

II Thessalonians and the Olivet Discourse | Don K. Preston

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By Don K. Preston

First and Second Thessalonians are perceived by many to be positive proof of a yet future, time ending, coming of Christ. These two books contain much about the Parousia; almost every chapter of both books contains some reference to that event. But does Thessalonians prove a future coming? We think not! This article shall examine this question from a somewhat distinctive approach--we shall seek to demonstrate that the subject of II Thessalonians is the same as that in Matthew 24--specifically the "first section," vss. 4-35; the section that is conceded by the majority of amillennialists to be referent exclusively to the coming of Christ in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Our point will be that if it is the case that in Matthew 24:4-35 the subject matter relates exclusively to the coming of Christ in the destruction of Judaism, and if it is established that Paul in II Thessalonians 2 drew his material from Matthew 24:4-35, then it is thereby established that Paul's subject matter in II Thessalonians 2 is also referent to the coming of Christ in the destruction of Jerusalem. Not only shall we seek to demonstrate the link in subject matter but in the chronological framework. Scholars have long recognized that Paul's discussion of Christ's coming bears striking similarity with Jesus' Olivet discourse. Ford and Beasley-Murray list several direct parallels between Jesus' discourse and Paul's teaching. There are not only direct parallels but more subtle verbal similarities that are apparent more to the reader of the original language than to the English reader. We have listed a few of the direct similarities between Matthew 24 and Thessalonians in our book "II Peter 3: The Late Great Kingdom" pages 113-114 and we refer the reader there. In this article we wish to concentrate on comparing the Olivet discourse with II Thessalonians 2. It is our sincere conviction that this comparison has devastating consequences for the traditional schools of eschatology--especially that of amillennialism.

THE GATHERING OF THE SAINTS As Paul addressed the problem of the false teachers the basis of his appeal was "We request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him." It will be observed that Paul was appealing to "our gathering together to Him" as something well known to the Thessalonians. Patently, Paul had taught them about eschatology while he was in the city; not to mention in his first epistle, cf. II Thessalonians 2:5. Where did Paul get the idea of the gathering of the saints at the coming of Jesus?

In Matthew 24:29-31 Jesus spoke apocalyptically of his return in judgment at the end of the Jewish [Aion](#) "But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heaven will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And he will send forth his angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other."

Now where else did Paul get his doctrine of the gathering of the saints at the coming of the Lord if not here? If it be responded that Matthew 25 was his source, this will hardly do. That gathering is the gathering for the

vindication of the saints as is 24:31--it is the same gathering at the coming of the Son of Man in power, great glory and judgment. Compare Matthew 16:27-28/Matthew 24:29-31/Matthew 25:31. An examination of Matthew 24-25 with II Thessalonians 1-2 is especially revealing. In Matthew you have the threat of persecution with the promise of the Parousia for vindication and judgment on the persecutors--the city of Jerusalem. In II Thessalonians 1 you have the church being persecuted, and that persecution is instigated by the Jews, Acts 17. Those being persecuted are promised vindication at the coming of the Lord in fire and vengeance. The Thessalonians were suffering the persecution promised and foreseen by Jesus. Why then is the coming of the Lord in vindication in Thessalonians not the same coming of Jesus in vindication and judgment as that of Matthew 24:29-31? See also Matthew 16:27-28. A powerful demonstration of the relationship of the two passages before us [Matthew 24:31/II Thess. 2:1f] is seen in an examination of the word gathering. When Jesus spoke of the gathering of the saints in Matthew he used a rather distinctive word--episunago. This word is used a total of nine times in all forms in the New Testament and mostly in an eschatological context. In Matthew 23:37 Jesus lamented over Jerusalem "how often would I have gathered thy children together." Mark 1:33 is a non-eschatological text as is Luke 12:1. The word is used in Mark 13:27 a parallel to Matthew 24:31; and Luke 13:34, the parallel to Matthew 23:37. In addition, Hebrews 10:25 uses the word episunagooee, rendered assembling. While this verse is traditionally but unfortunately applied to the worship assembly of each Sunday it clearly has no such application. It is referent to the gathering into the "most holy place" of verses 19ff and the context is the appearing of Christ "a second time... unto salvation," 9:28. This appearing was to be in "a very little while" and without delay, 10:37. The day the Hebrew saints could see approaching was the day of Christ's coming to gather his saints, Matthew 24:31. They were being encouraged not to give up faith thus forfeiting the blessings of that event. The use of episunago is patently a significant word with soteriological [salvation] and eschatological [end time] associations. Now since Jesus first used episunago in Matthew 24 in what is admitted by almost all amillennialists to be a referent to his coming in judgment on Jerusalem, upon what basis can one change the meaning and application in II Thessalonians? This is an especially significant question since the inspired writers naturally used words in the same context and with the same application as did Jesus. As Ford says of episunago in the Discourse "episunago is used in a unique sense in the first passage, and all commentators recognize here [II Thessalonians, DKP] a reference to Christ's saying as recorded in the second passage." Jesus NEVER used episunago to refer to any other eschatological gathering than that at his coming in judgment at the end of the Jewish Age! Would it not be necessary then, if one wishes to apply episunago in II Thessalonians 2 to an end of time coming, for the modern student to prove beyond all doubt that it was being used with a different application by Paul? Where is the evidence Paul is changing the referent of this word? In Matthew 24:29-34 Jesus predicted his coming to gather together the saints in that generation. In II Thessalonians 2:1 Paul spoke of the coming of the Lord to gather the saints. Reader, a question: how many comings of the Lord, with his angels, in fire, in power and glory, to gather the saints, are there in the New Testament? Will our detractors say there are several--or at least two? If one insists there are many comings of Christ, with fire, in power and glory, with his angels, to gather his saints, this necessitates some fancy hermeneutic contortions. First, it will have to be admitted that the foundation for the language, Matthew 24:29-31, is not to be taken literally of a physical, bodily gathering of people into one geographical location. But if this be admitted, then upon what basis, without some VERY CLEAR CONTEXTUAL PROOF, can one change the meaning of the same terms, the same distinctive words, to refer to a literal, physical, bodily gathering of people into one geographical location? Where is the magic key to let us know that Matthew 24:29-31 is a spiritual gathering but II Thessalonians 2 is a literal, physical, geographical gathering?

Second, to insist one "gathering" at the coming of the Lord is spiritual and the other literal is to demand the same of the clouds, angels, fire and trumpet. Those who believe the coming in Matthew refers to the spiritual events surrounding Jerusalem's fall would insist that we not literalize the clouds, the angels nor the trumpet blast. Yet, fascinatingly enough they insist we see them as literal when we study Thessalonians--in spite of the fact Matthew is the source for the language in Thessalonians! We believe the following citation from Robert Taylor, an outspoken critic of Covenant Eschatology is relevant. In discussing the language of Matthew 24:29-31 he compares it with that of Isaiah 13:10ff and the prediction of Babylon's fall "If the language did not demand a literal fulfillment in Isaiah 13:10, and it did not, neither does it demand a literal fulfillment in Matthew 24:29. If so, why?" [emphasis his] We could not agree more. But let us reframe the statement: If the language of Matthew 24:29-31 did not demand a literal fulfillment, and it did not, neither does it demand a literal fulfillment in I or II Thessalonians. If so, WHY? We ask again, where is the magic key to demonstrate that Matthew is spiritual imagery but Thessalonians is literal? We turn now to examine another point of contact between the Olivet Discourse and II Thessalonians 2. **THESSALONIANS, FULFILLMENT OF MATTHEW**

24 In Matthew 24:26ff Jesus warned his disciples that before Jerusalem's demise some would come trying to convince them that Christ had ALREADY COME: "If they shall say unto you, 'Behold, he is in the desert;' go not forth: 'he is in the secret chambers;' believe it not." With the modern concept of the coming of the Lord it is inconceivable for some to believe that there would be any success on the part of false teachers insisting Christ had already come. That speaks eloquently of the power of traditional concepts to blind people to the scriptures. The fact is the coming of the Lord was not and is not what the traditional schools have insisted--and these verses stand as powerful proof of that. In our booklet "How Is This Possible?" we examine in depth how it would be possible for anyone to believe the coming of Christ had already happened--if indeed it is a time ending event. It would of course be impossible to convince ANYONE that event had taken place if it is what traditionalism has taught. The only way anyone could possibly believe Christ had come was for them to have a concept of the coming other than a time ending, earth-burning event. If they had the Old Covenant concept of the Day of the Lord and some cataclysmic event had happened recently they could be convinced. Please see our booklet for a full discussion of the issues. One of our detractors has attempted to use Matthew 24:26ff to prove the coming of the Lord has to be a personal, bodily return. Their point was that the false teachers would be trying to point the deluded to individuals [real people] out in the desert or in the secret places. Unfortunately, this only compounds the difficulty! How would taking anyone out into the desert, which had not burned up in a time ending event, prove the coming of the Lord was/is to be a time ending event? If it proves the coming is/was to be a bodily coming it most assuredly proves beyond all doubt that the coming could never be seen as a time ending, earth-burning event!!!! If you can go out into the desert or into some secret chambers to see him after the Lord has supposedly returned, then earth has not been burned up and time has not ended! Our detractor's objection doth prove far too much! The point is, in II Thessalonians 2:1-2 Paul is dealing with a situation in which some, in direct fulfillment of what Jesus said would happen, were saying Christ's coming had ALREADY COME! Read vs. 2 where Paul urged them to "not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." [NASV] The reader can see that Paul was dealing with the very thing predicted by Jesus! Who could doubt the direct connection between Matthew 24 and II Thessalonians? **THE APOSTASY** Paul reminded the Thessalonians that before the Lord could come there must first be "the apostasy," II Thessalonians 2:3. It will be noted that Paul used the definite article "the" before apostasy. He was reminding them of some

distinctive singular apostasy they already knew about. Where did they get this doctrine? Generally, amillennialists happily admit the destruction of Jerusalem is called the coming of the Lord. For instance Wayne Jackson writes "this coming of Christ in Matthew 24:30 is a judgment of the Lord upon the city of Jerusalem." Robert Taylor says of Matthew 24:30 "it refers to the Lord's coming in punishment upon Jerusalem.", Roy Deaver, says verses 29-31 refer to "the coming of the Lord in judgment upon Jerusalem and the Jewish nation." In Matthew 24:12 Jesus said that in the days prior to his coming in the destruction of Jerusalem, "because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold." In the previous verse he warned that false prophets would "mislead many." In verse 10 he had stated that due to persecution "many will fall away."

Can you see the comparison? In Matthew 24 the disciples asked when the Lord was going to come. Jesus said before he returned there would be a time when "many will fall away;" false prophets would "mislead many;" and "most people's love will grow cold." He then told them he would come after that apostasy but in that generation, vss. 29-34. In II Thessalonians the brethren were believing the Lord had already come. To correct their chronological error Paul reminded them that before the Lord could come "the apostasy" had to happen. He was reminding them of the apostasy the Lord himself had said must happen! If the apostasy of II Thessalonians is not the apostasy of Matthew 24 the objector is positing the same thing about the apostasy that he is about the gathering of the Lord. He is saying there was/is to be at least two gatherings, at least two "the" apostasies. Did Jesus predict two apostasies? If so where is the proof? Would it not be far more consistent to stay within the time frame given by Jesus himself? Would it not honor the Lord and scripture far more to accept the correlation between Paul and Jesus? We know that Jesus predicted an apostasy before his coming in the destruction of the Old Theocracy. Paul, some 17 years later, yet 20 years before the destruction of Jerusalem, was reminding his readers of the promised apostasy--and was in fact trying to prevent an apostasy! [When he wrote to the Galatians he was amazed they had so quickly left the gospel! Witness the troubles of the Corinthians, Hebrews, II Peter 2, Jude, the churches of Revelation, etc, etc] Upon what basis does one deny that what Paul spoke of in II Thessalonians was the very thing predicted by Jesus in Matthew 24? **FALSE PROPHETS-FALSE**

SIGNS Our final point of comparison is the fact that in Matthew 24:24 Jesus warned his disciples that false prophets and false Christs would arise "and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect." In II Thessalonians 2:9 Paul spoke of the coming of the Son of Perdition, the Man of Sin "whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders." Significantly, in verses 13-14 Paul refers to the church at Thessalonica as those "chosen;" they were among the "elect" Jesus had in mind who would be in danger of being deceived by the coming of the false Christs and Man of Sin. Paul was most assuredly concerned that the Thessalonians, the elect, were about to be or actually had been already, deceived by the false teachers. Patently, he would also be concerned about the impact of the appearance of the Son of Perdition and his lying wonders. It is most assuredly worthy of note that Paul specifically says in verse 7 that the spirit of lawlessness was "already at work." The Restrainer was already restraining him! The man of Sin, although not fully revealed, was already on the scene! Jesus said the false Christs and false prophets, working their false wonders and lying signs, would come in the days before the fall of Jerusalem, Matthew 24:24-34. Paul said the Son of Perdition who would work lying wonders and signs was on the scene but being restrained.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION This brief article has examined only four of the many comparisons and parallels between the Olivet Discourse and Thessalonians. We encourage the reader to do their own study. What we have seen is that in II Thessalonians 2, just in the first three verses there are three major points of contact. [There are actually four--In Matthew Jesus urged his

disciples not to be deceived by the false teachers and prophets; Paul did the same. This is not an independently powerful parallel however.] These points of contact are far more than mere similarity of language--this is the same subject matter! Jesus used a very distinctive word to predict the gathering of the saints--and Paul used that identical word to speak of the gathering. Jesus predicted that false teachers would come saying Christ had returned--and Paul was writing to the Thessalonians to thwart false teachers who were saying Christ had returned. Jesus said there was to be an apostasy before he returned to destroy Jerusalem--Paul said "the apostasy" had to happen before Christ returned. Jesus predicted the coming of lying wonders and signs before the fall of Jerusalem; Paul said the Son of Perdition who would work all sorts of false miracles and lying wonders was on the scene but being restrained. Here is a very significant point: each of these points of comparison come from the section of Matthew 24 that almost all amillennialists agree refer EXCLUSIVELY to the coming of Christ in the destruction of Jerusalem! Are we to conclude that although the subjects of II Thessalonians are the subjects spoken of by Jesus in Matthew 24:4-35 in reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, that in II Thessalonians they refer to a totally different event, a different KIND of event, at a totally different time thousands of years later? This stretches credulity to the limit! If indeed Jesus spoke of an end of time coming in Matthew 24, and if Paul in II Thessalonians was speaking about that end of time coming, would it not behoove Paul to draw from the material in Matthew 24 that spoke of an end of time coming? If Paul spoke of an end of time coming, yet drew his material from Jesus' discourse about the destruction of Jerusalem, would this not be at the very least confusing? Should not Paul, in order to avoid such confusion, have drawn his material from Jesus' discussion of an end of time--if indeed Jesus discussed such a thing? We restate our argument a final time: If it is the case that in Matthew 24:4-35 the subject matter relates exclusively to the coming of Jesus at the end of the Jewish Age in the fall of Jerusalem; and if it is the case that Paul, in II Thessalonians 2 draws his material from Matthew 24:4-35, then it must be the case that Paul's subject matter in II Thessalonians 2 relates exclusively to the coming of Jesus at the end of the Jewish Age in the destruction of Jerusalem. It is the case that the subject matter of Matthew 24:4-35 is exclusively the coming of Christ in the destruction of Jerusalem. It is also the case that in II Thessalonians 2 Paul draws his material from Matthew 24:4-35. Therefore it must be the case that the subject matter of II Thessalonians 2 refers exclusively to the coming of Christ in the destruction of Jerusalem. When the student recognizes that Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24 is the very foundation of New Testament eschatology, and is the source for the terms and words used by the writers, it helps bring these other passages into sharper focus. We have seen that while most people believe Paul speaks of an end of time event in II Thessalonians, the comparison of the terms and subjects is taken exclusively from the section of Matthew 24 generally admitted to speak only of Jerusalem's fall. Context, identical terms, distinctive words, fulfillment of Jesus' prediction, logic and consistency demands we acknowledge the identical subject matter of the parallels between the Olivet Discourse and II Thessalonians 2--the end of the Old World of Judaism at the coming of Jesus Christ in 70 AD.

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