

### The Great Tribulation and the Return of the Lord

#### Matthew 24:15-31

Matthew 24:15-31 - *“Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” (whoever reads, let him understand), <sup>16</sup> “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. <sup>17</sup> Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. <sup>18</sup> And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. <sup>19</sup> But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! <sup>20</sup> And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. <sup>21</sup> For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. <sup>22</sup> And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened.*

*<sup>23</sup> “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There!’ do not believe it. <sup>24</sup> For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. <sup>25</sup> See, I have told you beforehand.*

*<sup>26</sup> “Therefore if they say to you, ‘Look, He is in the desert!’ do not go out; or ‘Look, He is in the inner rooms!’ do not believe it. <sup>27</sup> For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. <sup>28</sup> For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.*

*<sup>29</sup> “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>30</sup> Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. <sup>31</sup> And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”*

#### Background Notes

Our Lord’s “Olivet Discourse” about future events was given in response to the disciples’ questions: *“Now as He sat 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?’” (v3).*

The Lord’s teaching that was given on the Mount of Olives is covered in Matthew 24 and 25, Mark 13 and Luke 21. Only in Luke’s account do we see that the Lord said something about the future destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD. In the Holy Spirit’s selection of portions of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew’s Gospel, the Lord’s predictions about 70AD were omitted. In Matthew’s text the Lord moved right on to the future Tribulation Period at the end of the age. So Matthew 24:4-28 is all about the Tribulation Period that immediately precedes the Lord’s return to earth.

From the prophecies of Daniel 9 and the Book of Revelation we learn that the Tribulation Period will be seven years in length, and will be divided into two halves of three and a half years each. Matthew 24:4-8 refers specifically to the first half of the Tribulation - *“the beginning of sorrows.”*

In Matthew 24:15-28 the Lord was speaking about the second half of the Tribulation Period, which is often called the “Great Tribulation.” Look at verse 21: *“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.”* This future period of “great tribulation” cannot possibly refer to troubles or tribulations that Christians experience now, because the Lord specifically taught here that it will be a time such as the world has never seen before! Verse 23 tells us that for the sake of “the elect” (that is, for the sake of the believers of the Tribulation Period), this terrible time will end abruptly with the return of the Lord (v29-31).

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. The “abomination of desolation” marks the beginning of the Great Tribulation.

Two events signal the beginning of the Great Tribulation, or the second half of the Tribulation period. One event is the breaking of the covenant (likely a peace treaty) that was signed between Israel and the western nations under the direction of a charismatic and world-renowned political leader. This political leader is known in Revelation 13 as the “Roman beast,” and in some way he is associated with the number “666.”

The second event that signals the beginning of the Great Tribulation will be *the “abomination of desolation in the holy place,”* that was predicted by the prophet Daniel and is mentioned here in verse 15. The “abomination of desolation” will involve the complete disruption of Jewish worship in the future rebuilt Jewish Temple, and the erection of an image of the world-renowned political leader - an idol! - in the holy place of the Temple. Daniel 9:27: *“Then he [the world-wide political leader] shall confirm a covenant with many for one week”* [a week of seven years, not a week of seven days. This timetable is given in Daniel 9:24-26]. *“But in the middle of the week”* [that is, in the middle of the 7-year “week” or 3½ years into the Tribulation period] *“he shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate, even until the consummation, which is determined, is poured out on the desolate.”*

This is the “abomination of desolation” to which the Lord referred here in Matthew 24:15. This “abomination of desolation” is also mentioned in Daniel 12:11 - *“And from the time that the daily sacrifice is taken away, and the abomination of desolation is set up, there shall be one thousand two hundred and ninety days* [1290 days is just about 3½ years).”

So the breaking of the covenant and the “abomination of desolation” in the Temple will mark the beginning of the second half of the Tribulation Period, or the Great Tribulation, just as predicted by the prophet Daniel. These two events will be the signals to the Jewish believers of that day to immediately flee from the Jerusalem area because of great persecution to come (Matthew 24:16-20).

Believers at that time will know that the Lord is coming back to earth to end the Tribulation Period and set up His kingdom, but they're warned here to be very careful. They are not to listen to rumors that He has already returned to some desert place or to some secret location (v23-26). Even if the false messiahs and false prophets of that time are able to do great signs and wonders, the believers are warned not be taken in and deceived (v24). The Lord taught here that His return to earth will **not** be secret - it will be as open and obvious as lightning flashing across the sky (v27)! And, just as surely as eagles or vultures find a carcass, so the judgments will surely come upon the corrupt unbelievers of that future time (v28). The abomination of desolation marks the beginning of the Great Tribulation.

## 2. The sign of the Son of Man marks the end of the Great Tribulation.

*“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (v29-30).*

At that time there will be cosmic disturbances (v29). These cosmic signs are also prophesied in the Book of Revelation and in a number of Old Testament prophetic books. We don't know whether there will be a special sign associated with the Lord's return, or what *“the sign of the Son of Man”* will be. However, **everyone** on earth will see the Lord coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory! Maybe the whole world will view this event via TV.

Now remember - the return of the Lord mentioned here is **not** the rapture of the Church. That will occur **before** the Tribulation Period. The return of the Lord to earth in Matthew 24:30 will come **after** the Tribulation, and at that time He will return with divine judgment. All the tribes of the earth will mourn (v30). Unbelievers will mourn because of the coming judgments. The godly remnant of believing Jews will mourn because the Messiah that the nation of Israel once rejected has now returned as the Lord of glory!

I'm reading of that great event in Zechariah 12: *“And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.”* What a great time of reunion that will be!

Matthew 24:31 says, *“And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”* Again, this is not the trumpet mentioned in connection with the rapture of the Church. This trumpet call signals the gathering of believers from around the world for the beginning of the Millennial Kingdom of Christ! The sign of the Son of Man marks the end of the Great Tribulation.

## **Practical Application**

### **Don't be taken in by signs and wonders!**

During the future Tribulation Period, miraculous “signs and wonders” will be performed. However, verse 24 warns us that these signs will not necessarily be from God: *“For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.”*

This warning is true today. Why do some people (including some Christians) who see or hear of miraculous signs and wonders, immediately jump to the conclusion that “it must be a sign from God!”? All we have to do is read the warnings in the Bible. Miraculous signs and the people who are performing the “miracles” are **not** always from God!

Listen also to the words of our Lord in Matthew 7:22-23: *“Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”*

Notice – these people actually did perform miraculous signs and wonders, using the name of Christ - in fact, the Lord acknowledges that they did perform signs and wonders, even using His name! But - these miracles were **not from God!** The Lord will tell these false prophets and miracle workers, “Depart from Me, I never knew you.” Notice the Lord’s shocking final words to the false teachers: **“I never knew you!”**

Let us be warned! Don't be taken in by signs and wonders!