

Matthew 24: The Achilles Heel of Full Preterism

by Michael W. Adams

Preterism is becoming increasingly popular. Full Preterism¹ is the belief that the second coming of Christ is an event of the past; occurring in A.D. 70 and coinciding with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. For the full-Preterist, A.D. 70 is the focal point of both Old Testament and New Testament prophecy concerning the return of Jesus Christ and the end of the age. Full Preterists tell us that the circumstances described and the signs enumerated in Matthew 24² point to a single event in which the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, and Jesus Christ returned as promised. For full Preterism, this fulfills the words spoken in Matthew 24:34 when Jesus told his listeners, “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.”³ Full Preterists tell us that Scripture points to the terrible events of A.D. 70 as the climax of redemptive history when Christ returned, the Old Covenant passed away, the New Covenant was established, and the age to come promised in the New Testament began.

There are strengths within the system of Preterism that we must acknowledge. For example, it is impossible to read passages such as Matthew chapter 24 or Luke 21 and assert that it does not refer, at least in some way, to the events of A.D. 70. The destruction of the temple held some significance for our Lord as evidenced by the fact that he initiated a dialogue about it with his disciples (Matthew 24:1-2). His statement about its destruction piqued the disciples’ curiosity and prompted the dialogue that followed. Preterism has done a good job in reminding us that we cannot ignore such references to A.D. 70. Conversely, a down side to full Preterism is its denial of a physical, bodily resurrection. For full Preterists, the resurrection is a spiritual one that coincided with the second coming in A.D. 70.⁴

It is my intention to address full Preterism’s assertion that the second coming occurred in A.D. 70 by concentrating on their interpretation of Matthew 24. For the full Preterist, Matthew 24 is the key text in Scripture to which all subsequent eschatological utterances bow:

Upon the interpretation of this prophetic discourse [Matthew 24] will depend the right understanding of the predictions contained in the apostolic writings; for it

¹ By “full Preterist” or “hyper-Preterist,” I mean someone who embraces all that Preterism teaches. This includes not only the second coming of Jesus Christ in A.D. 70, but also the full Preterist landscape of redemptive history. For example, the “last days” within the full Preterist scheme cover the period from the cross (or Pentecost in Acts chapter 2) to A.D. 70 and is a reference to the “last days” of the Old Covenant. The New Covenant begins in A.D. 70 and is the “age to come,” mentioned in places such as the kingdom parables in Matthew 13. According to full Preterism, we are living in the age to come predicted in Scripture and this age is an unending one. See the chart on the next page.

² Many call themselves “partial Preterist,” meaning that they embrace parts of Preterism, as it seems to fit their view of Scripture. For a partial Preterist, portions of Matthew 24 were fulfilled in A.D. 70, but the second coming remains future and unfulfilled.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

⁴ It is not my intention to develop this much further. See Robert B. Strimple’s chapter on the resurrection in *When Shall These Things Be?*, ed. Keith A. Mathison (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2004), 287ff.

may almost be said that there is nothing in the Epistles which is not in the Gospels. This prophecy of our Saviour is the great storehouse from which the prophetic statements of the apostles are chiefly arrived.⁵

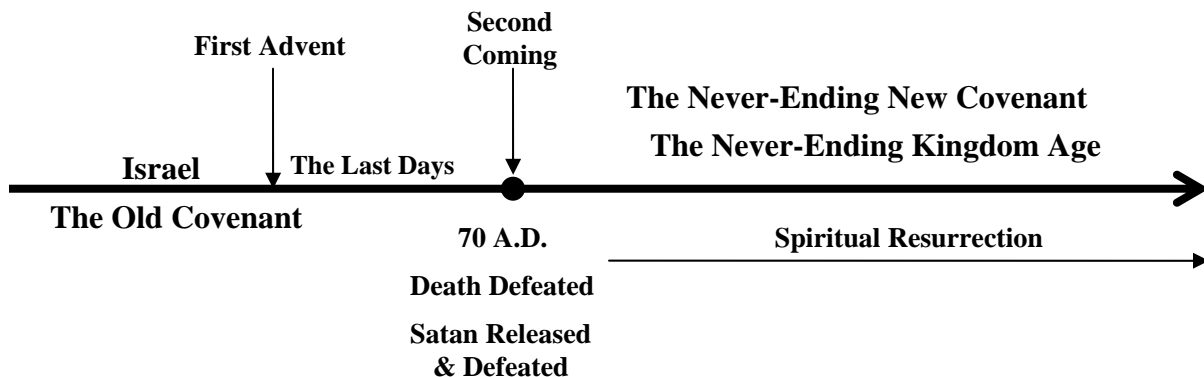
Since Matthew 24 is so critical to the full Preterist's argument and is the chief proof-text upon which its system rests, it becomes vital to determine if their interpretation of Matthew 24 is correct. If we can demonstrate that full Preterism has done a poor job of interpreting this important passage, then full Preterism as a system becomes suspect, because so much of what full Preterism teaches elsewhere is dependent on its interpretation of Matthew 24. This is a very important principle because no matter how carefully we construct a building, if the foundation is shaky, we do not have a safe structure. Nothing is gained by pointing out flaws in the building and leaving the foundation in place. We just get a new and different building erected on the same faulty foundation.

The Major Points of Full Preterism

Before going any further, we need to know something of how the full Preterist understands eschatology. In sorting out full Preterism, a chart can be a helpful tool. At the same time, we acknowledge that no sole authoritative source exists that defines clearly all that full Preterism teaches:

It is not that easy to get a handle on hyper-preterism in order to critique it. In the first place, hyper-preterism is not a confessional system of theology. There is no official statement of the basic beliefs of hyper-preterism. There is also no chief spokesman for hyper-preterism. Instead, there is a wide assortment of individuals who have embraced the basic hyper-preterist thesis and who have independently constructed various systems of theology on this foundation.⁶

With that in mind, please refer to the following chart as we highlight the significant points of full Preterism that I believe most full Preterists would embrace:



⁵ J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983, 1999), 54

⁶ Mathison, *When Shall These Things Be?*, 156

Let us notice some significant points that the above diagram illustrates concerning full Preterism:⁷

- The Old Covenant was in force until A.D. 70.
- The term “last days” used in the New Testament refers to the last days of the Old Covenant.
- The “last days” is the period from the cross until A.D. 70.
- The “present age” described by the New Testament writers is a reference to the age prior to A.D. 70. Therefore, the terms last days and present age are synonymous. Both describe the final days of the Old Covenant Era just prior to A.D. 70.
- The New Covenant era is the period from A.D. 70 until the present.
- The New Covenant era is referred to by the writers of the New Testament as “the age to come.”
- The New Covenant era is unending and is the eternal age, promised in Scripture.
- The second coming of Jesus Christ in A.D. 70 was a spiritual return, not a literal, physical return.
- The resurrection of the just and the unjust occurred at the second coming in A.D. 70, but was a spiritual resurrection and not a physical one.
- Believers have already been raised because the resurrection is a spiritual one and not a literal, physical one.

This brief outline of full Preterism demonstrates that A.D. 70 is the focal point or pinnacle of redemptive history. Full Preterism has assigned a theological significance to A.D. 70 that makes the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple the most significant event in Scripture subsequent to the incarnation and the cross. A.D. 70 is the event in Scripture that closes one age and inaugurates the unending age to come, promised by the writers of the New Testament. In making this assertion, full Preterism has missed the correct interpretation of passages such as Matthew 24 and has come away from that text with an incomplete view of its intended meaning, which has resulted in a confused and incomplete eschatology.

The Eschatology of the Old Testament

I must digress for a moment in order to establish what I believe is a fundamental error in full Preterism’s hermeneutic. Before we discuss Matthew 24 and related passages, we must talk about the eschatological anticipation of the Old Testament and the role it played with the Jews of Jesus’ day concerning the coming of the Messiah. To do this, we will ask two important questions: First, what kind of picture does the Old Testament, without the aid of the New Testament, paint for us concerning the coming of the Messiah? Second, what did the Jews of Jesus’ day anticipate would occur when the Messiah came? The answers to these questions will accomplish two things: First, they will aid in our interpretation of passages like Matthew 24 because they will help us to understand how the disciples thought at that

⁷ Again, I acknowledge the differences within full Preterism and am attempting to combine the major points of all that I have read by different Preterist authors. Not every full Preterist will agree with every point I am going to make.

moment. This will help us understand what they meant when they asked, “When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3). This is an important interpretive tool. We must always seek to understand the context by asking some key questions: Who is speaking? To whom are they speaking? About what are they speaking? In what manner are they speaking? How would their original audience have understood them? This last question is vital to a correct understanding of the author’s intent in this passage. We want to know what Jesus intended the disciples to learn from his words, and why Matthew included them in his Gospel. What is Matthew’s point? Matthew’s theme in his Gospel is that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah who brings the kingdom of heaven to earth and his intended audience is Jewish. Matthew’s readers did not need Jewish customs explained, they knew all about them. Matthew intends for his Jewish readers to understand that Jesus is the Messiah, the promised son of David, who brings the promised kingdom, but it is a heavenly kingdom, not an earthly one. Second, the answers to these questions will help us to build the framework for addressing the more difficult issues posed by full Preterism, because it is at this point that full Preterism fails to sufficiently recognize the distinction between what the Old Testament promised concerning the coming of the Messiah and what the New Testament explains about its fulfillment.

The first question we will explore is the kind of picture the Old Testament, without the aid of the New Testament, gives us concerning the coming of the Messiah. To answer this question, we must talk about the covenant God made with King David. God promised David an everlasting kingdom and told him that one of his descendants would reign from David’s throne in Jerusalem forever (2 Samuel 7:16, Psalm 89:3-4). This is important to understand because David prefigures Christ, but that is not clear from the Old Testament alone. In confirming the covenant he made with David, God tells the prophet Nathan:

And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies. (2 Samuel 7:10-11)

Years later, the prophet Isaiah restated this promise of a ruler from David over Jerusalem:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:6-9)

Ezekiel echoes the same theme:

“My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees.

They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever." (Ezekiel 37:24-28)

The original audience to whom these passages were addressed would have understood them thusly: First, the promised Messiah would liberate Israel from her enemies and establish a literal, physical kingdom centered in Jerusalem. He would remove the wicked nations from around Israel and give her final and complete rest from all who oppress her. The Baker Dictionary of Theology makes this interesting point,

It is noteworthy that the word Messiah does not appear at all in the OT [the AV of Dan. 9:25 is incorrect; it ought to read 'an anointed one'], and only rarely in the intertestamental literature. The primary sense of the title is 'king,' as the anointed man of God, but it also suggests election, i.e., the king was chosen, elect, and therefore honored. It could scarcely be otherwise than that it referred to a political leader, for in its early stages Israel sought only a ruler, visible and powerful, who would reign here and now. But the entire evidence of later Judaism points to a Messiah not only as king, but as eschatological king, a ruler who would appear at the end time.⁸

Second, both Isaiah and Ezekiel picture the ruler who is to come as a political ruler who would establish David's Kingdom in Jerusalem forever. He will govern Israel from David's throne in Jerusalem. This anticipated son of David would liberate Israel from her physical enemies and lead the Jews into peace and prosperity as he rules from David's throne in Jerusalem.⁹ Third, there is not a hint of a first and second coming in the promises given David. There is only one appearing of this future ruler in the promises given David.

This answers our first question, what kind of picture does the Old Testament, without the aid of the New Testament, paint for us concerning the coming of the Messiah? The portrait Scripture paints is that the Old Testament leaves its readers with the expectation that the Messiah is coming to establish his rule in Jerusalem and to rescue the nation of Israel.¹⁰ While the Old Testament portrays both a suffering Servant (Isaiah 53) and a ruling Messiah (Micah 5:1), any clear reference to a conflation of the two is lacking. The Old Testament presents three important distinct figures: Messiah, the Son of Man, and the Suffering Servant

⁸ Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 710

⁹ David prefigured or typified Christ and the promises given to him are a physical picture of the kingdom of God. The Davidic covenant is not given much ink in the New Testament except to tell us that the physical resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father is its fulfillment (Acts 2:22-36, 13:32-39). God's promise to David is already fulfilled in the New Testament era, and the New Testament does not anticipate a future, literal reign of Jesus Christ from David's throne in Jerusalem. There is more information about this subject on our web site at www.ids.org.

¹⁰ The Old Testament is fuzzy at best in any clear details of more than one appearance of Messiah.

(four, if you count the Prophet like Moses). Readers of the Old Testament would have had no reason to identify these figures with each other. We must keep them separate in our thinking as we read the Old Testament. It is not until Jesus comes and claims all these figures as his own that these three (or four) are fused into one. Imagine his disciples' confusion when he told them that he must suffer and die (Matthew 16:21). He had just confirmed that he was the Messiah. Suffering and death does not belong to Messiah, but to the Suffering Servant. Not only that, but Peter had just made the connection between the Son of Man and Messiah (Matthew 16:13-16). Now Jesus adds the Servant to his person as well. His disciples must have been staggered --- all these Old Testament expectations rolled into one person --- their teacher, Jesus of Nazareth!

Our second question addresses what the Jews of Jesus' day anticipated would occur when the Messiah came. This question is inseparable from the first one and is actually a by-product of it. To answer it, let us turn our attention to five New Testament examples of what the Jews of Jesus' day expected with the coming of the Messiah.

The Anticipation of the Jews

Simeon serves as our first example of what the Jews anticipated with the coming of Messiah. This narrative is found in Luke 2:25-38. In the context of the passage, Joseph and Mary appeared at the temple after the days of their purification were over to consecrate Jesus and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with the Law of Moses (Leviticus 12:1-8). The Holy Spirit had somehow revealed to Simeon that he would see the Christ before his death (vs. 26) and when Simeon saw Jesus, he recognized him as the anointed Messiah. Notice his expectation of the events surrounding the coming of the Messiah. The text tells us that he "was waiting for the consolation of Israel" (vs. 25). In other words, Simeon was anticipating a Messiah that would rescue and console Israel upon his arrival. His eschatology was Israel-centered and his expectation was for the liberation of Israel from her oppressors, as God had promised David.

In this same context, Anna the prophetess serves as our second example. She may have seen what had just transpired with Simeon and probably heard him say what he said about Jesus, because Luke tells us that she came up to them at that very moment and "she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (vs. 38). Anna's eschatology also was Israel-centered and she anticipated the literal fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. She was waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem and she identified Jesus as the Redeemer – the one who, by his coming, would liberate Jerusalem from her enemies.

John the Baptist serves as our third example of what the Jews of Jesus' time anticipated with the coming of Messiah. In chapter 3 of his Gospel, Matthew writes that John came as the forerunner to the Messiah and preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (vs. 2). Later in the same chapter, he tells us what he meant when he said, "the kingdom of heaven is near":

I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in

his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:11-12)

John is using Old Testament judgment language throughout this passage, from verse 7 to verse 12. It is *all judgment*. John contrasts his baptism with water for repentance with the Messiah's baptism of fire for judgment. The one who brings the baptism of fire is Jesus, and the means he uses to accomplish it is the Holy Spirit. This is no promise of a second blessing, as our charismatic friends would have us believe, but it is a terrifying threat of judgment. Isaiah chapters 3 and 4 are a good source from which to demonstrate this, especially 4:4, where we read of "cleansing by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire." The Pharisees and Sadducees would have been familiar with the Old Testament language that John employed, and what that language signified. They would have understood everything in John's diatribe against them as threats of judgment. John is telling the Pharisees and Sadducees that the kingdom long promised is at hand, and its coming brings wrath and judgment.

Because of the subsequent revelation of the New Testament, we know that the baptism of the Holy Spirit was accomplished on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 with the beginning of the church and the era of the New Covenant (Acts 1:5). Although this does not look like judgment from our end of the glass, it was judgment nevertheless.¹¹ The kingdom had come, and judgment had begun to fall on Israel. The judgment events depicted in verse 12 are part of the age of the kingdom; they just occur later than the judgment events depicted in verse 11. It is safe to say that John did not understand that one judgment event would *inaugurate* the kingdom [baptism of fire by the Holy Spirit] and other judgment events would occur *during* the kingdom reign, eventually resulting in the final judgment events that would *consummate* the kingdom. For this reason we can say that verse 12 contains judgment language reserved for the end of the age (cf. Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43), but the judgment described in the entire discourse begins with the coming of the Holy Spirit and *continues* through out this present kingdom age until the end. It is doubtful whether John made the connection that this judgment refers to two comings of the Messiah, separated by a great span of time. John is using Old Testament separation language to describe judgment (Isaiah 41:1-16; Jeremiah 51; Micah 4; and Joel 3:13), and that is exactly what happens throughout the age between Pentecost and the final judgment. The gospel separates the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the chaff, the non-elect from the elect. This process goes on until the final separation at the end. *It is judgment all the time until the ultimate, final judgment* (Romans 1:18, "the wrath of God *is being* revealed...").

The reason I can say it is doubtful that John recognized this type of separation in his prediction is because he later expresses doubt that Jesus is the anticipated Messiah and his doubt is based on Jesus' own actions: "When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" (Matthew 11:2-3) This means that John thought Jesus should be doing something other than what he was doing and the fact that he was not performing the way John thought he should, gave John pause to question Jesus. It seems safe to reason that John anticipated the same thing that Simeon and Anna anticipated; namely, the redemption of

¹¹ I direct the reader to my paper entitled, *John 15: The Dilemma of an Old Covenant Jew*. It can be found on-line at www.ids.org.

Jerusalem as promised to David centuries earlier. Jesus responds with the proof of who He is by pointing John's disciples to the evidences of His ministry (Matthew 11:4-5, Luke 4:22, cf. Isaiah 61:1-2). This evidence however, is restricted to Christ's first coming and any kind of distinction between a first and second coming may have been foreign to John's thinking at that point in time. John was anticipating Messiah's work as judgment of Israel's enemies and the establishment of a physical, literal kingdom. Jesus was not acting like Messiah; he was acting like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. John probably had not fused the two into one, and Jesus' actions puzzled him. Jesus' proof of his ministry may have puzzled him more. The Old Testament predictions that Jesus used blend the bestower of favor and the executer of judgment into one person (Isaiah 61:1-2). It is as if Jesus is saying, "This kingdom business, John, is about both favor and judgment. You are witnessing only one aspect at the present. Those who persevere will understand more. Do not give up hope that I will bring in the kingdom with judgment. You are seeing the Servant aspect of my ministry. I am also the King. The Servant and the King are one." Jesus does not refer John back to Messiah texts; he refers him to Servant texts. We know that the Servant and Messiah are one; John did not have that perspective until Jesus showed him. It is not clear from this text that any concept of two comings of Messiah had entered John's thinking at all, nor does Jesus make that point. His point here is that Messiah and the Servant are one and the same person, and that his work is to fulfill both roles. It is more a matter of ministry identity than time identity. I do not think we can read even an oblique reference to two comings of Messiah into this passage. This passage reinforces the idea that a two-part appearance of Messiah was foreign to the Jews of Jesus' day, but it does not introduce the concept into their thinking at this point.

For our fourth example of what the Jews expected with the coming of the Messiah, we will use the account of Cleopas and the unnamed disciple on the road to Emmaus. This narrative is found in Luke 24:13-27. The resurrected Lord joins these two disciples as they walk along the road to Emmaus and he begins to discourse with them about his death on the Cross, days earlier (vv. 13-18). We then get a glimpse into how they viewed the coming of Messiah and what they expected as a result. They said, "The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:20-21). This is an amazing statement; even after spending time with Jesus during his ministry, these two disciples still did not catch what was going on, but were looking instead to a literal earthly kingdom. They failed to understand *all* that the Old Testament prophets wrote concerning the Messiah:

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe *all* that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in *all* the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27, *emphasis mine*)

These two disciples failed to understand all that the Old Testament prophets wrote about Messiah because they failed to see that all the figures of future visitations from God were tied up in one person: The Prophet like Moses; The Son of Man; The Suffering Servant, and The Son of David. Messiah encompasses all of them, but that would not have been clear without the explanation provided by Jesus.

For our fifth and final example, we will look at the eleven apostles and our text will be Acts 1:6. It reads, “So when they met together, they asked him, ‘Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’” An Israel-centric eschatology is a common thread that binds the disciples prior to Pentecost. The unnamed disciple on the road to Emmaus was not one of these eleven, but both he and Cleopas reported to the eleven what the Lord had said to them (Luke 24:33). Evidently, the eleven still did not grasp it. Why? The promise made to David no doubt plays a major role and the disciples continued to expect a literal restoration of Israel with Jesus as the King on David’s throne. What makes this even more intriguing is that the events recorded in Acts chapter one occur more than thirty days after the event on the road to Emmaus, and the Lord had appeared numerous times to all of the disciples since then. Now he is about to ascend into heaven; the opening of New Covenant era is ten days away, and yet the burning question on the disciples’ minds is still “when are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” It was not until after Pentecost that the apostles were able to accurately interpret Scripture and put the Davidic covenant in its proper hermeneutical place (Acts 2:22-36). When the disciples understood the Davidic covenant in its proper hermeneutical context, they explained it to the crowd gathered for the Feast of Pentecost. The people who heard the explanation were “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). Not only had they rejected God’s Messiah when he came, but they would have realized from the Old Testament Scriptures that the coming of Messiah meant judgment. Hence the urgency of their question, “What must we do to be saved?” This is not so much a soteriological question as an eschatological one. “How may we escape the sure judgment that comes along with Messiah and the Holy Spirit?” Peter’s answer addresses their fears of judgment, “Repent and be baptized, and the Holy Spirit will come to you, not in the fire of judgment as threatened in the Prophets, but as the gift that was promised to Abraham.”

For the Jews of Jesus’ day, the coming of the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God meant that the Messiah would rule from David’s throne in Jerusalem bringing with it restoration, comfort, and peace to the nation of Israel, and judgment to her enemies. Jesus’ definition of the kingdom of God caught the Jews off guard:

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:20)

They expected a literal fulfillment to the covenant God made with David and missed the point that what God had promised in picture form to David would find its fulfillment in a spiritual nation under the New Covenant, the church (1 Peter 2:9-10). We now have some insight into how the disciples viewed the end of the age and coming of the Messiah to Israel. We can take that information into Matthew 24 with us, but first, we must take another short detour.

What Are The Signs of the Second Coming?

What are the signs of the second coming? Are we told in Scripture that there are indicators that the second coming is about to occur, or is it an event that takes the world by

surprise? To answer this question, look at the clear references in Scripture that every eschatological system agrees are a reference to the second coming. We will start with Matthew 24:36-41.

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.” (Matthew 24:36-41)

In describing what the second coming will be like, there is a comparison made to the flood of Noah’s time. Prior to the flood, life moved along in the ordinary way, right up to the day that Noah entered the ark and the flood arrived. For the people around Noah, there was nothing unusual about the day he entered the ark. That day looked just like the day before it and the day before that. It was business as usual, right up to the day of the flood; and when the flood came, it came suddenly and without warning or signs. Jesus teaches that this is “how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.” When he returns, the non-elect will be taken into judgment, suddenly and unexpectedly,¹² and the elect will inherit the place prepared for them since the creation of the world (Matthew 25:34). The illustration of two men working in the field and two women grinding at the hand mill is an indication that life will be moving at its normal pace when the Lord returns. Our dispensational friends stretch this illustration too far, and make it correspond in every point to Christ’s return. It is used merely to emphasize separation; not who goes first and the time interval between takings. His return is unexpected by those taken into judgment. The second coming occurs suddenly and without warning. The passage continues:

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” (Matthew 24:42-44)

In Matthew’s account, Jesus tells his hearers to keep watch and stay alert for the second coming, but he does not provide any indicators to watch for as signs that it is about to occur. The coming of Jesus Christ is “at an hour when you do not expect him” and he says that we “do not know on what day your Lord will come.” According to Matthew, the second coming is a surprise event that, even though anticipated by the elect, occurs unexpectedly and

¹² According to this passage, the *Left Behind Series* has it all wrong. In the context of these verses, those taken away are all the unbelievers (vs. 3) taken to judgment just like all the unbelievers of Noah’s day were swept away by the flood and those left behind are those in Christ who escape God’s wrath just like the 8 people in the ark escaped God’s wrath in Noah’s day. From that point of view, *no one* is left behind!

without warning. The day of the second coming is just another day until that moment. At that moment, the coming of Jesus Christ serves as its own sign:

“At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” (Matthew 24:30-31)

The only sign of the coming of Jesus Christ that Matthew gives us is Jesus Christ Himself appearing in the sky. The “sign of the Son of Man” is the “Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.” This is apocalyptic language borrowed from Daniel 7:13 and repeated in Rev. 1:7. It is used poetically in Psalm 104:1-4. However, the idea of God’s presence in a cloud is not confined to figurative pictures; we find it used literally in Exodus where it functions as a tool of guidance (13:21), of separation (14:19-20; 24:15-18), of confirmation (19:9, 16-19), and as a tool of judgment (16:10). Isaiah 19:1 uses it as a tool of judgment, although there it could and probably should be taken figuratively. Matthew’s Jewish hearers could not have failed to grasp all the implications of his choice of language. Paul reiterates the suddenness of the second coming, using the analogy of a thief:

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3)

Although the second coming takes place suddenly and without warning, bringing unexpected judgment on the unbeliever, it is the eagerly anticipated hope of the believer. Even though the believer does not know the day of its occurrence, he anticipates its arrival as a source of comfort and a day of glory.

But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. (1 Thessalonians 5:4-10)

Peter adds:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. (2 Peter 3:10-13)

While the unbeliever is taken away to judgment at the second coming, the believer enters into the full reward of heaven and eternal life with Jesus Christ. The second coming is an event that the believer embraces, anticipates, and welcomes because “God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” at his coming. We are “looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.” This point becomes important as we discuss the rest of Matthew 24 in the next section.

Matthew 24: New Testament Light on an Old Testament Eschatology

We are now ready to grapple with Matthew 24 and to begin to piece together all that we have said as it applies to that text. The full Preterist argues that everything in Matthew 24, including the second coming (vv. 36-51) occurred in A.D. 70 and was for that generation (vv. 32-25). Russell makes mention of this when he says:

It is impossible to read this section and fail to perceive its distinct reference to the period between our Lord’s crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem. Every word is spoken to the disciples, and to them alone.¹³

The majority of the Lord’s discourse in Matthew 24 is loaded with signs or indicators that something catastrophic is going to take place. This is in response to the disciple’s question in verse 3:

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:1-3)

The disciples ask the question, “When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” in response to Jesus’ prediction that the temple would one day be destroyed. The disciples equated the destruction of the temple with the coming of Christ and the end of the age. For them, these three events were the same thing and would occur simultaneously. The question we must ask, based on what we have already

¹³ Russell, *The Parousia*, 69

established concerning what the disciples thought was going to happen, is if they were correct in making such a connection. Full Preterism makes the mistake of assuming that they were and then moves through the remainder of Matthew 24 based on that assumption. I have already shown that the disciples (and others of Jesus' day) are not a good source for an accurate depiction of the coming of the Messiah at any point prior to Pentecost (Acts 2), because their expectation was one of a literal, physical fulfillment of the Davidic covenant within Israel. You will remember that it was not until after Pentecost that they fully understood how the Davidic covenant was fulfilled (Acts 2:29-36). Even after the resurrection and before Pentecost, the disciples did not accurately comprehend God's eschatological timetable (Luke 24:13-27) and were asking badly worded questions as a result (Acts 1:6).

The disciples' question in Matthew 24:3 is no different. For them, the destruction of the temple, the return of Christ, and the end of the age were the same thing. Their view of the return of Christ and of the end of the age was flawed at this point in time and not a reliable source from which to build an eschatological system of any kind. The disciples' question is actually a two-part question even though that is not how they posed it. Their question is worded based on their Old Testament eschatology, but Jesus answers it with a New Testament interpretation. Part one is "when will these things be?" and part two is "what will be the signs of your coming and of the end of the age?" Part one refers to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and part two refers to the second coming and the end of this present evil age. The answer Jesus gives the disciples in the remainder of Matthew 24 bears this out and is a New Testament interpretation of an Old Testament eschatology. Preterism misses that point altogether and has built a large part of its foundation on a badly worded question without proper consideration of the context it was asked in and the answer given it by Jesus. Let us look at the evidence more closely.

The controversial portion of Matthew 24 does not begin until verse 15. The discourse from verse 4 through verse 14 is a general description of the present age we are living in up to the time of the end (vs. 14). The discussion becomes more specific, however, starting in verse 15. The text reads:

"So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel--let the reader understand--then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."
(Matthew 24:15-16)

Our Dispensational, Premillennial brothers interpret this passage as a reference to a future antichrist who will one day set up his image in a literal temple in Jerusalem. Using the parallel account found in Luke 21, we are forced into a different conclusion:

"When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near." (Luke 21:20)

Allowing Luke to aid in our translation of Matthew forces us to conclude that the abomination that causes desolation found in Daniel and spoken of in Matthew 24 is not

something relegated to the far distant future of the end of the age, but is a prediction of a time when an army lays siege to Jerusalem and desolates it. This siege occurred in A.D. 70 when Titus the Roman devastated Jerusalem, resulting in the destruction of the temple as predicted by Jesus in Matthew 24:2. It is the future for his hearers, but not for us. Using Luke to interpret Matthew, the “abomination that causes desolation” can have no other meaning.

It is important to note that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70 is loaded with signs or indictors that is about to occur. This is important to note because we have already demonstrated that the second coming is not preceded by any signs, but as it was in Noah’s day, is sudden and unexpected. Life is going on as usual when the Lord suddenly returns. This distinction is an important aid in interpreting Matthew 24 and can be illustrated as follows:

Second Coming	Destruction of Jerusalem
No Signs	Preceded by Signs

In our interpretation of Matthew 24, recognition of this distinction is a significant help. We dare not think as the disciples thought at this point, because their expectation of Christ’s coming was distorted. Instead, we must recognize the flaw in their thinking as has been pointed out, and make the distinction that in Matthew 24, the signs refer to the temple’s destruction in A.D. 70, while there are no sign references to the second coming. This is consistent with how the rest of the New Testament portrays the second coming of Christ as a sign-less, sudden event. Matthew 24 either contradicts the rest of the New Testament by telling us there are signs that precede the second coming, or else there is more than one event addressed in response to the disciples’ question. Since there are no contradictions in Scripture, we conclude the latter.

Using the signs/no signs approach to Matthew 24, we can now cite specific verses that must refer to each event:

Second Coming	Destruction of Jerusalem
No Signs vs. 14 vv. 27-31 ¹⁴ vv. 36-51	Preceded by Signs vv. 15-25 vv. 32-35 ¹⁵

Another indication that there is more going on in Matthew 24 than an explanation of the second coming is the emphasis placed on warning the elect to escape. We remember Peter’s words concerning the second coming cited earlier, “But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:13). These words are a reminder that the second coming is a wonderful event for the elect and something we eagerly anticipate and embrace. If all of Matthew 24 is looking forward to

¹⁴ The only sign of the second coming is the second coming (vs. 30). The judgment language of verse 29 may or may not be literal (cf. Acts 2:16-20).

¹⁵ I deal with these verses shortly. For now, my point is that the signs of Matthew 24 point to A.D. 70, while the second coming remains cloaked and sign less in Matthew 24.

the second coming, why are the elect warned to escape and told that they may not survive it (vv. 15-22)? If this is the second coming, would not the elect run to it and not away from it? Are we to assume that those in Judea who are told to run to the mountains (vs. 16) are all non-elect Judeans? Are we to assume also that all of those on the rooftops (vs. 17) and all of the pregnant women at that time (vs. 19) are only the non-elect? Should we also assume that the survivors of this tragic event (vs. 22) are only the elect? Why are the elect told ahead of time to escape in the first place if A.D. 70 is simultaneous to the second coming? Where would they go (vv. 27-28) and why would they want to run away (vs. 31)? The event of A.D. 70 is not for the elect and so, the elect are warned ahead of time to get away from it:

When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. (Luke 21:20-21)

We conclude that the references in Matthew 24 to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70 do not correspond in any way with the second coming. Instead, A.D. 70 is a judgment event aimed at Israel:

For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. (Luke 21:22-23)

The judgment poured out in A.D.70 is an expression of God’s wrath toward the Old Covenant nation of Israel. His wrath against “this people” (vs. 23) is in “fulfillment of all that has been written” (vs. 22).¹⁶

Second Coming	Destruction of Jerusalem
No Signs	Preceded by Signs
Good News for the Elect	Bad News for the Elect
The World is Judged	Israel is Judged

There is another distinction within the context of Matthew 24 that lends support to the conclusion that Jesus’ reply to the disciples is a two-part response, even though the disciples viewed it as one unified question. That distinction is the wording the Lord uses in referencing each event. Concerning the second coming, he says, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36). Moments before his ascension, Jesus tells the disciples, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:6). Neither Jesus nor the angels in God’s presence knew the time of his coming, and Jesus told the disciples that they did not need to know. This is information that the Father alone possesses. That being the case, how is it that in Matthew 24 Jesus can say,

¹⁶ The only Biblical-theological significance to A.D. 70 is the prediction of its occurrence. The Old Covenant was already obsolete prior to A.D. 70 and that date serves as God’s final nail in an otherwise already biblically obsolete covenant (Hebrews 8:13).

“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. (Matthew 24:32-34)

Earlier, he had told the disciples:

“So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel--let the reader understand--then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.”
(Matthew 24:15-22)

How is it that Jesus can tell his disciples, “So when you see” these things happen, “flee,” when he also tells them “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36)? It is because the signs in Matthew 24 are associated with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and not associated with the second coming, which is without signs. For this reason, we can say that “this generation” mentioned in Matthew 24:32-25 must be the generation Jesus was addressing because they saw the signs alluded to by the parable of the fig tree. That generation did not pass until they saw all of the signs the Lord predicted would occur with the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

Second Coming	Destruction of Jerusalem
No Signs	Preceded by Signs
Good News for the Elect	Bad News for the Elect
The World is Judged	Israel is Judged
No One Knows When	“When You See...Armies”
No One Knows When	“This Generation” Sees It

Conclusion

Full Preterism has built a large part of its hermeneutic on a misinterpretation of the critical text of Matthew 24. Instead of laying the groundwork for how the disciples would have viewed the coming of the Messiah at that point in time and taking the time to examine carefully their Old Testament eschatology, they have used the disciples’ question in Matthew 24:3 as the framework from which to build their own system. This is a serious mistake

because it assumes their eschatological outlook at that point in time was a correct one. That assumption has led to a confusing misinterpretation of Matthew 24 and other passages and has led many astray in the process. By not recognizing the flaw in the disciples' eschatology prior to Pentecost, Full Preterism has embraced an Old Testament eschatology and given it a new name. The eschatology of Full Preterism is not completely unlike the disciples' eschatology prior to Acts chapter 2. As a result, full Preterism has elevated the events of A.D. 70 to an unbiblical status that the New Testament Scriptures will not allow. They have misinterpreted the predictions of Matthew chapter 24 resulting in a confused and fragmented eschatology that destroys the believer's hope and denies a physical resurrection of the body at Christ's glorious appearing.