

Matthew 24:20

“End-Time Flight on the Sabbath”

“But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath.”

Within the scope of examining Bible prophecy, there is a diversity of approaches to Yeshua’s Olivet Discourse, principally found in Matthew 24,¹ not just in terms of pre-millennialism (the view that the Messiah returns before His thousand-year Millennial reign), but some of other perspectives, notably including the preterist view that the “end-times” largely took place in the First Century C.E. via the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans. Pre-millennialists will largely recognize how the Olivet Discourse includes statements rooted within the First Century C.E. world of Yeshua and His Disciples, but which have an importance for the future period of time which will immediately precede the Messiah’s return. The Lord specifically issued a warning about the Abomination of Desolation taking place, and subsequent to this there would need to be an evacuation of Messianic Believers from the city of Jerusalem:

“Therefore when you see the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION [Daniel 9:27²; 11:31³; 12:11⁴] which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days!” (Matthew 24:15-19).

Pre-millennial interpreters will widely concur that at the Abomination of Desolation, which will presumably take place in a rebuilt Third Temple (or more minimally, a Tabernacle, tent-like structure), that the antimessiah/antichrist will declare himself to be a god (2 Thessalonians 2:4)⁵ and will demand worship (Revelation 13:14-15).⁶ Following the emphasis of fleeing without going down into one’s home to retrieve possessions, etc., is Yeshua’s statement, “Pray that you will not have to escape in winter or on *Shabbat*” (CJB). **What is this intended to convey?**

Various examiners⁷ have concluded that the Matthew 24:20 reference to the Sabbath is only concerned with the Gospel of Matthew having a Jewish (or at least mainly Jewish) audience.⁸ Yet, immediately preceding this is a reference to the Abomination of Desolation, taking place on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, and subsequent to this is a required evacuation of the Messianic Believers from the city. The emphasis here is rightly recognized to involve how fleeing the city of Jerusalem on the Sabbath or *Shabbat* would be a major problem, with travel restrictions imposed by the civil authorities. This is, actually, recognized to be the issue in view, by those who hold to both a

¹ For a broad overview, from a pre-millennial, post-tribulational perspective, consult the article, “The End-Times: What Should We Expect?” by J.K. McKee, appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*.

² “And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations *will come* one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate” (Daniel 9:27).

³ “Forces from him will arise, desecrate the sanctuary fortress, and do away with the regular sacrifice. And they will set up the abomination of desolation” (Daniel 11:31).

⁴ “From the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished and the abomination of desolation is set up, *there will be* 1,290 days” (Daniel 12:11).

⁵ “[W]ho opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God” (2 Thessalonians 2:4).

⁶ “And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who had the wound of the sword and has come to life. And it was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast would even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed” (Revelation 13:14-15).

⁷ Nolland, *Matthew*, 974 represents the broad options; France, *Matthew*, pp 914-915 also represents the broad options, but notably with a First Century siege in view; Keener, *Matthew*, pp 578-581 is widely representative of a First Century siege, but perhaps with some futuristic component in play.

⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28*, Vol 33b (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 701-702; Boring, in *NIB*, 8:443.

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First Century fulfillment of Matthew 24,⁹ and those who hold to a pre-millennial futuristic view, with a rebuilt Third Temple and an Abomination of Desolation taking place in view of the modern world via mass media.

Even though some of us would be in disagreement with his apparent commitment to a pre-tribulation rapture,¹⁰ we can still agree with the basic summary offered by Messianic Jewish commentator Barney Kasdan on the Sabbath being mentioned in Matthew 24:20:

"As challenging as this situation will be, there will be further complications. Messiah exhorts his listeners to *pray that they will not have to escape in winter or on Shabbat*. The winter is the main rainy season in Israel and thus presents some distinctive challenges. It is not uncommon for heavy rains in the hill country to flow down previously dry river beds (wadi) in the desert lowlands. In a matter of minutes, there can be a flash flood roaring through the ravine, destroying roads and most anything else in its path. The winter flash floods would present a daunting hurdle for those needing to flee from war. Yeshua also points out a distinctive challenge at that time, the need to travel on *Shabbat*. Although traditional *halachah* allows for emergency vehicles on *Shabbat*, the norm is that private and public transportation are not allowed on the Sabbath, especially in modern Jerusalem. By considering the Yom Kippur War of 1973, we can see the devastating impact a military attack can bring on a *Shabbat*. Thankfully, Israel recovered from that attack but only after some terrible loss of life. How dangerous it would be trying to flee the city when most everything is shut down for that day!"¹¹

The statement, "Pray that your escape will not happen in winter, or on *Shabbat*" (TLV), is rightfully concluded to represent the conditions in which the evacuation of Messianic Jewish Believers from the city of Jerusalem should not take place. Whether it is in the season of winter, or on the Sabbath on a Saturday, there will be unnecessary impediments to see a sizeable community of people flee to a place of refuge, impeding the arrival of the Great Tribulation.

A few observations from commentators need to be noted here. Leon Morris offers the general thought, "we must not miss the point that even should the critical time come on the Sabbath instant flight is imperative."¹² When we consider some of the views of the Messianic Jewish Believers in Israel regarding the Torah and the Sabbath,¹³ one does not often see a huge commitment to traditional *halachah*, and so the imperative to flee from the city would regard more the civil obstacles of travel limitation. Still, there are Messianic Jewish Believers in Israel who hold to more traditionally Orthodox Jewish views of *Shabbat*, and as such they might not be too inclined to flee Jerusalem should the Abomination of Desolation occur on the Sabbath. Michael J. Wilkins is right to point out, "In prayer the disciples must cling to God's presence and ever-ready help, even though they may have to disrupt even the most devoutly held religious traditions, such as the Jewish Sabbath."¹⁴ In the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, though, Aaron M. Gale keenly states, "breaking Sabbath laws is permissible to preserve life (see 12.1n.; 1 Macc 2.41; *b.Shabb.* 128b; *b.Yoma* 85a-b),"¹⁵ and **possibly fleeing on the Sabbath after the Abomination of Desolation** most certainly classifies as being among the premier times in history when formal *Shabbat* violation would indeed be permitted!

⁹ Carson, in *EXP*, 8:501.

¹⁰ Consult the publication *The Dangers of Pre-Tribulationism* by J.K. McKee.

¹¹ Kasdan, *Matthew*, pp 297-298.

¹² Morris, *Matthew*, 605.

¹³ Consult the perspectives widely offered in Seth D. Postell, Eitan Bar, and Erez Soref, *The Torah's Goal? (One for Israel Ministry, 2015)*. [eBook for Amazon Kindle]

¹⁴ Wilkins, 780.

¹⁵ Aaron M. Gale, "The Gospel According to Matthew," in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, NRSV (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45.