

Homiletics Analysis: Matthew 24

Content & Intent

Broader Unit (Matthew 24–25): Matthew 24 is the opening movement of the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24–25), Jesus’ final extended teaching before the Passion. The two chapters function together as a unified eschatological address: Chapter 24 diagnoses the present age and announces coming judgment and the Son of Man’s return; Chapter 25 applies that announcement through three parables demanding readiness and faithfulness. The Discourse is framed by the disciples’ dual question in 24:3 (“When will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”) and concludes in 25:46 with the final separation of the nations. Chapter 24 does not stand entirely on its own — it raises questions (what does “the end” look like? how should we live?) that Chapter 25 answers in parabolic form — but it makes a complete and substantial claim in its own right: the age between now and the Son of Man’s return is defined by tribulation, deception, and patient endurance, not triumphalist expectation.

This Text — Content: Jesus and His disciples have just left the temple precincts (24:1), prompting the disciples’ admiration of the temple’s grandeur. Jesus responds with a shocking prediction of total destruction (24:2). Seated on the Mount of Olives, Jesus addresses their two-part question in 24:3. The chapter then unfolds in three major movements: (1) vv. 4–14 — the character of the present age before the end, marked by wars, famines, persecution, false prophets, and global mission; (2) vv. 15–35 — the specific tribulation surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem (the “abomination of desolation”), culminating in cosmic signs and the visible coming of the Son of Man; (3) vv. 36–51 — the unknown hour of the final coming, the call to watchfulness illustrated by Noah, and the parable of the two servants. The chapter ends with a stark warning about the fate of the unprepared servant (vv. 48–51). Throughout, Jesus repeatedly interrupts the apocalyptic content with direct imperatives: “see that no one leads you astray” (v. 4), “do not be alarmed” (v. 6), “the one who endures to the end will be saved” (v. 13), “watch therefore” (v. 42), “be ready” (v. 44).

This Text — Intent: God is seeking to accomplish a specific re-orientation in His people. The disciples (and the church in every generation) are prone to two opposite errors: (1) false alarm — misreading present suffering or dramatic events as certain signals of the immediate end, leading to panic, credulity toward false claimants, and abandonment of mission; and (2) false security — presuming on future time, assuming “my master is delayed,” and drifting into unfaithfulness. Jesus addresses both errors simultaneously. The intent is not primarily to satisfy prophetic curiosity but to produce a particular posture: sober, clear-eyed, undeceived, missionally committed, faithfully enduring, and actively watchful. The disciples are to neither run after every “Christ” in the wilderness nor sleep through the master’s return. The claim God is making through this passage is a call to a

specific kind of alertness — one grounded not in calculating the end but in knowing the character of the age and the certainty of the Son of Man’s coming.

Subject Sentence: Jesus maps the character of this age — tribulation, mission, and the Son of Man’s certain return.

Primary Claim: Because the present age is defined by deception, suffering, and incomplete mission rather than peaceful triumph, Jesus calls His people to endure without being deceived and to watch without presuming on time — for the Son of Man will come at an unknown hour, and only the faithful servant will be found ready.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “Abomination of Desolation” and the AD 70 Question (vv. 15–22): The central interpretive question in Matthew 24 is the relationship between the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70) and the final coming of the Son of Man. Three readings compete: (a) *Full Preterism* — all of Matthew 24 was fulfilled in AD 70; the “coming of the Son of Man” refers to His coming in judgment against Jerusalem, not a future personal return. (b) *Dispensational Futurism* — the entire chapter (or nearly all of it) describes a future seven-year tribulation period; the “abomination of desolation” refers to a rebuilt temple and a future Antichrist, not Titus’s desecration in AD 70. (c) *Reformed/Partial Preterist reading* — the chapter addresses two distinct (though typologically related) events: the destruction of Jerusalem (vv. 15–34, answered by “this generation will not pass away” in v. 34) and the final, universal return of the Son of Man (vv. 36–51, answered by “no one knows that day or hour”). The “coming of the Son of Man” in vv. 29–31 may be understood as the vindication of the Son of Man at His resurrection/ascension (Dan. 7:13–14, read in its context as ascent to the Ancient of Days, not descent to earth) with its visible, earth-altering effects beginning at AD 70 — while the final, bodily return awaits vv. 36ff.

The Reformed reading (c) is preferred on three grounds: (1) The text’s own structure argues for two referents — the phrase “but concerning that day and hour, no one knows” (v. 36) introduces a decisive shift in register from the earlier, sign-laden material; (2) “this generation” (v. 34) most naturally refers to the generation of Jesus’ hearers, which fits AD 70 perfectly; (3) the language of vv. 29–31 draws from Daniel 7:13, Zechariah 12:10–14, and Isaiah 13:10, all of which use cosmic-collapse imagery to describe historical judgments, not only the literal end of the physical universe.

Full Preterism is **refuted** as a total reading: it cannot account for the final universality of “all the tribes of the earth” mourning (v. 30), the gathering of “the elect from the four winds” at the end of history, or the Acts 1:11 promise of a visible, bodily return using identical

“coming on the clouds” language. The angels’ proclamation in Acts 1 was not fulfilled in AD 70.

Dispensational Futurism is **qualified**: it correctly insists that the Son of Man’s return is literal, visible, bodily, and future. Where it overreaches is in evacuating the near-term AD 70 referent entirely — the word “immediately” (v. 29) and “this generation” (v. 34) resist a purely future reading. The Dispensational reading also imports the Daniel 9:27 “parenthesis” hermeneutic (a gap between the 69th and 70th weeks of Daniel), which does not arise from Matthew 24 itself. The value of the Dispensational tradition here is its insistence that the coming of the Son of Man is not merely spiritual or providential — it is a real, visible, historical event still future to us. That instinct is well-grounded; the system built on top of it is over-constructed.

“This Generation” (v. 34): Some interpreters (including parts of the evangelical tradition) read “this generation” as referring to the Jewish race (“this people will not pass away before all these things take place”), or to the end-time generation that witnesses the beginning of these signs. Both alternatives are grammatically possible but contextually strained. The most natural antecedent is the generation of Jesus’ hearers — consistent with every other use of “this generation” in Matthew (11:16; 12:41–42; 23:36). The AD 70 fulfillment satisfies the near referent; the shift at v. 36 then introduces the unknown final horizon.

“No One Knows the Day or Hour” (v. 36): This verse is occasionally qualified by those who argue that the Son knows (citing His omniscience as the divine Son) and that the statement reflects only His *incarnational* self-limitation. That theological point may be true at the level of Christology, but it is exegetically beside the point for homiletical purposes. The pastoral function of v. 36 is clear and absolute: no human being (and apparently, in His incarnate state, not even the Son) is in a position to calculate the end. Date-setting of any kind is directly excluded by this text. Every movement in church history that has announced a date for Christ’s return has violated this verse.

The “Fig Tree” Parable (vv. 32–34): Some Dispensational interpreters read the budding fig tree as a symbol for the nation of Israel, with the founding of the modern state of Israel (1948) as the fulfillment of “putting forth its leaves.” This reading is **refuted** by the context: the fig tree parable is introduced as a lesson about *recognizing the nearness of summer from observable signs* — it is an analogy about reading visible precursors, not a coded reference to a specific nation. Matthew uses the fig tree as an analogy of visible readiness elsewhere (21:19–21), never as a symbol of Israel in the way the Dispensational reading requires. Importing the fig-tree-as-Israel symbolism here is exegetically unsupported.

Key Canonical Support

- **Daniel 7:13–14** — The “coming of the Son of Man” language in Matthew 24:30 is drawn directly from Daniel 7, where the Son of Man *comes to the Ancient of Days* to

receive dominion. This canonical grounding reframes “coming” as the Son of Man’s enthronement and vindication — not only His descent to earth — providing the background for understanding how AD 70 judgment participates in the Son of Man’s coming authority.

- **Daniel 9:26–27** — The “abomination of desolation” Jesus cites (v. 15) picks up Daniel’s prophecy of a desolating act in the temple precincts. The first-century fulfillment through the Roman desecration gives the passage its near-term referent; the Reformed reading honors this without collapsing the whole chapter into that single event.
- **Jeremiah 7:1–15; 26:1–19** — Jeremiah’s temple sermon is the canonical forerunner to Jesus’ prediction of the temple’s destruction. Both speakers make the same claim against the same presupposition: that the temple’s physical presence guarantees God’s protection regardless of faithfulness. Jesus stands in direct continuity with Jeremiah here.
- **Acts 1:9–11** — The angelic promise at the Ascension (“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven”) anchors a future, visible, bodily return as the certain terminus of history — confirming that Matthew 24:36–51 is not exhausted by any past event.
- **1 Thessalonians 5:1–11** — Paul’s treatment of “the day of the Lord” directly parallels Matthew 24:36–51: the day comes like a thief in the night; those in darkness are caught off-guard; those who are awake and sober are not surprised. Paul applies the same posture Jesus demands — watchfulness grounded in security, not anxiety — confirming the pastoral intent of this section of Matthew 24.
- **Revelation 1:7** — “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him” echoes Matthew 24:30 and Zechariah 12:10–14, confirming the universal, visible character of the Son of Man’s final appearing as a still-future reality at the time of Revelation’s writing.

Aim: To re-orient the reader’s posture toward the present age — neither alarmed by its tribulations nor presumptuous about its duration — grounding steady, missionally faithful endurance in the certainty of the Son of Man’s return.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
24:1–2	Disciples admire the temple; Jesus predicts its	Sets the question; the temple, the great sign of

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	total destruction — not one stone left on another	covenant presence, will be razed — shocking claim
24:3	On the Mount of Olives, disciples ask two questions: (1) When will this happen? (2) What is the sign of Your coming and the end of the age?	Two questions may or may not have the same answer — this ambiguity drives much of the interpretive debate
24:4–5	First warning: “See that no one leads you astray” — many will come claiming to be Christ	The first imperative — deception is the lead danger
24:6–7	Wars and rumors of wars, nation against nation, famines and earthquakes — “but the end is not yet”	These are not signs of the immediate end; they are the normal texture of the age
24:8	“All these are but the beginning of the birth pains”	Metaphor: labor pains — increasing intensity, but not yet delivery
24:9–10	Persecution of disciples, martyrdom, betrayal, hatred — many will fall away	The cost of the mission; falling away is the internal danger
24:11	Many false prophets will arise and lead many astray	Second false-prophet warning — deception intensifies within the community
24:12	Lawlessness increases; the love of many grows cold	Moral and relational collapse in the broader culture
24:13	“The one who endures to the end will be saved”	The endurance imperative — salvation awaits the one who does not abandon the faith
24:14	The gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world, then the end will come	Global mission is the non-negotiable precondition before the end; mission defines the age
24:15–16	The abomination of desolation in the holy place — “let the reader	Direct citation of Daniel; “let the reader understand” signals coded urgency — AD

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	understand”; flee to the mountains	70 primary referent
24:17–20	Urgency of flight — don’t go back for belongings; woe to pregnant women; pray it doesn’t happen in winter or Sabbath	Concrete, historical specificity — this language fits a literal flight from Jerusalem in AD 70
24:21–22	The great tribulation — unprecedented suffering; days cut short for the sake of the elect	The elect are preserved through, not removed from, tribulation
24:23–26	Second wave of false Christ warnings — if anyone says “here is the Christ” in the wilderness or inner rooms, do not believe it	Deception peaks during tribulation; desperation creates credulity
24:27	“For as the lightning comes from the east and shines to the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man”	The real coming will be unmistakable — universal, instantaneous, undeniable; no one needs to point it out
24:28	“Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather”	Proverbial — judgment gathers wherever its object is; the Son of Man’s coming brings comprehensive reckoning
24:29–31	Immediately after the tribulation — cosmic signs, the Son of Man coming on the clouds, the elect gathered	The climactic arrival of the Son of Man in glory; mourning of all tribes; angelic gathering of the elect
24:32–33	The fig tree parable — when you see these signs, know it is near	A lesson in reading visible precursors; the budding signals the coming summer
24:34	“This generation will not pass away until all these things take place”	Near-term referent: the AD 70 generation will live to see the Jerusalem tribulation events
24:35	“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away”	Jesus’ word is more permanent than the created order — the ultimate ground

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
24:36	“But concerning that day and hour, no one knows — not even the angels, not even the Son, but the Father only”	of confidence Sharp transition to the final coming; complete unknowability of its timing
24:37–39	The days of Noah — people eating, drinking, marrying — unaware until the flood came	The danger is not dramatic apostasy but ordinary, unsuspecting pre-occupation
24:40–41	Two in the field, two grinding — one taken, one left	The separation at the coming is not geographically predictable; it cuts through ordinary life
24:42	“Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming”	The primary application of the entire second section — watchfulness grounded in ignorance of the hour
24:43–44	The thief parable — if the homeowner knew when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake; “be ready”	Readiness is not based on prediction but on constant posture
24:45–47	The wise servant — faithful and prudent in the master’s absence, found doing his job at the master’s return; rewarded with greater responsibility	Positive model: faithfulness during the long, unknown interval
24:48–51	The wicked servant — says “my master is delayed,” beats fellow servants, eats and drinks with drunkards; master returns unexpectedly; severe judgment	Negative model: the presumption of delay as license for unfaithfulness; the “cut in two” judgment

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
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Division	Verses	Label
1	24:1–3	The Temple Question: The Trigger and the Double Question
2	24:4–14	The Character of the Age: Birth Pains, Not the End
3	24:15–28	The Jerusalem Tribulation: The Abomination, the Flight, and the False Christs
4	24:29–35	The Coming of the Son of Man: Cosmic Signs, Gathering of the Elect, and the Near-Term Timeframe
5	24:36–44	The Unknown Hour: The Transition to the Final Coming and the Call to Watchfulness
6	24:45–51	The Two Servants: Faithfulness and Presumption in the Master’s Absence

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Jesus maps the character of this age — tribulation, mission, and the Son of Man’s certain return.

Primary Claim: Because the present age is defined by deception, suffering, and incomplete mission rather than peaceful triumph, Jesus calls His people to endure without being deceived and to watch without presuming on time — for the Son of Man will come at an unknown hour, and only the faithful servant will be found ready.

Applications (Five)

1. Refuse to let present suffering function as evidence that God has lost control — or that the end is immediately at hand. (*Mind/Belief*) Jesus’ first and most sustained word to His disciples is calibration: wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, and even widespread apostasy are not indicators that the end is arriving on schedule or that something has gone wrong with God’s plan. They are the expected texture of this age — “the beginning of birth pains.” The Christian who is destabilized by geopolitical chaos, pandemic, or cultural collapse has absorbed a false expectation — that the age should be

peaceful, that the church should be winning visibly, that suffering signals divine absence. Jesus directly disabuses this. The believer who has genuinely understood Matthew 24:6–8 is not surprised by tribulation; they have been told in advance. To take Jesus seriously here is to stop interpreting each new crisis as a sign that history is spiraling out of control, and to return to sober mission.

2. Name and resist the specific form of deception Jesus warns against: the authoritative voice that offers a shortcut to the kingdom. (*Mind/Belief*) Jesus' most emphatic and repeated warning in this chapter is not about persecution but about deception — and the deception He describes is distinctly religious in character. False Christs, false prophets, and insider claims to know where Christ is (“he is in the wilderness,” “he is in the inner rooms”) are the particular danger. This is not primarily about cult leaders in remote compounds (though it includes them). In the ordinary Christian life, this deception takes the form of any voice that claims to know more than Jesus said we can know — date-setters, prophetic movements that claim insider revelation about the end-times schedule, teachers who offer a “hidden” kingdom accessible to those with special knowledge. Jesus says, emphatically, do not go. The Son of Man's coming will require no one to point it out. Resist the credulity that desperation and suffering create.

3. Let the unknown hour produce in you the posture of a servant who expects the master today. (*Affections/Worship*) The practical effect of not knowing when the master returns is not paralysis or anxiety — it is the freedom of complete daily faithfulness. The wise servant is found “giving them their food at the proper time” (v. 45) — doing exactly what was assigned, at exactly the right time, as if the master might walk in at any moment, because he might. The worshipful dimension of this posture is profound: to live in daily readiness for Christ's return is an act of faith in His lordship and love for His appearing. The wicked servant does not begin to abuse the household because he is morally depraved in some dramatic way — he begins because he has quietly concluded, “my master is delayed” (v. 48). The slow drift from “my master is coming soon” to “my master is delayed” is the spiritual movement Jesus is most concerned to prevent. Examine what you have assumed about the timeline and what that assumption is licensing in your life.

4. Re-orient your daily life around the one thing Jesus identifies as the non-negotiable precondition of the end: the global proclamation of the gospel. (*Will/Behavior*) Jesus provides exactly one scheduled precondition for the end in this chapter: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (v. 14). This is not an incidental detail — it is the charter of the church's existence during the age of birth pains. The age defined by tribulation, deception, and patient endurance is also, precisely because of those conditions, the age of mission. The endurance Jesus calls for (v. 13) is not passive survival but active proclamation under pressure. Practically, this means that the believer's response to Jesus' eschatological teaching is not primarily prophetic curiosity (calculating signs and seasons) but missionary commitment — supporting, praying for, and personally participating in the proclamation of the gospel to people who have not heard it.

5. Identify where you have made peace with the servant's reasoning — “my master is delayed” — and repent of the specific unfaithfulness it has licensed. (*Will/Behavior*)

The parable of the two servants (vv. 45–51) is designed to produce self-examination. The wicked servant is not an apostate; he is an appointed servant who was given real responsibility and who began to abuse it the moment he concluded the master was in no hurry. The question is not whether a person professes faith but what their daily behavior reveals about what they actually believe about Christ's return. Where have you been eating and drinking with drunkards? Where have you been beating the fellow servants? The language is figurative, but the failure modes are concrete: relationships managed carelessly because there is always more time, responsibilities discharged half-heartedly because the accountability moment feels distant, the tongue given license, the private life left unreformed. Jesus is not asking whether you believe He is coming — He is asking what you are actually doing while you wait.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Matthew 24 is one of Scripture's most explicit teachings on the nature of the present age — what it is, what it is not, and what it demands. It establishes that history between the First and Second Advents is not a period of progressive earthly triumph for the church but of tribulation, deception, mission, and patient endurance. The sovereign Jesus who delivers this discourse speaks with authority over history itself: He announces the destruction of the temple before it occurs, describes the character of an age He is about to inaugurate, and declares that His words carry more permanence than the created order (v. 35). Most significantly, the chapter establishes the *certain* return of the Son of Man — not as a possible outcome or a theological concept, but as the fixed terminus of history that all present suffering is moving toward. The church's endurance, mission, and watchfulness are not groundless virtues — they are grounded in the certainty of a coming that, however unknown in its timing, is utterly certain in its occurrence.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Matthew 24 sits at the intersection of three core Reformed convictions: the sovereignty of God over history, the perseverance of the elect through tribulation rather than removal from it, and the sufficiency of Scripture's own categories to resist speculative eschatological systems. The elect in this chapter are not raptured out of the tribulation — they are gathered through it (vv. 22, 31), with the days “cut short for their sake.” This is not incidental: it reflects the Reformed understanding that the covenant people of God are called to endure in the world, not to escape it. The passage also performs a sharp anti-triumphalist function: the church in the present age is not promised visible dominance, cultural ascendancy, or even numerical majority. It is promised the Son of Man's return — and in that promise, it has everything it needs to

sustain mission under pressure. The Reformed tradition's commitment to patient, persevering, ordinary faithfulness finds its eschatological grounding here. The wise servant is not the one who predicted the date — he is the one found doing his work.

Main Takeaway

The present age is not a peaceful prelude to a kingdom that gets better and better before Jesus arrives. It is a contested, tribulation-marked age of mission, deception, and patient endurance — and Jesus told you so in advance. He is coming. No one knows when. Stop calculating, stop panicking, and stop using the assumed delay to fund unfaithfulness. Do the work you were given, preach the gospel to those who haven't heard it, and be the servant who is found doing exactly that when He walks in.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching Matthew 24 as a prophetic timeline rather than a pastoral address.** The most common failure with this chapter is treating it as an eschatological chart to be decoded rather than a pastoral address to be received. Jesus' repeated imperatives — “see that no one deceives you,” “do not be alarmed,” “watch,” “be ready” — are doing pastoral work, not speculative forecasting. Sermons that spend their energy resolving the AD 70 / Second Coming timeline and then tack on a brief application at the end have inverted Jesus' own priorities. The timeline questions matter, but they are in service of the pastoral claim, not the other way around. Begin with the claim; let the exegesis serve it.
- **Importing a particular eschatological system (usually Dispensational) as the assumed grid before the text speaks.** Matthew 24 has been preached through a Dispensational lens so thoroughly in popular evangelicalism that many congregations cannot hear it any other way. Terms like “the rapture,” “the seven-year tribulation,” “the Antichrist,” and “the rebuilt temple” are not in this text — they are imported from a systematic framework. That framework may or may not be correct, but preaching it as if Matthew 24 straightforwardly teaches it without acknowledging the genuine Reformed and historic Protestant alternatives misrepresents the text and the tradition. The preacher owes the congregation clarity about what the text actually says and where interpretive work is being done.
- **Treating “this generation” (v. 34) as referring to end-time believers or to ethnic Israel, thereby evacuating its near-term force.** Every other use of “this generation” in Matthew refers to the generation of Jesus' contemporaries. The natural reading of v. 34 is that the AD 70 events were predicted to occur within that lifetime — which is exactly what happened. Refusing this reading to protect a purely futurist reading of the whole chapter does not serve the congregation. It creates an artificial tension

the text does not require and obscures the remarkable specificity of Jesus' fulfilled prophecy.

- **Preaching the “no one knows the day or hour” as a reason not to think seriously about eschatology.** Some preachers over-correct from date-setting speculation into eschatological indifference: “we can’t know anything, so let’s not think about it.” This is the opposite of what Jesus demands. The unknown hour is given not as a reason to disengage but as the specific ground of watchfulness. “You do not know when” → “therefore watch” → “therefore be ready.” The unknown hour is not a conversation-stopper; it is a call to posture.
- **Using Matthew 24 to generate anxiety about geopolitical events rather than stability in them.** Preaching that correlates current news events with Matthew 24’s birth pains (wars, earthquakes, famines) as “signs of the approaching end” — a staple of popular prophecy preaching — directly violates Jesus’ explicit instruction. He says these things are *not* the end (v. 6); they are the normal texture of the age. Preaching that functions to heighten prophetic anxiety rather than produce sober endurance has misread the text’s intent.
- **Neglecting the servant parables (vv. 45–51) as the chapter’s behavioral landing point.** The chapter ends not with cosmic imagery but with a parable about a servant and a master — ordinary household responsibility during an ordinary absence. This is where Jesus lands the entire eschatological address: in the concrete question of daily faithfulness during the unknown interval. Sermons that build through the cosmic material and then run out of time for the servant parables have left out the passage’s own applicational conclusion. The servant parables are not an appendix — they are the behavioral claim the whole chapter has been building toward.