

The Coming of the Son of Man

Introduction

This morning, we're going to come back to Daniel 7 one last time and consider, again, the "coming" of the one like a son of man (13-14), and what is the relationship between His "coming" and the destruction of Jerusalem by that "little horn" (who I would understand to be the Roman general Titus) in 70 A.D. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. was a historical event that got very little, if any, attention in our high school or college history books. Even many Christians today don't really know much, if anything, about it. "Seventy A.D." can feel to us like no more than a passing footnote of history. But, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

For one thousand years the temple in Jerusalem had stood at the very center of Israel's covenant relationship with God. It was the temple worship that stood at the heart of true religion versus idolatry. A pilgrimage to the temple for a faithful Israelite was the greatest joy of his life (cf. Ps. 84). Because the temple was situated in Jerusalem and because God's anointed king ruled from Jerusalem, Jerusalem was truly "the city of the great King," "the joy of all the earth" (Ps. 48). Jerusalem, with its temple and throne, represented the whole land – all of God's covenant people together. It's in light of these things that we can feel the full weight of the *very last* words that we read in our Old Testaments:

I. Malachi 4:5–6 — Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet *before* the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, or else I will come [NIV; HCSB; NLT; cf. Verhoef] and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction [cf. Lev. 27:29; Deut. 7:26; Josh. 6:17-18; 7:1, 11-15; 1 Sam. 15:21; 1 Kings 20:42; Isa. 34:5; 43:28].

The Lord was not saying that one day Elijah would literally return from heaven to earth as a prophet in Israel, but rather that before the great and awesome day of the Lord came a prophet would come to the Old Covenant people in the spirit and power of Elijah and call them one last time to repentance. When the angel, Gabriel, announced to Zechariah the birth of John the Baptist, he quoted these verses from Malachi:

□ Luke 1:16–17 — He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

The ministry of John the Baptist was not a failure. It was through his preaching that a people *was* made ready for the coming of the Lord – that a people *was* prepared for the arrival of Jesus, their Messiah. And yet the people prepared and made ready were only an elect and chosen remnant (cf. Rom. 9:27-29; 11:1-10). The rest of the people continued in disobedience and ultimately rejected not only Elijah (John the Baptist), but even their own long-awaited Messiah. In answer to a question the disciples asked, Jesus explained:

- Matthew 17:11–13 — “Elijah does come, **and he will restore all things**. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

On the one hand, the ministry of John the Baptist was a success; a people was, indeed, made ready for the Lord – the true and spiritual remnant of Israel (the disciples among them). But was this enough for the Israelite nation as a whole to be spared? Was this enough to hold off that threatened decree of utter destruction in Malachi chapter four? On the day of Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem we read that...

II. Luke 19:41–44 (cf. 23:27–31) — When he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

After this, we’re told that Jesus went into the temple, “and when He had looked around at everything, as it was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve” (Mk. 11:11).

- Mark 11:12–14 (cf. Lk. 13:6–9) — On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.”

When they had entered Jerusalem again, Jesus drove those who bought and sold and the money-changers out of the temple and rebuked the people for turning God’s house into a den of robbers (cf. Mk. 11:15–19). It was the next morning, after this “cleansing” of the temple, as they were returning again to Jerusalem that the disciples saw the fig tree withered away to its roots (cf. Mk. 11:20–21). Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree symbolized the curse that was about to fall on Israel and on Israel’s defiled temple. God had called His covenant people to bring forth the fruits of righteousness, but they had produced only leaves. Therefore, they were cursed and would never again—*as a covenant nation*—bring forth fruit. In that last week before His crucifixion, Jesus told this parable to the people:

III. Luke 20:9–16; Mat. 21:43 — A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, “What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.” But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, “This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.” And they threw him out of the vineyard and

killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? **He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others... Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.**

The first tenants of the vineyard were the people of Israel under the Old Covenant, but now those tenants would be utterly destroyed and the vineyard taken away from them and given to a people—to a true Israel composed not only of the spiritual remnant of the Jews, but also of believing Gentiles (cf. Gal. 6:12-16)—who would bring forth fruit under a New Covenant. Do you see how the kingdom being given to the Israel of the New Covenant is closely connected with the destruction of the previous Israel of the Old Covenant? When the Israel of the Old Covenant is destroyed, *then* the vineyard (kingdom) will truly be seen to belong to the new Israel of the New Covenant, composed not only of Jews but also of Gentiles.

Jesus told another parable:

IV. Matthew 22:1–10 — The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, “Tell those who are invited, ‘See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.’” But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, “The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.” And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Those who were first invited to the wedding feast were the Old Covenant people of Israel; but when they paid no attention and even killed the messengers who were sent to them—including the Messiah Himself—they exchanged the kingdom for the wrath of God. God will send his troops and destroy those murderers and burn their city, and then He will send his servants out to invite to the wedding feast as many as they find—including not just the believing remnant of the Jews, but even Gentiles from every nation—so that His wedding hall will be filled with guests. Once again, do you see how the gathering together of the New Covenant Israel in the king’s wedding hall is closely connected with the destruction of the Old Covenant Israel? When the city of Old Covenant Israel is burned and the people in that city killed, this will be the sign of that new work of gathering into the wedding hall a new Israel formed around a New Covenant.¹

In Matthew chapter 23, after a long list of woes on the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus concluded:

¹ After the ascension of Jesus and before the destruction of Jerusalem, there was still a specifically Jewish mission (clearly distinguished from the Gentile mission; Acts 2:40; 3:26; 13:46; Rom. 1:16; 2:9-10; Gal. 2:7-8; 1 Thess. 2:15-16). It would seem that after the destruction of Jerusalem, there would no longer have been any need for this demarcation between the Jewish and Gentile missions.

V. Matthew 23:33–38 — How are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate.

All of the righteous blood that had ever been shed in all the previous generations of the world, including even the blood of Abel, would come, Jesus said, on “*this* generation.” This can’t be just about a physical destruction. Not only would Jerusalem and the temple be destroyed and left desolate, but the people themselves would be utterly and finally cut off from the covenant. This is what Jesus means when he says that their house will be left to them desolate. Only a remnant chosen by God’s sovereign grace would be saved out of that Old Covenant people – the first fruits of a new covenant people—a new Israel—composed of both Jews and Gentiles in one body (cf. Acts 2:40-41).

Are you seeing how the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was a visible marker of the end of the old era and the beginning of the new. The destruction of Jerusalem marked the changing of an age – the end of one epoch in God’s redemptive plan and the beginning of another. Yes, the Old Covenant had come to its end with the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the beginning of the mission to the Gentiles, but it was not fully seen to have come to its end until the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and God’s judgment poured out upon the Old Covenant people. But now let’s look again at what Jesus says in Matthew 23:

□ Matthew 23:34–35 — Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and **some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town**, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth.

Who are these “prophets and wise men and scribes” who will be flogged in the synagogues and persecuted from town to town even in that generation of Jesus’ day? Well, they certainly included Jesus’ own disciples. Jesus had already said to them in Matthew chapter ten:

VI. Matthew 10:16–17, 23 — Behold, **I am sending you out** as sheep in the midst of wolves... Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts **and flog you in their synagogues...** **When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next**, for truly, I say **to you**, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel **before the Son of Man comes**.

Do you recognize the language here from Daniel chapter seven? In Daniel 7, the coming of the Son of Man was a *coming to the Ancient of Days* to be invested with royal authority and power and to receive an everlasting kingdom. We saw a few weeks ago that this vision was fulfilled “already” when the resurrected Jesus ascended into heaven and was enthroned at the right hand

of God. In other words, the Son of Man—Jesus—has already “*come*” on the clouds of heaven. Jesus Himself said to His disciples, “You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” At the very least Jesus was saying this: “You will not have finished announcing the good news of the kingdom to all Israel (cf. Mat. 10:5-7) before the Son of Man has received that kingdom and sat down enthroned at the right hand of God. But is it possible that He’s saying more?

The royal authority of Jesus *in heaven*—or we could say the “*coming*” of Jesus to the Ancient of Days *in heaven*—was made **visible** on earth in different ways. It was made visible on earth in His pouring out of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

□ Acts 2:33, 36 — Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are *seeing* and *hearing*... Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

The coming of the Son of Man was (and still is) made visible on earth in the building of the church and the spread of the Gospel to all the nations.

□ Matthew 28:18–20 (cf. Mat. 16:18) — Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go *therefore* and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, *I am with you always*, to the end of the age.”

The coming of the Son of Man to the Ancient of Days was also made visible on earth in the destruction of Jerusalem as God’s just retribution on those who had killed His only Son (cf. Mat. 27:25). Could the “coming” of the Son of Man here in Matthew 10 be a reference to the “making *visible*” of that coming in one or more of these specific events? You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man “comes” as evidenced and revealed in the destruction of Jerusalem. You will not have finished your mission to all the towns of Israel before that mission is cut short by the coming of the Son of Man and the subsequent wrath of God and of the Lamb poured out on Jerusalem (cf. Rev. 6:16; 14:10). Whatever the case may be, Jesus taught that in some very real sense the coming of the Son of Man would take place before that generation of His own day had passed from the scene (“You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes...”) We see this also in Matthew chapter 16:

VII. Matthew 16:27–28 — For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done [“not yet”]. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom [“already”].

On the one hand, the ultimate “making *visible*” of the coming of the Son of Man to the Ancient of Days to receive royal power and authority is His own future bodily return and “coming” to this earth. On the other hand, when Jesus says “there are some standing here who will not taste

death” that’s another way of saying: “Within this generation the Son of Man will come in His kingdom; even some of you who are standing here today will live to see *with your own eyes* the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” How would they see the Son of Man *coming* in His kingdom? The royal authority of Jesus *in heaven*—or we could say the “*coming*” of Jesus to the Ancient of Days *in heaven*—would be manifested and *made visible on earth* by His pouring out of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (which, as Peter emphasized to the people, “*you yourselves are seeing and hearing*”); in the building of the church and the spread of the Gospel to all the nations, and in the destruction of Jerusalem as God’s just retribution on those who had killed His only Son. It’s in this same light that we can make sense of Jesus’ words to the High Priest in Matthew 26:

VIII. Matthew 26:64 — I tell you, *from now on* you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.

You can hear the clear undertone of threat and warning in these words, and so it seems that we’re especially meant to think, here, of the coming of the Son of Man made visible in the wrath of God poured out on Jerusalem.

But what about that final, ultimate “making visible” of the coming of the Son of man to the Ancient of Days in His own future bodily return and “coming” to this earth? Immediately after Jesus had told the people that their house was left to them desolate, we read that “Jesus left the temple and was going away, when His disciples came to point out to Him the buildings of the temple.”

IX. Matthew 24:2–3 — But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things [the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple] be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

In the mind of the disciples, the destruction of the temple must be closely connected with the final appearing of Jesus at the end of the age; and as we’ll see, the disciples were both right – *and* wrong. In verses 4-14 Jesus tells His disciples about the “birth pains” that will *precede* the “great tribulation and the destruction of Jerusalem in 67-70 A.D. In verse 6 He says, “See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.” In verse 8 He says, “All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.” And then, finally, when we get to verse 14 we read:

□ Matthew 24:14 — And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

In verse 34, Jesus is explicitly clear:

□ Matthew 24:34 — Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

And so we know that by the time of Titus' invasion of Israel and the beginning of the "great tribulation," not only had all of these "birth pains" been fulfilled, but the Gospel had also already spread throughout all the world (Col. 1:5-6, 23) and been made known to all nations (Rom. 16:25-26). And it was after this had happened, Jesus said, that "the end" would finally come. So it's in verses 15-28 that Jesus transitions to the "great tribulation" itself and that final sign of the end when His disciples would see with their own eyes the "abomination of desolation" standing in the holy place (24:15; "let the reader understand"; cf. Luke 21:20). The horrors of that tribulation, Jesus said, would be beyond description (cf. Mat. 24:21-22, 28), and the Jewish historian Josephus confirms this very graphically. It was then that the city of Jerusalem would finally fall and the temple be destroyed, and all the people slaughtered and led captive among the nations. And now let's remember again what Jesus says to His disciples in verses 32-34:

X. Matthew 24:32-34 — From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, **when you see all these things**, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, **this generation will not pass away until all these things take place**... But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

With the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D. the days of imminence would arrive – and yet the days of imminence would not just be empty, pointless days. After the city of Old Covenant Israel was burned and destroyed, these days of imminence are the days when the new Israel formed around a New Covenant is being gathered into the wedding hall. After the Israel of the Old Covenant was destroyed, these days of imminence are the days when the new Israel of the New Covenant—composed of both Jews and Gentiles—is producing fruit in God's vineyard. The coming of Christ is now imminent (at any time), but that doesn't mean there's nothing happening or that these days have no real meaning or purpose. To the contrary! Jesus goes on in chapters 24 and 25 to imply that these days of imminence—when He is "near" and "at the very gates"—will also be characterized by "delay." He tells a parable in which a wicked servant says to himself, "My master is delayed" (24:48), and then another one in which the bridegroom is "delayed" (25:5) and then another one in which a man is away even for "a long time" on a journey (25:14-19). And again, the point of these parables is that it's *during* these days of imminence *and* delay that a new Israel is being called out from the world and formed around a New Covenant and called to be faithful stewards of the vineyard by bringing forth fruit for God. What a wonderful thing it is to live in these days of imminence *and* delay. What a high privilege and responsibility it is to live in these days of imminence *and* delay.

Remember how in the mind of the disciples, the destruction of the temple was closely connected with the final appearing of Jesus at the end of the age. On the one hand, we can see how in the light of this period of "delay" they were wrong. The destruction of the temple and Christ's return to this earth have now been separated by 2000 years of "delay." It's in light of this fact that when it comes to Christ's return at His second coming, Mark can record Jesus saying this:

XI. Mark 13:24, 26 — But *in those days, after* that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light... And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

Notice how vague and imprecise the language is: “*In those days, after* that tribulation.” In other words, “sometime after that tribulation—sometime in the very midst of those days of imminence and delay, the Son of Man will return, though no one knows the day or the hour” (cf. Mk. 13:32). What Luke records Jesus as saying, however, is even more clear than what He says in Mark:

XII. Luke 21:23–25, 27 — There will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword **and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled** [after which Christ will return and the Jerusalem that is above—the Jerusalem of which we all are citizens—will come down out of heaven from God; cf. Gal. 4:25-26; Rev. 3:12; 21:2-3, 9-14]. And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars... And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

Luke is clear that after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, these days of imminence will also be days of delay – “until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” So, then, why does Matthew, in his parallel passage, record Jesus as saying this:

XIII. Matthew 24:29–31 — **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. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

How can Matthew have Jesus saying “immediately after the tribulation of those days” when both Mark and Luke (in the parallel passages) seem to rule this out and when even in Matthew Jesus characterizes the days *in between* the destruction of Jerusalem and the second coming as days of imminence and delay? Matthew has Jesus saying: “Immediately after the tribulation *of those days*.” On the one hand, all the birth pains of the tribulation and even the “great tribulation” itself were completely fulfilled before that first generation of Jesus’ disciples passed away (cf. 24:34). And yet here Jesus seems to be extending the tribulation of “*those days*” even into the following days—even into *these* days of imminence and delay (cf. “time, times, and half a time”). The “Great Tribulation” might be over, but these days in which we’re still living are still days of tribulation (cf. Jn. 16:33; Rev. 1:9) – of “wars and rumors of wars” (24:6), of famines and earthquakes in various places (24:7), of Jesus’ followers being delivered up to tribulation and put to death and hated by all nations for His name’s sake (24:9), and of false prophets arising and leading many astray (24:11). And for that matter, these days of imminence and delay are also days when the gospel of the kingdom is still being proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations (24:14). And so it’s in light of these things – of the birth pains that still characterize these days in which we live, and especially in light of the fact that Jerusalem and the temple have already been destroyed – that we know “the end” (cf. 24:14) is truly imminent.

That's why instead of just saying "after the tribulation of those days," Matthew has Jesus saying "immediately after the tribulation of *those days*"—because there is a sense in which the destruction of Jerusalem and the second coming of Jesus have everything to do with each other. Ever since 70 A.D. these have been days not just of delay, but also of imminence and therefore we're called to live in these days of delay always in light of the "*immediacy*" and the "*imminency*" of His return (cf. 24:42, 44; 25:13) – always in light of the immediacy and the imminency of that day when He will come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory and send out His angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect—even us—from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

As the new Israel being formed around a New Covenant and gathered into the wedding hall we are called to bring forth fruit as the stewards of God's vineyard and to continuously proclaim, and rejoice in, the gospel of the kingdom – always remembering His promise to us:

□ Matthew 28:20 — And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

What wonderful encouragement, brothers and sisters, for *these* days – and for *every* day.