

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
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18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
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Matthew 24:15-31 “The Coming Tribulation and Second Coming”

Intro. Our world may be on the verge of its most difficult days since Noah’s flood. You see, in our text Jesus tells of a prophetic event known as the Great Tribulation, that will overtake not just a few nations, but the whole world. That’s the bad news. The good news is that the tribulation will soon be followed by the Second Coming of Christ. He will then establish a kingdom of peace. Satan will be bound. War will be abolished. Hunger will be abolished. Love and joy will abound. His coming will indeed mean, “Joy to the World.”

Now an important question is whether this text has any relevance to us. After all, many believe that the Bible at least infers a pretribulational rapture of the Church. Now the Bible is unmistakably clear that believers in Christ will be raptured, or caught up to meet the Lord in the air when He returns (1 Thess. 4:13-18). The question is, “When does the rapture of believers take place?” And as far as I can tell, the Bible does not *clearly* place the rapture before the tribulation. But you can arrive at that interpretation through a series of arguments. For example, 1 Thess. 5:9 says in the context of a teaching about the return of Christ, “For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” During at least part of the tribulation period the wrath of God will be poured out on a godless, Christ-rejecting world. Therefore, God may indeed fulfill the promise of 1 Thess. 5:9 by means of the rapture before that time. Another argument is the doctrine of imminence. Some Scriptures seem to indicate that the return of Christ could take place at any moment. For example, look at v.42, “Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.” But if at least 7 years of tribulation events have to take place first, then His return would not be imminent. Therefore, the pretribulational rapture seems to be the best interpretation from that perspective. Another argument is that Daniel’s prophecy referred to in v.15 refers specifically to Israel. V.20 of our text applies specifically to Israel. The tribulation is the “time of Jacob’s trouble” according to Jer. 30:7. Since the Church is not specifically in view in the prophecies, then it is believed that the Church will be removed from the world first. Furthermore, there are dozens of other arguments I could give. I hope that interpretation is correct for at least 2 reasons. First, I want to see Jesus sooner rather than later. Second, I would *really* rather not go through the tribulation. So if that interpretation is correct, then this text has little relevance to believers today, other than recognizing from the signs of the times that we are getting close to the beginning of the tribulation period, and therefore the rapture.

But on the other hand, I must be faithful to the truth and say that it is *possible* that the pretribulational rapture interpretation is not correct. I have done quite a bit a study on this, and I have read reasonable counter arguments to *every* argument for the pre-tribulational rapture. We read in v.31 of a gathering of the elect (cf. 2 Thess. 2:1), announced by a trumpet, at the *end* of the Tribulation. That sounds a lot like the rapture passage of 1 Thess. 4:13-18. So while I *hope* the rapture takes place before the tribulation begins, I feel it is wise to be watchful and prepared for the other possibility. Someday we will know for sure which view is correct. If the Lord doesn’t delay His coming must longer, we will either experience the rapture before the Tribulation that is spoken of in our text, or some will live to see v.15 come to pass, which would settle the question.

So let's learn what Jesus says about one of the most significant events in Bible prophecy, the Great Tribulation. In my 40+ years of preaching, I have never felt that the signs pointing to the Tribulation are more evident than now. Now first of all, Jesus tells us:

I. THE SIGN OF THE GREAT TRIBULATION

Jesus says there is a specific sign that marks the beginning of the *Great Tribulation*. In vv.6-12 Jesus talks about a time of tribulation. But in v.21 He speaks about "great tribulation." What is that sign? In v.15 Jesus says, "Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place...." In Acts 6:13 & 21:28 the "holy place" is clearly a reference to the temple. Thus, many believe that the Jewish temple will be rebuilt by the middle of the 7-year tribulation period prophesied by Daniel. The first step in the fulfillment of that prophecy took place in 1948 when Israel was reborn as a nation. In 1967 they regained control of east Jerusalem, where the temple mount is. There has been another development. In 2006, for the first time in 1900 years, there are once again more Jews living in Israel than in any other country on Earth. Today, there are over 6 million Jews in Israel. But there is a major problem regarding the rebuilding of the Jewish temple. The Jews most likely will only rebuild the temple on the original temple site, which is now occupied by the Muslim Dome of the Rock. Perhaps this is where Daniel's prophecy comes in. In Daniel 9:27 the prophet says, "Then he [the Antichrist] shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering." The Hebrew word "week" is actually the word for "seven." So we are talking about a 7-year agreement. I believe that a powerful, charismatic leader will arise who will negotiate a peace treaty between Israel and the Muslim nations. This person is known in prophecy as the Antichrist, and for the first time, real progress is being made toward peace, with three or four additional Muslim countries signing peace deals recently. The Muslims will get financial incentives and peace out of the deal, and Israel will get security and protection from their enemies, and evidently permission to rebuild their temple, either near the Dome of the Rock, or perhaps after the Dome of the Rock will have suffered some catastrophe.

Now both Daniel and Jesus affirm that during the reign of the Antichrist, the "abomination of desolation" will take place. Something spiritually detestable or blasphemous will take place,¹ and that will lead to the destruction and desolation of the city of Jerusalem, or of the temple. One clue is found in the end of v.15, "standing in the holy place." That word "standing" can mean "set up," which could refer to an image of the Antichrist set up in the temple built for the worship of the one true *God*. Even so Daniel 11:31 says, "They shall defile the sanctuary fortress; then they shall take away the daily sacrifices, and place there the abomination of desolation." No doubt when that takes place the Antichrist will personally be present. Then in 2 Thess. 2:3-4 Paul said, "... that Day [of the Lord] will not come ... the man of sin is revealed, ... who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God." Even so Daniel 11:36 says that "he shall exalt and magnify himself above every god, shall speak blasphemies against the God of gods, and shall prosper till the wrath has been accomplished...." We know also from the book of Revelation that he will demand that all the world worship him and his image (13:15). Satan has always wanted the world's worship, and in the middle of the Tribulation he will begin to receive it.

¹ Such an abomination took place during the days of the Maccabees by Antiochus Epiphanes (1 Macc. 1:54).

Now Matthew adds an important note of application in the last of v.15, “whoever reads, let him understand.” Even so, right in the context of Daniel’s prophecy about the abomination of desolation, he says in 11:33, “And those of the people who understand shall instruct many....” People who know the prophecies of the Word of God will understand what is going on, and they will instruct others regarding the significance of the events that are taking place right before their eyes. Part of their instruction will include what we read beginning in v.16. In times like this, what should the tribulation saints do? First, Jesus says they should quickly leave Jerusalem and the surrounding area and flee to safety. The abomination of desolation will signal the fact that Jerusalem and Judea will soon become a battleground. So Christ says in vv.16-18, “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop² not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes³.” Delay might mean being captured, turned back, or perhaps even being killed. The great tribulation is one time when believers are to flee the way Lot did from Sodom.

I want you to remember that Matthew 24 has prophecies that have dual fulfillments. The disciples asked regarding both the destruction of the temple and the return of Christ. The temple was destroyed and Israel became a desolation beginning in 70 A.D. In fact, Jesus had said, “Behold, your house is left to you a deserted place.” And right before this event an abomination took place in the temple that was soon followed by desolation. The Roman armies, with the image of the emperor upon their standards, an image and an emperor worshipped by them, laid siege to the city of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20).⁴ Most Jews rushed into Jerusalem during the siege. They were going the wrong way! As a result, at least a million Jews suffered a horrible blood bath. Only believers who understood this prophecy fled from Jerusalem and the surrounding area, and they were spared. And history will repeat itself in the end times.⁵

Jesus gives another warning in v.19, “But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days!” Notice the tender concern of Christ for women and for babies. Now if the rapture takes place before the Tribulation, then *current* believers need not be concerned about this. But if not, or if you are not a Christian, then you *should be* if you are of child-bearing age. If you live to see a 7-year treaty signed between Israel and Muslim her neighbors, then it’s time to stop having children! This explains Paul’s strange statement in 1 Cor. 7:29, “But this I say, brethren, the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none.” Until then, obey the Bible which says, “Be fruitful and multiply!” After all, people have thought that the return of Christ was near for almost 2,000 years. Only if you see the antichrist negotiate a 7-year peace treaty between Israel and her neighbors should you modify your plans regarding having children.

Now let’s consider another sign of the Great Tribulation, which signal the return of Christ:

² The housetops were pretty flat & people spent time relaxing or praying there.

³ This is probably referring to an outer garment, which was also used as a cover for sleeping.

⁴ Luke’s instructions apply to the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and the “sign” was the gathering of the armies around the city.

⁵ To what extent believers actually heeded the warning of Christ is unclear. The Christian historian Eusebius reported that Jesus’ warning to flee to the mountains was fulfilled during the Jewish revolt when Christians fled to Pella (Eccl. His. 3.5.3). Yet Hendriksen says, “Scholars who have made a special study of the early history of the Jerusalem church doubt this fourth century A.D. report.”

II. THE SPIRITUAL SEDUCTION OF THE TRIBULATION

World conditions during the tribulation will be so terrible that men will wonder if any relief will come, and this will give false messiahs opportunities to deceive many. Jesus said in v.24, “For false christs and false prophets will rise . . .” The false messiahs will claim that they have come to save the world during such a difficult time. Of course, the antichrist will be a false messiah, but others will precede him and accompany him. One way these false messiahs and false prophets will deceive people is with signs and wonders, which will be more common during the Tribulation. Jesus said in v.24 that they will “show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.” The fact that a religious leader performs miracles is no assurance that he has come from God. Satan is capable of performing “lying wonders” (2 Thess. 2:9-12; Rev. 13:13-14). The ability to work miracles, especially in the last days, should be looked upon with suspicion because the next great miracle worker will not be Christ: he will be Antichrist with his false prophets. Many of the “signs” will be wrought by the false prophet, who is the second beast of Revelation 13.

Since that is the case, believers during the Tribulation need to guard themselves from being deceived. One protection that Jesus has given is knowledge of Prophecy. Jesus said in v.25, “See, I have told you beforehand.” God gave the prophecies and signs of the end times so that we would be forewarned, and not be deceived and in darkness (cf. 1 Th. 5:4). When the fiery trial arrives, no one should be able to say, “How strange and unexpected! Why did he not warn us?” Instead, their faith in Jesus will be all the more confirmed by the fulfillment of end time prophecies.

One example would be discerning the false claims of the false messiahs that shall arrive. In such desperate times, when people will be looking for Christ to intervene, there will be false claims that the messiah has arrived somewhere on earth. So Jesus said in v.23, “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There!’ do not believe it.” Then he gives some specific examples in v.26, “Therefore if they say to you, ‘Look, He is in the desert!’⁶ do not go out; or ‘Look, He is in the inner rooms!’ do not believe it.” In such desperate times, when people will be looking for Christ to intervene, don’t believe those who say that He has come. Now in v.27 Jesus explains why such claims cannot be true. He says that His return will be unmistakably clear, “For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.” He says that His return will be as visible as lightning. The posttribulational coming of Christ will not be secretive, but open and dramatic.

So be careful who you listen to in these last days. There are many false prophets, and there will be many to arise in desperate times claiming to be God’s messiah, a savior.

Now the fertile ground from which false messiah will arise will be due to the next sign that Jesus speaks of in this prophecy:

III. THE SEVERITY OF THE TRIBULATION

Jesus gives ample warning of how bad conditions will be during the Great Tribulation. He says in v.21, “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.” This is essentially what Daniel 12:1

⁶ The desert had messianic overtones for diverse groups within Israel such as the Essenes of the Qumran community (Wilkins, 781).

says as well.⁷ Imagine a tribulation, a time of world distress, worse than WWI or WWII. It will even be worse than what the Jews experienced under Nazi Germany! Such a time is described more fully in Revelation 6-19. Things are pretty bad now, but we know we are not in the Great Tribulation because so far conditions are no worse than some of the tribulations in the past.

One aspect of the severity of the great tribulation will be the great loss of life. This is indicated in v.22, “And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved....” If the tribulation lasted more than a few years, the people of our world would so turn against each other that no one would be left alive! For example, we read in the Book of Revelation that during the Tribulation one-third of the population of the earth will be destroyed. On another occasion one-fourth of the population will be destroyed. It is absolutely unique. We’ve never had so much death since Noah’s flood.

There will be another specific time near the end of the tribulation when there will be great loss of life at the battle of Armageddon. I believe that is alluded to in v.28, “For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles⁸ will be gathered together.” I believe this refers to Christ's coming in judgment, because Revelation 19 tells us about an invitation that went out to the birds to come together for a great banquet of human flesh (19:17-19). So one event that precedes His return is the gathering of the Gentile nations at Armageddon, or the battlefield at Megiddo in Israel (Rev. 16:13-16; 19:11ff). This event will have special meaning for Israel. Jesus will return at that hour when Israel is about to be defeated by the Gentile armies (Zech. 12). He will rescue His people, and they will see Him and recognize that He is their Messiah (Zech. 12:9-14). There will be a national repentance, national cleansing, and national restoration under the gracious leadership of their Messiah. Then Paul’s words in Romans 11:26 will be fulfilled, “And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob.’”

So as Christ said, for the sake of believers, “those days will be shortened.” In the worst of times Jesus assures us that God is still in control! Those days will be shortened to how long? Daniel 12:11 says, “And from the time that the daily sacrifice is taken away, and the abomination of desolation is set up, there shall be one thousand two hundred and ninety days.” God has determined that the Great Tribulation will be short, not to exceed 3 ½ years beyond the abomination of desolation. That will give the tribulation saints hope to endure whatever suffering they face, for deliverance will soon come. In fact, Paul says in 2 Thess. 1:6-8, “since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God....”

Finally, let’s see from our text the good news that will come in such dark days:

IV. THE SIGNS OF THE END OF THE TRIBULATION

Jesus said back in v.13, “But he who endures to the end shall be saved.” The tribulation period will be a difficult time indeed. But Christ promises His saints that the tribulation will not last long. And if they endure to the end, they will be saved out of it. And according to v.31, some saints will indeed survive to the end.

⁷ “And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time....”

⁸ The term “eagles” may refer to vultures. They circle in the sky over a carcass as a sign. Even so, the coming of Jesus is assigned of the deadly judgment that will fall upon many unbelievers.

Now Jesus gives some signs that the end of the tribulation is very near. In fact, He says in v.33, “So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near—at the doors!” These signs will give God’s people hope and encourage, helping them persevere just a little longer. So what are those signs? First of all, there will be:

A. Signs in the Solar Heavens – Jesus said in v.29, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” This could be a God-caused sign in the solar heavens. On the other hand, it could refer to a nuclear exchange right before Christ returns. You see, “heavens” is from *ouranos*, from which we get “uranium.” And notice that the “powers” of the heavens will be “shaken.” That sounds like a nuclear chain reaction that results in explosive power. Furthermore, a nuclear war would darken both the sun and moon, and the bombs would appear as stars falling from heaven. Nuclear war is still possible. There are thousands of nuclear warheads that are still active in this world. Either way, when v.29 is fulfilled, believers will know that the return of Christ is *very* near.

In v.3 the disciples had asked the sign of His coming, so in v.30 Jesus gives:

B. *The Sign of the Second Coming* – There Jesus said, “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, ... and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” The sign is probably the very appearance of Jesus Himself upon clouds of glory. In fact, Mark and Luke’s account leave out the word “sign,” and simply say, “And then shall they see the Son of man...” Likewise, Daniel 7:13 says, “I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven!” Christ’s brilliant self-manifestation will be a sign that He is about to descend in order to meet His people while they ascend to meet Him in the air. Furthermore, His glory will be a sign, a definite proof, of God’s delight in His Son and of the justice of the impending judgment upon this world.

C. *The Signal of the Second Coming* – Jesus said in v.31 that His return will be accompanied “with a great sound of a trumpet⁹...” (Cf. 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16). It is clear that the Lord’s return will be heard as well as seen. For believers this sound will be full of cheer. It will be the fulfillment of the trumpet ordinance found in Lev. 25, and will proclaim liberty throughout the universe for all the children of God, their everlasting jubilee. It will also be the trumpet call of war, for the saints of God will gather (cf. Isa. 27:13¹⁰) to return with Christ on white horses (Rev. 19:14) and Christ will utterly defeat the Antichrist and his armies. Then v.33 will be fulfilled, “So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near — at the doors!”

Conclusion: What would happen to you if these verses were being fulfilled today? One of two things would happen. First, if you are not saved, you will join many others in mourning your impending doom and utter loss. Jesus warned in v.30 that “all the tribes of the earth will mourn...” This is very similar to how the book of Revelation begins, “Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the

⁹ Numbers 10:2-3 says, "Make two silver trumpets for yourself; ... you shall use them for calling the congregation.... When they blow both of them, all the congregation shall gather before you...."

¹⁰ Paul also mentioned “our gathering together to Him” in reference to His Second Coming (2 Th. 2:1), the noun form of the verb used in v.31.

earth will mourn because of Him” (1:7). Why will they mourn? They will realize that the Bible is indeed true, and that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. They will realize that they have made the biggest mistake of their lives in not trusting in Him as their Savior. They will mourn because they will sense that Christ is coming to them as a judge, just as He said. (Cf. Zech. 12:10, 12; Rev. 6:15-17). It will be too late to repent and be saved.

The other option is expressed in v.31. Those who are saved, or “elect,”¹¹ will be gathered together by the angels from all over the world.¹² They will be delivered from further tribulation, and from the final outpouring of the wrath of God.¹³

Are you ready for the return of Christ? Do you know the signs of His return? Are you watching for His return? I am ready for whatever the future holds, for I have placed my faith in Jesus Christ, who died for my sins, and rose again by the power of God. And He not only conquered death, but He will conquer all the power of Satan and his Antichrist. He has the power to deliver His people, and establish a kingdom of peace. Whose side are you on? Are you with Jesus? Well now is the time to take your stand for Jesus. If you’re uncommitted, if you’re on the fence, you are against Him. The rapture *could* take place today. The tribulation could be upon us very soon. I call upon you to make sure that you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior. And then you need to take a stand for Jesus by making a public confession of your faith. Do it now. Don’t delay!

Sources: Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2020; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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¹¹ Who are the elect, mentioned also in vv. 22, 24? In Mt. 20:16; 22:14; Lk. 18:7; Rom. 11:7 and Rev. 17:14 they refer to believers in Jesus, and not Israelites, the chosen people.

¹² Jesus refers elsewhere to the angelic host that accompanies His return for gathering and for bringing judgment (Matthew 13:39, 41, 49; 16:27; 25:31).

¹³ Some believe this is a reference to the regathering of Israel. But Paul said in 2 Thess. 2:1, “Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and [or “even”] our gathering together to Him....” He uses the noun form of the verb used in v.31 of our text.