

Study Guide #1: The Little Apocalypse

Introduction

Jesus' talk with His apostles in Matthew 24, along with the parallel chapters in Mark 13 and Luke 21, is known as "the Little Apocalypse" because it *ultimately* deals with the end-times, something that apocalyptic prophecies (notably Daniel and Revelation) cover. As we will see in this Study Guide, it covers *more* than just the events immediately preceding the 2nd Coming of Jesus.

Question #1: What is the "abomination of desolation" Jesus refers to here?

Answer: According to the parallel in Luke 21, "**the abomination of desolation**" in Matthew 24:15 (NKJV) and Mark 13:14 are the Roman armies that surrounded Jerusalem (Luke 21:20-24) and led to its destruction in A.D. 70. This is confirmed by the fact that reference is made to Judea immediately after "**the abomination of desolation**" in Matthew 24:16 and Mark 13:14. In the devastation involving the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in the 1st century, Christians escaped because they remembered Jesus' words to "**flee to the mountains**" (Matthew 24:16, NKJV; Mark 13:14). Therefore, the people who were victims of that terrible ordeal were non-Christian Jews.



Question #2: Does the "abomination of desolation" have a second fulfillment?

Answer: Yes. After identifying it in connection with the Roman armies, Jesus suddenly telescopes far into the future after the destruction of Jerusalem because He said **that "unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved,"** referring to the "**elect**" (Matthew 24:21-22, NKJV; cf. Mark 13:20). By the context, it's clear that the "**elect**" are Christians. This is the reason we know that Jesus telescoped to a different time of great tribulation, of which the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 must be a type. We can identify this later tribulation because Jesus also called it the world's greatest period of tribulation that ever was or will be (Matthew 24:21; cf. Mark 13:19). The only reasonable way that *both* the 1st century destruction of Jerusalem and some future period of tribulation could be the greatest time of trouble that ever would be is that the duration of each period must be different. Because the tribulation in A.D. 66-70 was of relatively short duration, then the later period must be the worst ever in terms of its length.

Question #3: What is the 2nd fulfillment of the "abomination of desolation"?

Answer: Mark 13:24 gives us a clue to identify the 2nd fulfillment when it quotes Jesus as saying, "**in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars of heaven will fall...**" (NKJV). This implicitly means that the period of tribulation has a *specific* duration, but that the actual persecution will end *before* its official period ends. These facts also show that Jesus

wasn't talking about the final persecution of His people immediately before the 2nd Coming, because that persecution will continue into the Seven Last Plagues (Revelation 16) and can't be of long duration. [NOTE: See Explorer III, Study Guide #18 for information about the Seven Last Plagues.] When we examine history, the only reasonable period of persecution that fits the specifications is the period of Medieval Church domination in the long Middle Ages. It's estimated that at least 50 million people were executed for their Christian faith because they didn't conform to the Medieval Church's doctrines and practice. [NOTE: See Explorer III, Study Guide #8 for more information on this long period of persecution.]

Question #4: Approximately when did the period of Medieval persecution end?

Answer: Medieval religious persecution largely (although not entirely) ended after the Thirty Years' War, which began as a campaign to eliminate Protestant Christianity and ended in 1648. Since Mark's gospel tells us that at least the 1st of the heavenly signs [see under Question #3] would occur within that period of time but after widespread persecution had ended, we should expect that it would have occurred sometime after 1648. One additional fact must be considered: Revelation 6:14-17 refers to the 2nd Coming of Jesus. Note that it tells us that **"a great earthquake"** will precede the same heavenly signs mentioned in the gospels (vv. 12-13):



Medieval Warfare

¹²I looked when he opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. ¹³And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. ¹⁴Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. ¹⁵And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶and said to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?' (NKJV)

By comparing Revelation 6:12-17 with Matthew 24:29 and Mark 13:24-25 (cf. Luke 21:25), it's clear that they are all talking about the same series of events.

Question #5: How do we know that this "great earthquake" and the heavenly signs are literal, specific events rather than symbolic language denoting divine intervention that shakes up the world?

Answer: It's true that several Old Testament prophets used the language of tumult in the heavens in connection with the day of the Lord (Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Amos 8:9; and Joel 2:28-32). But that doesn't mean that any or all of those references are speaking symbolically. In any case, Jesus' words in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 were spoken in the context of other signs as well as the 2nd Coming of Jesus, and all of them are obviously literal events. Therefore, we should understand the signs in the gospels and Revelation 6 as also literal events.

Question #6: How can we identify these signs?

Answer: Each sign must logically meet 4 criteria. *First*, it must be a very significant event that would attract special attention to it. *Second*, it must occur in the exact sequence that Revelation 6 and the gospels specify. *Third*, it must occur in lands where many Christians live and could discern it as a sign from God. *Fourth*, it must have a significant spiritual impact, positive on some and negative on others. *Finally*, please note that *none* of them must necessarily be supernatural in nature because earthquakes are natural disasters, and God can use natural events as signs.

Question #7: What was “the great earthquake” foretold in the prophecy?



Answer: The great Lisbon Earthquake occurred on November 1, 1755, with its epicenter near Lisbon, Portugal. Although it wasn't the most disastrous earthquake in world history, its effects were felt as far away as 1,100 miles. Many devout Christians believed it was a sign of the end-times, while skeptics scoffed at those who saw it as a warning of God's impending judgment.

Question #8: What was the Dark Day foretold in the prophecy?

Answer: On May 19, 1780, a very unusual thick darkness covered an area estimated to be about 25,000 square miles in most of New England and parts of New York and New Jersey. Farm animals came into their barns on their own, and people couldn't see enough to continue their daily activities. Many went to their churches as thoughts of judgment day were on their minds. Some critics have suggested that smoke from a huge fire north of New England in Canada was responsible for the darkness. Even if that were true, God can use natural events as signs and would have known in advance that such a fire would be raging. However, in this case, no reports of the smell of smoke exist, and no other explanation was forthcoming.

Question #9: How did the moon turn to blood as foretold in the prophecy?

Answer: Revelation 6:12 gives 2 details that Jesus didn't give in the gospels. *First*, the moon turned to a blood color (“**like blood**,” NKJV), and *second*, it was a “whole moon” (or “full moon”) according to the Greek textual evidence. This event occurred in the correct sequence on the night of May 19, 1780, following the Dark Day. What was remarkable is that the moon had become full just the previous evening. This event seemed to reinforce the spiritual significance of the Dark Day earlier.

Question #10: What event fulfilled the prophecy about the falling of the stars?

Answer: This event occurred in the pre-dawn hours of November 13, 1833, as one of the more spectacular meteor showers ever witnessed and apparently could be seen throughout most of North America. It was so bright that some people were awakened out of sleep. In harmony with the detail given in Revelation 6:13, this meteor shower gave the optical illusion that stars were falling in whatever direction a person was standing—just like “**a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind**” (NKJV). It was

so significant that it gave birth to our modern scientific study of meteor showers. Its religious impact was also significant, as many believers viewed it as a fulfillment of the Bible's prediction.

Question #11: How could these be signs of Jesus' soon return when the last of these signs occurred in 1833?

Answer: *First*, there's no doubt that they met all 4 criteria that logic tells us should have been met in order for them to be viewed as the signs Jesus foretold. *Second*, remember that God reckons time differently from how we do. *Third*, these signs were linguistically in Mark 13:24 connected more with the general end of the Medieval period of persecution, even though they also served to spiritually awaken people to get ready for Jesus' return. In His discourse, Jesus spoke about the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Matthew 24:15-20) and telescoped to the period of Medieval Church domination (vv. 21-22), which began at least 450 years later as the Roman Empire was rapidly declining in the West. Therefore, the word for **"Then"** in Matthew 24:30 may only indicate the *sequence*, *not* the closeness of time, between the falling of the stars and the 2nd Coming of Jesus.



Meteor Shower

Both in the gospels and in Revelation 6:12-17, the next event is the actual 2nd Coming of Jesus. Can that glorious event be that far ahead?

Question #12: What are the major views of what Jesus meant when He declared that "this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34, NKJV; Mark 13:30; cf. Luke 21:32)?

Answer: Since it's obvious that the generation of people in Jesus' day did not live to see the 2nd Coming of Jesus, there have been at least 3 different interpretations of this text. *One* is that it refers to the generation of Jesus' day in connection with the signs of Jerusalem's destruction. A *second* one is that it refers to the generation that sees the signs in connection with the 2nd Coming of Jesus (with the possible caveat that it only applies to those who see the last of those signs). *Finally*, one view says that it refers to the Jewish people who will survive Jerusalem's destruction and subsequent long period of persecution by Gentiles throughout history (Luke 21:24).

Question #13: Does Jesus's statement refer to the generation that saw the destruction of Jerusalem?

Answer: The argument for this thesis is 2-fold: (1) that Jesus used the term **"this generation"** in the gospels to refer to the Jews who rejected Him in His day (Matthew 11:16; 12:41-42, 45; 23:36); and (2) the phrase **"all these things"** refers only to the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. We reject this thesis that **"all these things"** refers *only* to the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem for 2 reasons. *First*, Jesus' response in Matthew 24 reveals that He knew the apostles thought

that *both* the destruction of Jerusalem *and* Jesus' 2nd Coming was essentially one event, or that the latter would occur immediately after the former. Therefore, in the apostles' minds, they referred to both events with the phrase **"all these things."** *Second*, regardless of the confusion about these 2 events in the apostles' minds, Jesus plainly used the phrase **"all these things"** (vv. 33-34) and the term **"this generation"** (v. 34) to particularly refer to His 2nd Coming, because the immediate context both before *and* after these verses is the 2nd Coming. *Finally*, where Matthew 24:33 and Mark 13:29 quote Jesus as saying, **"it is near"** (or "he is near" in the margin of the NKJV), Luke 21:31 quotes Jesus as saying, **"the kingdom of God is near"** (NKJV)—thus referring to His 2nd Coming. It seems quite evident, then, that Jesus' words are in reference to His 2nd Coming (not only to the destruction of Jerusalem).

Question #14: But aren't there problems in interpreting Jesus' words as applying to the Second Coming?

Answer: Yes. Since we have identified the signs as specific and sequential in nature, it's plain that no one is still alive who saw the first of those signs, even if you count the Dark Day as the first of them (since the gospels don't mention the great earthquake). Even if we are wrong about the identity of the specific signs, saying that the generation who sees them all will also see the 2nd Coming of Jesus violates the clear spirit of Jesus' very next words in Matthew 24:36 and Mark 13:32 that **"but of that day and hour no one knows"** (NKJV). But if **"this generation"** refers to those who see all the signs, then one living at that time could



Tidal Wave

know that at least some of those then living would be alive to see the return of Jesus. As a result, some have proposed that it only applies to the generation that sees the *last* of those signs, which according to Luke's account is **"the sea and the waves roaring"** (21:25, NKJV), an apparent reference to horrendous natural disasters. But we must reject that also, because the expression is **"all these things,"** *not* "the last of these things."

Question #15: So what did Jesus mean by His words about "this generation"?

Answer: We agree that Jesus used the term **"this generation"** as a reference to His Jewish critics. (See under Question #13.). But the Greek word for "generation" can also refer to a race or ethnic group of people. With this word having a flexible usage definition, Jesus might have meant that the collective group of believers who sees and recognizes all the signs will also see Him return. In this way, it could include the *theological relatives* of the individuals who actually saw one or more of those signs without necessarily referring to any of the individuals who literally saw them. *Or* He might have meant the Jewish people, despite their persecution from the time of Jerusalem's destruction in A.D. 70 throughout their persecution by Gentiles until the 2nd Coming of Jesus, will survive to see the 2nd Coming. In either case, Jesus didn't err in what He said.