

## **The Olivet Prophecy Paradox**

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Please start turning to Matthew 24. Yes, this is the second message on prophecy from CGG within the same year. I hope you can survive the shock. What I have today was left over from the previous message on Jacob's Trouble.

Matthew 24 is the very well-known Olivet Prophecy, in which Jesus gives us the progression of end-time events. But Matthew 24 also contains an apparent paradox that will be our focus for today. The stage is set for the prophecy in the first few verses. Jesus and the disciples are surveying the Temple complex, and Jesus shocks them by saying that “not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down” (Matthew 24:2).

The Temple and its environs were the center of religious life, so Christ's statement captures the attention of the disciples. In verse 3, their location has moved slightly from the Temple area, across the Kidron Valley, and to the Mount of Olives, from which they could still see the Temple Mount. So, when nobody else is around, they say to Him, “Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”

The disciples' question is multi-faceted. It seems like they assume that the destruction of that Temple would coincide with Christ's return and the end of the age. As it turned out, the fall of Jerusalem almost 40 years later was the end of an age, but Christ did not return then.

Yet Christ's answer is also curious because it answers both what happened within the first century and also what will happen when this age ends, and He returns. So, both elements are found in His answer. There was an early, lesser fulfillment, but the true fulfillment is still ahead. In the decades following this prophecy, there were false messiahs, wars, famine, persecution, and martyrdom. The gospel was preached. There was an

Abomination of Desolation, and most of the Jerusalem church fled to Pella before Jerusalem was destroyed. But there were not any heavenly signs—certainly not of the magnitude that is described in this chapter and in Revelation 6—and, obviously, Christ did not return.

We will pick up the flow in verse 10. It shows that the pressure becomes so intense that there will be betrayal and hatred among God's people. It seems to indicate the betrayal may be for the sake of saving their own lives—that they are unwilling to lay down their lives, but will rather seek to preserve them by betraying their brethren.

Obviously, this violates the Passover imperative of discerning the Body of Christ. This foretells of a time when the spiritual strength of the church of God is at a very low ebb, which corresponds with Christ's question that, when He returns, whether He will really find faith on the earth. When heat is applied, the unfaithful will betray rather than sacrifice.

In verse 11, this high-pressure environment leads to a rise in false prophets and widespread deception. Put simply, people are more easily led astray by teachers who promise them relief from the pressure in some way. That could be promises of security, or being able to instill a good feeling, especially when life is difficult or uncertain.

The result of the false teachers is found in verse 12. Lawlessness will abound, causing the love of many to grow cold. I John 5:3 gives the foundation of the love of God as keeping His commandments. So, in an environment of commandment-breaking, encouraged by teachers who ignore or even undermine God's clear standards, the love of God grows cold.

Again, this paints a dismal picture of the spiritual state of God's people in the lead-up to Christ's return. This does not mean that everyone will be in this state, but remember that Jesus is foretelling the general signs of His coming and the end of the age. So, if we see hatred, betrayal, false teachers, lawlessness, and the love of God growing cold among many, we can know that the end is not far off.

In addition to the pressure and what it produces in some, Jesus gives us two more concrete signs. The first is in Matthew 24:14, where He says that the

gospel of the Kingdom—not the gospel of grace—will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

That happened only in type in the first century. In Colossians 1:23, Paul says that the gospel was preached to every creature under heaven. Some commentators suggest that Paul was referring to the general revelation that God gave to mankind through creation, which demands the existence of a Creator. It could also be that Paul was using some hyperbole to describe the evangelism of the apostles after Christ's death. But in either case, the full preaching of the gospel of the Kingdom in all the earth still lies ahead.

The second clear sign is found in Matthew 24:15, which is the Abomination of Desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place. That is a reference to several places in Daniel, including the 70 Weeks Prophecy in Daniel 9:27, as well as Daniel 11:30-31 and Daniel 12:11. In Daniel 11, a king from the north of Judea will show favor to those who forsake the holy covenant, and he will defile the sanctuary fortress, take away the daily sacrifices, and replace them with the abomination of desolation, or the abomination that causes desolation, or it could be translated, “the appalling abomination.”

This had one fulfillment around 167 BC by Antiochus IV, nicknamed “Epiphanes.” He constructed an altar to Zeus within the Temple at Jerusalem, and then he sacrificed swine on that pagan altar. For those who feared God and who respected His word and the holiness of the system He had given them, that shocking abomination was horrifying.

There was a similar fulfillment in the first century. Josephus records that when the Roman army under Titus came to Jerusalem to put down a Jewish revolt, the Romans entered the Temple with their ensigns, or standards. Those standards included at least the Roman eagle and the image of the Emperor, which was worshipped, and possibly a bronze head of a dragon. Josephus says the Romans made sacrifices to these standards in the Temple, declaring Titus as emperor in the place dedicated to the worship of the true God.

While the previous fulfillments are clear, there are differing opinions on what a future fulfillment could entail. Some point to “the holy place” as

referring to a rebuilt Temple, just like the previous fulfillments. Others point out that all of Jerusalem, or at least the Temple Mount, could be considered “the holy place,” and thus it could be more general, requiring only an altar and not a Temple. Luke’s account mentions armies surrounding Jerusalem, but there would have to be more to it for that to be an abomination. Whatever the case, the pattern is that it will be idolatrous, honoring a foreign god in the place dedicated to the true God.

Now, all of this leads up to verses 21-22, which are part of the apparent paradox I mentioned:

**Matthew 24:21-22** For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened.

This is maximal language. It refers to the time of greatest tribulation, which means pressure, including persecution and martyrdom. We find the same maximal language in Jeremiah 30:7, which says,

**Jeremiah 30:7** Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it; and it is the time of Jacob’s trouble . . .

Similarly, Daniel 12:1 says,

**Daniel 12:1** . . . And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time. . . .

So, what lies ahead will be the very worst of times. They will be so perilous that unless God had put a limit on the number of the days, no flesh would be saved. Yet for the sake of the elect, a limit has already been placed.

However, Christ gives other descriptions of this same time that may sound contradictory. Hold your place in this chapter, and please turn to Luke 17:

**Luke 17:26-30** And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise as it was also in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

On one hand, Jesus says that just before His return will be a time of great tribulation, unlike anything that has occurred in history. But here, He likens that same time to the days of Noah and the days of Lot. He mentions people eating, drinking, marrying, buying, selling, planting, and building.

So, this is the apparent paradox: One part of the Olivet Prophecy describes the absolute worst of times, with everyone's survival threatened, and then another part alludes to people pursuing normal activities of life, as though nothing unusual is happening.

Now, the bottom line with prophecy is that we simply will not know definitively until it happens. A good approach, then, is to be aware of what the prophecies say and some possibilities for how they could unfold, rather than being confident in how it must take place. This is not to suggest that there is no value in studying the prophetic part of God's word—there certainly is, as we are doing today. But there is also wisdom in acknowledging our own limited understanding, and that we are still looking through a glass darkly.

In this regard, the Messiah was not recognized in large part because of preconceptions of what the Messiah would be like, and what He would do, and how He would arrive. Those who rejected Him believed they had Scripture on their side. It turns out they had misinterpreted the Messianic prophecies, and the same thing can happen to us. We have our own theories of what the end-times will be like and who the major actors will be, and we have scriptures to back up our viewpoints. Yet it is quite possible for these

preconceptions to blind us—each one of us—because of the tendency to explain away things that don't fit our mental picture. As with everything else, we need to approach prophecy with humility.

So, we will look at a couple of *possible* ways these seemingly contradictory passages can be understood.

We will begin with what Jesus intends by mentioning “the days of Noah” and “the days of Lot.” In Christ's descriptions, He gives us the activities of the people immediately before sudden destruction. But we should understand that these activities by themselves—the eating and drinking and so forth—are not actually any sort of sign. Mankind has been doing these things from the beginning. Christ's point in these illustrations is not that the world before His return will be overflowing in good times, but rather He is emphasizing how unexpectedly God's judgment can fall. He is saying the future destruction will happen suddenly, just like what happened to the people of Noah's day and the residents of Sodom.

This emphasis on how unexpected that judgment will be is easier to see in Matthew 24, if you would flip back there. In Matthew's version, Christ's illustration of the days of Noah is unmistakably about the unknown timing, not the activities. This is found in verse 36:

**Matthew 24:36-44** But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Before and after Christ's mention of the days of Noah, His point in verses 36, 42, and 44 is the unknown timing. The overall flow and context show that Jesus is not saying that He will return when eating and drinking and marrying are at their peak, but rather that His return will be unexpected.

So, Christ's reference to the days of Noah and the days of Lot do not contradict His warning of a time of intense trouble. The time before His return will be the worst of times, and His return will be unexpected, just as the destructions by the flood and by fire and brimstone were entirely unexpected. The activities of the people at the time demonstrate they had no clue as to what was about to happen.

However, there is another way to understand this paradox, and it comes from one of the darkest times in history—certainly in more recent history. This example took place during World War II, when Europe went mad and tore itself apart, driven by ideologies that grew out of the Enlightenment, ironically enough.

In 1939, Warsaw, the capital of Poland, was taken by Nazi Germany. Warsaw had a large Jewish population, and that population increased even more by Jewish refugees who were fleeing the German-Polish front. In 1940, the Germans moved all the ethnic Poles out of the area of Warsaw with the highest Jewish population, and moved all the Jewish refugees and Jews from other parts of Warsaw into what became known as the Warsaw Ghetto.

The initial population of the ghetto was 450,000, confined to an area of 760 acres. That might sound like a lot of acres, but it works out to 1.2 square miles. So, the population density was extremely high. The Nazis built a 10-foot-high fence around the Jewish section of Warsaw, topped it with barbed wire, and shot on sight anybody trying to escape.

Over the next couple of years, the borders of the ghetto shrunk as the captive population died off through regular executions, mass hunger, and infectious diseases. That should ring a bell—violence, famine, and disease epidemics. Those are aspects of the Olivet Prophecy and three of the Horsemen in the Seals of Revelation.

The ghetto environment was an induced famine, with each person being allotted only about 200 calories per day—a tithe, or less, of what is recommended today. If it weren't for the work of smugglers, the starvation would have been even worse. But because of the unburied bodies of those who succumbed to the Black Horse of famine, plus malnutrition, the Pale Horse of disease, and especially typhus, stalked the residents of the ghetto.

The Nazis left the administration of the ghetto to a Jewish Council of Elders. The leader of the Council chose a policy of collaboration with the Germans, hoping that accommodation might save more lives. The Council was supported by the Jewish Ghetto Police, which was a force of 3,000 or so men who enforced the law, as well as carried out orders from the Nazis.

As mentioned, there was a thriving smuggling culture within the ghetto, and the really good smugglers became wealthy. Workshops were created to manufacture goods to be smuggled out and sold outside the wall. There were also sanctioned factories for building materiel for the Nazi forces. So, there was industry amidst the scarcity.

Despite the hardship, the Jews did what they could to establish educational and cultural institutions, some legal and others underground. The captives had hospitals, soup kitchens, orphanages, refugee centers, recreation facilities, a school system, secret libraries, as well as a symphony orchestra. There are even records of weddings in the ghetto. Even in this darkest of times, people endeavored to live with a semblance of normalcy. It is a testament to one of mankind's abilities, that of adaptability and resilience.

I will read an excerpt from Wikipedia's article on the Warsaw Ghetto because it shows a human reality:

[An Israeli historian and Holocaust survivor] estimates that around 20,000 prisoners (out of more than 400,000) remained at the top of ghetto society, either because they were wealthy before the war, or because they were able to amass wealth during it (mainly through smuggling). Those families and individuals frequented restaurants, clubs and cafes, showing in stark contrast the economic inequalities of ghetto life. [Another source] estimates that group at around



10,000 people—"rich industrialists, many . . . council leaders, Jewish Ghetto Police officers, profiteering smugglers, nightclub owners [and] high-end prostitutes" who were spending their time at over sixty cafes and nightclubs, "dancing among the corpses."

So, even amidst the horror, some were living high on the hog, so to speak.

While the Nazi strategy in the Warsaw Ghetto consisted mainly of starvation and encouraging disease, plus regular executions, in 1942, Hitler set his "Final Solution" into motion. The Jews in Warsaw were told they would be resettled in the east. Trains started rolling in, and the Nazis, with the help of the Jewish Ghetto Police, rounded up Jews and put them in the cattle cars. Yet the trains did not go east, but to the north about 50 miles, to an infamous camp called Treblinka. That was their final destination. As it happens, this mass deportation and extermination started on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av.

Between the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av and the Day of Atonement, when the deportation ended, over a quarter of a million inmates—the ones who survived the Red, Black, and Pale Horses—were sent to Treblinka. Perhaps fittingly, the last trains carried the Jewish Ghetto Police and other collaborators and elites. Even those at the top outlived their usefulness to the so-called "master race."

The Warsaw Ghetto is a microcosm of many of the elements in the Olivet Prophecy. This is not to suggest that it was a fulfillment, but more like a foretaste. It serves as a sobering example of people working for a sense of normalcy even in the worst of times. Some achieved it more than others. As foretold, there was hatred and betrayal, with some Jews selling out their brothers for a little security, a little favor with the occupiers, perhaps more and better food, and access to nicer things. A little compromise for a little comfort, even though it meant dealing with the devil.

But even amidst the war and the starvation and pestilence, there was also buying, selling, and building—most for survival, but some becoming wealthy off their brethren. While there were few weddings, there was eating and drinking by those at the top, as well as cavorting with prostitutes. Until the day the trains came and took them all away.

So, getting back to the apparent paradox, we've seen two things. First, we saw that the intent of the references to the days of Noah and the days of Lot is less on the activities and more on the fact that the people never knew what hit them. God's judgment fell swiftly. In the same way, Christ's return will also be a shock to the world, even though those with spiritual awareness will recognize things leading up to it. But the exact timing will be unknown.

Second, the Warsaw Ghetto is a stark and sobering example of how life goes on—until it doesn't. It shows what people will do to adapt to degraded circumstances and achieve a sense of normalcy. Maybe that means collaborating for the sake of perceived security. Maybe that means setting up schools and orchestras, or heroically trying to save others. Maybe that means smuggling for survival or smuggling for profit. Maybe that means selling oneself for what one values more. But among many other dreadful lessons, the Warsaw Ghetto demonstrates the human capacity to adjust, and to do what is possible to achieve a certain equilibrium.

There is one more remarkable piece to this end-times picture. Look back to verse 22. "Unless those days were shortened, no flesh would [survive]."

Some of you remember the heavy emphasis the Worldwide Church of God put on prophecy. Verse 22 played prominently in the church's media presentations. That church developed in the aftermath of World War II and the beginning of the Atomic Age. It continued through the Nuclear Age, including the Cold War, with its continual threat of nuclear annihilation. It was commonly recounted in relation to this verse that there were enough nuclear weapons to destroy all life on the planet many times over.

In addition, mankind has developed horrific chemical and biological weapons. Scientists have been creating genetically modified organisms for decades, presuming to know better than the Creator how the genetic code should operate. More recently, military strategists are combining artificial intelligence with advanced weaponry, seemingly without regard to the inherent risks. So, mankind now possesses various options for wiping himself out.

However, something is being overlooked that significantly changes the landscape of verse 22. There is a parallel verse in Luke that shows the threat

to humanity may not be what we have expected. Before turning to Luke, though, just keep in mind the context leading up to verses 21-22. Starting in verse 15, there is the abomination of desolation, the warnings to flee, and a woe pronounced on those who are pregnant and nursing.

Now, please turn to Luke 21:20. Notice that this is the very same context:

**Luke 21:20-24** But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

It is the same context, and this version gives us a general geographical setting: Jerusalem and Judea. It talks about “the land”—the land of promise—as well as “this people.” This does not mean there will not be trouble or tribulation elsewhere, but the epicenter of the turmoil will be Jerusalem and its environs, and the “troublers” will be Gentiles.

This passage also fills in some details that tie this time of great tribulation directly to Jacob’s Trouble. Verse 24 describes death in warfare and being carried away into other nations. It also says that Jerusalem will be given over to the Gentiles until the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled. We can correlate that with Revelation 11:2, which says that the Gentiles “will tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months.” The city will be trampled by Gentiles, and whatever worship has been taking place will be stopped.

But the verse that is almost always overlooked is verse 22: “For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.” The events here are the culmination, the comprehensive fulfillment, of what has

been spoken of before by the prophets. And Jesus calls this time, “the days of vengeance.” This vengeance is not arbitrary, like human vengeance, but a fulfillment of divine warnings given previously.

So, putting the two chapters side-by-side, Luke’s phrase, “the days of vengeance,” is parallel to the statement in Matthew that “unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved.” Suddenly, the threat does not look like a lab experiment that goes wrong, nor a weapons system identifying man as a threat. I’m not saying there is no danger from those things, but that the threat here is specified as “vengeance” rather than technology.

As it says, these days of vengeance have been written about before, so we have to go back to what was previously written—and especially about vengeance that is prophesied—to understand why no flesh would survive unless God had placed limits.

In short, this is the time of God’s vengeance. It seems we have been looking in the wrong place—we have not looked high enough. God is the threat to mankind at the end, both to Jew and Gentile. That may sound shocking, but there are precedents. Remember that God wiped out the pre-Flood world. All flesh was destroyed, save Noah and his family. God threatened to wipe out Israel and start over with Moses after the Golden Calf incident. And God was also ready to consume the whole nation because of Korah’s rebellion.

Thus, there are precedents and prophecies of near annihilation. And there are numerous prophecies of vengeance, which I will leave to you to search out. But what is critical to understand is that God’s prophesied vengeance is not one-sided. On one hand, the prophecies foretell His vengeance against His own people because of their rebellion (Isaiah 1:21-24; 35:4; 59:17). But other prophecies point to His vengeance on other nations who have done wickedly, especially in oppressing His people (Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 79:5-10; Isaiah 46:10; Jeremiah 50:15; 50:28; 51:6-11; 51:56; Ezekiel 25:17; Joel 3:9-16; Revelation 18:20), nations like Edom, the descendants of Esau (Isaiah 34:8; 63:4; Ezekiel 25:14).

Thus, the time when mankind’s survival hangs in the balance seems to parallel the days of vengeance, when God takes His vengeance against all flesh—first Israelite, and then Gentile. This is seen most clearly in Zechariah

14:1-3, which says that first God gathers all the nations to battle against Jerusalem, and the city is taken. But then God fights against those same nations. The iniquity and lawlessness will be so great, and His justified wrath so intense, that unless He had shortened those days, no flesh—Israelite or Gentile—would survive His vengeance.

Now, the world is not at that point yet, and thankfully, we are not facing conditions like the Warsaw Ghetto. But let's return to what we saw about adaptability. Adaptability is a God-given trait, and it can be a very helpful, but there is also a danger in that we will adapt to the wrong type of things.

In that excerpt I read, one account records that those at the top of ghetto society spent their time at cafes and nightclubs, it says, “dancing among the corpses.” They adapted. It is an extreme example, but the question for us is in what ways have we adapted to our environments. Our consciences will adjust so that things that God finds abominable can seem normal to us through repeated exposure and gradual, subconscious acceptance.

This is why Paul warns us not to allow the world to squeeze us into its mold—because we will adjust to its standards, or lack thereof, and not even be aware of how far out of alignment with God we may be. If we adjust to the rising tide of sin, so that it no longer phases us, our love of God is growing, or already has grown, cold.

In this same chapter—Luke 21:34—our Savior warns us to take heed to ourselves, lest our hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life. Even if we are not given to drunkenness or carousing, the cares of life—all the things under the sun—are an ever-present threat to the calling God has graciously extended to us. His warning is that we may become so caught up in the world's enticements, or even just the ordinary activities of life—eating, drinking, buying, selling—that we are unprepared spiritually when our race comes to an end.

Somewhere in our minds may be the thought that we will get serious about our calling when the time seems to be getting close. After all, we don't see armies approaching Jerusalem. But the essence of Christ's warning is that even the intensity of the end times will not awaken people to their need, because even the worst of times can be adapted to, even as we are adapting

right now. We dare not put off that preparation, because spiritual preparation takes place ahead of time. When that final time arrives—when the ghetto wall goes up—it may be too late. It was those who already had oil with them who went into the marriage supper. Our preparation requires all the time that God makes available to us.