

1 Thessalonians: Standing Firm
Lesson 4 “The Great Tribulation

I. Review and Introduction - This church was founded on Paul’s second missionary journey in 51 A.D. after he left Philippi. Paul taught in Thessalonica for three Sabbaths and was then run out of town by unbelieving Jews. Paul then travelled to Berea and began to minister there, but the Jews from Thessalonica traveled there and ran him out of town there also.

A. Paul wrote *1 Thessalonians* about six months after he planted the church in Thessalonica to strengthen, comfort, and ground this church in truth.

B. Last week we looked at how Paul said this church was appointed to affliction and that Paul suffered tribulation when he was with them. The Greek word for affliction is *thlipsis* - *affliction, anguish, persecution* - *this is the same word used for Great Tribulation in **Matthew 24** and in **Revelation**.*

C. Tonight I want to walk you guys through what the Great Tribulation was. Why?

1. The rest *Thessalonians* talks about the catching away of the church and the return of Christ - future events. We’ll study those over the next few weeks.
2. I want to clarify some things from Jesus’s most startling prophecy about what the Bible doesn’t say about the return of Christ so we can take can more clearly see what it says about the return of Christ. **Many people confuse some things about the Olivet Discourse and bring it into end time events and muddy the waters and unintentionally misinterpret scripture and the voice of the Holy Spirit.**
3. This will build faith in you when see the accuracy of Jesus’s words.
4. Some people teach all the events of *Matthew 24* occurred in A.D. 70 and He has already returned for the the church. We are going to look at what did happen in the Great Tribulation and why that is past and why Jesus is still yet to come.
5. I want to teach you guys how to study the Bible. Learn how to look at cultural context, history, audience relevance, etc.

II. The Olivet Discourse (**Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21**)

A. **Matthew 24:1-3** The disciples are walking around the temple and marvel at the buildings. Herod’s temple was more glorious than the first. They show the buildings to Jesus and Jesus says they will all be destroyed. The disciples then ask three questions:

1. When will these things be (when will the temple be destroyed)?
2. What will be the sign of Your coming?
3. What is the sign of the end of the age?

B. Many people blurred all three of these questions together and make them all about the same event. 99% in my informal polling. Most believe this is about the rapture that will happen at the end of the age. I want to submit this is at best an incomplete truth because it doesn't answer all of these questions.

C. Unpacking the three questions.

1. When was the temple destroyed? The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in the year 70 A.D. by Roman armies as part of the Jewish-Roman war that lasted from 66-73 A.D. Flavius Josephus wrote about this in "The Siege of Jerusalem."
 - a. **Matthew 24:34** *this generation will by no means pass away til all these things take place.* Jesus gave the Olivet Discourse in A.D. 30 and the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, which is 40 years or one generation.
 - b. Jesus prophesied the destruction of the temple because He wanted to end the Old Covenant temple sacrifice system, which was an abomination after he went to the cross. **Hebrews 8:13** talks about how the new covenant made the old obsolete.
2. When will the end of the age be? **Matthew 24:6** Often when we hear of wars and rumors of wars people think Jesus is about to return, yet this scripture is plain as day He's not coming yet. In other words, when we hear about wars we don't need to try to get out of here. We need to relax and stay and fulfill our purpose.
 - a. What did Jesus mean by the end of the age? **Matthew 24:3** age is the Greek word *aion*. It means an age (dispensation/period of time) not end of the world. Different Greek word *kosmos* is usually used for the earth.
 - b. **Matthew 24:7-14** All these things happened between 30 and 70 A.D.
 - c. Jesus's warning to his disciples **Matthew 24:15-22**. Also look at **Luke 21:20-21**. He tells them when they see all of these things they need to flee to the mountains. **The statements in this passage was made to Jesus's 12 disciples, not us today.** History records Christians who left Jerusalem when the Roman armies began to surround the city and lived and many Jews who stayed in the city to fight and died.
 - d. Jesus also stated the greatest tribulation ever would occur in this time. He was talking to the 12, not us. (Principle of audience relevance.)
 - e. God had the temple in Jerusalem destroyed because of His grace. The Old Covenant system and/or a system of mixing the covenants was so bad for people, God had to destroy the temple for the benefit of humanity. We now live under just the New Covenant of Jesus's finished work.
3. When will be the sign of Jesus's coming **Matthew 24:29-31**
 - a. We've already established all these events happened in the first century and we can see from history they did, but this passage seems problematic. It reads futuristic. How do we understand it?

b. This passage says that immediately following the tribulation of those days the Son of Man will come. This has caused many to ask, “Did Jesus already come? Has he already set up the kingdom on earth.” How does this square with what I observe around me? **The Bible does teach in the physical return of Christ in the future, but I would argue this passage isn’t talking about that.**

c. We must understand for this passage to be fulfilled in the generation of the 12 disciples, it can’t be futuristic. **This means the better way to view this passage is symbolic than literal.**

d. Example of **Isaiah 13:9-10** I don’t know about you, but this sounds like some bad stuff to me; the stars of the heaven won’t give light, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not cause its light to shine. Is this another end time prophecy we need to consider? No. Pretty much every theologian under the sun recognizes **Isaiah 13** is about God’s judgment against Babylon in the 6th century B.C.

e. Dallas Seminary professor John Martin acknowledges that the language is figurative: “The statements in **Isaiah 13:10** about the heavenly bodies (stars . . . sun . . . moon) no longer functioning may figuratively describe the total turnaround of the political structure of the Near East. The same would be true of *the heavens* trembling and *the earth* shaking (v. 13), figures of speech suggesting all-encompassing destruction” Other examples of metaphoric language used in the scripture to describe the judgment of nations include **Ezekiel 32:7-15** about Egypt and **Isaiah 34:4-5** about Edom.

f. Quote by N.T. Wright on the symbolic language of **Matthew 24:29-31** *“It is crass literalism, in view of the many prophetic passages in which this language denotes socio-political and military catastrophe, to insist that this time the words must refer to the physical collapse of the space-time world. This is simply the way regular Jewish imagery is able to refer to major socio-political events and bring out their full significance,”*

Again, “the dramatic and (to us) bizarre language of much ‘apocalyptic’ writing is evidence, not of paranoia or a dualistic worldview, as is sometimes anachronistically suggested, but of a creative reuse of Israel’s scriptural, and particularly prophetic, heritage”.

In summary, Mt. 24:29 is stock-in-trade OT prophetic language for national disaster. “Jesus is not predicting that strange astronomical events will occur; he is predicting the judgment of God on the Jewish nation”

f. If the context **Matthew 24:29-31** isn’t about the physical return of Jesus and is a symbolic passage, what does the mean? This passage is referencing Jesus's coming in power and judgment on the Old Covenant Jewish temple system. The sign in heaven of His victory is the destruction of the temple. The part of about the tribes of the earth beholding Him is probably a reference to the 12 tribes of Israel (Jewish people) in mourning

because they didn't believe Him. The trumpet blowing is a reference to the trumpet blowing to announce the year of Jubilee or the inauguration of the New Covenant. Check out *Leviticus 25:9*. All of this is Old Testament biblical imagery Jesus's original audience would have understood.

The angels gathering people from the four winds in this passage is a reference to the church age where ministers preached the gospel and the church has been enlarged. The Greek word for angels in this verse is *angelos*, which can refer to an literal angel or a physical messenger like an evangelist or pastor. Another way of looking at this verse that it is literal angels who gather in the harvest through the bold preaching of the gospel with signs and wonders following.

III. Conclusion - What do we with all of this?

- A. We do understand their will be a return of Christ physically one day. **Acts 1:9-11** *Jesus will return in the same way he ascended meaning people will see Him physically.* Also **1 Corinthians 15:50-58**.
- B. We need to see the grace of God in how intentional Jesus was about ending the temple worship system. It deceived many people and they stayed under law or a mixture of law and grace.
- C. We need to understand tribulation is part of the Christian life, but according to Jesus the worst tribulation has already come so we don't need to panic. We need to have faith and occupy until Jesus comes while we look for the return of Christ.
- D. We need to be careful about the prophecies we listen to and need to make sure they are properly aligning with proper integration of scripture. This keeps us out of error. ex: Late Great Planet Earth and Chuck Smith prophesying the return of Christ by 1981. This comes from **eisegesis** - reading into scripture a subjective interpretation we are hoping for instead of proper **exegesis** of scripture - reading out of the text what the original author mean.
- E. Understanding the truth about what happened in A.D. 70 still leaves open pre-trib, mid-trib, and post-trib views of the rapture.
- F. Pray Closing Prayer