I. Introduction

Jesus’ sermon in Matthew 24-25 is commonly called the Olivet Discourse because He gave it to His disciples on the Mount of Olives. The purpose of this sermon is two fold: 1) first, it is to prepare His disciples for the horrific events of judgment that will befall the nation including the destruction of the Temple; 2) second, it is to prepare them for the interval of time leading up to Jesus’ return in glory and triumph. Just like the Book of Revelation, Jesus gave this prophecy to encourage His followers.

Obviously, this message is in response to the disciples’ question in verse 3: “Tell us, when will this happen, 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 in the New Testament. This teaching of Jesus has been analyzed and dissected in hundreds of ways. Depending on the mindset of the interpreter, some interpretations are so complex that they hardly make any sense at all.

When we interpret Scripture, we need to remember the setting and the audience. The audience, the disciples, were not learned men. They only listened to what Jesus had to say, they didn’t have the words printed on paper so that they could analyze every phrase or word or letter. The intricate interpretations, that some have come up with, are far beyond what the disciples heard and what Jesus was trying to teach. We need to take Jesus’ words as simply and straightforward as possible. He was just trying to clarify and give encouragement for the events that were to come.

To better help us understand the disciples’ question and Jesus’ answer, we need to know where the disciples were coming from. Whether a person is a Christian or not, it is human to wonder about the future. The Jewish people were no different. From the Old Testament, they had found promises of future blessing, deliverance, and prosperity. They knew God had promised to overcome all their enemies and to establish His eternal kingdom of righteousness and judgment on earth. They knew that the Lord’s Anointed One—the Messiah—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.

From Zechariah 14 and other prophesies, the Jewish religious leaders taught that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by a terrible tribulation. They believed that in the midst of the turmoil an Elijah-like forerunner would come heralding the coming Messiah. They believed that when the Messiah appeared, He would establish His kingdom age of glory. But before that, there would be an alliance of

[1]
nations to fight against Him and He would destroy them. After that Jerusalem would be restored and the Jews who had been scattered around the world would be gathered back to Israel. Then Palestine would become the center of the world and all nations would be subject to the Lord. A new and eternal age of peace, righteousness and divine glory would be established.

The Jews of Jesus’ day, including His disciples, felt the time was ripe for the Messiah’s coming. They had suffered persecution and were under the control of Rome. John the Baptist had appeared on the scene and he reminded everyone of the prophet Elijah. When Jesus began His ministry of preaching and healing, the Jews were convinced that He was the Messiah. When He rode into Jerusalem on the colt, everyone was beside themselves in anticipation of the arrival of the long-awaited Son of David and all that would follow.

At that point, however, Jesus’ ministry quickly 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 victory over them. This idea was still in the minds of the 12 Apostles. In some way they ignored, rationalized, or spiritualized Jesus’ teachings about His suffering and dying. They, like even the Old Testament prophets, saw the Messiah’s coming and establishing His kingdom as a single event.

As Jesus was nearing Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, we read in Luke 19:11 that while they were listening to these things, He went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately. The disciples were certain of His next move—His destruction of the nations—they were just curious about the timing. Their question really was, “Is it going to be in the next few days or weeks.”

In Mark 13:1-36 and Luke 21:5-36 we find two other accounts of this same discourse. Luke focuses more on the historic details of the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem. In Matthew’s and Mark’s records, Jesus hints at the destruction of the Temple but the emphasis is on a more future fulfillment. In today’s Scripture, Jesus gives a preview of general conditions on the earth leading up to His return. Jesus answers the second part of their question—“What will be the sign of your coming?”—by describing the initial group of six signs which will occur just before His coming. Like birth pains precede the birth of a baby, these signs are the birth pains preceding or coming just before Jesus’ return to the earth.

II. Birth Pains

Jesus begins His sermon with a warning: “Watch out that no one deceives you.” Throughout the years, many events may deceive Jesus’ followers into thinking that the end of the age has arrived. There have been wars and rumors of wars for all time, these would be what we would call “false labor pains.” The events of Matthew 24-25 will be unique to the end times in detail, sequence, and scale. Some of the
events, such as disorder of the heavens will be completely unique. Like true labor pains, which come just before birth, these events will occur with increasing frequency and severity until the Messiah returns to the earth. The Books of Daniel and Revelation have much more to say about this.

A. False Messiahs  The first birth pain to signal Christ’s return will be widespread deception by false messiahs—people claiming to be sent by God. There were false chists or messiahs before Jesus’ time and after. Jesus is saying that the deception in those days will increase and be more convincing. When Jesus warned, “Watch out that no one deceives you,” He is really telling them to “keep your eyes open.” Turn to 1 John 4:1-3. Just like the first disciples, we need to watch out for false messiahs—false teachers. The 2nd birth pain is . . .

B. Disputes and Wars  This pain will involve intensified and unparalled disputes and wars among nations and kingdoms of the world. Following the analogy of labor pains, the implication is that the conflicts will increase both in number and intensity as the return of Christ approaches—until as Daniel 11, Zechariah 14 and Revelation indicate, they explode into a grand holocaust of bloodshed and carnage. But Jesus says that believers during that time should not be frightened because those things are certain evidence that God’s plan is unfolding according to His will. Those events, horrifying and destructive as they will be, must take place. They are indications of the end, but as Matthew 24:6 says: “the end is still to come.”

C. Worldwide Devastation  Another birth pain preceding the end time will be worldwide devastation. In addition to the deception of false chists and wars among nations, there will be natural disasters of unbelievable size that will arise as the cursed earth begins to disintegrate. Luke adds in Luke 21:11 that “there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.” But as Jesus said, “All these things are the beginning of birth pains.” This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t help those who are in need, but we should be anticipating Jesus’ return.

D. Severe Persecution of Believers  The fourth labor pain will be severe persecution of believers by the evil, ungodly world. Turn to Mark’s account—Mark 13:9. The court probably represents Gentile authority and the synagogues represent Jewish authority—the persecution will come from both groups—both the secular and the religious. Being identified with Christ’s name will cost believers their freedom, their rights, their respect, and even their lives.

Jesus’ disciples—Christians—will feel the wrath and alienation from humanity for following Him and proclaiming His message. The hatred of God will be directed at His followers. When Paul said in Galatians 6:17 that he bore in his “body the marks of Christ,” he was saying that he had received wounds that were really directed at Christ. Because people could not get to Christ, they abused the one who
represented Him. The same will be true for those who call themselves “Christians.” Persecution must be expected.

E. Defection of False Believers  The fifth birth pain is a consequence of the fourth—defection of false believers. As the persecution intensifies and believers are arrested, hated, and martyred for Christ’s sake, many supposed Christians will defect. Although they had an outward identification with Christ, these false believers will prove by their desertion that they never really belonged to Him. To prove that their defection is sincere—real, they will join fellow unbelievers in attacking God’s people. Jesus gives 3 reasons for their defection.

1. The cost will be too high. Turn to Matthew 13:20-21. Every cause has hangers-on who love to be associated with it while it is popular but quickly fall away as soon as criticism or conflicts arise. Just consider the elections we just had here in the Wisconsin and the US and how the support of various people (like Nancy Pelosi) or projects (like the high speed train or national health care) has changed as criticism increased. In the same way, John says that these pretenders, these false Christians will leave Christian fellowship because they were never really part of it. The Apostle John put it this way in 1 John 2:19, “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.” For them the cost is too high. A 2nd reason for defection is that . . .

2. The deception will be too convincing. Some false believers will defect because they are deceived about the gospel. False teachers and false messiahs will teach doctrines that seem true and godly, but in fact are false and satanic. Turn to Paul’s warning to the Ephesian church—turn to Acts 20:29-31. Like the Bereans of Acts 17:11, every Christian must search the Scriptures so that you know the truth.

3. Sin will be too attractive. A third reason for defection is that sin will be too attractive. As wickedness increases most people’s love for righteousness, truth, and the things of God will grow cold. Many people who are initially drawn to the gospel will turn away from it because of the attractiveness of sin. Turn to 2 Timothy 3:1-5 where Paul writes about this attitude. Doesn’t this sound like today?

Jesus reminds Christians that a disciple’s real commitment to Him is demonstrated in whether he or she remains steadfast. Jesus is faithful to provide the resources needed to withstand any difficulty that may come—all we need to do is ask. As He said in Matthew 28:20 Jesus will be with us to the end of the age

F. Worldwide preaching  The sixth and last birth pain to indicate that the end time is near will be the worldwide preaching of the gospel. Revelation 7:1-8 and 14:1-7 teach that God will choose and seal 144,000 Jewish evangelists who will carry the kingdom message to the ends of the earth. They will be
followed by an angel who “had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people.”

Matthew 24:14 does not teach that the Gospel of God’s grace must be spread to every nation before Jesus can return in the clouds for His church—what we call the Rapture. It is the Lord’s return at the end of the age to establish His kingdom on earth that is in view here—the return the Jews were looking for. After the final and total evangelization of the world, man’s day will be finished, his rebellion will be over, and his opportunity for salvation will be gone, because “then the end will come.”

III. Conclusion—The Purpose of Prophesy

Many study prophesy in a vain attempt to figure out what Jesus declared to be unknown—the time of the end and His return. (Just last week I heard a preacher on the radio say that Jesus was going to return on May 21, 2011.) The Bible doesn’t record prophesy of end-time activity just for curiosity’s sake. Prophesy about the future is always given for the purpose of affecting behavior in the present.

A. First, it encourages godly living. In the middle of His prophesy, in Matthew 24:25, Jesus says, “See, I have told you ahead of time.” He tells His disciples—He tells us—what will happen so that we aren’t deceived and go after false messiahs and prophets; so that we may develop godly perseverance through wars, famines, earthquakes, and persecution; so that our love for Him and each other will not diminish as wickedness grows around us; and so that the testimony of our lips and lives will remain steadfast and pure to the end. In spite of all that is happening around us, we will walk in His Steps.

B. Secondly, it gives us confidence about the future. As we try to determine “the time and events,” we may be wrong at certain points, but, no matter what, we can have conviction that God is in control of all the events that happen. The end of the world will come only when God says so, then Jesus will return visibly and powerfully. With this hope and confidence in God we can stand firm no matter how bad things get.

C. Thirdly, it warns of difficult times ahead. Being forewarned is being forearmed. Knowing that there will be false messiahs and difficult times, we can be ready. We can test what they say and not be misled by those who “tickle our ears” with what we want to hear. Knowing about the coming devastation, we won’t be caught off guard. Jesus gives us this information so that we can endure and live appropriately in the difficult times ahead until He returns.

D. Finally, it warns of coming judgment. Not only does prophesy encourage godly living, it is a stimulus to repentance. Whether at the end of a person’s life or the end of the age, judgment is coming. We need to be ready and we need to warn others of the coming judgment.
The writer of Hebrews gives the correct responses to these and, for that matter, all words of prophesy—turn to Hebrews 10:23-25. Live your life like there is no tomorrow!