

Understanding Matthew 24

M.W. Bassford
1-14-07

Introduction.

- A. In dealing with any sort of communication, one of the most important things we can do is to put words into their context. Almost nothing we say is meant to stand alone; instead, we mean for our listeners to understand it in the general sense of what we've been saying all along. That's why we hate to have our words taken out of context—it gives our words a meaning that we did not intend.
- B. Context is every bit as important in studying the Bible as it is anywhere else. Every thought and every idea in the Bible has a context, and one of the most important contexts of God's word is the context of the time in which it was written. As we study the Bible, we absolutely must remember that we are not its original audience. Everything in the Bible was written to people who lived at least two thousand years ago, and if we forget that, we are likely to go astray in our interpretation of the word and its application to our lives.
- C. One of the areas where failure to appreciate this historical context causes the most problems is in the way we deal with the prophecies of the New Testament. Remember—those prophecies were written to first-century Christians too. Many people in the religious world, however, love to take these prophecies and apply them, not to things that people in the first century would have cared about, but to our present day and our immediate future. One prophecy in particular that comes in for a lot of this treatment is the prophecy of Jesus in Matthew 24:1-35. As we consider this portion of Scripture in its original context, however, a very different meaning emerges. Jesus was speaking about a catastrophe that would occur not in the 21st century, but in the 1st century. Let's devote ourselves this evening, then, to understanding Matthew 24.

I. A History Lesson.

- A. In order for us to appreciate the importance of this historical context, we need to know what it is, so a brief history lesson is in order. Fear not! I know that not everyone loves history as much as I do, so I'll make this as quick and painless as possible. The first historical event from the first century that we need to appreciate occurred during the years of **50-60 AD**, during which time the gospel was preached throughout the Roman Empire. We see Paul's commentary on this in Romans 10:17-18, among other places. To understand Paul's message here, we need to get a handle on the way that the Bible uses the phrases "all the world" and "all the nations." That isn't talking about places like North America that the Jews didn't even know about. Instead, it's talking about the world of the Roman Empire. When the Bible says "all the nations" or "every nation," it's talking about the nations around the Mediterranean basin. We see "every nation" used in this way in Acts 2:5, and then "every nation" is described in Acts 2:9-11. It's just talking about the peoples of the Roman Empire.
- B. We next need to look at events from the time of around **66 AD**. Unlike the spread of the gospel, these events are not chronicled in Scripture, but we know about them from the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, as well as from the works of the church fathers. This is a time of great instability in Palestine, and one of the ways it shows itself is by the murder of James, the brother of the Lord. He is a greatly respected man in Jerusalem, yet one day as he is praying in the temple, some men associated with the high priest seize him, throw him from the temple wall, and then, because he wasn't dead yet, stone him. Also as a consequence of the great Jewish unrest, the Jews finally revolted against their Roman overlords and begin a war.
- C. The next big historical events occur about **68 AD**. The Roman general Vespasian brings a Roman army against the Jews. In mid-conquest, however, he receives word that the Roman emperor Nero is dead, so he takes his army off to Rome to fight for power instead. About this same time, the Jews begin to fight a civil war among themselves. During this civil war, the Jewish group known as the Zealots attacks the Jerusalem temple. They fortify it, murder the high priest, and fight battles against the other Jews in the temple courtyards. After this, the Jerusalem Christians flee the city and regroup in a city called Pella.
- D. The final grouping of important events occurs in **70 AD**. Back in Rome, Vespasian has won the civil war. He is now emperor, and he sends his son Titus with four legions to crush the Jewish rebels. Around Passover in 70 AD, Titus besieges Jerusalem. During the fighting of this siege, Titus attacks the Temple Mount, burns the Temple itself, and levels the temple complex. Shortly afterward, the city itself falls, and Titus destroys it and kills essentially everyone in it. Other than a few isolated holdouts, this is the end of the Jewish Revolt.

II. History and Matthew 24.

- A. So, now that we know what happened, why should we care about this bloody and brutal segment of history? Well, first and foremost, we should care about it because this series of events tracks precisely the prophecy that Jesus delivered in Matthew 24, more than 30 years ago. The first verse in which this is evident is **Matthew 24:14**. In this passage, Jesus prophesies that the end will come after the gospel has been preached through the whole world to all nations. Now, there are folks out there who say this prophecy hadn't

been fulfilled in 70 AD because the gospel hadn't yet been preached to the United States, for instance, but in dealing with this verse, we need to remember to use Bible terms in Bible ways. Remember, in our earlier discussion, we learned that to the Jews, "the world" was the Roman Empire, and "all the nations" was the peoples of the Mediterranean. According to the testimony of the apostle Paul himself, the gospel had already been preached to these groups. This prophecy was fulfilled, and the end of the Jewish nation was near.

- B. The next prophecy fulfilled in the first century was the prophecy of **Matthew 24:9**. The murder of James is just an example of this. The Jews had been killing Christians for decades, and Nero had already begun to persecute the church for supposedly burning down Rome, so this prophecy was fulfilled by 66 AD.
- C. Next in line, we see fulfillment of the prophecies of **Matthew 24:6-8**. The Jewish revolt against Rome certainly meets the criteria of this prophecy, but the Roman civil war was also well under way by this time, so that may be part of the "wars and rumors of wars" that Christ predicts as well. Equally importantly, just as Christ also said, the beginning of these wars was not yet the end, not yet a time for Christians to take action.
- D. The next prediction that we need to turn our attention to is contained in **Matthew 24:15**. Here, Jesus urges the Christians to pay attention to what He called "the abomination of desolation," some bad thing that was going to happen to the Temple. As Jesus also says, this prophecy refers back to another prophecy contained in the book of Daniel. It seems correct to link this prophecy to the Zealot desecration of the temple.
- E. The very best reason we have for making this connection is the result that this desecration got, which parallel the commands of Christ in **Matthew 24:16-18**. Jesus here instructs His disciples that when they see the abomination of desolation, they are to immediately flee Jerusalem for the mountains. During the Christian exodus to Pella, that's exactly what they were doing. This tells us that they saw something happening in the temple that convinced them that the prophecy of Jesus had been triggered. They clearly fled in response to this prophecy. Even more convincing, the flight to Pella almost certainly saved the lives of Christians who would have been massacred had they remained in Jerusalem. Friends, when someone acts in response to a prophecy, and that action saves their lives, it's likely they're right about the prophecy.
- F. Next, we can connect Titus' siege of Jerusalem and **Matthew 24:28**. Some translations here say "vultures" instead of "eagles," but in Koine Greek, these two words are identical. So . . . what in the world is Jesus talking about? To understand what's going on here, we need to understand something about the Roman army. Every Roman legion had a legionary standard. Atop each of these legionary standards was the figure of an eagle, and this eagle was extremely important. The whole standard, and sometimes the entire legion, was actually referred to as an eagle. Jesus here is making a wordplay. He's telling His hearers that soon, the eagles of the Roman legions will gather around Jerusalem like vultures gather around a corpse.
- G. After this, we can turn our attention to the destruction of the Temple and the prophecy of Jesus in **Matthew 24:2**. By the time Titus was through with the Temple, not one stone was left standing atop another. Now, we might wonder about the Wailing Wall that is still in Jerusalem today that always shows up on the TV news. What about it? We need to understand, though, that the Wailing Wall was not actually part of the temple. All it was, was the western retaining wall for the Temple Mount. The Temple itself was obliterated.
- H. Finally, we can turn our attention to the destruction of Jerusalem itself, as prophesied in **Matthew 24:29-30**. This passage throws a lot of people off. They see Jesus talking about strange things happening in the heavens and how He's going to come on the clouds, and they assume that it has to be fulfilled literally, which it obviously hasn't been yet. However, that's not the case. Here, Jesus is using what's called apocalyptic language. Basically, apocalyptic language is any time the Bible starts sounding like the book of Revelation, and this kind of language is not meant to be taken literally. We see a divinely inspired interpretation of apocalyptic language in Peter's first sermon in **Acts 2:16, 19-20**. Remember, Peter and the other apostles have just begun to speak in tongues. Peter says that this is the fulfillment of a prophecy that describes eclipses and all sorts of other strange happenings, when none of those things have literally occurred. This means that both Peter and his audience recognize those strange happenings as things that aren't meant to be literal. It's just a prophetic way of saying, "Something big and spiritually important is going to take place."
- I. We also need to understand the way that the Bible uses the idea of "the coming of the Lord." Just because Jesus is described as "coming" doesn't mean that this is the Final Judgment and the end of the world. In Scripture, any time when God brings judgment on the earth is A coming of the Lord. It happens repeatedly. We see an example of this in **Micah 1:3-6**. First of all, we know that this is a fulfilled prophecy. The city of Samaria is today a heap of ruins. It happened. Second of all, we know that we're still here, so obviously, this coming of the Lord for judgment was not the final one. Finally, we notice from this passage the use of apocalyptic language that did not literally happen to mark a significant event. Matthew 24 is the same way.
- J. From all of this, it's obvious that we can connect Matthew 24 to the events of AD 70. On the other hand, though, many have come up with equally long explanations connecting Matthew 24 to other things. How do we know this explanation is the true one? Simple! Look at the words of Jesus in **Matthew 24:32-34**. He tells His audience to pay attention, because this generation would not pass away before these things took place. Jesus' prophecy would be fulfilled in the lifetime of His hearers. It would be fulfilled in 70 AD.

Conclusion. If you're here and you believe in the prophetic power of Jesus, become His disciple today.