

Matthew 24 and the Great Tribulation

Chapter 6: The Judgment: Past, Progressive or Final

[Brian Schwertley](#)

The fourth objection (and the second *major* objection) to the idea that all of Matthew 24 and 25 concerns the destruction of Jerusalem is based on the descriptions of judgment following Christ's coming. A very strong case can be made that Jesus uses the urgency associated with the destruction of Jerusalem as a springboard to warn all Christians to be ready for the final judgment at the second bodily coming. There are a number of reasons for this interpretation.¹

(1) The reason given for watchfulness in the parables is that when Jesus returns He will mete out immediate and terrible punishments to all hypocrites while giving rewards to all those who are faithful. (The purpose of these parables is to call believers to watchfulness. All Christians must be spiritually alert and biblically engaged in the Master's service and thus be ready at every moment to stand before Jesus Christ and give an account.) Throughout these parables we observe the terminology not of conquering armies, national disasters or physical slaughter, but the terminology associated with the final judgment when people are judged and cast into heaven or hell. The master of the servant "will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 24:51). The

¹ The idea of a progressive judgment (which is advocated by interpreters such as Milton Terry and Gary De Mar) is very attractive for a number of reasons. First, it avoids having to posit a jump from the destruction of Jerusalem to the final judgment thousands of years in the future. Second, it comports well with the picture of Christ's kingship found in passages such as Psalm 2 and 110 where the Messiah is pictured ruling and destroying enemy kings and nations progressively by the rod of His power. Third, it applies well to the destruction of Jerusalem, which is the first and major example of a progressive judgment. Fourth, the parables apply well to that situation because the nation of Israel (which was at that time the covenant people) were not ready to meet the master and thus were cast out of the kingdom. The progressive judgment interpretation, however, is subject to a number of objections by final judgment advocates. First, the idea of a progressive judgment is not stated or taught in any of the parables or the judgment scene of Matthew 25:31 ff. It is inferred solely from the alleged necessity of tying the parables and judgment scene somehow to the destruction of Israel in A.D. 70. Given the manner in which the Old Testament prophets jumped without warning from events that were near to events that were far off, the necessity of connecting the judgment scenes to A.D.70 is overstated. Second, the condemnation terminology of the parables and final judgment scene are virtually identical to other descriptions of the final judgment (Mt. 8:12; 13:41-43; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Lk. 13:28; Rev. 20:11-15). Third, historical judgment events like the destruction of Jerusalem are God's way of dealing with unbelievers and persecutors. Faithful Christians are spared and continue to live their normal lives. The parables and judgment scene focus their attention on faithful believers and hypocritical Christians. Rank unbelievers are ignored. Fourth, the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13), which discusses the final harvest in which believers and hypocrites are separated, occurs at the end of the new covenant age not the beginning. Fifth, the judgment scene in Matthew 25:31 ff. describes a large group of people being judged simultaneously. While there are numerous examples of God crushing nations in Scripture, the Bible (with the possible exception of this one verse) contains no examples or description of public (i.e. many people) yet partial judgment scenes. Sixth, the parables and judgment scene describe a literal bodily coming of the Master in which everyone must stand in His presence to be sentenced. The judgment upon Jerusalem by our Lord did not involve a literal bodily descent upon Jerusalem. One cannot assert that Jesus literally came in A.D. 70 without denying the true humanity of the Messiah. If He came literally how come no one saw Him? Where is He now? Was there a second hidden ascension? While the progressive judgment view is an acceptable interpretation (unlike the full preterist view which is heretical), the final judgment view is superior in the opinion of this author.

“good and faithful servants” hear, “enter into the joy of your lord” (Mt. 25:21c) while “the wicked and lazy servants” hear “cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 25:30).

While there is no question that watchfulness is needed to avoid the coming calamity upon Israel, *the believers living in A.D. 70 were not judged by Christ for they escaped the wrath of God and continued to live normal lives.* For partial preterists who apply Matthew 25 to believers meeting Christ throughout history (i.e. a progressive judgment) this is not a major problem. However, full preterists (who teach that *everything* was fulfilled in A.D. 70) cannot explain how the final judgment took place without resorting to bizarre speculations that not only contradict the clear teaching of God’s word regarding the day of judgment, but also do great violence to common sense. The major alternatives presented by hyper-preterists are a representative judgment or a secret judgment. Full preterists usually argue that all people whether alive or dead were judged in A.D. 70; that people living were judged without being aware of it; that people were judged who were not yet born for lives not yet lived. Scripture twisting and bare assertions without a shred of biblical evidence are the twin pillars of heterodoxy.

(2) The Lord’s injunction to watch is directly applied by Jesus not merely to and for His apostles, but to and for every Christian in *all places and times.* Note the parallel account in Mark: “And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch” (13:37). “In Mark’s view ‘all’ naturally includes in its scope all believers....It makes explicit the hints scattered through the discourse that in the instruction delivered to the disciples the church is being addressed.”² “[T]he Master wanted to impress upon his disciples the fact that his admonition to be and remain alert...was of supreme value not only for them but also for all other believers both then and later.”³ [W]hat I say to you of this generation, I say to all that shall believe in me, through your word, in every age, *Watch, watch,* expect my second coming, prepare for it, that you may be found in peace, without spot, and blemish.”⁴ If Christ literally returned in A.D. 70 and the final judgment has already taken place then obviously the injunction to watch does not apply to any believers after A.D. 70. Indeed, many of the central imperatives in the New Testament connected with the church’s sanctification do not apply to us. Full preterists can say such injunctions apply. However, if they do they are explicitly contradiction their own teaching regarding the coming of Christ.

(3) The Lukan account of Jesus’ discourse makes it clear that our Lord looks beyond the destruction of Jerusalem to the final judgment when faithful believers will stand by grace before the Son of Man. “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Lk. 21:36). The phrase “to stand before the Son of Man” without doubt is a reference to the final judgment when believers will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Note the following passages that confirm this assertion: “For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ....So then each of us shall give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:10, 12). “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). “These two texts therefore place beyond

² George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days*, 474. “Luke follows the...parables of the Watching Servants and that of the Burglar with the question of Peter, ‘Lord, are you speaking this parable to us or to all?’ (Luke 12:41)” (*Ibid.*). This fact indicates that when Jesus says “all” He was not merely expanding His injunction to the rest of the twelve apostles. Further, the fact that the twelve had listened very carefully to the whole discourse renders the idea that the use of all is merely an expansion to the twelve apostles superfluous.

³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 544.

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:545.

all dispute the certainly of future judgment for believers.”⁵ “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened....And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books” (Rev. 20:12).

The Bible says nothing about a representative or secret judgment. All believers will stand before the King. Did the believers who were alive in A.D. 70 stand before Jesus and give account? Did all the believers who had not yet been born and thus did not even exist stand in the presence of Christ in A.D. 70? Were all the secret sins of every human being publicly exposed in A.D. 70 (cf. Mt. 10:26; 12:26; Rom. 2:16)? Did believers hear the words “Enter into the joy of your Lord” (Mt. 25:21) in A.D. 70? Were all the people whether alive or dead consigned to their eternal state in both *body* and *soul* (cf. Mt. 10:28) in A.D. 70? The answer to all of these questions is an emphatic no, absolutely not.

(4) The strongest evidence against the full preterist interpretation of Matthew 25 comes from the description of the judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus ends the parabolic section of the Olivet Discourse with a non-parabolic (i.e. a literal description with a few parabolic or metaphorical elements, e.g., “sheep” and “goats”) description of the final judgment in order to clarify or explain the urgency of the former parables. Christians need to remain spiritually awake because when Jesus returns at the end of history everyone must stand before the judgment seat of Christ. This section of the discourse (like the parables) is directed to professing Christians in all nations throughout history. The persons judged in this section are either faithful believers (Mt. 25:34-40) or hypocritical professors (Mt. 25:40-46).

There are a number of reasons why this portion of the discourse is incompatible with an A.D. 70 fulfillment.

a) Matthew 24:15-34 describes a *local* judgment (i.e. God’s wrath that came upon rebellious apostate Israel). Matthew 25:31 ff. describes a *universal* judgment. “All the nations [Gk. *ethne*] will be gathered before Him” (Mt. 25:32). “The judgment of the great day will be a general judgment. All must be summoned before Christ’s tribunal...all those nations of men that are made of one blood, to dwell on all the face of the earth.”⁶ The coming in judgment upon Jerusalem led to the slaughter of over one million Jews. The judgment of Matthew 25:31 involves all men of every nation.

b) Matthew 25:31 ff. describes a personal judgment. The professing Christians involved stand before Christ and have direct communication with Him. Our Lord commends the faithful believers for their works of faith. The hypocrites are condemned for the lack of the works of saving faith. Both the faithful and unfaithful are permitted to ask questions of the Judge. This whole scene of judgment is totally incompatible with an A.D. 70 fulfillment for a number of reasons. First, it destroys the full preterist notion of a secret impersonal judgment of which most people are totally unaware. The great judgment will be like a court with people present and questions asked. Second, the judgment event of A.D. 70 involved unbelievers, not professing Christians. Believers observed the signs and escaped to the mountainous area of Pella and thus were not killed. If believers remained alive why would they be pictured as standing before Christ in heaven?

⁵ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968 [59, 65]), part 2, 184.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:379.

c) Matthew 24:31 teaches that our Lord's judgment of Israel inaugurated a great gathering of the elect throughout the whole earth through the preaching of the gospel. (In other words the destruction of the old rebellious covenant nation pushed the Great Commission [Mt. 28:19-20] into high gear.) Matthew 25:32, however, pictures all the nations (people both saved and lost) already standing before Him. Matthew 24:31 pictures the beginning of the gospel age while Matthew 25:32 sets forth the end of this process. The wheat and the tares (Mt. 13:25-40), the sheep and the goats (Mt. 25:32) are separated. Full preterism has both the beginning and ending of new covenant history occurring simultaneously.

d) The judgment scene of Matthew 25:31 ff. describes the assignment of both the righteous and the wicked of every nation to their eternal rewards. "And they will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mt. 25:46). The fact that both the righteous and the wicked go either to eternal life or to everlasting punishment cannot be harmonized with the A.D. 70 judgment event upon Israel. Believers in A.D. 70 were not killed and thus did not stand before Christ. If full preterists argue that Christians were given eternal life (i.e. salvation) in A.D. 70 then they have also contradicted Scripture. Everyone with genuine faith in Jesus in A.D. 70 was already born again and in possession of eternal life (Jn. 3:36). Matthew 25:46 must refer to the full redemption of both body and soul on the final day after the resurrection of the body.

(5) The full preterist interpretation of Matthew 25 is disproved by the biblical teaching regarding the final judgment. Whenever any portion of the Bible is interpreted it must be analyzed within the overall context of Scripture. The full preterist teaches that the final judgment occurred in A.D. 70. A study of the biblical teaching regarding the final judgment proves beyond a shadow of doubt that the full preterist view is exegetically, theologically and logically impossible. Note the following proofs:

a) Jesus taught that at the final judgment God will cast the damned both *body* and soul into hell. "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt. 10:28). "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation" (Jn. 5:28-29). "The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works" (Rev. 20:13). Were evil unsaved persons resurrected and then cast into the lake of fire in A.D. 70? No. It didn't happen. And even if it did occur, what about evil unsaved people who die after A.D. 70? Do they get to avoid the punishment promised by Jesus in Matthew 10:28 because they live after the resurrection occurred? The full preterist can't answer these questions without totally twisting the plain meaning of Scripture.⁷

⁷ The average Christian reader of Matthew 25:31-46 will immediately recognize a description of the final judgment. And he is right. That is what this section of Scripture describes. But the full preterist says, "No, it's not that simple let me explain it to you." Note the incredible Scripture twisting of the full preterist Max King. He writes, "'All nations' may include Gentiles, but it is the author's view that Matt. 25:31-46 is equated with Matt. 13:37-43 and

b) Our Lord explicitly said that non-Jewish pagans who had been dead for thousands of years would be involved in the day of judgment. Note, the following passages: “Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city” (Mt. 10:15; cf. 11:23-24)! “But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you” (Mt. 11:22). “The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here” (Mt. 12:42). Jesus said that the rank heathen sex perverts of Sodom and Gomorrah who were destroyed in a temporal judgment 2,000 years before our Lord spoke these words would be judged in the future on the day of judgment. Likewise, the evil Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon who received historical judgments long ago (e.g., Ezek. 26:3-21, 28:20-24; Amos 1:9; Joel 3:4-6; Isa. 23:12; Jer. 27:3-6) would some day be judged with the wicked Israelites of Jesus' generation. Even the righteous Ninevites (c. 899 B.C.) who repented under Johah's preaching will be judged on the same day—the day of judgment. The fact that the non-Jewish people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Nineveh, Tyre, and Sidon, and the Ethiopian queen of Solomon's day are all to be judged together with the Jews of Jesus' generation totally disproves the hyper-preterist contention (e.g., Russell, King) that the day of judgment was a strictly Jewish affair. It also disproves the full preterist concept of a representative judgment.

The final judgment is universal (i.e. it involves all nations). It involves all people who ever lived throughout all of human history. This point raises the question: Were the ancient people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Nineveh, Tyre and Sidon and Ethiopia judged in A.D. 70 when Christ destroyed Israel? No. The final judgment hasn't happened yet. Further, Christ said that the inhabitants of ancient Nineveh and the Queen of the South of Solomon's day “will rise up in the judgment with this generation” (Mt. 12:42). In other words, everyone who lived throughout history will be raised from the dead in order to

Revelation 14:14-20. ‘Nations’ is a term that also applies to the Jewish tribes or people (Rev. 20:3, 8; 2:26; Matt. 21:43), and here this judgment seems to involve *all nations* or all the *tribes of Israel*. It was a judgment to determine true spiritual Israel from rebellious fleshly Israel. The nations were divided or separated into two groups. Those on the right hand received the kingdom (verse 34). Those on the left hand were removed from the kingdom (verse 41). This corresponds with Matt. 21:43: ‘Therefore say I unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.’ The kingdom of God was never taken from *Gentiles* for they never had it (Eph. 2:12). Nor were the *Gentiles* ever cast out of the kingdom, for they were never in it. (Matt. 13:41, 42; Matt. 25:41). Thus, it is quite obvious that the judgment of Matt. 25:31-46 belongs in the *Jewish setting* wherein it was spoken and to which it applied. Jesus was merely showing how the children of the kingdom (the Jews) would be cast into outer darkness and the kingdom would be possessed by another nation, namely the sons of God born of spiritual birth by Abraham's spiritual seed (Gal. 3:16-29)” (*Spirit of Prophecy* [Warren, OH: Parkman Road Church of Christ, 1971], 170). Note that Matthew 25:31 does not say “tribes of the land” but “all nations.” The term nations (*ethne*) is never used in the Bible as a designation for Israel.

Another full preterist, Dr. Kelly Nelson Birks, argues that Matthew 25:31 ff. does indeed describe the last judgment. According to Birks the last judgment occurred in 70 A.D. Birks argues that God looked throughout human history and saw the lives of all men before they were even born and evaluated them when Jesus returned in A.D. 70. Not only is Birks' theory a bare assertion without a shred of biblical evidence (in other words he just made it up), it also contradicts the explicit teaching of Matthew 25:31 ff. that all the nations are *present* before Christ, that all men are there before the King to be questioned and rebuked. Remember the old saying “one heresy leads to another.” The full preterist treatment of the last judgment passages are more convoluted, bizarre and dangerous than the worst theories of the dispensational sensationalists.

appear before Christ at the final judgment. Note, that this resurrection from the dead includes the contemporary generation of Jews (“with this generation”). This statement from the lips of Jesus presupposes that the general resurrection occurs at a point in the future in which all the inhabitants of Christ’s day have passed away. Our Lord’s teaching explicitly places the general resurrection at a future point in time beyond the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. It is absolutely impossible to reconcile our Lord’s teaching regarding the final judgment and the general resurrection with the full preterist’s concept of an A.D. 70 fulfillment.

c) The New Testament teaching regarding the final judgment completely contradicts the full preterist idea of a secret, hidden judgment. Jesus said, “But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly” (Mt. 6:3-4; cf 6:6; Note the plural demonstrative (“those”) in Matthew 25:34, 41). Later, He spurred the disciples to courageous action saying, “For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known” (Mt. 10:26). After rebuking the Pharisees for blaspheming the Holy Spirit our Lord declared, “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment” (Mt. 12:36). “There shall be a day of judgment wherein all sins, even words, shall come to be judged: for here *a day of judgment* shall pass upon particulars, even upon words.”⁸ Paul concurred: “In the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel” (Rom. 2:16). Were all believers rewarded openly in A.D. 70 for their charitable deeds? No. They were not. Were all the hidden sins revealed when Jerusalem was destroyed? No. The hidden deeds are still hidden. They have not been made public. Have all men given account for every idle word they have spoken? No. In fact men continue to spout filth, hatred and perversion. Has God already judged the secrets of everyone? Has He exposed hypocritical professors of religion as in Matthew 7:22-23 or 25:42 ff.? No. He clearly has not. The hyper-preterist understanding of the final judgment ignores the Bible’s own description of that solemn day.

d) The full preterist teaching regarding an A.D. 70 final judgment also explicitly contradicts Revelation 20. In Revelation 20, we are told that Satan is bound at the beginning of the millennium (20:1-3). Virtually all amillennial and postmillennial scholars teach that the devil was bound at the first coming as a result of Jesus’ death and resurrection (cf. Mt. 12:28-29; Jn. 12:31-32; Lk. 9:1; 10:18-19; Heb. 2:14; 1 Jn. 3:8). In Revelation 20:7 it says that at the end of the 1,000 years (the millennium) Satan is released from prison to gather the nations of the earth to attack the saints and the beloved city (v. 9). This attack does not succeed because fire comes down from heaven, destroys the enemy armies and then the devil is cast into the lake of fire (vs. 9-10). According to the full preterist this has already taken place in A.D. 70. They teach that the final judgment is coterminous with Satan’s final defeat and judgment. The hyper-preterist interpretation raises the following questions. Why is the millennium (which according to the hyper-preterist lasted only around forty years) described as a thousand year period? While there is no question that the phrase “one thousand years” is symbolic of an indefinite period of time, the number 1,000 is never used in Scripture to describe a small

⁸ David Dickson, *Matthew*, 173.

number but always a vast number. For example, God owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 50:10). This indicates that God owns all the cattle (i.e. thousands of cattle and hills; cf. Dt. 1:11; 7:9; Ps. 68:17; 84:10; 90:4).

The use of one thousand years to describe the period between the first and second *bodily* coming of Christ to judge the world cannot be explained away (i.e. in a biblical, exegetical or logical manner) by the full preterist. Further the description of what occurs at our Lord's return in Revelation 20 explicitly contradicts what occurred in A.D. 70. In A.D. 70 the Roman armies conquer the city, slay its inhabitants and march back to Rome victorious. In Revelation 20:9 the armies are not victorious, nor do they remain alive, but are obliterated instantly by fire from God. In Revelation 20:9 the beloved city is the encampment of the saints. In the Jewish war the city is completely abandoned by Christians who flee to Pella to escape the destruction. In A.D. 70 the city is the encampment of apostate Christ-hating, Jewish unbelievers. How can Revelation 20 be harmonized into the hyper-preterist system when it teaches almost the exact opposite of what full preterists teach?

It is one thing to observe how apocalyptic imagery and Old Testament prophetic terminology are used by Jesus in order to give a careful, responsible exegesis of Matthew 24:4-35. It is quite another thing to allegorize straight forward passages, invent bizarre new theories and make up new teachings out of thin air to fit the judgment scene of Matthew 25 into the full preterist paradigm. Arbitrary, fanciful eisegesis is the only way that full preterists can redefine long established orthodox confessional doctrines.⁹

(6) The obvious objection that a shift occurs from a discussion of the judgment upon Jerusalem to the necessity of being ready to stand before Christ on the day of judgment (the logical point to make this shift would be Matthew 24:42) is that the disciples would have been completely oblivious to such a change. While it may be true that the apostles would have had a difficult time understanding that Jesus was now warning all believers of every nation throughout history of the necessity of being ready to stand before the King, there are good reasons for acknowledging such a change. First, (as noted) a careful study of the rest of the New Testament reveals that the public separation of the sheep and the goats of all the nations is to occur at the end of history, not in the middle of history. The New Testament teaching regarding the final judgment cannot be harmonized with an A.D. 70 fulfillment without departing from several well established orthodox and confessional doctrines (e.g., the time and nature of the resurrection, the rapture, the second bodily coming of Christ, the consummation of the kingdom and the beginning of the final state, etc.). Second (as noted) Mark's account makes it clear that our Lord is speaking to the whole church, not merely the apostles or the Christians in Palestine (cf. Mk. 13:37).

Third, a study of Old Testament prophecy reveals that shifts within prophecies of events that are near (or about to occur) to events that are distant often are difficult or even impossible

⁹ For example, the Bible teaches (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:52 ff.; Phil. 3:21, etc.) that when Christ returns all believers are to receive new glorified spiritual bodies. This event, obviously, has not happened yet. That truth doesn't stop hyper-preterist interpreters from spreading heresy. One full preterist (Dr. Kelly Birks) argues that all believers past, present and future did in fact receive their new resurrected glorified bodies in A.D. 70. For Christians who did not yet exist in A.D. 70 these bodies were placed in storage in heaven for the future. While a creative imagination is very useful when writing fiction, it is not helpful when writing theology.

for the original audience to discern. Note the following examples. In Isaiah chapter 7 the prophet approaches King Ahaz in a time of crisis (Judah is under attack by Syria and Israel, c. 734 B.C.). Jehovah through the prophet tells the king that within 65 years Ephraim will be broken (Ephraim and Israel are the collective names of the ten northern tribes). Israel is defeated in 722 B.C. and the northern kingdom completely ceased to exist within the 65 years. In the midst of prophecies dealing with the immediate future, God orders Ahaz to ask for a sign. Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign, then God says, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel....For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings” (Isa. 7:14, 16). If we apply the full preterist hermeneutic to this portion of Scripture we would achieve a completely erroneous interpretation. The discussion of the child who is to be born comes within the context of a prophecy regarding events that are to take place within 65 years (Isa. 7:8). In verse 16 God even switches *mid-sentence* from a discussion of the Messiah (who will not be born for another 730 years) to the end of the military campaign by the kings of Israel and Syria that were in Ahaz’s immediate future. Would the people who heard this prophecy understand or perceive that God was switching back and forth several centuries in time? No. They almost certainly would not. Does this make the prophecy any less true or relevant? No. It does not. Further, this prophecy punches large irreparable holes in the full preterist over-use of the word “you” and audience relevance. Jehovah through Isaiah tells Ahaz directly that, “the Lord Himself will give you a sign” (v. 14). According to the full preterist method of interpretation this passage must teach that Ahaz himself would be alive to witness the virgin birth. However, we know from the New Testament that it was his relatives far off in the future that were alive to witness this great redemptive event.

In Isaiah chapter 11 there is a wonderful prophecy regarding Jesus Christ and His kingdom. This prophecy without any warning or indication of a change of time fulfillment is given in the same prophetic discourse that deals with the imminent destruction of Assyria. Note the passage that gives the time indicator: “For yet a very little while and the indignation will cease, as will My anger in their destruction” (Isa. 10:25). “From the time of Tiglath-pileser to Sennacherib was roughly about thirty years. In the prophetic view, it was a short time.”¹⁰ If the full preterist was consistent with his method of dealing with time indicators he would have to argue that the Jews of Isaiah’s day should have expected the Messiah in “a very little while.” A consistent preterist would say, “The Jewish audience who heard or read this prophecy would have had no way to distinguish between events that are near at hand and events that are several centuries in the future. Therefore, we must not arbitrarily divide them without solid evidence.” But, we know from the completed canon that God has no problem placing prophetic events that are to take place several centuries apart next to each other with no explanation whatsoever. The full preterist hermeneutic is over simplistic and defective. Prophetic discourse is often not as clearly or logically laid out as we would like.¹¹ Given the manner in which the Old Testament prophets often mingled events which were about to take place with distant events without explanation, it would not be out of character or unusual if Jesus went from a discussion of the day of the Lord that occurred in A.D. 70 to the final and ultimate day of the Lord at the second bodily coming of Christ.

¹⁰ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:372.

¹¹ For an excellent refutation of the full pretest interpretation methodology of using imminency passages to force everything into an A.D. 70 fulfillment see C. Jonathan Seraiah, *The End of All Things: A Defense of the Future* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 98-102.

Conclusion

The Olivet Discourse has been greatly abused by prophetic sensationalists, dispensationalists and radical futurists. The section of the discourse (Mt. 24:2-34) so often used to scare believers and sell books has already come to pass over nineteen centuries ago. Further, Jesus said that the time of His second coming is a secret (Mt. 24:36). Date setting and wild speculations about the “terminal generation” have done great harm to the cause of Christ and the reputations of Christians in general. However, the fact that no one knows the time of the second coming (except God) is not and should never be used as an excuse by believers to be lazy, complacent or disobedient. On the contrary, our Lord emphasizes in the “watch” parables and the description of the last judgment that all professing Christians must live every moment of every day as if Jesus could appear at any moment. Biblical Christianity is not a religion of escape, hedonism or retreatism, but a religion of day-by-day fervency, service, kingdom building and repentance. The major thrust of the Olivet Discourse is not on the fun and excitement of prophecy but on the motivation and necessity for spiritual alertness, sanctification and the day-by-day struggle for personal holiness.

A proper understanding of the Olivet Discourse will help fend off the retreatist pietism and belly-button theology of much of modern evangelicalism. However, in our battle with the radical futurism of dispensationalism we must avoid the theologically fatal doctrine of full preterism (or hyper-preterism, pantelism, consistent preterism, radical preterism, etc.). While dispensationalism neuters the church by eliminating the Great Commission concept of building Christian cultures and nations over the long haul, full preterism destroys the church by denying (through complete redefinition; like modernists but in a different more clever manner) doctrines central to the Christian faith (e.g., the second bodily coming of Christ, the resurrection, the final judgment, the full victory of Jesus' resurrection in history, etc.). “Too many people have been leaning away from the briar patch of dispensationalism on their left only to fall from their horse into the pit of the damnable heresy of pantelism on their right.”¹² Given this fact we must approach Matthew 24 with utmost care and reverence, recognizing the analogy of faith and the difficulties involved in understanding certain sections of the discourse. It is our hope and prayer that a more biblical understanding of the Olivet Discourse will point the modern evangelical church away from rapture fever toward the important task of working for godly dominion in family, church and state.

Copyright 2000 © Brian Schwertley

[HOME PAGE](#)

¹² R. C. Sproul, Jr., “Foreword” in C. Jonathan Seraiah, *The End of All Things*, 10.