

STUDY THREE – THE SPINE OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY!

INTRODUCTION

When I was young in my faith, I heard a statement by a Jewish believer that I never forgot. This is what he said: Interpreting prophecy is just like putting together the pieces of a human skeleton. If we want to do it successfully, we must start with the right piece—and the right piece is the spine. When we get the spine in place, we can begin to fit the other members onto it. In this study and several studies that follow, we will start fitting the pieces of biblical prophecy together following Jesus' discourse in the Mount of Olives, as recorded in Matthew 24–25.

Despite the chapter division, there is no division in the discourse. The first part of the discourse is also found in Mark 13 and Luke 21. These are three different perspectives of the same discourse, almost like three television cameras all focused on Jesus. Each record what He says and does, yet from a slightly different perspective. To get the full picture we need to put all three together.

Matthew 24 records that Jesus gives this discourse while on the western slope of the Mount of Olives with His closest disciples. *“Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple” (Matthew 24:1).* Jesus' response to His disciples' pleasure in showing Him the Temple buildings would have been almost like a blow to the face for them. *“And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down’” (verse 2).*

We cannot possibly understand the impact of those words. Thus, as soon as the disciples have an opportunity—after Jesus leaves the Temple area, they get alone with Jesus and question Him. The next verse says: *“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?’” (verse 3).*

The disciples obviously believe that if the Temple were destroyed, such a disaster would mark the end of the age. They cannot imagine that the age would continue if the Temple were destroyed. The disciples think they are asking Jesus one question, but they are asking two. The first is *“When will these things be?”* This refers to the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. The second is *“What will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?”* Jesus answers both questions.

The First Question: The Temple

I want to note here the answer to the first question as recorded in Luke 21.

“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. For these are the days of vengeance that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon these people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” (Luke 21:20-24)

That is the answer to the question *“When will these things happen? When will the Temple be destroyed and Jerusalem be destroyed?”* Jesus says, *“This is the sign: When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, know that its desolation is near.”* This was fulfilled historically in A.D. 70. The Roman commander Vespasian laid siege to Jerusalem and surrounded it with his armies. He received word from Rome that

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he had been chosen as the next emperor, which necessitated his return to Rome to receive his position. Vespasian lifted the siege of Jerusalem temporarily and the armies withdrew—but only temporarily.

Those Jews in Jerusalem who acknowledged Jesus as a prophet of the Lord understood the application of these words. They fled from Jerusalem to a town called Pella on the east side of the Jordan. Vespasian's successor, Titus, re-formed the siege, gathered the armies together and continued to besiege Jerusalem until the words of Jesus had been exactly fulfilled. The whole city was destroyed. The Temple was destroyed so completely that not one single stone was left upon another. During that war, two million Jews were killed and one million were sold into captivity as slaves throughout the Roman Empire. At one point, in fact, there was such a glut of slaves in the markets that even at low prices no one was buying them.

These words of Jesus were fulfilled and note this: The people who gave heed to what Jesus prophesied saved their lives. (This is a very important lesson.) Here again are Jesus' words to His disciples:

“For there will be great distress in the land [land of Israel] and wrath upon these people [Jewish people]. And they will fall by the edge of the sword and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” (vv23-24)

The “times of the Gentiles” are times when Gentile powers rule the land given by God eternally to Israel. That second half of verse 24 has covered nearly two thousand years.

One of the key years in Jewish history is 1967, marking the Six-Day War. At that time, for the first time in nearly two thousand years, the Jewish people regained control of that vital area called the Old City. But the prophecy has not yet been fulfilled completely, because the Jewish people did not take control. They could have done so, but they did not, and so the Temple area is still occupied by a Muslim mosque. It is as if we are right on the verge, but we have not actually stepped into position because Jerusalem has not been liberated from Gentile domination.

Then Jesus goes on immediately to say:

“And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” (Luke 21:25-27)

When Jerusalem is finally liberated from Gentile domination, the events on the calendar move swiftly to the return of Jesus in person.

The Second Question and a Warning

Now we go to Matthew 24 to consider the disciples' second question: “What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” Notice the disciples do not say “the signs [plural]” but “the sign [singular] of Your coming.” Jesus answers that question, but He does not answer it immediately. He leads up to His answer. Let's follow His line of thought.

Jesus begins His analysis of the closing phase of this age with a word of warning: “Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ [the Messiah],’ and will deceive many” (Matthew 24:4-5).

The first great warning given to us concerning the period of the end is a warning against deception by false messiahs, which is repeated twice during this prophecy. Three times in connection with the close

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of the age Jesus warns His disciples against being deceived. In my opinion, deception is the greatest single danger that threatens us as Christians—greater than persecution, greater than war.

I have heard people say, “Well, it could never happen to me!” I want to warn you: If you think it never will happen to you, it will happen to you. That statement is a sure mark you are already under deception. Jesus warns His own disciples, who have been close to Him for three and a half years, who have heard all His teachings and seen all His miracles: “Be careful; don’t come under deception.”

We have only one sure guarantee against deception, given to us in 2 Thessalonians 2:10:

“The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.” (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10)

Our only protection from deception is not something negative, but something positive—the love of the truth. The Greek word used there is *agape*, which is the strongest form of love. To avoid being deceived, we must have a passionate love for the truth. It is not enough to have a quiet time every morning or attend a good church or say our prayers. We must have a passionate commitment to the truth of the Word of God to avoid being deceived.

In Matthew 24:5, Jesus says, “For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ [the Messiah],’ and will deceive many.” That prophecy by Jesus has been fulfilled. A Jewish encyclopedia lists approximately forty false messiahs who have come to the Jewish people since the time of Jesus, and all have deceived some of the people.

As we will see, the first grouping—wars, famines, earthquakes and pestilences—is just the beginning. Yet Jesus gives us His assurance: “When you hear of wars and commotions [or troubles], do not be terrified; for these things must come to pass first, but the end will not come immediately” (Luke 21:9).

We will continue our piecing together of the “spine” of end time prophecy in our next study.