

The Olivet Discourse Part 1 - the Jewish Remnant

by C.H. Mackintosh

The Olivet Discourse is a prophetic discourse that focuses on the destiny of the Jewish remnant, the history of Christendom, and the judgment of the nations, with a specific emphasis on the period between the rapture and the appearing of the Son of Man.

Scripture: Matthew 24:15

Topics: "Eschatology", "Israel's Restoration"

Description

C.H. Mackintosh delves into the profound and comprehensive discourse in Matthew 24:1-44, focusing on the destiny of the Jewish remnant, the history of Christendom, and the judgment of the nations. The passage emphasizes the Jewish standpoint, surrounded by Jewish circumstances and influences, distinct from the Church of God. Jesus' departure from the temple symbolizes the rejection of the Messiah by the apostate nation of Israel, leading to darkness, desolation, and ruin in Israel's history. The discourse on the mount of Olives addresses a remnant of godly souls who clung to the hope of redemption and restoration for Israel, distinct from the Church, and anticipates the great tribulation before final deliverance.

Transcript

Matthew 24:1-44.

Matthew 24:1-44 forms a part of one of the most profound and comprehensive discourses that ever fell on human ears - a discourse which takes in, in its marvelous sweep, the destiny of the Jewish remnant; the history of Christendom; and the judgment of the nations. Let us first look at the Jewish remnant.

In order to understand Matthew 24:1-44, we need to place ourselves at the standpoint of those whom our Lord was addressing at the moment. If we attempt to import into this discourse the light which shines in the Epistle to the Ephesians, we shall only involve our minds in confusion, and miss the solemn teaching of the passage which now lies open before us. We shall find nothing about the Church of God, the body of Christ, here. The teaching of our Lord is divinely perfect, and hence we cannot, for a moment, imagine anything premature there-in. But it would be premature to have introduced a subject which, as yet, was hid in God. The great truth of the Church could not be unfolded until Christ, being cut off as the Messiah, had taken His place at the right hand of God, and sent down the Holy Ghost, to form by His presence the one body, composed of Jew and Gentile.

Of this we hear nothing in Matthew 24. We are entirely on Jewish ground, surrounded by Jewish circumstances and influences. The scenery and the allusions are all purely Jewish. To attempt to apply the passage to the Church would be to miss completely our Lord's object, and to falsify the real position of the Church of God. The more closely we examine the Scripture, the more clearly we shall see that the persons addressed occupy a Jewish standpoint, and are on Jewish ground, whether we think of those very persons whom our Lord was then addressing, or those who shall occupy the self-same ground at the close, when the Church shall have left the scene altogether.

At the close of Matthew 23, our Lord sums up His appeal to the leaders of the Jewish nation with these words of awful solemnity: "and ye, fill up the measure of your fathers. Serpents, offspring of vipers! how should ye escape the judgment of hell? Therefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes; and some of them ye will kill and crucify, and some of them ye will scourge in your synagogues, and will persecute from city to city; so that all the righteous blood shed upon the earth should come upon you, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those that are sent unto her, how often would I have gathered thy children as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate; for I say unto you, Ye shall in no wise see me henceforth until ye say, Blessed be He that comes in the name of the Lord" (verses 32-39).

Thus closes Messiah's testimony to the apostate nation of Israel. Every effort that love, even divine love, could put forth had been tried, and tried in vain. Prophets had been sent, and stoned; messenger after messenger had gone and pleaded, and reasoned, and warned, and entreated; but to no purpose. Their mighty words had fallen upon deaf ears and hardened hearts. The only return made to all these messengers was shameful handling, stoning, and death.

At length, the Son Himself was sent, and sent with this touching utterance: "It may be they will reverence My Son, when they see Him". Did they? Alas! no. When they saw Him, there was no beauty that they should desire Him. The daughter of Zion had no heart for her King. The vineyard was under the control of wicked husbandmen. "The husbandmen said among themselves, This is the heir, come, let us kill Him, that the inheritance may be ours".

Thus much as to Israel's moral condition, in view of which our Lord spoke those unusually awful words quoted above; then "He went forth and went away from the temple". How reluctant He was to do this we know; for, blessed be His name, whenever He leaves a place of mercy or enters a place of judgment, He moves with a slow and measured pace. Witness the departure of the glory, in the opening chapters of Ezekiel. "And the glory of Jehovah departed from over the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim. And the cherubim lifted up their wings, and mounted up from the earth in my sight, when they went out; and the wheels were beside them; and they stood at the door of the east gate of Jehovah's house; and the glory of the God of Israel was over them above" (chapter 10:18-19). "And the cherubim lifted up their wings, and the wheels were beside them; and the glory of the God of Israel was over them above. And the glory of Jehovah went up from the midst of the city, and stood upon the mountain which is on the east side of the city" (chapter 11:22-23).

Thus, with slow and measured pace, the glory of the God of Israel departed from the house at Jerusalem. Jehovah lingered near the spot, reluctant to depart¹. He had come, with loving alacrity, with His whole heart and His whole soul, to dwell in the midst of His people, to find a home in the very bosom of His

assembly; but He was forced away by their sins and iniquities. He would fain have remained, but it was impossible; yet by the very mode of His departure, He proved how unwilling He was to go.

Nor was it otherwise with Jehovah Messiah, in Matthew 23. Witness His touching words, "How often would I have gathered thy children as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" Here lay the deep secret "I would". This was the heart of God. "Ye would not". This was the heart of Israel. He, too, like the glory in the days of Ezekiel, was forced away; but not, blessed be His name, without dropping a word which forms the precious basis of hope as to the brighter days to come, when the glory shall return, and the daughter of Zion shall welcome her King with joyful accents. "Blessed be He that comes in the name of the Lord".

But until that bright day dawn, darkness, desolation, and ruin sum up Israel's history. The very thing which the leaders sought, by the rejection of Christ, to avert, came upon them, in stern and awful reality. "The Romans shall come, and take away both our place and nation". How literally, how solemnly this was fulfilled!

1 Contrast with this reluctant departure His ready entrance into the tabernacle in Exodus 20; and into the temple, 2 Chronicles 7:1. No sooner was the habitation ready for Him, than down He came to occupy it, and fill it with His glory. He was as quick to enter as He was slow to depart. And not only so, but ere the book of Ezekiel closes, we see the glory coming back again; and "Jehovah Shammah" stands engraved in everlasting characters upon the gates of the beloved city. Nothing changes God's affection. Whom He loves, and as He loves, He loves to the end. "The same yesterday, to-day, and forever".

Alas! their place and their nation were gone already, and the significant movement of Jesus, in Matthew 24:1, was but the passing sentence, and writing desolation upon the whole Jewish system. "Jesus went out and departed from the temple". The case was hopeless. All must be given up. A long period of darkness and dreariness must pass over the nation - a period which shall culminate in that "great tribulation" which must precede the hour of final deliverance.

But, as in the days of Ezekiel, there were those who sighed and cried over the sins and sorrows of the nation, so in the days of Matthew 24, there was a remnant of godly souls who attached themselves to the rejected Messiah, and who cherished the fond hope of redemption and restoration for Israel. Very dim indeed were their perceptions, and their thoughts full of confusion. Nevertheless their hearts, as touched by divine grace, beat true to the Messiah, and they were full of hope as to Israel's future.

Now, it is of the utmost importance to recognize and understand the position of this remnant, and that it is with it our Lord is occupied in His marvelous discourse on the mount of Olives. To suppose for a moment that the persons here addressed were on Christian ground would involve the abandonment of all true thoughts of what Christianity is, and the ignoring of a company whose existence is recognized throughout the Psalms, the Prophets, and various parts of the New Testament. There was, and there always is, "a remnant according to the election of grace". To quote the passages which present the history, the sorrows, the experiences, and the exercises of that remnant would demand a volume, and hence we shall not attempt it; but we are extremely desirous that the reader should seize the thought that this godly remnant is represented by the handful of disciples which gathered round our Lord on the mount of Olives. We feel persuaded that if this be not seen, the true scope, bearing, and application of this remarkable discourse must be lost.

"And Jesus went forth and went away from the temple, and his disciples came to him to point out to him the buildings of the temple. And he answering said to them, Do ye not see all these things? Verily I say to you, Not a stone shall be left here upon a stone which shall not be thrown down. And as he was sitting upon the mount of Olives the disciples came to him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be, and what is the sign of thy coming and the completion of the age?"

The disciples were, naturally, occupied with earthly and Jewish objects and expectations - the temple and its surroundings. This must be borne in mind if we would understand their question and our Lord's reply. As yet they had no thought beyond the earthly side of things. They looked for the setting up of the kingdom, the glory of the Messiah, the accomplishment of the promises made to the fathers. They had not yet fully taken in the solemn and momentous fact that the Messiah was to be "cut off and have nothing" (Daniel 9:26). True, the blessed Master had, from time to time, sought to prepare their minds for the solemn event. He had faithfully warned them in reference to the dark shadows that were to gather round His path. He had told them that the Son of Man should be delivered to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified.

But they understood Him not. Such sayings seemed dark, hard, and incomprehensible; and their hearts still fondly clung to the hope of national restoration and blessing. They longed to see the star of Jacob in the ascendant. Their minds were full of expectancy as to the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. As yet they knew nothing - how could they? - of that which was to spring out of the rejection and death of the Messiah. The Lord had spoken of building His assembly; but as to the position and privileges of that assembly, its calling, its standing, its hopes, they knew absolutely nothing. The thought of a body composed of Jew and Gentile, united by the Holy Ghost to a living and glorified Head in the heavens, had never entered - how could it have entered? - their minds. The middle wall of partition was still standing; and one of their number - the very foremost amongst them - had, long after, to be taught, with much difficulty, to take in the idea of even admitting the Gentiles into the kingdom.

All this, we repeat, must be taken into account if we would read aright our Lord's reply to the inquiry as to His coming and the end of the age. There is not a single syllable about the Church, as such, from beginning to end of that reply. Up to verse 14, He passes on to the end, giving a rapid survey of the events which should transpire among the nations. "See that no one mislead you", He says. "For many shall come in my name, saying, I am the Christ; and they shall mislead many. But ye will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that ye be not disturbed; for all these things must take place, but it is not yet the end. For nation shall rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; and there shall be famines and pestilences, and earthquakes in diverse places. But all these are the beginning of throes. Then shall they deliver you up to tribulation, and shall kill you; and ye will be hated of all the nations for my name's sake. And then will many be offended, and will deliver one another up, and hate one another; and many false prophets shall rise and shall mislead many; and because lawlessness shall prevail, the love of the most shall grow cold; but he that has endured to the end, he shall be saved. And these glad tidings of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole habitable earth, for a witness to all the nations; and then shall come the end".

Here then we have a most comprehensive sketch of the entire period from the moment in which our Lord was speaking, down to the time of the end. But the reader will need to bear in mind that there is an unnoticed interval - a parenthesis, a break - in this period, during which the great mystery of the Church is unfolded.

This interval or break is entirely passed over in this discourse, inasmuch as the time had not arrived for its development. It was as yet "hid in God", and could not be unfolded until the Messiah was finally rejected and cut off from the earth and received up into glory. The entire of this discourse would have its full and perfect accomplishment, although such a thing as the Church had never been heard of. For, let it never be forgotten, the Church forms no part of the ways of God with Israel and the earth. And as to the allusion, in verse 14, to the preaching of the gospel, we are not to suppose that it is at all the same thing as "The glad tidings of the grace of God", as preached by Paul. It is styled, "These glad tidings of the kingdom"; and, moreover, it is to be preached, not for the purpose of gathering the Church, but "for a witness to all the nations". We must not confound things which God, in His infinite wisdom, has made to differ. The Church must not be confounded with the kingdom; nor yet the gospel of the grace of God with the gospel of the kingdom. The two things are perfectly distinct; and, if we confound them, we shall understand neither the one nor the other. And, further, we would desire to press upon the reader the absolute necessity of seeing the break, parenthesis, or unnoticed interval in which the great mystery of the Church is inserted. If this be not clearly seen, Matthew 24 cannot be understood.

At verse 15, He seems to call His hearers back a little, as it were, to something very specific - something with which a Jewish believer would be familiar from the fact of Daniel's allusion to it. "When therefore ye shall see the abomination of desolation, which is spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in what is a holy place, (he that reads let him understand,) then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let not him that is on the house come down to take the things out of his house; and let not him that is in the field turn back to take his garment. ... But pray that your flight may not be in winter time nor on sabbath: for then shall there be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall be".

All this is most definite. The quotation from Daniel 12 fixes the application beyond all question. It proves that the reference is not to the siege of Jerusalem, under Titus; for we read in Daniel 12, "At that time thy people shall be delivered"; and, most clearly, they were not delivered in the days of Titus. No; the reference is to the time of the end. The scene is laid at Jerusalem. The persons addressed and contemplated are Jewish believers - the pious remnant of Israel, in the great tribulation, after the Church has left the scene. How can any imagine that the persons here instructed are viewed as on church ground? What force would there be to such in the allusion to the winter or the sabbath day?

Then, again, "If any one say unto you, Behold, here is the Christ, or here, believe it not. ... If they shall say unto you, Behold He is in the desert, go not forth: Behold He is in the secret chambers, believe it not". What possible application could such words have to persons who are instructed to wait for God's Son from Heaven, and who know that ere He returns to this earth they shall have met Him in the clouds and returned with Him to the Father's house? Could any Christian, instructed in his proper hope, be deceived by persons saying that Christ is here or there, in the desert or in the secret chambers? Impossible. Such a one is looking out for the Bridegroom to come from Heaven; and he knows that it is wholly out of the question that Christ can appear on this earth without bringing all His people with Him.

Thus, the simple truth settles everything; and all we want is to be simple in taking it in. The simplest Christian knows full well that his Lord will not appear to him like a flash of lightning, but as the bright and morning Star, and hence he understands that Matthew 24 cannot apply to the Church, though most surely the Church can study it with interest and profit, as it can all the other prophetic Scriptures; and, we may add, the interest will be all the more intense, and the profit all the deeper, in proportion as we see the true application of such Scriptures.

Limited space forbids our entering as fully as we could wish into the remaining portion of this marvelous discourse; but the more closely each sentence is examined, the more fully each circumstance is weighed, the more clearly we must see that the persons addressed are not on proper Christian ground. The entire scene is earthly and Jewish, not heavenly and Christian. There is ample instruction supplied for those who shall find themselves, by-and-by, in the position here contemplated; and nothing can be clearer than that the entire paragraph, from verse 15-42, refers to the period which shall elapse between the rapture of the saints and the appearing of the Son of Man.

Some may perhaps feel a difficulty in understanding verse 34: "This generation will not have passed away until all these things shall have taken place". But we must remember that the word "generation" is constantly used in Scripture in a moral sense. It is not to be confined to a certain number of persons actually living at the time, but takes in the race. In the passage before us it simply applies to the Jewish race; the wording leaves the question of time entirely open, so that the heart might ever be kept in readiness for the Lord's coming. There is nothing in Scripture to interfere with the constant expectation of that grand event. On the contrary, every parable, every figure, every allusion is so worded as to warrant each one to look for the Lord's return in his own lifetime, and yet to leave margin for the elongation of the time according to the long-suffering grace of a Savior God.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ch-mackintosh/the-olivet-discourse-part-1-the-jewish-remnant/>

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