter as they passed by;  
 Every sweet-smelling tree God caused to spring up for them,  
 That Israel might pass by in the visitation of the glory of  
 their God.

Put on, O Jerusalem, thy glorious garments;  
 Make ready thy holy robe;  
 For God hath spoken good for Israel forever and ever,  
 Let the Lord do what he hath spoken concerning  
 Israel and Jerusalem;  
 Let the Lord raise up Israel by his glorious name.  
 The mercy of the Lord be upon Israel forever and ever.

In the eighth event of the Messiah’s coming Palestine would become the center of the world, and all nations would be subjugated to the Lord. “And all the isles and the cities shall say, How doth the Eternal love those men! For all things work in sympathy with them and help them. . . . Come let us all fall upon the earth and supplicate the eternal King, the mighty, everlasting God. Let us make procession to His Temple,



for He is the sole Potentate” (*Sibylline Oracles* 3:690ff.).

Ninth and finally, the Jews of Jesus' day believed that with the establishment of the Messiah's kingdom would come a new and eternal age of peace, righteousness, and divine glory.

Those ancient views of the coming of Christ were extrapolated largely from Old Testament teachings, and they closely correspond to New Testament premillennial doctrine about His second coming. The major difference is that those Jews had no knowledge of His coming twice, the first time to offer Himself as a sacrifice for the world's sin and the second to establish His millennial kingdom on earth. The Jewish people were not looking for inward deliverance from sin but for outward deliverance from political oppression.

In the minds of the Jews of Jesus' day, the time was ripe for the Messiah's coming. They had suffered persecution and subjugation for many centuries and were at that time under the relentless power of Rome. When John the Baptist appeared on the scene, reminiscent of the preaching and life-style of Elijah, the people's interest was intensely piqued. And when Jesus began His ministry of preaching, with unheard of authority and of healing every sort of disease, many Jews were convinced that He was indeed the Messiah. When He rode into Jerusalem on the colt, the crowds were beside themselves with anticipation, and they openly hailed Him as the Messiah, the long-awaited Son of David (Matt. 21:9).

At that point, however, Jesus' ministry rapidly and radically departed from their expectations. According to their thinking, the next steps would be the gathering of the nations against the Messiah and His dramatic and effortless victory over them.

That idea apparently was also still in the minds of the Twelve. Jesus' many predictions that He must suffer, die, and be resurrected had simply not registered with them. In some way or another they either had discounted those teachings or had rationalized and spiritualized them into being something other than literal, physical, and historical realities.

### PROPHETIC DISCUSSIONS WITH JESUS

In fairness to the disciples, the Old Testament prophets also saw the Messiah's coming and establishing His kingdom as a single event. The church age was a mystery to them, a mystery, as Paul explained, “which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested” (Rom. 16:25-26). Because Israel had obviously experienced tremendous tribulation, because Jesus declared Himself to be the Messiah and identified John the Baptist as His forerunner, and because He had accepted the Messianic acclaim of the people a few days earlier, the disciples understandably thought that the sequence of events would continue as

they expected. They were now certain that Jesus' next move would be to demonstrate His inexorable power over the nations that would soon rise up against Him.

It was doubtlessly such thoughts that had kept Judas superficially committed to stay with Jesus. He expected to be in the Messiah's inner circle when the kingdom was inaugurated and to be given power, wealth, and prestige commensurate with that position.

#### NEAR THE TEMPLE

**And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He answered and said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down."** (24:1-2)

Jesus had spent all day Wednesday of Passover week in **the temple**, giving His last public teaching and pronouncing His final and most intense judgment on the false religious leaders and on the nation of Israel. Now He **was going away** to the Mount of Olives to be alone with **His disciples**.

As they were leaving Jerusalem, the **disciples came up to point out the temple buildings** to Jesus. The other two synoptic gospels report that they were pointing to **the temple** in admiration, saying, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" (Mark 13:1; cf. Luke 21:5).

**The temple** and its adjunct **buildings** stood on the top of a mount. A massive retaining wall on the south and west sides helped support the mount itself as well as the Temple. The Temple was awe-inspiring by any standards, but to a group of common men from rural Galilee it must have been a breathtaking marvel. They could not conceive how such an enormous structure could have been built or decorated so magnificently. The Roman historian Tacitus reported that it was a place of immense wealth, and the Babylonian Talmud said, "He that never saw the temple of Herod never saw a fine building." Some of the stones measured 40 feet by 12 by 12 and weighed up to a hundred tons, quarried as a single piece and transported many miles to the building site.

The disciples were perhaps wondering how such an amazing edifice, especially one dedicated to the glory of God, could be left desolate, as Jesus had just predicted. They should have remembered Ezekiel's vision of God's glory departing from the Temple and going "up from the midst of the city" (Ezek. 11:23). The holy sanctuary that had once been God's house was His no longer. It is now "your house" Jesus had said to

the unbelieving Jews before He left **the temple**, and it “is being left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:38), because the glory of the Lord would soon depart from it. The beautiful **buildings** that had been devoted to God's glory and that should have honored Jesus would henceforth be devoted to desolation and destruction.

Jesus therefore responded to the disciples' admiring comments by saying, **Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.** The disciples' jaws must have dropped when they heard those incredible words. They could not imagine how the Temple could be destroyed or why God would allow such a thing to happen.

Yet that is exactly what God allowed less than forty years later. When the Romans sacked Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and massacred most of its citizens, they also set fire to the Temple and razed it, just as Jesus predicted. The only stones left intact were the huge foundation stones, which were not part of the Temple edifice proper. Josephus commented that a person visiting the site after the destruction could not believe that anyone had ever inhabited the place, much less that one of the most magnificent structures of the ancient world had stood there only a short while before.

Shocked as they were to realize that the Temple would be destroyed, the disciples were no doubt heartened as well, thinking that that event would be related to the Messiah's expected purification of Jerusalem, which would occur immediately after He destroyed the nations.

#### ON THE MOUNT

**And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”** (24:3)

Upon leaving the Temple, Jesus and the Twelve left Jerusalem through the eastern gate, crossed the Kidron Valley, and ascended the Mount of Olives. As they traveled that short distance, the disciples were probably discussing the question that Peter, James, John, and Andrew would ask Jesus on their behalf (Mark 13:3). As the sun was setting over Jerusalem and the Temple was silhouetted by the last rays of sunlight, they asked the Lord, **“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”**

For some time the disciples had been convinced “that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11). Therefore, in the context of the situation and of the disciples' probable frame of mind, the word **when** seems to imply immediacy, suggesting the time might be

tomorrow, the day after, or no later than the end of Passover.

**These things** referred to what Jesus had just been talking about, namely, the former house of God that would soon be left desolate (23:38) and destroyed (24:2). The disciples were expecting the final stages of the Messiah's work to unfold in rather quick succession. The nations surely would rise up against Him, He would defeat them swiftly, purify Jerusalem, regather the Jews from around the world, and establish His glorious kingdom.

**“What will be the sign of Your coming?”** they now wanted to know. “What would the first indicator be? How will we know when those remaining events will transpire?” They still understood the Messiah's **coming** as a single continuum of events, having no comprehension of the church age that would intervene between His two comings. And they probably thought that **the sign of Christ's coming** would be something appropriately spectacular, such as a great darkness at midday, a brilliant light at night, the appearance of an angelic host, or a great blare of heavenly trumpets.

This was possibly the most exciting part of the disciples' experience with Christ, as they contemplated the imminence of His millennial kingdom. Based on what Jesus had just said, the disciples believed that the next time the unbelieving Jews whom Jesus had just confronted in the Temple would see Him would be when He came in His glory and they would be constrained to declare, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” (23:39). More than ever, they were persuaded that that day could not be far off.

Even after the resurrection, the disciples still held to the same expectation. The last question they asked Jesus before His ascension was, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Jesus' death and resurrection had not lessened their anticipation but immensely heightened it. Surely now that He had proved death had no hold over Him it was time to proclaim Himself King, destroy His enemies, and inaugurate His kingdom.

The **coming** that the disciples had in mind was not a second coming. They saw His **coming** just as the Old Testament prophets had seen and predicted it, compressed into an unbroken series of events that would occur over a relatively short period of time.

**Coming** translates *parousia*, which has the basic meaning of presence and secondarily carries the idea of arrival. The disciples' question might therefore be paraphrased, “What will be the sign of Your manifesting Yourself in Your full, permanent presence as Messiah and King?” They did not use *parousia* in the specific and more technical sense that Jesus used it later in this chapter (vv. 27, 37, 39) and as it is often used elsewhere in the New Testament in referring to His second coming (see, e.g., 1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Thess. 2:8; 1 John 2:28). They were not thinking of Jesus'

returning, because they had no idea of His leaving, but were thinking rather of His perfected Messianic presence, which they expected Him to manifest presently.

**End** translates *sunteleia*, a compound word that refers to completion, as in the final culmination of a planned series of events. In the disciples' minds **the end of the age** would accompany Jesus' full manifestation of His messianic power and glory, bringing to a close the era of man's sin and rebellion against God and ushering in the divine kingdom of righteousness and justice.

Jesus used the phrase **the end of the age** in the parable of the wheat and tares and the parable of the dragnet, where in both cases it represented the gathering of the wicked by God's angels in preparation for judgment (Matt. 13:39, 49). He also used the phrase at the conclusion of the Great Commission, assuring the disciples, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

The disciples' question was about the ultimate **end of the age**, not simply the end of an era or epoch of history, but the final end to the present world system of darkness and sin—an end they expected soon. It was also, of course, a question about the beginning of a new and eternal age of light, righteousness, truth, and justice. The ungodly would be forever damned, and the godly would be forever blessed. When would that transpire, they wanted to know, and what sign would herald its arrival?