

# Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

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## What to Watch For

by Dan Trygg

"... 'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming and of the summation of the age?'<sup>4</sup>  
And Jesus answered them, 'See that no one leads you astray.'" Matthew 24:3,4

After concluding His confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees in the temple, Jesus and His disciples departed to go out of the city. As they were leaving, **the disciples were pointing out the ornate and beautiful buildings of the temple complex.** King Herod the Great (the same king who tried to have Jesus killed as a baby – Matt. 2) initiated a grand project to rebuild the temple, beginning in 19 B.C. Although Herod himself died in 4 B.C., the construction and beautification work continued up through 64 A.D. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, He had cleansed the temple. In His confrontation with the Jewish leaders at that time, they mentioned in passing that it had taken 46 years to build the temple (Jn. 2:20). This gives us a solid date for the start of Jesus' public preaching, 27 A.D. [This date is confirmed by Lk. 3:1,23, where it says that John the Baptist began his ministry in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius Caesar. Since Tiberius became a co-emperor with Augustus in 12 A.D., this puts the beginning of the Baptist's ministry in 27 A.D. It would appear that Jesus was baptized about six months into John's ministry, which would have still been the same year.] Herod spared no expense to prepare for this project, assembling huge white marble stones for the main construction material. **The white marble, coupled with large plates of gold which were hung on the eastward side of the building, caused the temple to shine brightly in the sun.** It was located on a point of higher elevation than most of the rest of the city, so that with its various colonnades and courts on lower levels **it resembled a snow-covered mountain, radiant in the sun, and visible from a great distance. It was a sight to behold!**

**Jesus' response to their admiration was that these buildings would be torn down.** When they reached the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley east of Jerusalem, He sat down and **the disciples asked, "When will these things come to be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"** What they were thinking is not clear, but the word translated as "coming" was often used to refer to a visit from the emperor. The word translated "end" is not the typical Greek word for "last" or "final", such as when we speak of "end times". This word means "completion, consummation", or even "accomplishment". **The disciples were probably expecting Jesus to describe the overthrow of the current regime, followed by the ushering in of His earthly kingdom and a new age of prosperity and peace.** That this was their hope and expectation is evident from Acts 1:6-8. Their question to the post-resurrection Jesus was, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Even after His death and resurrection, they had no real grasp of what was to happen. They were hoping for the Messianic age. **They did not perceive the task which lay before them.** He told them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has set by His own authority, but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses... to the remotest part of the earth." **He directed their attention away from speculations to focus on the task at hand.**

**As we begin to study this chapter, it is important to recognize that we have two thousand years of church history and interpretation behind us, and there are some very different theories.** If you have been in our current church culture for long, you have probably picked up at least snippets of other peoples' beliefs concerning "end time" events. **The most difficult part of coming to grips with "What did Jesus mean?" has to do with putting these predispositions aside, so that we can examine the text with an open mind and heart.** That said, I also want to say that it is important to ask if there are aspects of popular theory that simply do not fit with what Jesus says. For example, one of the more popular theories today says that Jesus could come *at any moment*, that there are *not* specific signs which must be fulfilled before He comes. We must always be spiritually prepared, for He could come today. As we go through the passage, ask yourself if that idea seems to square with the tenor of what Jesus says. If not, where does this notion come from?

**The next important point to make is that Jesus emphasizes, "See to it that no one misleads you"** (vs. 4,11,23-25). Apparently, this is an area that will be a point of attack in the future. It is a subject that is either easy for the enemy to exploit or one which Jesus recognizes as vulnerable to deception. In any case, **it is important for us to get it right, to know clearly what is going to happen, so that we are not led astray.** Jesus warned that "many" will be led into deception, and even destruction, because they do not clearly understand what the Bible says about this subject. Historically, this has been the case. **In every generation, people have been fooled into following some erroneous teaching in this area, or they have been manipulated into following some false or mistaken leader.** Had they taken heed to what Jesus warned here, they would have avoided the hype and deception of such

movements. Clearly, the responsibility is upon us to diligently teach and study this area, so that we as a people are prepared.

OK. Let's move into what Jesus has to say. **Verses 4-14 seem to be an overview of things to expect throughout the age.** It is important to understand this, because **we don't want to jump to the conclusion that we are approaching Christ's return, if we are just dealing with things that He tells us to expect to occur throughout history. What kinds of things is He talking about?**

**(1.) False Christs** (vs. 5). There will be "many" who will come in Jesus' name, claiming to be Him. "Many" will be led astray by these false Christs. Obviously this is a hot button. Lots of people are going to fall for these charlatans. Don't be taken in by anyone who claims to be Christ. If someone makes that claim, or seems to be making that claim, or anything close to that, disassociate yourself from them immediately.

**(2.) Wars and rumors of wars** (vs. 6,7a). Jesus tells us not to get excited when wars break out. They will. We are not to be frightened into thinking that we are approaching the end of the age, just because wars are taking place. Notice He tells us not to get startled or alarmed if we hear of such events, or have to go through them. He says "it is necessary" or "it is bound" for those to happen. Wars will be part of human history throughout the age. "...but the end is not yet". This comment about the "end" clues us in to what Jesus' focus is. He is going to teach the disciples about what to expect about the end, conclusion or completion of history will be.

**(3.) Famines** (vs. 7). There will be famines which will periodically occur throughout history.

**(4.) Earthquakes** (vs. 7). These also will occur at various times and places in human history.

As tragic as wars, famines and earthquakes are, Jesus describes them as only the "first" or "beginning" of **birth pangs** (vs.8). This is an interesting word picture. It could be that Jesus is suggesting that *these kinds of signs will happen with increasing intensity and frequency* throughout the age. Like the birthing process, where contractions begin somewhat randomly during the last months of pregnancy, but then, once labor actually kicks in, they become stronger and closer together, it *could be* that Jesus is saying that wars, famines and earthquakes will exist throughout history, but will increase dramatically as we approach the end of the age. This, in fact, would seem to be true, from what we can tell from historical records. In any case, **we are commanded not to be alarmed.**

**(5.) Persecution of believers** (vs. 9). This also will be in evidence throughout the age, in all times and in every country. Persecution, even martyrdom, is to be expected. **Being hated by others because we are Christians should not surprise us. They hated Him; they will hate His followers** (Jn. 15:18,19). As a result of this persecution, many professing Christians will be stumbled or ensnared, and will betray other believers and disregard their lives and safety (vs. 10). (The Greek word "hate" does not necessarily mean the bitter anger that we associate with that word. It can mean to disregard or devalue another person. In this context, it could mean that some Christians will cave into pressure and will turn over other believers to authorities in order to protect themselves. Instead of loving others, they "sell them out", disregarding the lives of their former friends in order to save their own skin. Again, this is also a phenomenon that has occurred throughout history.)

**(6.) False prophets** (vs. 11). Again, Jesus warns that these people will "lead many astray", so we must be particularly watchful for this kind of person. The word "prophet" literally means "one who speaks before", and could refer to those who declare messages which they claim to have heard from God, or simply preachers who claim to be declaring God's word. In any case, they are not genuine, and it is up to us to discern the truth.

**(7.) Lovelessness of believers** (vs. 12). Because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of the many (the saints – cf. vss. 10,11) will grow cold or be extinguished. With love extinguished, we have little left to offer the world to show the reality of Jesus in our lives. *It was to be the identifying mark of the followers of Jesus* (Jn. 13:34,35). **When the Christians become "loveless", the church is deeply in need of revival.** Love for others grows out of love for God (I Jn. 4:7,8,19-21). God is the source of *agapē* love, and it is His character to love, so lovelessness is a symptom of an unhealthy, stunted relationship with God. Note the cause of lovelessness, here. Apparently, the lawlessness of the surrounding culture, or even the Christian culture, causes people to stop wanting to give in love, because they don't want to be taken advantage of. Human love has its limitations. God's love (*agapē*) never fails or gives out (I Cor. 13:8).

**But the one enduring these tests of faith until the end will be saved.**

There is only one specific sign which Jesus gives in this first section which gives us a clear demarcation of time. The rest of the signs are cyclical or repetitive. They will happen at various times and places throughout history. **There is one sign that we can use to see when we are getting close to the end or completion of the age.** Jesus said, "This gospel will be preached as a testimony to all nations, and *then the end will come.*" **Jesus will not come back until we accomplish the mission of telling the message of His death and resurrection to every nation.**

**One thing is very clear from Jesus' teaching in this passage: His return was a long ways off.** The whole tenor of the passage testifies to that, and the one specific sign Jesus gives makes it very clear. He won't be coming

back until the job is done. **The idea that He could come any time *does not fit* with Jesus' clear teaching.** There are signs that will happen, and a job to be done, before He returns. We are not to be discouraged, misled or distracted from doing our job.

## Tribulation Before the End

**"For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be."**

Matthew 24:21

**The first three rules of sound interpretation are (1.) context; (2.) context; and, (3.) context.** That cannot be over-emphasized. In interpreting a passage such as Matthew 24, it is critical to take careful note of the context in which Jesus delivered this monologue. **First of all, it was a response to the disciples' admiration of the temple buildings. Jesus had said that they would be razed to the ground.** Matthew 24 is an expansion, or further description of the events Jesus was alluding to by this statement. **Secondly, it is also important to recognize that there are three different questions being asked by the disciples.** Apparently, *they* were thinking that they would all happen at once, or within a short span of time, but that was not to be the case. We have to ask how Jesus dealt with these questions. **Thirdly, we have to take into account the nature of the monologue.** Jesus was not intending to give a blow by blow chronological description of events that would occur. **He was speaking prophetically, using an established and well-known style of presentation,** similar to apocalyptic literature. The apocalyptic style was dramatically employed by Daniel in his dreams and visions of the end of kingdoms and of the distant future. Typically, apocalyptic literature employs the use of a vision or dream as a key element of the presentation. Jesus does *not* do that here. The book of Revelations would be a more classic example of literature presented in that style. It also employs vivid description and cryptic symbolism, which Jesus uses only sparingly in Matthew 24. Other characteristics of apocalyptic literature *are* present in Jesus' teaching, however. He does speak of events in the distant future, using bold and broad statements. He also speaks eschatologically, that is, He is teaching about the events of the end of the age. Specifically, He is teaching about the end-time coming of the Son of Man, the Messiah, who will come to judge the wicked and save His people. The main difference between Jesus' teaching, here, and earlier apocalyptic writings is that Jesus is Himself this Messiah, returning to gather His own people.

**When talking about prophetic events, the time factor is often difficult to sort out.** It is like viewing a picture taken with a wide-angle or telephoto lens on a camera. The dimension of depth, while noticeable, can be significantly distorted. Things that are actually very far away may seem to be up close. A phenomenon similar to this seems to be present in prophetic passages about future events. Things which may appear close together in a prophetic declaration may actually be separated considerably by time. **It is also not uncommon for prophetic statements to have an immediate, as well as a future, fulfillment.** For example, the prophecy in Isa. 7:14, about the young woman (virgin) who would bear a son, whom she will call "Immanuel", was fulfilled in the immediate context by Isaiah's own wife and child (7:10-16; 9:3-10), but 700 years later by Mary and Jesus (Lk. 1:26-35; Matt. 1:18-23). Similarly, some of what Jesus says here in Matthew 24 had an immediate fulfillment, and apparently will yet have another fulfillment in the future.

Having laid out all of those considerations, let's work through the passage. It is clear that verses 15-28 are describing some horrific "**tribulation**" or "affliction, distress, or trouble" that will come upon at least the people in Judea. Verse 15 makes a cryptic reference to the "**abomination of desolation** which was spoken of by the prophet Daniel". The term first occurs in Dan. 9:27, then again in 11:31, and a third time in 12:11. The context of chapter 9 describes the coming of Messiah the Prince in 69 "weeks" after a decree to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. (Most scholars see this as groupings of 7 years, meaning a total of 483 years. The decree spoken of coincided with the coming of Ezra to Jerusalem in Ezra 7:6-8, a decree from Artaxerxes I given in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of his reign, which would have been 457 B.C. Thus the 69 weeks of Daniel's prophesy would have predicted that the appearance of Messiah the Prince would happen in 26-27 A.D., the exact time Jesus began His public ministry!) Then the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end will come with a flood. Even to the end there will be wars and desolations. Daniel 11 was a prophetic vision regarding the defeat of the Persian kings by Alexander the Great. It speaks of how his empire would be divided among his four generals, and there would be conflict between the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt with the Seleucid kings in Syria. Because Palestine lay between these two powers, inevitably the Jews were affected by this conflict. Eventually a Seleucid king arose (Antiochus Epiphanes) who stopped the sacrifice and set up an "abomination of desolation", an idolatrous altar to Zeus which desecrated the temple in Jerusalem. He persecuted and murdered many of God's people. Daniel prophesied the Maccabean revolt, where the Jews took action, defeating the Greeks and cleansing the temple (historical background for the feast of Hanukah). Finally, in Daniel 12, the

archangel Michael and two other angels spoke with Daniel about the events of the end. They mention a time of great distress, followed by a resurrection of the dead. They told him that the power of the holy people would be shattered before the events of the end take place (vs. 7). The new information here is that “from the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination of desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days”, or 3½ years. There is much more than I can write here, especially when the vision of Dan. 7 is also considered. **Some recurring themes are (1.) a powerful opponent to the people of God will arise who will conquer and persecute them; (2.) he will stop the regular worship, and will set up something despicable in the sanctuary of God; (3.) he will be defeated and then the “son of Man” and the “saints” will receive the kingdom (Dan. 7:13-28).**

This is the backdrop from Daniel that Jesus uses to speak to the disciples about coming events. Again, **are we talking about a short-term fulfillment, a distant fulfillment, or both? We know that there was a short-term fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D.** The devastation was incredible. They offered sacrifices to their ensigns (foremost of which was the eagle), and proclaimed Titus as the emperor and victor. The temple was desecrated, plundered and burned. Eventually the beautiful marble stones were cut up and hauled away by people for building material, so that Jesus’ words were literally fulfilled. All that remains of those great buildings is the so-called “wailing wall”, a retaining wall built to contain some of the fill used to enlarge the temple mount. In Luke’s parallel account (21:20,21), Jesus says, “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, ...” When the Romans began gathering around the city, the Christians heeded the words of their Master, and fled to the mountains east of the Jordan, near Pella, and escaped the destruction of the city.

**Are we to suppose that this was the complete fulfillment of Jesus’ words, or will there yet be another?** According to Dan. 7:23f., *there will yet arise a king who will become a world ruler.* This is confirmed by Rev. 13:3-7. Note also that *he, too, will make war with the saints and overpower them.* This sounds very similar to the prophecies of Daniel. The NT book of Revelation is comprised of visions given to the apostle John while in exile on the island of Patmos, about 95 A.D., long after the destruction of Jerusalem. Certainly this indicates **we should expect a yet future fulfillment of these elements of the prophecies given by Daniel, Jesus and, now, John.**

Returning to Jesus’ prophecy, note that He specifically declared that **the tribulation of those days would be the worst that had ever been seen throughout history, or would ever exist** (vs. 24). In fact, Jesus says that unless the period of tribulation had been cut short, no human beings would have survived. **We haven’t seen anything that severe, yet, have we?** If you read of the plagues in the book of Revelation, however, you can easily see that John tells of natural catastrophes that will be on such a wide and severe scale that they would, indeed, be able to destroy all life upon the earth (Rev. 8:7-12; 16:1-21). Therefore, we have not entered the final time of the end of the age. Note, too, that Jesus said that God will not allow these plagues to continue because “the elect”, His chosen ones, are still upon the earth (vs. 22). Thus it is clear from this statement, as well as all the passages from Daniel, Revelations (13:1-18; 14:9-12) and from Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians (2:1-13), that **the saints, the believers, the “chosen ones” (Matt. 24:22,31) will be here through the time of the antichrist**, the evil world ruler that will attack and murder the saints.

In vss. 23-26 of Matthew 24, **Jesus warns of those who claim to know where Jesus is, as though He were going to come in a manner that is secret.** He again warns that false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will even perform great signs and wonders to mislead, if possible, even the elect (cf. II Thess. 2:9). (Some think that the “if possible” means that the elect could not be deceived. If that were true, then there would be no point in warning us of their coming. The fact that Jesus warns us indicates to me that this is a very real and dangerous test.) **To eliminate any question of confusion over so-called “hidden” “invisible” or “secret comings”, Jesus plainly tells us that when He returns, His coming will be as visible as lightning shining in the sky** (vs. 27). The apostle John tells us in Revelations 1:7 that “He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, ...and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him.” The latter part of this verse agrees with what Jesus says in Matt. 24:30. **When Jesus returns, it will be very visible, and public. It won’t be a hidden, secret thing at all.** People will see the sign of His coming a great ways off. There will be dramatic signs in the heavens that will immediately proceed and accompany the Lord’s return on the clouds (Lk. 21:25-27; cf. Rev. 6:12-17). **When He comes, He will come in power, and the sound of a great trumpet, and He will send out His angels to gather His people from all over the world** (Matt. 24:29-31). From Paul’s writings, we find out that the dead in Christ will rise from their graves, and those who are alive will be caught up to meet the Lord in the sky (I Thess. 4:13-17; I Cor. 15:50-53). When we see Him, we will instantly be like Him (I Jn. 3:2). Our mortal bodies will be transformed, the weak and mortal being clothed with immortality (I Cor 15:35-54; II Cor. 5:4). **From that time on, we shall always be with the Lord** (I Thess. 4:17), **but He is on His way here, so we return with Him in a triumphal procession to take possession of this planet, and to reign with Him in His millennial kingdom** (II Tim. 2:12; Rev. 5:9,10; 20:4-6).