Prophecy & Olivet Discourse

The Importance of Accurate Prophetic Interpretation: Part 1

The discussion around prophecy, particularly the words of Jesus, is a subject of intense debate. As we begin this exploration, it is crucial to ground our understanding in the framework provided by Scripture, specifically how God has instructed His people to discern between true and false prophets.

Deuteronomy 18:20-22

> *“But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die. And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?’—when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.”*

This passage is significant because it highlights God’s standard for His prophets. If a prophecy fails to come to pass, the prophet is false. This distinction between true and false prophecy is a testimony to God’s sovereignty, as He alone declares the end from the beginning.

The Christian Scriptures and Perfect Prophetic Fulfillment

The Scriptures present a unique distinction from other religious texts in that they contain perfect prophetic fulfillment. This is an important apologetic tool for

Christians when discussing prophecy, whether addressing cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons, who have produced multiple failed prophecies. These false prophecies, according to the biblical standard, demonstrate that their leaders do not speak from God.

As Christians, we take great confidence in the perfection of God's Word. Any failed prophecy would invalidate the entire Bible according to its own standard. This reality makes the integrity of prophecy paramount in understanding and defending the Christian faith.

The Olivet Discourse and Jesus' Prophecy

One of the most common challenges brought against the Christian faith involves the interpretation of Jesus' prophecy in the Olivet Discourse. Atheists such as Bertrand Russell, and even respected Christian figures like C.S. Lewis, have struggled with Jesus' statement in **Matthew 24:34**:

> *"Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."*

Lewis, in his essay *The World's Last Night*, referred to this verse as one of the most "embarrassing" passages in the Bible, suggesting that Jesus may have been mistaken about the timing of His return. However, this interpretation fails to consider the context of Jesus' words. Jesus, in fact, was speaking specifically to the generation in front of Him and referencing the events that would occur within their lifetime, not a distant future event.

Understanding "This Generation"

The phrase "this generation" is key to interpreting the Olivet Discourse. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly uses this phrase to refer to the people He was addressing in His time. For instance, in **Matthew 23:36** He says:

> *“Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”*

Here, “this generation” clearly refers to the contemporaries of Jesus, those living at that time. Jesus was prophesying about events that would happen within their lifetime, including the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This historical event vindicated Jesus’ prophetic accuracy, fulfilling His words precisely as He had spoken them.

Eusebius and the Early Christians

Church historian Eusebius, in his work, documents how the early Christians escaped the destruction of Jerusalem, having been forewarned by Jesus’ prophecy in the Olivet Discourse. According to Eusebius, the Christians fled to the town of Pella when the Romans besieged Jerusalem, demonstrating that Jesus’ prophecy was not only accurate but also practically fulfilled in the lives of His followers.

The significance of this historical account is profound. While many modern Christians interpret the Olivet Discourse as referring to future events, the early Christians saw it as a prophecy fulfilled in their own time, proving Jesus’ reliability as the Messiah. This stands as a powerful testimony against those who would claim that Jesus’ prophecy failed.

The Danger of Newspaper Exegesis

One of the dangers in modern eschatological discussions is the tendency toward “newspaper exegesis.” This refers to the practice of interpreting Scripture through the lens of current events rather than allowing Scripture to speak for itself. Christians throughout history have fallen into this trap, attempting to tie contemporary events, such as wars or

political upheavals, to biblical prophecies.

For example, many prophecy teachers today point to conflicts in the Middle East, particularly the involvement of nations like Iran and Russia, as the fulfillment of prophecies in **Ezekiel 38-39** concerning Gog and Magog. However, a careful reading of Ezekiel reveals that this prophecy describes a battle involving ancient weapons, such as swords and shields, which do not align with modern warfare.

Furthermore, the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy can be traced back to events recorded in the Old Testament, such as the deliverance of the Jews in the book of Esther. Yet, despite clear historical fulfillment, some persist in pushing these prophecies into the future, attempting to fit current events into biblical texts.

Historical Examples of Misinterpretation

This tendency toward newspaper exegesis is not a new phenomenon. In the 19th century, many Christians believed that the Great Tribulation would occur in their generation. Movements such as Mormonism and the Seventh-Day Adventists arose from this mindset, with their founders predicting imminent tribulation based on current events. However, as history unfolded, these prophecies failed, leaving these movements with false predictions.

This highlights the need for caution when interpreting prophecy. We must be careful not to impose our contemporary context onto Scripture but rather allow Scripture to interpret itself.

2 Peter 1:20-21

> *"Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."*

By adhering to this principle, we safeguard ourselves against misinterpretations that lead to faulty theology.

The Importance of Accurate Prophetic Interpretation: Part 2

As we continue our exploration into the prophetic words of Jesus, particularly regarding the Great Tribulation, it's essential to respect the process of understanding Scripture carefully and contextually. Rather than immediately jumping to conclusions based on popular teachings from figures like Tim LaHaye or Hal Lindsey, we should aim to discern what the inspired Word of God truly says.

When we examine the text leading up to Jesus' prophecy of the Great Tribulation, we find that the progression of events and parables tells a profound story of judgment on the covenant-breaking people of Jesus' day, not necessarily a future event meant for us today.

The Parable of the Wedding Feast and Its Implications

In **Matthew 22:7**, Jesus speaks the parable of the wedding feast, where invitations go out to those who refuse to come. The parable culminates with a declaration:

> *"The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city."*

In this parable, the king represents God, and the destruction of the city symbolizes the judgment that was coming upon Jerusalem. This parallels the coming judgment Jesus warns about throughout His ministry, including the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. It is no

coincidence that this parable precedes the Olivet Discourse, which also speaks of Jerusalem's destruction.

Attempts to Trap Jesus and His Response

Following this, the religious leaders attempt to trap Jesus with questions designed to discredit Him or get Him into trouble with both Roman authorities and different Jewish sects. These confrontations, detailed in **Matthew 22 and 23**, showcase the tension between Jesus and the leadership of His day. Jesus has already cleansed the temple for the second time, signaling the judgment that was coming, and now He openly declares that the leaders of Israel are about to be judged.

In **Matthew 23:13**, Jesus begins His stern rebuke:

> *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in."*

This condemnation, where Jesus pronounces a series of "woes," mirrors the Old Testament prophets who denounced Israel for their failure to obey God. The accusations are serious: they lead the people astray, they are blind guides, and they neglect the weightier matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Jesus' Indictment Echoes Old Testament Judgments

The judgments that Jesus pronounces are not novel. In fact, they echo the very same indictments that Yahweh made against His people through prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. For example, in **Isaiah 1**, the prophet condemns the people of Israel for outward displays of religion that mask inward corruption:

> *“Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.” (Isaiah 1:13)*

Jesus takes up this same prophetic mantle, denouncing the leaders of Israel for their hypocrisy and failure to produce the fruit of righteousness. The parallels between the Old Testament prophets and Jesus’ words are unmistakable. Just as the prophets warned Israel of coming destruction for their covenant-breaking, so does Jesus.

The Target of Jesus’ Rebuke: The Covenant-Breaking Leadership

A crucial aspect of interpreting the Olivet Discourse is recognizing who Jesus is addressing. From **Matthew 20 to 23**, it is clear that Jesus’ primary target is the covenant-breaking Jewish leadership of His day. The Pharisees and scribes are singled out for leading the people astray, for rejecting God’s messengers, and ultimately for rejecting the Messiah Himself. This is not a broad, generalized prophecy for all future generations but a specific judgment on that generation.

In **Matthew 23:34-36**, Jesus says:

> *“Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”*

Here, Jesus clearly identifies His audience: the Jewish leadership of His time. The judgment is not for a distant future group but for those standing before Him. His repeated

use of “this generation” solidifies the immediacy of the coming judgment.

The Lament Over Jerusalem

In **Matthew 23:37-38**, Jesus laments over Jerusalem:

> *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate.”*

This poignant lament underscores Jesus’ deep sorrow over the rejection of His message and the impending destruction that would result. The phrase “your house is left to you desolate” refers to the temple, which was central to Jewish worship. By pronouncing this, Jesus is signaling that God’s presence is departing from the temple, much like in the Old Testament when God’s glory left the temple before its destruction (see **Ezekiel 10:18**).

Jesus Foretells the Destruction of the Temple

Following this, Jesus and His disciples discuss the fate of the temple. In **Matthew 24:1-2**, Jesus declares:

> *“Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”*

This prophecy of the temple’s destruction was fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the Roman armies, under General Titus, destroyed the temple. This catastrophic event marked the end of the old covenant era and vindicated Jesus’ words about the desolation of the house of Israel.

The End of the Age, Not the End of the World

When the disciples ask Jesus in **Matthew 24:3** about the "sign of your coming and the end of the age," it's important to understand that they are not asking about the end of the physical world but the end of the Jewish age, the old covenant era. The term used here, *aeon*, refers to an age or period, not the cosmos.

Jesus is speaking about the transition from the old covenant to the new covenant, from the temple-centered worship of the Jewish system to the new temple of God's people, the church. This transition is marked by the destruction of the temple, which was the epicenter of Jewish religious life.

Wars, Rumors of Wars, and the Coming Tribulation

In **Matthew 24:6-7**, Jesus warns:

> *"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places."*

Although wars and rumors of wars may seem common throughout history, Jesus' prediction was unique given the context of the Pax Romana, a time of enforced peace throughout the Roman Empire. The eruption of conflict, particularly the Jewish-Roman War that led to the destruction of Jerusalem, was a significant event in that generation.

Additionally, famines and earthquakes were recorded in the first century, including the famous earthquake that devastated Pompeii in 62 A.D. These signs were relevant to Jesus'

immediate audience, affirming that the tribulation He spoke of was imminent.

Persecution and Apostasy

Jesus continues in **Matthew 24:9-10**:

> *"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another."*

The early Christians faced intense persecution, first from the Jews and later from the Romans. The book of Acts records numerous instances where the apostles and early believers were imprisoned, beaten, and even martyred for their faith. This was the tribulation that Jesus had warned them about, and it unfolded within their generation.

The Importance of Accurate Prophetic Interpretation: Part 3 and Conclusion

As we delve further into understanding the words of Jesus concerning the Great Tribulation, one recurring question arises: Is this prophecy relevant to us today, or was it fulfilled in the first century? Let's examine the language and context to arrive at a faithful interpretation of the Scriptures.

Understanding "All the World" and the Gospel Proclamation

In **Romans 1:8**, the Apostle Paul uses the phrase "all the world" when referring to the spread of the gospel:

> *“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.”*

Similarly, in **Colossians 1:23**, Paul states:

> *“…the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.”*

When the Bible uses the phrase “all the world” or “all creation,” it refers to the known world of the time—the Roman Empire. This manner of speaking is important when interpreting prophecies like Jesus’ statement that the gospel would be proclaimed throughout the whole world before the end would come. Paul and the early Christians believed this prophecy was fulfilled within their lifetime, as the gospel had indeed spread throughout the Roman Empire.

The Abomination of Desolation: Local Judgment

In **Matthew 24:15**, Jesus warns:

> *“So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”*

This warning is not about a global event but a localized judgment on Jerusalem. The reference to Judea makes it clear that Jesus is speaking to His immediate audience, the people of Israel in the first century. Luke’s account in **Luke 21:20** clarifies that this abomination refers to the Roman armies surrounding Jerusalem:

> *“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near.”*

Historical records confirm that when the Roman armies initially surrounded Jerusalem, they unexpectedly withdrew, allowing Christians who heeded Jesus' warning to flee to the mountains and escape the subsequent destruction. The early historian Eusebius records that the Christians fled to Pella, following Jesus' prophecy.

The Great Tribulation: A First-Century Event

In **Matthew 24:21**, Jesus describes the coming tribulation:

> *"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."*

Some might point to modern wars and calamities to argue that this prophecy has yet to be fulfilled. However, the language Jesus uses here is consistent with dramatic prophetic hyperbole found throughout the Old Testament. In **Isaiah 13**, God describes His judgment on Babylon using similar language:

> *"For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light." (Isaiah 13:10)*

This cosmic imagery is not meant to be taken literally but serves as a powerful symbol of the destruction and upheaval that accompany God's judgment. In the same way, Jesus uses this language to describe the unparalleled devastation that would befall Jerusalem during the Roman siege in 70 A.D.

The Coming of the Son of Man on the Clouds

Another point of confusion arises in **Matthew 24:30**, where Jesus says:

> *“Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and 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.”*

This passage is often misinterpreted as referring to the second coming of Christ. However, Jesus is quoting from **Daniel 7:13-14**, where the Son of Man comes not to earth but to the Ancient of Days, receiving dominion over all nations. This is a description of Jesus’ ascension and enthronement, not His return. The “coming on the clouds” is a symbol of judgment, often used in the Old Testament to describe God’s coming in judgment on nations (see **Isaiah 19:1**).

Jesus is not predicting His physical return in this passage but rather the visible manifestation of His authority and kingship, which would be confirmed by the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple—events that vindicated Him as the Messiah.

Jesus’ Prophecy Fulfilled in That Generation

In **Matthew 24:34**, Jesus emphasizes the timing of these events:

> *“Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.”*

Jesus is clear that everything He described—the wars, tribulations, and destruction of Jerusalem—would happen within the lifetime of His contemporaries. This is a crucial point in understanding the context of the Great Tribulation. It was not a distant event meant for our future but a judgment that came upon the Jewish nation for rejecting the Messiah.

Conclusion: Interpreting the Great Tribulation Faithfully

When we take into account the historical and biblical context of Jesus' prophecy in the Olivet Discourse, it becomes evident that the Great Tribulation He spoke of was fulfilled in the first century. The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was the culmination of the judgment Jesus warned about, and it served as a confirmation of His messianic claims.

To interpret these passages as referring to our present time or future conflicts, such as those involving Israel and Hamas, is to misapply the text. The Olivet Discourse has nothing to do with current events; rather, it was a specific prophecy concerning the Jewish nation and the destruction of the temple. Jesus' words were fulfilled, demonstrating that He is the true prophet, the Messiah.

Christians should take great comfort in knowing that Jesus' prophecy was fulfilled as He said it would be. This fulfillment vindicates Him as the Messiah and assures us of His sovereign rule over history. While the Great Tribulation is not a future event for us, we can still look forward to the promises of Christ's eventual return, when He will make all things new and fully establish His kingdom on earth.

In the meantime, we should be cautious not to interpret current events through the lens of apocalyptic prophecy. Instead, we should focus on the ongoing mission of the church—to proclaim the gospel to all nations, trusting in God's plan and timing.

This concludes the discussion on the Great Tribulation and its fulfillment in the first century. Jesus' prophecy was accurate, and His words came to pass exactly as He said, proving that He is the Messiah. The challenge for us today is to interpret Scripture faithfully, recognizing its historical context and the fulfillment of prophecy, while continuing to

live out our faith with the assurance that Christ reigns over all.