

# Matthew 24:21-28

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-24/matthew-2421-28/>

*Jesus continues to answer the disciples' second question regarding the sign of His coming and identifies the second precursor as the great tribulation. It will be a time of unprecedented peril. He makes it clear that no guessing will be needed. If there is any doubt, then it isn't Him. When He comes, everyone will know it.*

The parallel gospel account of this teaching is found in Mark 13:19-23.

Luke 21:20-24 appears to intermix his details from this passage with the previous section.

In this section of commentary, we will look at the second precursor event that Jesus told His disciples would indicate that His return was very soon. The first precursor was the Abomination of Desolation. The second precursor He gave them is known as “The *Great Tribulation*.”

This is part of Jesus's Olivet Discourse, which began with Him answering three questions from the disciples regarding future events while He sat on the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem. Their questions were:

1. When will these things happen?
2. What will be the sign of your coming?
3. What will be the sign of the end of the age?

Jesus answered these questions in reverse order.

Previously Jesus answered the disciples' third question and told them that the sign of the end of the age would be when the gospel of the kingdom was preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all the nations (Matthew 24:14).

This passage contains the middle portion of His answer to their second question.

His ultimate answer for this second question—What will be the sign of your coming?—would essentially be “You won't need a sign to know that I have come. It will be unmistakably apparent!” (Matthew 24:27). Nevertheless, Jesus gave three signs or precursors that would indicate His return was soon.

The first precursor that Jesus gave signaling the nearness of His return was “The Abomination of Desolation” (Matthew 24:15). The second precursor is “The *Great Tribulation*” (Matthew 24:21). The third precursor will be the Darkening of the Sun, Moon, and Stars (Matthew 24:29).

Jesus previously described the event known as the Abomination of Desolation, which was spoken of through Daniel and would occur standing in the holy place of the Temple in Jerusalem (Matthew 24:15). *He* then warned them to immediately run to the mountains and escape “when

you see” this happen (Matthew 24:15-16). The reason they should flee instantly was because *for then there will be a great tribulation, such as not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will*. This *great tribulation* would happen so quickly after the Abomination of Desolation, that no one will have time to gather their belongings or even return for their cloak (Matthew 24:17-18).

Luke’s gospel record of Jesus’s teaching hardly distinguishes the Abomination of Desolation from The *Great Tribulation* and describes them as a single period of time (Luke 21:20-24). Perhaps he did this because these events follow so closely together. Daniel’s prophecy indicates that this *tribulation* disaster will begin once “the abomination of desolation is set up” (Daniel 12:11).

The prophet Jeremiah described *the great tribulation* as “the time of Jacob’s distress” (Jeremiah 30:7). Daniel described it as “a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time” (Daniel 12:1). The Book of Revelation calls it “the great tribulation” (Revelation 7:14).

The Greek words translated as great tribulation are “Megas” and “Thlipsis.” “Megas” simply means “huge,” “large,” or “great.” The English word “mega” comes from the Greek, “megas.” Thlipsis literally means “a pressing together.” Metaphorically it means a time of intense pressure or oppression, a period of duress or stress, or a confining situation with only terribly hard or dangerous options.

Jeremiah gave a vivid image of the intensity of this stress when he described how men will buckle onto their hands and knees and grab their stomachs and scream as though they are in labor:

“I have heard a sound of terror,  
Of dread, and there is no peace.  
‘Ask now, and see  
If a male can give birth.  
Why do I see every man  
With his hands on his loins, as a woman in childbirth?  
And why have all faces turned pale?”  
(Jeremiah 30:5-6)

The fact that Jesus described the great tribulation *such as not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will* suggests that He was not merely referring to the moment that would happen forty years after He said these things during the Olivet Discourse—the moment after the Roman general Titus crushed the Jewish revolt and demolished the Temple in 70 A.D. (Titus’ demolition of the temple was the third potential example of the Abomination of Desolation.)

That was a terrible time for the Jews and the Christians living in Judea, but it’s unsupportable that this was the worst event that ever has *occurred* or *ever will* occur in the history of *the world*. *The world*, and even the Jews, have experienced similar or worse catastrophes before and after

this occurred. Two calamities that might be comparable to what happened to Jerusalem in 70 A.D. could be the siege and fall of Jerusalem to Babylon (586 B.C.) described in 2 Chronicles 36:17-21 and the Book of Lamentations; and the Nazi Holocaust and Soviet Pogroms during World War II (1939-1945 A.D.). Jesus does not appear to be hyperbolic when *He* said these things, in which case the *great tribulation will* be even worse than those enormously terrible disasters.

To further support that Jesus is speaking literally here, He said, *unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.*

*Those days* is a reference to the period of the *great tribulation*. *Those days* had to be limited or *cut short*, because they are going to be so horrific that *no* one would survive them if they continued for much longer. This is what is meant by *no life would have been saved*. During the great tribulation, *the world will* become so violent that it would wipe out humanity if left to itself. God in His mercy has and will *cut those days short*. *He will do it for the sake of the elect.*

The Greek word that is translated as *elect* is “eklektos.” It means “selected,” “picked out,” or “chosen.” Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers that God “chose us” into His family before the beginning of time and predestined us to be adopted as His sons,

“...He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will.”  
(Ephesians 1:4-5)

Jesus’s use of *elect* in this passage refers to the same group of people as *the elect* in Ephesians. *Elect* refers to people who have or will believe in Jesus and consequently are or will become members of God’s eternal family. God will cut short the time of the *Great Tribulation* for the survival of *the elect*. Apparently, some people who will forever reject God will also survive *the Great Tribulation* period along with some of *the elect* (Revelation 9:20-21).

This likely matters because there will need to be *elect* people that survive *the great tribulation* in order to populate the kingdom Jesus will set up on the current earth. If the current world was going to cease to exist at the end of *the great tribulation*, it would not seem to matter whether any *elect* survived, since all believers will have a new, resurrected body while dwelling in the new earth (1 Corinthians 15:42-44; Revelation 21:1-4).

Jesus’s disciple John reported that the faithful who endure the many troubles of *the great tribulation* will be honored by being given white robes and serving God before the throne day and night in His heavenly temple (Revelation 7:14-15). The white robes likely represent their righteous deeds in being faithful witnesses during the *tribulation*.

Daniel prophesied, “Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:3). This indicates that in this darkest of days on the earth, those who understand the times, and

choose to live as faithful witnesses will be the brightest of lights. It is in the darkest places that the light shines brightest (See also Matthew 5:14-16).

### **How long will *the great tribulation* last?**

Other than revealing that those days will be *cut short*, Jesus does not say how long this *great tribulation* will be. However, the prophet Daniel and the apocalyptic vision of John both suggest in various ways that the number of those days will be about three and a half years.

“I heard the man dressed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, as he raised his right hand and his left toward heaven, and swore by Him who lives forever that it would be for a time, times, and half a time [three and a half years]; and as soon as they finish shattering the power of the holy people, all these events will be completed”  
(Daniel 12:7)

“From the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished and the abomination of desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days [one month longer than three and a half years]. How blessed is he who keeps waiting and attains to the 1,335 days!”  
(Daniel 12:11-12)

We can note that the time of the verses in Daniel 12:11-12 varies from 1,260 days, which is three and a half years, adding thirty days and making the total time 1,290 days. Then an additional forty five days is added, making 1,335 days. This would indicate that there will be substantive events in the thirty days after the 1,260 days, and the forty five days after 1,290 days. For those who might be dwelling during that time period, it seems it will be important for them to recognize this, and continue to endure.

Using a thirty-day lunar month, which the Jews used, 1,260 days is three and a half years. What follows is a number of verses that allude to a period that is roughly three and a half years.

“Leave out the court which is outside the temple and do not measure it, for it has been given to the nations; and they will tread underfoot the holy city for forty-two months [three and a half years].”  
(Revelation 11:2)

“And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for twelve hundred and sixty days [three and a half years], clothed in sackcloth.”  
(Revelation 11:3)

“Then the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days [three and a half years].”  
(Revelation 12:6)

“But the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, so that she could fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time [three and

a half years), from the presence of the serpent.”  
(Revelation 12:14)

“There was given to him a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies, and authority to act for forty-two months [three and a half years] was given to him.”  
(Revelation 13:5)

All the time spans in the verses above are the same length of time, at three and a half years. All describe a time when evil will be unleashed, the people of God will be in physical retreat, or detail when God’s two witnesses will testify amidst the turbulent environment.

*Jesus said, Behold, I have told you in advance as a way to underscore the importance of the things about the great tribulation He was describing to His disciples as He answered their second question: “What will be the sign of your coming?” (Matthew 24:3).*

*This three and a half year period Jesus calls the great tribulation is likely the second half of the seventieth week (of years, or seven years) spoken of in Daniel. This is from Daniel’s vision in Daniel 9:24-27. A time period of sixty nine weeks of years (483 years) began when a proclamation was made to rebuild Jerusalem’s wall, which was destroyed by the Babylonian invasion in 586 BC (Daniel 9:25). The 483 year “clock” stopped when Jesus was rejected (Daniel 9:26). So the seventy week “clock” was stopped at sixty nine weeks (of years). It will start again upon the signing of a treaty between Israel and the beast, possibly a treaty that allows Israel to rebuild its temple. At the end of the seven year period, The Jewish people will be fully restored. During the middle of that seven year time, the great tribulation will commence, a period of three and a half years.*

Daniel’s seventy week prophecy proclaims that at the end of the seventy weeks (of years, or 490 years) the following events will be completed for the Jewish people and Jerusalem:

“to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy place.”  
(Daniel 9:24)

This string of descriptors indicates that at the end of the seventy weeks (of years, 490 years in total) righteousness will be restored to the Jewish people, all prophecies concerning Israel will be fulfilled, and there will begin a time when sin will no longer reign on the earth.

As of this writing (in 2022) it seems most likely the seventy weeks “clock” is still on pause. The clock will begin again when a world leader (who will turn out to be the antichrist, a fact which might not initially be apparent) signs a treaty with Israel for “one week” (seven years). But “in the middle of the week (three and a half years) he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction...” (Daniel 9:27).

This appears to be the “abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet” event Jesus speaks of in answering the three questions posed by the disciples (Matthew

24:15), and it occurs in the “middle of the week” that is the seventieth week (of years). That means the remaining three and a half years of the seventieth week (of years, seven years) is what Jesus calls the *great tribulation*.

It appears it will be some time after this 1,260 day period of tribulation that Jesus will return to the earth. It is intriguing that Daniel 12:11 says,

“From the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished and the abomination of desolation is set up, *there will be 1,290 days.*”  
(Daniel 12:11)

Here Daniel added an extra thirty days to the 1,260 days that represent three and a half years of the *great tribulation*.

Then the angel speaking to Daniel adds:

“How blessed is he who keeps waiting and attains to the 1,335 days!”  
(Daniel 12:11-12)

Perhaps there is a 45 day period where the events of Jesus’s return to earth transpires, and He begins to restore all things implied in this intriguing clue regarding a blessed time of 1,335 days. It seems perhaps that during those forty five days, there will be an additional time of testing, with an additional opportunity for blessing for those who remain faithful during that period.

*Jesus then reminded the disciples about not being deceived by the false prophets and fake messiahs who will appear during this time of duress. This was the third time He said something like this during His conversation with His disciples on the Mount of Olives (Matthew 24:5; 24:11):*

*So if they say to you, ‘Behold, He is in the wilderness,’ do not go out, or, ‘Behold, He is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe them.*

Understandably, during *a time* of such duress, *a time which has not occurred from the beginning of the world until now*, there would be a great yearning for deliverance. And apparently many will come to the Jewish nation claiming to be their deliverer. But Jesus warned not to believe them.

Perhaps the main reason Jesus warned His disciples to be ready but to also ignore reports of His return was because there would be no need for them or anyone to investigate.

Unlike His first coming (John 1:11), there will be no guessing as to who Jesus is. When *He* returns, everyone will know He is God.

Jesus said this about His return: *For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.* The term Son of Man is Jesus’s way of referring to Himself as the Messiah. It was a Messianic term from Daniel 7:13-14. The

expression about when *lightning flashes from* one end of the sky to the other suggests that everyone sees it. It will be sudden and unmissable. Everyone will know it has happened. When Jesus returns, everyone will know. And no follow-up investigation or speculations will be required.

Then Jesus said something that seems curious. *Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather*. This is a grisly example of cause and effect. It could apply to various aspects of this passage, as a way to emphasize that all actions will eventually have their just due. It also could reference the carnage that will be associated with Jesus's return when *He* defeats the armies gathered against Israel (Revelation 19:11-21).

The prophet Zechariah described this horrific scene this way:

“Now this will be the plague with which the Lord will strike all the peoples who have gone to war against Jerusalem; their flesh will rot while they stand on their feet, and their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongue will rot in their mouth. It will come about in that day that a great panic from the Lord will fall on them; and they will seize one another's hand, and the hand of one will be lifted against the hand of another.”  
(Zechariah 14:12-13)

Everyone in the world will either receive Jesus as the Messiah by faith, as *He* first came humbly on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9) or they will run from Him in terror as He comes to them on His war horse (Zechariah 14:3; Revelation 19:11).

The ultimate answer Jesus gave His disciples regarding their question about the sign of His return was that they would not need one. Nevertheless, Jesus mentioned two precursors to His coming: the Abomination of Desolation described in Daniel (Matthew 24:15); and the *Great Tribulation* which follows (Matthew 24:21). *He* would mention one additional precursor to His return: the darkening of the sky (Matthew 24:29-30) as *He* continued answering this question about the sign of His coming.

This third precursor is discussed in the next section.

## **Biblical Text**

**<sup>21</sup> For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. <sup>22</sup> Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. <sup>23</sup> Then if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here is the Christ,’ or ‘There *He is*,’ do not believe *him*. <sup>24</sup> For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. <sup>25</sup> Behold, I have told you in advance. <sup>26</sup> So if they say to you, ‘Behold, He is in the wilderness,’ do not go out, *or*, ‘Behold, He is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe *them*. <sup>27</sup> For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be. <sup>28</sup> Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.**