

## The Olivet Discourse

Whenever a major earthquake happens someone inevitably points to the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 as proof that the earthquake was some kind of fulfillment of prophecy. I don't know how many times I've been told that earthquake activity is a sign that the Tribulation is near. You see it everywhere – blogs, books, sermons, etc.

I believe this is caused by a misunderstanding of the Olivet Discourse. As it turns out, Matthew 24:1-14 is not talking about the period before the Tribulation. What Jesus is describing in those verses is the first half of the Tribulation itself. In other words, Matthew 24 describes the *actual* Tribulation, not the years leading up to it.

Stop and think about it for a moment. In the beginning of Matthew 24 the disciples approached Jesus privately and asked Him a few questions:

**Matthew 24:3:** “And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?”

Today when we read those verses we immediately think about the Rapture, but that would not have been on the disciples' minds. After all, at this point in time the disciples didn't even know that the Church was going to exist, let alone that there would be a Rapture! When Paul mentioned the Rapture for the first time in I Corinthians 15:51 he said “Behold, I show you a mystery.” The word “mystery” is a very meaningful one, and in the Bible it refers to something *that had never been revealed before*. Christ had alluded to a deliverance “from the wrath to come” but Paul was the first one to expound on the details. The disciples didn't find out about the Rapture until long after the Resurrection.

What this means is that when the disciples asked Jesus “what shall be the sign of thy coming”, they were asking about the Second Coming, *not* the Rapture. It is important to emphasize that the Second Coming and the Rapture are not the same thing. The Rapture happens *before* the Tribulation and removes the Church from the Earth. The Second Coming happens *after* the Tribulation when Jesus returns from Heaven *with* the Church and ends the reign of the Antichrist.

We can see the difference between these two comings illustrated in several passages. First, look at I Thessalonians:

**1 Thessalonians 4:16:** “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:

17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.”

This is actually where we get the word “rapture.” In Latin translations of the Bible the phrase “caught up” in verse 17 is the word “rapturo.” When people speak of the Rapture they are talking about the time when the Church will be “caught up” to meet the Lord in the air. As far as I know the idea that we will “meet the Lord in the air” is not seriously disputed among believers. What people do argue about is when this happens and what happens next, but that is a topic I've discussed elsewhere so I won't repeat it here.

The key point is that in the event described in I Thessalonians 4, the dead are raised, the living are changed, and we are “caught up” to “meet the Lord in the air.” Notice also that Jesus appears to come to Earth *alone*. The reason this is important is because the Bible also describes a very different

event where Jesus returns to the Earth *with the armies of Heaven*, full of wrath and ready to wage war:

**Revelation 19:11:** “And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.

12 His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself.

13 And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God.

14 And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean.

15 And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

16 And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS. ...

19 And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army.

20 And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.

21 And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh.”

You can immediately see that this is a very different event from one the described in I Thessalonians 4!

Interestingly, earlier Revelation 19 the Marriage of the Lamb took place in Heaven, between Christ and His Bride the Church (verse 7). Since I Thes. 4:17 describes the time when Jesus comes to Earth to take His Bride *to* Heaven, and Revelation 19 described the Marriage of the Lamb *in* Heaven, then Rev. 19 must take place *after* the Rapture. What we see described in Revelation is the Second Coming that the disciples were asking about – the time when Jesus returns with the armies of Heaven.

Zechariah also mentions this event:

**Zechariah 14:3:** “Then shall the LORD go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle.

4 And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south.

5 And ye shall flee to the valley of the mountains; for the valley of the mountains shall reach unto Azal: yea, ye shall flee, like as ye fled from before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah: and the LORD my God shall come, and all the saints with thee.”

Needless to say, in Christ's first coming He never stood on the Mount of Olives and broke it in half, creating a giant valley! He did not “fight against those nations.” What the Bible is describing in

these verses has yet to take place.

Do you see the difference between the Rapture (I Thes. 4) and the Second Coming (Rev. 19)? In the Rapture the Lord returns to Earth *alone*, meets the Church *in the air*, and *goes back to Heaven*. In the Second Coming the Lord returns to Earth with the armies of Heaven, *sets foot* on the mount of Olives, and *wages war* against the armies of the antichrist. They are *completely different events*.

Now that a distinction has been made between the Rapture and the Second Coming, we can turn our attention back to Matthew 24. In this chapter Jesus tells His disciples what signs will occur before His Second Coming, and He goes into a lot of detail. The important thing to remember is that everything you see in Matthew 24:4-28 happens *during* the Tribulation. I realize that verses 5-14 are commonly used as evidence that the Tribulation is near, but what they are actually describing are *the first three-and-a-half years of the Tribulation itself*.

Take a look to see what I mean:

**Matthew 24:5:** “For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many.

6 And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

7 For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places.

8 All these are the beginning of sorrows.”

Compare that to the verses in Revelation that describe the Tribulation itself:

**Revelation 6:1:** “And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.

2 And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

3 And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see.

4 And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.”

Do you see the correlation? Matthew 24:5-7 says the *beginning* of sorrows will be composed of “wars and rumors of wars”, and that is exactly what happens in Revelation 6 when the *first* two seals are opened during the beginning of the Tribulation.

Matthew 24:8 says there will be a famine, and that happens when the third seal is opened:

**Revelation 6:5:** “And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.

6 And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.”

The “penny” mentioned in verse 6 was actually a day's wage. When these events take place, food prices are so high that it takes an entire day's salary to purchase a single measure of wheat! That is a famine of catastrophic proportions.

Verse 12 mentions a “great earthquake” – the sign that people get so excited about:

**Revelation 6:12:** “And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood;

13 And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind.”

Notice that neither Matthew nor Revelation say “there will be an increasing number of severe earthquakes as the Tribulation draws nearer.” Go back and look – it doesn't say that! All Jesus says is that there will be earthquakes in diverse places (which is completely different from “an ever-increasing number of earthquakes”), but not to panic because *the end is not yet*. In other words, in Matthew 24:6-7 Jesus was actually saying that if you see earthquakes happening, *don't panic!* He was telling the disciples about signs that *should not cause alarm*. Besides this, the earthquakes Jesus mentioned (and Revelation does talk about more than one) happen *during* the Tribulation, not *before* it. There is a huge difference!

Matthew mentions martyrs:

**Matthew 24:9:** “Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake.”

Revelation 6 does as well:

**Revelation 6:9:** “And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:

10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?”

Matthew says that the gospel will be preached to the whole world, “and then shall the end come”:

**Matthew 24:14:** “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.”

Revelation reports that this happens *during the Tribulation*, just before the end:

**Revelation 14:6:** “And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people,

7 Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.”

Do you see the striking correlation between Matthew 24 and Revelation 6? The events Jesus describes in those first few verses match the events that take place in the first half of the Tribulation – and as I've explained elsewhere, the verses in the second half of the passage *definitely* correspond to the Tribulation. It is at the midpoint of the Tribulation when the “abomination of desolation” takes place,

which Jesus mentions in Matthew 24:15, and the rest of the chapter discusses the terrible events of the “great tribulation” (Matthew 24:21). I cannot escape the conclusion that what Jesus is describing in Matthew 24 *is the seven-year Tribulation itself*. He isn't telling them events that are going to take place *before* the Tribulation; instead He's telling them things that will happen *during* the Tribulation!

The reason He is doing this is because the disciples wanted to know what signs would happen just prior to His Second Coming. When does that take place? *After* the Tribulation. (Look at the passage to see what I mean – the “great tribulation” is mentioned verse 21, and the Lord returns in verse 29-30, “immediately after the tribulation.”) So it makes perfect sense that the Lord would explain the events of the Tribulation to them – events that would certainly indicate that the Second Coming was near, and events that Jesus was the first to reveal. At this time Revelation had not yet been written; in fact, Revelation would not be penned until all of the disciples except for John had been executed.

When Jesus says in verse 34 that “this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled”, He is saying is that the generation that is alive when the Tribulation begins will still be alive when Jesus returns. When Jesus told this to His disciples no one realized this. Jesus was the first one to make it known that the generation that was alive when the Tribulation started would not have died out before the Second Coming.

I want to emphasize this again: when Jesus says in Matthew 24:33 “so likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors”, He is not talking about the Rapture or the Tribulation. What He is saying is that His Second Coming (which takes place *after* the Tribulation) is near. When He says in verse 36 “But of that day and hour knoweth no man” He is talking about the Second Coming, *not* the Rapture. The Rapture is not even mentioned in Matthew 24! People apply these verses to the Rapture all the time but that is *not* what Jesus was talking about.

Just to make it clear, *before* the Tribulation begins the Lord will come and get His Church and take them home to Heaven. That is the Rapture. Later, at the *end* of the Tribulation, the Lord will come back to Earth *with* His Church and defeat the Antichrist. This is the Second Coming, and *that* is what Matthew 24 is talking about.

So, in conclusion, when you see an earthquake happen, take Christ's advice in Matthew 24:6 and *don't panic*. As Jesus said in that very same verse, “the end is not yet”!