

# How Are We Supposed to Discern the Signs of the Times When Jesus said that No One Knows the Day or Hour of His Return?

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## *Does Jesus Discourage or Encourage Discernment? Clarifying the Context and Message of Matthew 24*

One of the most quoted passages related to the end-times is Jesus' statement in Matthew 24:36:

*"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, but My Father only."*

As well as being among the most quoted it is also the most distorted and misunderstood. When people quote the verse, they use it to discourage discerning the hour of history that we're living in. But when Jesus said it, He said it to encourage it and to actually command it. In fact, that was the explicit purpose of the statement: Jesus was commanding the elect to do two things (1) Watch and (2) Know. Before we examine those two words, let's consider the context and main message of this chapter holistically.

In verse 3 Jesus is asked when the end of the age will come and what the signs will be. The next two chapters (24-25) is His answer. Chapter 24 contains the events and timing indicators that signal us telling us that the culmination is near. And chapter 25 contains three parables that point us in the right direction of how to be prepared for those events spoken of in Matthew 24.

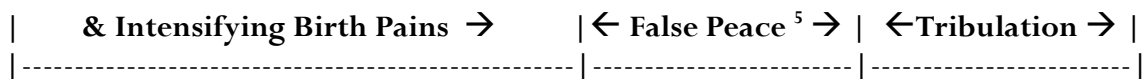
The events mentioned in Matthew 24 can be broken up into three sections and three distinct time frames that constitute the final generation:

1. Jesus describes the events of history that are not unique to the end times <sup>1</sup> that **do not signal** the nearness of His return but lead up to in an ever increasing intensity: these are called the “beginning of sorrows” – see verses 4-8. The intensification process most likely began with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the possession of Jerusalem in 1967. <sup>2</sup> There have always been wars, famines, earthquakes and the rest. These are not signs. The intensification of these trends alongside the rebirth of the nation of Israel and the emergence of Antichrist is what makes them signs. And their intensification is to us a signal.
  
2. Jesus describes events prior to the Great Tribulation that are unique to the end times and that **do signal** the nearness of His return: intensified “birth pains.” In the midst of this intensification Antichrist will emerge and instate unprecedented peace. This peace will last 3 ½ years. This begins the final 7 years of history. <sup>3</sup> This will be marked by the emergence of the greatest ministries of false prophets that history has ever known. <sup>4</sup>
  
3. Jesus describes events that constitute the Great Tribulation that are unique to the end times that **signal the final 42 months** until His return: “great tribulation” – see verses 21-22.

Notice the progression from “**the beginning of sorrows**” to the intensification of “**birth pains**” in the first 3 ½ year period and the intensification of the “**great tribulation**” in the final 3 ½ year period. Deception, war, famine and earthquakes do not serve as signals pointing to the end of the age. These are not unique to the final generation. What makes them unique *in the final generation* are their *frequency, intensity and parallel occurrences* with the existence of Israel as a nation and the presence of Antichrist. These trends and events serve as signs only when they intensify to such a degree *alongside* the prophetic events that signal the final 3 ½ years of the great tribulation.

### **THE THREE PROPHETIC SEASONS**

#### **Rebirth of the Nation of Israel**



*Duration: One Generation* <sup>6</sup>

*Duration: 3 ½ yrs* <sup>7</sup>

*Duration: 3 ½ yrs* <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Like deception, war, famine and earthquakes. These are not unique to the final generation. What makes them unique in the final generation is their frequency and intensity. These trends and events serve as signs only when they intensify to such a degree alongside the prophetic events that signal the final 3 1/3 years of the great tribulation.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 24:4-8; Lk 21:23, 25

<sup>3</sup> Daniel 9:27; 1 Thessalonians 5:3; Revelation 17:2-6

<sup>4</sup> This season of false peace is most clearly foreshadowed by the wake of WWI and the unusual emergence of Adolph Hitler. The season peace was abruptly ended resulting in the death of 50 million people and 6 million Jews.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:3; Daniel 9:27; Isaiah 28

Consider the following verses that explain the progression from normal to intense to overwhelming (and note the phrases emphasized):

<sup>5</sup> *Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. 6 You will hear of wars and rumors of wars...for all these things must come to pass, **but the end is not yet.** 7 For nation will rise against nation...and there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes...8 All these are **the beginning** of sorrows [birth pangs]. (Mt. 24:5-8)*

<sup>3</sup> *When they say, "**Peace and safety!**" [first 3 ½ years] then **sudden destruction** comes upon them, as **labor pains** [final 3 ½ years; Great Tribulation] upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. (1 Thessalonians 5:3)*

*"For **then** there will be a great tribulation, such as has **not been** since the beginning of the world until this time, **nor ever** shall be. And unless those days were shortened **no flesh would survive...**" (Matthew 24:21-22)*

This progression takes place over a period of seven years. That “sudden destruction” and that “great tribulation” begin in the middle of those seven years and kick off the final 3 ½ years:

<sup>27</sup> ***He** [Antichrist] shall confirm a covenant with many [nations] for **one week** [7 years]; but **in the middle of the week** [between the first and final 3 ½ years] he shall bring **an end to sacrifice** [in the Jerusalem Temple]. (Daniel 9:27)<sup>9</sup>*

It's clear that this event triggers the final 3 ½ years when we see Jesus' quotation of the passage in Matthew 24 and when we see the prominence of the final 3 ½ years in the whole of Scripture.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 24:33-34

<sup>7</sup> Daniel 9:27

<sup>8</sup> *42 months* (Rev. 11:2; 13:5), *1260 days* (Rev. 11:3; 12:6), *time, times and half a time* (Rev. 12:14; Dan. 7:25; 12:7), and *Middle of the Week* (Dan. 9:27), the *Great Tribulation* (Rev. 7:14), *Jacob's Trouble* (Jer. 30:7).

<sup>9</sup> Many argue that the “he” in this passage is not Antichrist but Jesus and that the “middle of the week” is the death of Jesus after His 3 ½ year ministry. The problems with this theory are abundant. Among them, it makes nonsense of the second 3 ½ years. The sacrifices didn't stop after Jesus died; they ended in 70 AD when Jerusalem was destroyed. One of the main messages of the book of Daniel was the ministry of the coming world leader known as Antichrist. Moreover, the prophecy as a whole was a blueprint for the whole of human history. When Jesus died those prophecies mentioned in verse 24 did not come to pass. This is yet to come.

As we continue, keep in mind, Matthew 24:15-22 is where Jesus explains the primary timing indicators that will signal this final 3 ½ years. That's what He is doing. The scriptures for the last 3½ years of this age include 6 different expressions: **42 months** (Rev. 11:2; 13:5), **1260 days** (Rev. 11:3; 12:6), **time, times and half a time** (Rev. 12:14; Dan. 7:25; 12:7), and **Middle of the Week** (Dan. 9:27), the **Great Tribulation** (Rev. 7:14), **Jacob's Trouble** (Jer. 30:7). The 3½ year time period is designated in three different ways numerically so as to render it impossible to spiritualize, thus making it symbolic of something other than 3½ years.

### *The Use of Timing Indicators in Matthew 24*

Jesus makes reference to the prophecy in Daniel 9:27 in 24:15 as He begins to explain how the timing indicators function and how we're to understand them in Scripture and in the future on the world stage:

*"Therefore, **when** you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the **holy place** [the Temple sanctuary] (whoever reads **let him understand**), the let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains..."*

Pay close attention to the passage. Jesus uses the word "when" which communicates timing and indication. Then He quotes Daniel 9:27, which just so happens to be the most important verse in the Old Testament about the timing of the end of the age, and tells two primary signs. The two signs are "the abomination of desolation" and its presence in "the holy place." I separate the two because the rebuilding of the Temple is a very important sign that will precede the abomination of desolation.

He says that *when* these events are witnessed all in Judea should flee into the mountains. Because when the abomination of desolation is established in Jerusalem we can be sure that there is half a week (3 ½) years remaining until this age ends. That event will trigger the "great tribulation." Then He describes that hour of history by saying:

*"For **then** there will be a great tribulation, such as has **not been** since the beginning of the world until this time, **nor ever** shall be. And unless those days were shortened **no flesh would survive...**" (Matthew 24:21-22)*

Notice the word "then." The word is communicating timing. From there Jesus explains the culmination of the great tribulation by describing the physical return of Jesus to the earth and the rapture of the elect (24:23-31).

From there Jesus moves onto a parable about growing figs (24:32-35). He says that in the same way that one can discern what season it is by the figs on the fig tree so too can we discern what season it is by what's taking place on the earth. There we read:

***When** you see all these things, **KNOW** that it is **near**--at the doors!  
**Assuredly...**this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place... (Mt. 24:33-34)*

Notice the words “when,” “know,” “near” and “assuredly.” These words are so important to understand so that we see the central message of the chapter. Because, remember, the following verse is “*Of that day and hour no one knows.*” In order to understand what is meant by that phrase we need to see that it is sandwiched between 35 verses of prophetic signs and timing indicators on the front side and 61 verses of prophetic parables explaining why we must understand those timing indicators and respond accordingly. THAT is a very important fact! That is, that the statement is right in the middle of the clearest and most explicit explanation of the signs of the end of the age. That context plays a massive role in helping us determine how to interpret this statement. Before moving on, let’ recap by outlining the chapter by section. Take notice of the prominence of Jesus’ use of prophetic signs and commands to notice them:

1. The disciples ask to know the signs of the end of the age (24:3)
2. Jesus tells them the signs (24:4-31)
  - a. He tells them 12 signs indicating the beginning of sorrows (24:4-8)
  - b. He tells them the trends that will signal the intensification (24:9-14)
  - c. He tells them when the sign that triggers the final 3 ½ years (24:15)
  - d. He commands those who see it to do certain things (24:16-20)
  - e. He describes the intensity of the final 3 ½ years (24:21-22)
  - f. He describes what His return will be like (24:23-31)
3. He tells them a parable to command them to know the hour of His return (24:32-25)
4. He tells them no one knows when it’ll happen (24:36)
5. He likens it to the days of Noah (24:37-39)
6. He commands the elect to know the hour of His return by telling a series of parables about preparedness (24:40-25:46)

Now the question is: Would Jesus give so much detail and explicit information about the timing of the end of the age to then negate it all by saying “But, no one knows, so don’t worry about it”? No! The central message of the chapter is the requirement of knowing the hour of His return! Jesus says clearly repeatedly that we expected to “know” the hour of His return.

Jesus said “of that day and hour no one knows” not to discourage people from knowing the timing of the end of the age but to command it. The context and the explicit information pertaining to the signs of the times indicates that the phrase “no one knows” is meant to be understood as “Pay attention!” He did not say “No one can know.” Nor did He say “No one will know.” He said, “Right now, as I am about to go the cross, and am anticipating a few thousand years of history between now and then, no one knows the hour. The timing indicators are still a long way off. In other words, **right now you don’t know, but then you will be required to.**”

### *The Use of the Word “Know” in Matthew 24*

Those who argue that we aren't supposed to "know," need to explain why Jesus used the word "know" so many times in this chapter. The issue of knowing is central to His discourse on the final generation and it must be central in our understanding of it.

*"When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you **KNOW** that summer is near." (v. 32)*

*"When you see all these things, **KNOW** that it is near--at the doors!" (v. 33)*

*"Of that day and hour no one **KNOWS**..." (v. 36)*

*"...they were eating and drinking and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark and did not **KNOW** until the flood came and took them all away..." (v. 38-39)*

*"Watch therefore, for you do not **KNOW** what hour your Lord is coming..." (v. 42)*

*"But **KNOW** this, that if the master of the house had **KNOWN** what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into..." (v. 43)*

Seven times we read the word "know." Five times out of the seven it is used as a command to "know" the hour of His return by discerning the signs. And twice it is used to say that no one "knows" the signs.

Now either Jesus didn't actually mean to command us to be ready for His return by observing the timing indicators mentioned, OR, He actually meant what He said and that we need to watch because we won't know anything unless we notice those signals. Considering that five times we are commanded to "know," we're safe to conclude that he expects us to. Moreover, it's safe to conclude that the reason He has to command it is because if we don't pay attention, we won't "know." Being commanded to "know" is what we need in order to not be counted in the multitudes that don't "know" in an hour when it is possible for us to not "know" but when we are required to "know."

The key verse of the seven is Matthew 24:38-39. Noah's generation was told and yet they did not know the flood was coming until it came. THAT tells us what we're to understand what "no one knows" means (more on this in a moment).

### *Two Parables About Knowing the Day and Hour*

Between 24:32 and 25:46 there are a number of parables. I want to highlight two realities from two of the parables.

First, Jesus, immediately after saying that no one knows the day or hour of His return, says that the end times will be just like “the days of Noah” (See 24:37-39). I want to point out that Noah was told 120 years before the flood that the earth would be flooded in 120 years to the day. In other words, he knew the day and he knew the hour even though his generation did not. They didn’t know not because it was impossible to know but because they refused to know. Noah preached for those 120 years warning people about what was coming. And only 8 people entered the ark when it began to rain.

Noah’s 120 years will be parallel to our final 3 ½ years. We will warn our generation of the ‘flood’ to come. And the same thing will happen to our generation that happened to Noah’s – many will be taken away in judgment. That is what is meant by the one man being left in a field and one being taken (24:40-41). This doesn’t refer to the rapture (as is commonly taught) but the end time flood of judgment that consumes those who did not heed to word of the Lord and the signs of the times like Noah’s generation.

The second parable is of the faithful and evil servant in 24:45-51. Here we read about Jesus’ requirements for leadership over the church in the final generation. He says that if the leadership of the church does not “feed the people food in *due season*” it is equivalent to “beating” and making the people “drunk” (see 24:49).

How could these servants over their absent Master’s house feed people in due season if they are told they aren’t supposed to know the season?

The parable about Noah is with regards to the prophetic element of the final generation whereas the parable about the Servants is with regards to the leadership element of the final generation. In both parables we find the clear idea being communicated of the requirement upon us to know the hour of Jesus’ return.

### *The Central Message of Matthew 24-25*

Whether it is the prophetic timing indicators or the prophetic parables about those indicators the central message of these two chapters is clear: God is going to give the final generation clear signs that will serve as global ‘billboards’ telling us what’s happening and what we’re to do.

If we do not respond and if we refuse to “know,” then we will be held accountable. This is what Jesus thinks of those who refuse to obey Him in the hour of transition when He is giving clear instruction:

*The Pharisees...came testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven...**Hypocrites!** You know how to discern the face of the sky, but **you cannot discern the signs of the times.** A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign... (Mt. 16:1-4)*

***If you had known,** even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace...For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and **level you,***

*and your **children within you**, to the ground...because you did not know the time of your visitation. (Lk. 19:42-44)*

The idea that Jesus discourages and even condemns the discerning of the signs of the times is not what is meant by the statement “Of that day and hour no one knows.” The heart of this chapter is essential for us to understand in these days. The consequences of our decisions are unfathomable.