

What Did Jesus Really Teach About His Second Coming?

By Graham Osborne

As we enter into Lenten preparations for Easter, many great saints have encouraged us to reflect on Jesus' final coming at the end of time as a helpful activity during this time. But such reflection has been the source of trouble for many over the centuries.

Based on passages in Matthew 24-25 and Luke 21, some believe Jesus promised that his final coming would be relatively soon: "they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory... this generation [Biblically speaking, about 40 years] will not pass away till all these things take place" [Matthew 24:30, 34].

But 2000 years later, Jesus still hasn't returned! Consequently, many have questioned: if Jesus got this wrong, what else did he get wrong?! Some even go so far as to question whether Jesus really was who he said he was. Sadly, many have had their faith shaken by this misperception, and some have even turned away from Christianity all together. So it's important to clear this misunderstanding up! So in the tradition of St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, who both dealt with this question, let us do just that.

Let's start with the context of these passages. In Matthew 24:1-2, Jesus' disciples are admiring the temple and he says to them: "You see all these [buildings]? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left... one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down".

This is a shocker for them. But Jesus is absolutely right. In 70 AD, the Roman army would utterly crush a Jewish rebellion, obliterating the temple in the process. The fires that raged as a result melted the gold of the temple, and the Romans spent years sifting through the rubble extracting the melted gold from virtually every stone.

The disciples then ask two questions: "Tell us, (1) when will this be, and (2) what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age" [Matthew 24:3]?

To properly understand these passages, it is critical to know which question Jesus is addressing and when. In Matthew 24:4-34 and Luke 21:8-32, with a few exceptions, Jesus is answering only the first question: when will the temple be destroyed, why will it be destroyed, and how it will all come about? It is the misinterpretation of Jesus' answer here that causes all the trouble. He is not talking about his Final Advent/Coming at the end of time here at all, as many assume, but his "coming" in judgment against the Jews who have rejected him, and the consequent destruction of the temple, the heart of Jewish worship.

And in answering this question, Jesus also systematically starts to prepare his disciples for all the things that will happen in advance of the temple's destruction.

There will be wars, famines, earthquakes [Mat 24:6-8] – all of which eyewitness historians of the time tell us happened leading up to 70 AD.

There will be tribulation. As the double persecution by both the Romans [especially starting with Nero] and the Jewish authorities intensifies, and the Roman army lays siege to Jerusalem, Jesus reveals that many will fall away.

He then warns them of false messiahs that will come, deceiving many into thinking that he has returned [Jewish and Roman historians record several of these]. And here, Jesus actually *does* momentarily speak about his final coming, just to reassure his disciples that this last coming will be unmistakable – they won't possibly confuse it with a false messiah: "for as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man."

But then Jesus tells them: be ready to run! “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart... for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written” [Luke 21:20-22].

And this is exactly what happened. Writing around 340 AD, Church historian, Eusebius, recorded that all Christians fled Jerusalem before its destruction: “The... church at Jerusalem... commanded by a divine revelation... removed from the city, and dwelt at a town beyond the Jordan, called Pella.”

Additionally, if Jesus really had been describing his Final Coming at the end of time here, as some contend, there would be no point in fleeing – there would be no way to avoid it.

But the passage that follows next is the source of most of the confusion. “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken [Matthew 24:29].

Here, Jesus turns to “apocalyptic” language, a style of writing well known in his day, and commonly used by prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel and Joel. Typically, it used cosmological/astronomical terms to describe the fall of political powers.

Isaiah 13:9-19 is a perfect example of this, as it predicts the destruction of Babylon by the Medo-Persians: “Behold, the day of the LORD comes... to make the earth a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising and the moon will not shed its light... Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place... Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them”.

Similarly, Jesus is not speaking about the end of the world in Matthew 24:29, but using apocalyptic language to signal the end of the *Jewish* world as they know it. And no Old Testament Jew would have missed that. And interestingly, there were, in fact, many strange other-worldly signs seen in the sky at this time, as recorded by both the Jewish historian Josephus, and the Roman historian Tacitus.

Jesus continues: “then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven [and there are fascinating eye witness testimonies and historical accounts of signs in the sky connected with this prophecy by Jesus], and then all the tribes of the earth [referring to the twelve tribes of Israel] will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” [Matthew 24:30].

Jesus also uses similar language when addressing the high priest in Matthew 26:64. Asked if he was the Christ, Jesus replies: “I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 26:64).

What is going on here? Isn't this Jesus speaking about his coming at the end of time? Not at all! Jesus is alluding to two Old Testament passages here: Daniel 7 and Psalm 110. Both refer to him going *to* the Father in Heaven, *not returning to earth* at the end of time as some assume.

And as you read on in Daniel 7:13-27, the context is that of a court sitting in judgment: “and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man... and he came *to* the Ancient of Days... the court shall sit in judgment... his dominion shall be taken away... consumed and destroyed to the end... And the kingdom... given to... the saints of the Most High”.

Similarly, Psalm 110:1-6 speaks of Jesus sitting at the “right hand” of the Father in Heaven *until* his enemies are made his footstool. Both Daniel 7 and Psalm 110 involve a kingdom reign, but *from* heaven. Neither refers to his final return to earth.

Intimately familiar with these passages and their apocalyptic tone, Caiaphas does not miss Jesus' message: he will be judged, and his power and authority will be stripped. He tears his garments in response.

And just as it was the Medo-Persians that carried out God's judgment against the Babylonians in Isaiah 13:9-19 above, similarly, it will be the Roman army, and not Jesus, that the Jews will see when Jesus comes "on the clouds of heaven with power" to judge them. Just as God preserved the Assyrians [recall Jonah preaching to them] to be the instrument of God's judgment against the ten idolatrous northern tribes of Israel in 722 BC, so will the Roman army be God's instrument to carry out his judgment against the Jews who have rejected him.

Jesus now concludes his answer to his disciples' first question: "when will this be"? When will the temple be destroyed? His answer? "This generation will not pass away till all these things take place" [Matthew 24:34]. With few exceptions, everything Jesus has said before this point applies to the judgment and destruction of Jerusalem, and *not* his final coming at the end of time.

But now, Jesus finally turns to his disciples' second question: "what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" Now he *will* talk about his Final Coming.

With a change of tone, Jesus states, "But of *that* day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." [Matthew 24:36]. Probably not the answer the disciples were hoping for! Remember, Jesus is answering the disciples' second question about his coming at "the close of the age" now. So what "day and hour" is Jesus talking about here? He is referring to his words immediately before this, when "Heaven and earth will pass away" [Matthew 24:35]. When "Heaven and earth pass away" will be the moment of his final coming!

He then goes on to compare his Final Coming to the time of Noah – life went on as usual, right up until the final day. He then goes on to give examples of ordinary life in current times: "Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left" [Matthew 24:40-42]. Some will be chosen for eternal life, some not. He concludes: "watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming [Matthew 24:42]."

In the passages before this, Jesus was very deliberate in describing the destruction of the temple and his coming in judgment against the Jews, including its timing and the signs that would precede this event. But now there is a change. There will be *no* signs, no clues – like a thief in the night.

Jesus then follows this with several parables illustrating his final coming. And interestingly, time after time – the "master", "the nobleman", the "Bridegroom" – is delayed. His Final Coming isn't necessarily imminent, as the destruction of the temple was. In fact Jesus seems to be hinting at just the opposite. But again, Jesus' message? "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" [Matthew 25:13].

And finally, Jesus concludes his teachings on his final coming with the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46. Here, Jesus does indeed give us a picture of his actual final coming and judgement: "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations [these are now all the people of the world, and not just the twelve tribes of Israel], and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats".

Basing this final judgment on good works, Jesus concludes: "'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

No one will know the day or the hour. But be sure. Jesus didn't get his Final Coming wrong... Best to be a sheep...

Hebrews 9:25-28 He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.