

# The Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24)

Many widely accepted views of the Olivet Discourse hold that all of the events contained within comprise one unit and cannot be separated. This is complicated by the idea that the reading of the first portion of this text could be seen as having been fulfilled in the events surrounding the Jerusalem's fall in the first century, while the fulfillment of the remainder of the events seem to only refer to a yet future return of Jesus Christ, His Second Coming. These two groups of events could seem to be at odds with each other, leading varying groups to either say that all or none of these have happened (preterists and futurists). However, we will demonstrate, through the text, that they are indeed separate, and partially fulfilled.

Adding complexity are the “time texts”, Matthew 24:34,36. The first says that “all these things” will happen within “this generation”, seeming to indicate 40 years to many, and the second says that “about that day or hour no one knows”. Additionally, the traditional interpretation of Matthew 24:29 has seemed to link these two events with a timing element in the translation of the opening words, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days...” But, as we will see, this latter restriction is not a facet of the original language, and the points of disagreement in interpretation of this passage, when properly understood, indeed directly and necessarily point to their separation and partial fulfillment.

In Matthew 24:29, we must look at the issue of translation.<sup>1</sup> “Eutheos de meta” are the Greek the words translated “Immediately after”. “Eutheos” is derived from the word meaning “straight”. It could be more directly translated with the out-of-use word “straightway”, but it is not commonly in modern speech. The Greek here is more interested in “sequence”, though, than “timing”, and the English could better be read as, “Next, but after, ...” The text is indicating that the issue of these two events is that one must come first, and that the Second Coming events will only happen once the first set of events happen. This is our first textual clue that there are two separate sets of events, and is the first portion in the answer of the question of “When?”. The two events will occur, but one must be preceded by the other.

Unfortunately, most of our translations read “Immediately”, and do not give the proper connotation of the Greek. While “eutheos” can mean “without intermediate duration”, it must be determined from the context.<sup>2</sup> In John 6:21, this word is used concerning the boat “immediately” reaching the other shore. In all John's account, when a miracle occurs, God is the one doing the miracle. In this case, the subject of the verb is the boat. Clearly, from this and the parallel accounts (Matthew 14:34; Mark 6:53), while God is certainly capable of miraculously transporting the vessel to land, this particular instance was not anything more than rowing. With “eutheos”, there is an implied gap, either of very little, or in v29, apparently very large duration. This gap is later described in v36 to be unknown, since the day and hour are unknown. In John 6, this gap from “eutheos” could have been an hour or more, which makes the English rendering of “immediately” out of place.

In another example, in Mark 1, it says Jesus “immediately” began preaching on the Sabbath. Well,

- <sup>1</sup> This translation issue of “eutheos” was illustrated in the article “Matthew 24: A Structural Analysis” by Ted Noel, author of [A Primer on the Book of Revelation](http://www.beyondrevelation.com/book/appendix/), published by Wipf & Stock Pub. A reproduction of that article can be found at <http://www.beyondrevelation.com/book/appendix/>. His website is <http://www.bibleonly.org/>.
- <sup>2</sup> As an unrelated issue, the common translation of “eutheos” involving many of Christ's miracles as “immediately” also comes into question. While they certainly could have been instantaneous, the language of the Greek leaves room that, perhaps, at least in some of them, a few minutes would have transpired. While with God, all things are possible, this possibility would fit the testimony of many who have seen miraculous healings, some instantaneous, and some “straightway” after prayer.

certainly He could have, but honestly, He would have had to wait at least overnight, because synagogues meet during the day time. Some translations address this and say He began to preach on the “next Sabbath”, that is, when Saturday morning came around. In this case, though, it could actually have been a few days! Clearly, what the English word “immediately” describes is not an adequate translation. Other examples of “eutheos” implying a time gap include Matthew 13:5 and Mark 4:15, where the seed “forthwith” sprang up, Luke 6:49, the house built on sand falling “immediately” when it might have lasted for some time in the storm before failing, and 3 John 1:14, John is writing in a letter that he trusts he shall “shortly” see them, not “immediately”.

From this aspect of Matthew 24:29's translation, the two sets of events of our subject are divided into two separate parts, now connected only in sequence rather than timing. Going further, we discover that the idea of two separate groups of events, the first fulfilled and the second not, is indeed the right interpretation of this passage.

Through Matthew 24:4-22, Jesus describes a series of events, in response to the question of “When will **these things** take place?” This is in reference, obviously, to the “**these things**” of vv1-3, and the continuation of Matthew 23's woes and predicted judgments. “**These things**” all refer to the destruction of the then visible buildings. The reference is, of course, v1-3, those stones that were visible even in this discourse spoken on the Mount of Olives. Try as interpreters might, the clear context of this discussion is in reference to Jesus' question, “Do you not see all these things?” (v2), meaning the temple in existence then, and not a future one.

Verse 22 ends the talk about **these things** and then the focus shifts, and Jesus makes another reference to time. “Then if anyone says to you...” Jesus again divides the time before the culminating destructions in v22 from what follows in v23. His focus from v23-28 is then to differentiate between the two sets events. Whereas in v16 of the first section, one is told to flee when they see the abomination of desolation (v15), v23-28 says it will not matter where one is. “Then...” (v23) it will not matter if one is in Jerusalem, Judea, or elsewhere, because “as lightning in the east is seen in the west”, so will the Second Coming be. Again, here, Jesus is drawing a direct contrast between the two sets of events. They are separate, only linked in sequence, and not timing, as Matthew 24:29 rightly interpreted should read. Here, then, they are described in their qualitative differences, being another clear indication as to their difference, rather than unity.

So, Matthew 24:29-31 then describes the coming of the Son of Man, Christ's Second Coming. “Immediately”, as has been described, is not needed nor accurate in the translation. It is merely “next but after”. But, in this, Jesus describes that “day known only to the Lord” (Zechariah 14:7). He largely only summarizes the prophets before Himself in this exegesis, giving greater greater focus to the events already prophesied in the Old Testament, but He describes the eschatological end of things and His own glorious return through v31.

Finally, after establishing the context of both events in question in v3, Jesus addresses the actual question of “When?”. Understand, though, that Jesus has just described the first and second events, the first in detail, and the second in summary. Only after first doing this, does He bring our focus to the much debated “time texts” of v34-36.

Matthew 24:32 begins the introduction of the timing with talk of the fig tree. v33 is often mistranslated as reading “he is near”, but should read “it is near”. v34, though, is the real focus for many in this dialogue. “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” Now, for many, this is taken as “all the things so far talked about”, but that is not all that Jesus said.

This part of Jesus' conversation must be taken together with v36, which reads, "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." We must consider these both, together, to reach the appropriate meaning.

First, we already see that Jesus is most probably talking about two separate things with His use of "eutheos de meta" in Matthew 24:29, saying "Next, but after, ..." But, here, we have to take into consideration exactly what He is referring to in His clauses. The "**these things**" of v34 could refer to all that has been discussed before, as many have taken it, but that doesn't work. Recall that Jesus talked particularly in v36 of "**that day**". Since we know that "**these things**" refer to the judgments predicted, going back into Matthew 23, we have to ask ourselves what "**that day**" specifically refers to. "**That day**" couldn't have been the v4-22 events, because those are general statements of judgments occurring over a period of time, and not limited to a specific day and hour. Many have assumed that this refers to the final fall of Jerusalem and the burning of the temple, but that is not a single day and hour either. The temple did in fact get burned on a particular day, but the day afterward there was still destruction, bloodshed, and judgments, and the day after that, and the day after that. Furthermore, the temple did not likely burn in an hour. So, regardless, the "**that day**" of v36 does not equate with a particular day in the overthrow of Jerusalem, but refers specifically and only to v29-31, the eschatological return of the Lord. This should not come as a surprise, as this is in congruence to the other prophets as well.

Understanding that v36 can only be talking about the coming of the Lord in v29-31, this would seem to have direct bearing on the "**these things**" of v34. But, does it exclude v29-31?

We must now look at the opening clause of v36, which joins v34-35 with it. It reads, "But concerning that day..." Right there, in the plain text, is the exclusion of the v29-31 events from the reading of v34. They are expressly excluded from the other events being discussed, through the introduction with the word "but". Putting them together, you could read v34&36, without the intermediate verse (v35), as "All these things will happen within this generation but that day's timing is unknown". The difference is right there. The exclusion of "**that day**" is inherent, and it separates it from the "**these things**" of v34 by way of intentional construct.

Another way of looking at it, "**these things**" ("pas tauta" in Greek) always refer to the 70 AD destruction events, and "**that day**" refers to the parousia, or Second Coming. This is the intentional and plain reading of v34&36 in the most literal sense. It also simply makes sense, since the "**these things**" are the then visible buildings and the primary topic of their conversation, and the eschatological end, "**that day**", is a separate, but related matter.

The "**These things**" of v34 could not include the v29-31 day, because it is intentionally excluded. Additionally, to understand this the other way would make the "day and hour unknown" of v36 to instead be "somewhat unknown", and only as unknown as the first, which is said to be within a generation. Seeing as the two different explanations were used, one within a generation and one completely unknown, this supports our finding in support of the two separate events.

From v37 onward, into Matthew 25, the only topic discussed is the Second Coming. Jesus relates the need for preparedness in relation to the unknown hour of that day, and relates the need for being prepared through some parables.

The other conclusion of this analysis, is, of course, that the so called "Great Tribulation" of Matthew 24:21 is fully past. As v29 is the dividing point between the first and second sets of events, and as v1-3 can truly be interpreted as none other than the "then visible buildings", all of the events of Matthew

24:4-22, having more than sufficient historical evidence to support their fulfillment, are a matter of historically fulfilled prophecy, just as the prophecies of Jesus' first coming are now fulfilled. Whereas the preterists generally get the fulfillment of v29-31 wrong, claiming it, too, is in the past, the historical and Biblical research on the 70 AD events is, by and large, correct.<sup>1 2</sup>

This same reading, then, is directly applied to the Mark 13 account, whereas the Luke 21 version interposes the “time of the Gentiles” between the two sets of events in Luke 21:24.

In conclusion, upon examining this chapter, we see that Jesus first describes and contrasts the two events and indicates their sequence, but leaves them very much separate, and this is His intentional language. He is really answering the question of “When” with throughout. He does not relate timing in v29, but while the latter is completely unknown, He does say that it will be after the first. Only after introducing both events, completely separated and contrasted, does He then discuss their timing elements. This purpose in His discourse explains the particular use of “Eutheos de meta” in v29, and forms the basis for the clear distinction that the Second Coming would not be “imminent” until after the fall of the city.<sup>3</sup>

Seeing that beginning of the chapter clearly limits the discussion to the destruction of the Second Temple, the one standing then before Jesus and the disciples, and that indeed quite sufficient historical evidence for all of the events listed in v4-22 can be found, we can conclude that v4-22 are completely fulfilled in history. While the Second Coming is yet to happen, we then have the clear instruction from Mark 13:37: What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'.

In the final analysis, while holding a portion of the truth, both the standard futurist and preterist positions are both wrong. Yet, that error was hidden largely in a translation issue (v29), and the particular focus on v34 did not take in account v36 as the obvious exclusion.

No only is the separation of the two sets events a possibility, it is directly indicated through the entire text, and appears to be the clear intent of the Lord on giving the discourse.

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1 The preterist reading for v14 is found in Colossians 1:23. As literal or figure of speech as you want to take Matthew 24:29, you can take Paul's words in Colossians, concerning the Gospel “...which was preached to every creature which is under heaven”.

2 The other main Eschatological reference to the “Great Tribulation” is Daniel 12. While most would agree that Daniel 11:1-35 has its fulfillment from antiquity to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, there is disagreement concerning v36-45. However, comparing v40-43 to history, we see that the events described appear to correspond to the Battle of Actium, which was the beginning of the Roman Empire, with Caesar Augustus as its first emperor. Thus, the time of great trouble in Daniel 12 is pointing, specifically, to the time of the coming of Christ in birth (Luke 2:1), ministry, and onward. Thus, these two text both point to a time of a first century fulfillment for the time of unprecedented trial.

3 This is probably also the distinction Paul is making in 2 Thessalonians 1-2. In chp 1, he is clearly talking of the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming. However, the chp 2 discussion explains how the following events, probably referring to 70 AD, must take place “after”. This unknown quality of the Lord's coming is described only as being “next but after” the Jerusalem ones.

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