

## Aim of lesson

To study what Jesus said about the future in order to build up a picture of what life is likely to be like when he returns.

## Bible background

Matthew 24; Luke 21

## Preparation required

Read through the notes so that you are familiar with the history around AD 70 and which parts of the prophecy have happened in part and which parts we ought to watch out for. You may like to bring some highlighting pens for the young people to use.

## Suggested outline of lesson

Although Jesus talked often about the kingdom and sometimes about his second coming, he seldom gave any detail about timing. His disciples were naturally curious. At the time, they did not appreciate that there would be a long absence, and they were keen to know when Jesus would be taking over, partly because they themselves had a vested interest. They asked Jesus, and by way of answer he gave the Olivet Prophecy, sometimes called the Little Apocalypse.

The main reports of the prophecy appear in Matthew 24 and Luke 21. It will be useful to have some of the class turn up one passage and some the other, so that each can follow in their own text and contribute detail, helping build up a more complete picture.

## The Circumstances

A visit to the Temple prompted the question. Jesus and the 12 were on a pilgrimage to the holy city, and they were marvelling at the magnificence of the Temple buildings, at that time in their 46<sup>th</sup> year of construction and nearing completion. (Matthew 24:1, Luke 21:5) Jesus' comment was that, glorious though it might be, the Temple would be totally destroyed.

Naturally, the disciples were stunned. This did not fit in with Jesus as conquering liberator. Later, on the Mount of Olives (hence the name given to the prophecy) the disciples asked two questions, though they may not have realised how separate they were. This fact that there were two should be emphasised.

1. When will the Temple be destroyed?
2. What signs will there be of Christ's coming and of the end of the world?

Jesus answers both questions, but it is by no means straightforward to sort out the two. There is no point at which we can say that he has finished the first and will now be dealing with the second. The class can be asked to try to find such a point, and their suggestions can be explored to see how they fit. This exercise may take up most of the lesson and will help the class become familiar with the shape of the prophecy.

The answer given to the first question was not specific, but there were sufficient hints to enable listeners and readers to escape the horrors of the cruel siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans under Titus in 70 AD. One account has it that Christians heeded these words of their Lord and fled Jerusalem to Pella when they saw the signs coming to pass in 68 AD, thereby escaping the worst atrocities of that dreadful time.

One of the Old Testament tests for a prophet was whether his prophecy came true. This was not much help to the prophet's contemporaries if the prophecy took 1000 years to be fulfilled. Perhaps for this reason, many OT prophecies had an initial, early (and probably partial) fulfilment as well as a long term application. The class may be able to think of some examples (David's house-building son, Isaiah's child, Jeremiah's return of the Jews etc.) The Olivet prophecy may well include some such "dual fulfilment" elements.

Matt 24	Mark 13	Luke 21	Q1?	Q2?	Notes
4-5	5-6	8	✓	✓	False Christs - this could apply to both events, and has in a small way been experienced in the 20 <sup>th</sup> century. Simon (Acts 8:9) may have been a first century example. Have the class come across any examples?
6-8	7-8	9-11	✓	✓	Rumours of wars, the end - again, possible dual application, but certainly with latter day implications.
9-12	9	12-13	✓	✓	Persecution - This certainly came true in 70 AD, and seems likely to apply also to the last days - Revelation 13:7-8, for example.
13	10-13	14-19	✓	✓	Encouragement in tribulation.
14	(10)		✓	✓	World-wide preaching - if "in all the world" is to be understood in a literal and global sense, this can apply only to the last days. However, in the more limited parochial sense sometimes used in prophecy (e.g. Daniel 2) it was true also in 70 AD.
15	14	20	✓	✓	<p>Abomination of desolation - this probably relates to the erection of an image of Jupiter in the Temple. Some think it now refers to the Al Aqba Mosque.</p> <p>If the young people are keen on prophecy they may be interested to look at the relevant passages in Daniel, as another example of repeated patterns of prophecy.</p> <p>Daniel 11:31. The chapter describes the events that would follow the death of Alexander the Great. In BC 168 Antiochus Epiphanes defiled the temple in Jerusalem by building a pagan altar and offering swine flesh on it. Daniel 8:13-14 probably refers to the same events.</p> <p>Daniel 9:27. The prophecy of 70 weeks speaks of Messiah (Anointed one in modern versions) the Prince and is usually understood to depict the time beginning with the decree of Artaxerxes in 457 BC - Ezra 7:11-26. In this context the 'abomination that causes desolation' would refer, initially at least, to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Note that whereas Matthew and Mark speak of the 'the abomination of desolation', the parallel passage in Luke refers to Jerusalem being surrounded by armies.</p> <p>Daniel 12:11. Since v2 refers to resurrection and judgment we can be sure the chapter is about the last days.</p>
16-20	14-18	21-24	✓	✓	Flee to the mountains - as mentioned above, many Christians took this warning.

From this point, what follows applies increasingly only at the time of the return of Christ.

Matt 24	Mark 13	Luke 21	Q1?	Q2?	Notes
21-22	19-20		✗	✓	Great tribulation - The scale of devastation described may transcend 70 A.D. which, though dreadful for those involved in the mass crucifixions and other atrocities, was nevertheless limited to the numbers then inhabiting the region, and has almost certainly been exceeded in our own century with the development of the dreadful machines of mass destruction and mechanised warfare deployed against civilians in recent times. What is described exceeds the horrors of anything experienced in our time. In its fullest application, this can only refer to the last days, and tells of the most awful time, yet to come.

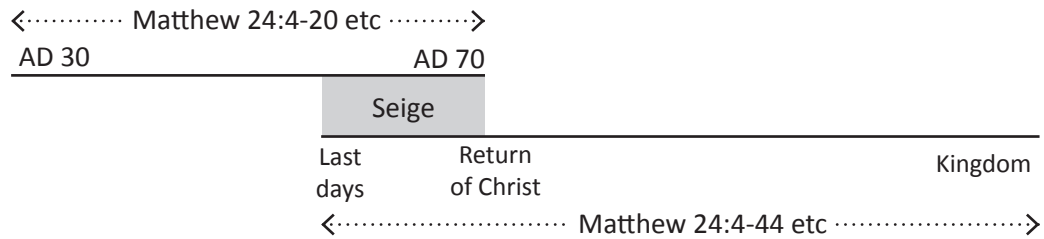
Matt 24	Mark 13	Luke 21	Q1?	Q2?	Notes
23-28	21-23		✘	✓	False Christs again - signs and wonders are not of themselves indicators of veracity. The Lord is probably saying that the signs will be a visible warning of the dying of the age, like vultures hovering over a dying animal.
29	24-25	25-26	✘	✓	Signs in the sun, moon and stars. This is often interpreted as relating to political powers rather than to literal heavens, but whether we take it literally or not, these verses no doubt had a local application in AD 70 and will apply again at the return of Christ. (Halley's Comet appeared around 65 AD).
30	26	27-28	✘	✓	The coming of the Son of Man - there is no mistaking that this applies solely to the last days
31	27		✘	✓	Gather together his elect - This certainly describes the coming of the Lord. The gathering may be linked with a number of other passages (I Thessalonians 4 "to meet him in the air"; Isaiah 49:18 etc.) Some brethren anticipate a second exodus, with a gathering to Sinai and a second entry to the promised land.
32-33	28-29	29-31	✘	✓	The parable of the fig tree - at its simplest level, this tells that natural signs portend natural events and Jesus' signs will portend events of the kingdom of God. However, the reference to the flourishing of the fig tree (and all the trees - Luke 21:29) is an unmistakable reference to the profusion of nations coming to independent statehood. The fig tree itself is probably Israel, but do not make this assumption too easily as the OT more often presents Israel as a vine
34-35	30-31	32-33	✘	✓	This generation shall not pass. If Jesus was talking at this stage about the time of the end, he cannot be referring to the generation of his first hearers. One suggestion is that he is talking of the generation which sees the fig tree (Israel) restored to nationhood; that is, our own generation. Another relies on the translation of the Greek word rendered "generation" and points out that it may alternatively be "nation", again Israel (compare Mark 8:12; 13:30; Luke 11:29)
36-41	32-34	34-35	✘	✓	That day and hour. Jesus plainly teaches that the signs are to enable his people to keep themselves prepared, not to work out precise dates. Ask the class whether they would think it a good thing to know in advance the precise timing of the Lord's coming.
					The days of Noah - Ask the class to identify similarities between Noah's time when people ignored the signs and carried on with everyday activities, and our own time. Can this apply also to the 70 AD destruction of Jerusalem?
42-44	35-37	36	✘	✓	Watch. Because we do not know when Christ will come, and the one certain thing is that he will appear when most are not expecting him, the only way is to be perpetually ready.

It may be helpful, as they go through the prophecy, for the young people to highlight key phrases in one or more of the gospel records so that they are picking out the main points of each element.

Encourage them to think about the extent to which the words have already been fulfilled.

You may need to remind them that as there seem to be passages that have not happened yet, it may suggest that the coming of Christ is some way away (as it may be), but these things could happen extraordinarily quickly.

In summary, it may be that a simple diagram summarises the prophecy:



## Relevance to our lives

We are clearly told by Jesus to watch. This does not mean work out when Jesus is going to return but keep our eyes open so that we are prepared at all times.

## Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to understand what it means to watch and try to do it. Help us not to be scared of the future but know that if we put our trust in you, you will keep us close to you. Amen.

## Other suggestions for activities

Ask the young people to look for something in the newspapers during the coming week that might be indications of the imminence of Jesus' return. It might be events in the Middle East, decline in moral standards, disregard of God's word, etc.