

"THE OLIVET DISCOURSE AND THE FUTURE"
(ESCHATOLOGY: Biblical, Historical and Practical Approaches)

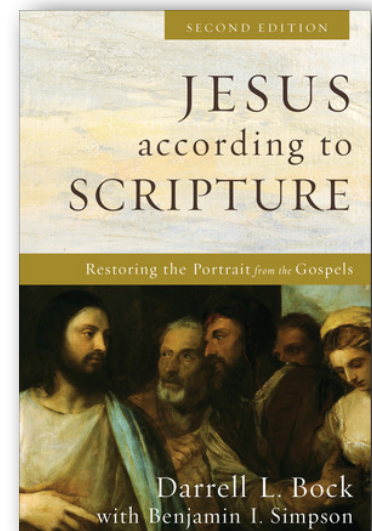
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Jesus's most focused discussion of the future is found in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21:5-36). This is a complicated discourse because we have it in three versions and it addresses two events at the same time that mirror each other. Those events are the destruction of the temple in 70 CE and the events tied to the end times. The destruction is seen as a precursor and reflection of the end. This kind of multiple event mirroring is known as typology, or pattern prophecy; it is where one event sets a pattern for another that comes later. If one does not appreciate this mirrored or layered structure in this discourse, it becomes very confusing to read the text, especially in its various versions.

Some, in failing to see the layers, force us to choose between 70 CE and the end for the discourse as a whole. Some argue the passage is only about 70 CE and the destruction of Jerusalem. They point to the opening remarks of Jesus that led to the disciples asking about when these things would be. Jesus is predicting the temple's destruction when he says not one stone will be left on another of the temple the disciples are admiring. Others say that Jesus is discussing the end when he refers to the Son of Man and the gathering of the saints. Not only that, but the question in Matthew explicitly points to and asks about the end. So which approach is correct?

The better answer is not to force a choice, but to see both as correct because a patterned fulfillment is being presented. One set of events mirrors and points to the other in a patterned fulfillment. Such patterns are common in Jewish interpretation of the period. One can speak of the exodus or a new exodus. One can speak of the day of the Lord and mean Joel's locust plague as a picture of the end-time judgment. One can see Eden as a picture of the new heaven and earth. The antichrist can be Antiochus Epiphanies, a Roman emperor, or the figure of the end. Patterns for looking at the future using the past, present, or near future are common in the Bible. That is what is happening here. This means that a writer can present the text focusing on the pattern itself in its double layering. One can emphasize the near setting that sets the pattern or look to its end result in the completion of the pattern. Our contention is that Mark simply presents the pattern, while Matthew focuses on the end time and Luke focuses on the nearer event that sets the pattern. Matthew's unique reference to the end in the opening question shows his focus. Luke's reference to the destruction of the city and his lack of reference to the abomination of desolation shows his near view focus. With this interpretive observation in place, we can now consider how Jesus presents what lies ahead.

Jesus begins his discourse with a series of events he says come before the end, as either the beginning of birth pangs or things that are not yet the end. These include messianic claimants, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, and famines. It is a chaotic period. In a passage unique to Luke that gives us some timing for these events, Luke 21:11 introduces the idea that before the above list comes a period of persecution of believers. The exhortation in this section is to be faithful and to not worry as to what should be said; the Spirit will help in replying. One can see by the way Jesus covers this material that his goal is not to give a sequence of events or a calendar but to describe in general terms the conditions that lead to both the destruction and the end. In fact, Jesus is reassuring the disciples that no matter how chaotic things get and seem, God's plan is unfolding. Disciples can trust in God and remain faithful, even in the midst of great pressure.



That pressure will start immediately for the disciples and will remain until he returns. Those who follow Jesus need to understand that and always be prepared for rejection and persecution.

Luke's version discusses next how the city itself is surrounded, referring to its desolation. He discusses how the city will be trampled down until the days of the Gentiles are complete. This anticipates how the city will be completely overrun in 70 CE. It looks to the short-term image. In Matthew and Mark we have a discussion instead of the abomination of desolation, a specific sacrilege by the antichrist standing in the Holy Place at the end, as Daniel 9:27 foretold. In both eras, the temple is under great duress. One event mirrors the other. In one, the temple is destroyed. In the other, the city will be rescued.

Then comes the discussion of the return at the end as the Son of Man rides the clouds and comes with glory to gather the elect. He will carry out the judgment that many of the passages we have noted already promised would take place. Jesus's picture of the future does not go into much detail. He simply presents the end as an act of divine vindication that includes a judgment of the wicked and the gathering of the righteous. Other New Testament texts give more detail to this basic structure.

When it comes to what to do with this information regarding what will precede the end, Jesus has one core application: Keep watch, for no one but the Father knows exactly when this will happen. Keeping watch and being ready fit the themes we saw in some of the parables Jesus tells about the end. When the end of the discourse tells the disciples not to engage in dissipation, the point calls for application of what the future should lead us to do: to live in a sober way and not ignore the return of the Lord. The picture is of disciples living and carrying out the mission the parables also describe.

What this overview of the Olivet Discourse shows is how its themes also fit the themes about the future we already saw elsewhere. The end will be chaotic. The call is to keep watch and be faithful. Judgment and accountability come at the end. God has a program, and the chaos does not mean things are out of control, so be ready and keep watch. The Synoptic Gospels use the future to encourage followers to be faithful and trust that God has a plan. The future will result in the vindication of the righteous in the end. A judgment comes that separates the righteous and the wicked. So be an ally of God, be accountable to God in your stewardship of your calling to walk with him, and trust in the One he has sent as you carry out the mission God has given you.