

**Matthew 24:26-35--A Case Study in
Interpreting the "Obscure" by the "Clear"**
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Recently I had the privilege of teaching a class on Revelation at South Side Christian Church in Springfield, Illinois. Following one of the evening sessions, a young man came up and asked me how I interpreted Matthew 24. I told him that I believed that Jesus was responding to two questions asked by the disciples: When was the Temple and Jerusalem going to be destroyed and what signs would accompany the end of the world? I believe that the disciples were equating the two, and Jesus was clarifying that they were not one-in-the-same. They were two distinct events. The first event would be accompanied by signs and Jesus said that the judgment on Israel as a nation would come within their lifetimes (Matt. 24:1-35). The other event would not be accompanied by signs, but rather they (and we!) needed always to be alert (Matt. 24:36-25:46).¹ He had been taught that "this generation" in 24:35 referred to the generation living right before Christ returns. Not so, I responded. Let me share with you a portion of my explanation I offered to him.

A fundamental hermeneutical principle is that the Bible student should interpret a passage that is perceived to be "obscure" in light of a passage (or passages) perceived to be "clear." Perhaps Matt. 24:26-35 is an example of applying this principle. Do these verses refer to the destruction of Jerusalem or to the so-called "end of the world" or final coming of Jesus?

There are many reasons why we have difficulty in understanding these verses, but one stands out: the language that Jesus uses. It appears to me that the point of the language is that creation reacts; all heaven breaks loose when God comes down (either in 70 A.D. when Jerusalem was destroyed or when Christ comes a final time). Morna Hooker reminds us that the language here "is more than metaphorical, less than literal" (see *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, p. 319). Jesus is describing cosmic phenomena, but he is not giving an exact or scientific description of the phenomena. Nor is he merely suggesting times will be bad by hyperbolically employing

¹ I find it fascinating that Jesus would give "signs" for an event that took place in 70 A.D. but refused to give signs for his final coming! Too many preachers and teachers come into conflict with the way Jesus handled the question!

heavenly metaphors. The basic point is that the destruction of Jerusalem or the final coming will be an earth-shattering event. What is described is seen as real, but the terms used for the description are hyperbolic in character, indicating the significance of the events.

In reflecting on 24:26ff., I have concluded that the passage is reminiscent of Old Testament passages which speak about God's coming in judgment on Israel or other nations. These passages sound like God himself is carrying out the judgment or coming in judgment while the passages are really speaking about how God works through nations to bring about judgment. Let me give some examples:

- The Old Testament prophets employ such cosmic terms to describe the ruin of Edom, the death of Pharaoh and the invasion of Judah and Jerusalem (Isa. 34:4; Ezek. 32:7-8; Jer. 4:23-24; see also Zeph. 1:15; Dan. 7:13; Isa. 19:1).
- See also such passages as Isa. 13-23, 28-33 and Habakkuk 1-3.

The genre is not mere poetic imagery but the expression of OT theology. Since Yahweh is the author of the events of history as well as of the creator of the universe, there is a kind of pre-established harmony between the moral and physical world. Accordingly, any crisis in human affairs (e.g., The Assyrian or Babylonian invasions of the land) provokes a sympathetic resonance in nature.

In Matt. 24:26ff. Jesus is describing how God will bring about judgment on Jerusalem and the nation because of its rejection of him as the Messiah. Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans, but Jesus says that God used the Roman empire to bring about the judgment on his people. He used the nations to do so in Old Testament times, so why not in the first century?

That this section likely refers to the destruction of Jerusalem rather than the final coming of Jesus is, I believe, confirmed by focusing on two "clearer" passages. The first is 24:34 where Jesus informs the disciples that the events (those described in 24:26ff.) will take place in the time of "this generation." The formula "I tell you the truth" links vs. 34ff. with the previous section (see 18:18ff. for a similar use). Moreover, the phrase "this generation" or the word "generation" as used in Matthew's Gospel usually refers to the generation in Jesus' day (11:16; 12:41,42,45; 16:4; 17:17;

23:36).² Note that there is a bracketing effect (an inclusio) with 23:36 assuring the disciples and the readers that these events will happen to "this generation" (that is, the first century generation) and a re-emphasis of this in 24:34. In other words, "this generation" refers to the first century people; it does not refer to "our" generation or the so-called "end-times generation." The events of 24:3ff. were fulfilled by 70 A.D. with the destruction of Jerusalem.

The second clear passage is 24:36. The formula "now concerning" (unfortunately omitted from the NIV but found in such translations as the NASB) signifies that Jesus is moving on to the question raised by the disciples concerning his final coming (the formula shows a shift in subject matter in such passages as Matt. 20:6; 22:31; 27:46; I Cor. 7:1,25; 8:1,4; 12:1; 16:1). Specifically, Jesus shifts from the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem to the destruction of the world, a theme developed in the rest of Matt. 24 and not ending until the last parable in Matt. 25.³

² An exception is found in 1:17 where the word "generation" is used four times to refer to the generations associated with Jesus' genealogy.

³ Interestingly, the word "parousia" is used in 24:27 to refer to Christ coming in judgment on Jerusalem, a judgment carried out in 70 A.D. as well as a word linked with Christ's final coming (24:37,39).