

119

MINISTRIES

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Fleeing on the Sabbath (Matthew 24:20)

During his teaching concerning the coming destruction of Jerusalem in Matthew 24, Yeshua—Jesus—admonished his followers who would be caught in the middle of the war at that time to pray. Curiously, what he told them to pray in Matthew 24:20 involves the Sabbath. Here is what he says:

Matthew 24:20

[Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath.](#)

Again, Yeshua had in view the coming war and destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 24:2-3), which occurred decades after he gave this instruction. As we just read, Yeshua’s followers in Jerusalem and Judea were to pray that they wouldn’t have to flee in winter or on the Sabbath during this time. Why?

The reference to winter is easy to understand. Travel during the winter season was problematic for several reasons. As Craig Keener explains:

In Judea, winter was the rainy season, and otherwise dry creek beds could flood with water from the mountains; cold winter rains also buried some roads in mud. The Jordan River also flooded, making it harder to cross; Josephus reports that even in the spring of AD 68 Judean fugitives were trapped by the flooding Jordan and thus slaughtered by their pursuers (Josephus, *Wars* 4.433). Armies normally withdrew from battle during the winter; travel was particularly dangerous in the cold mountains.

-Craig Keener, NIV, *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible: Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016)

Given the additional difficulties that fleeing in the winter would provide, it makes sense that Yeshua would not want his followers to have to flee during that time of year. But why did Yeshua tell his followers to pray that they wouldn’t have to flee on the Sabbath? In what way would fleeing on the Sabbath be considered less-than-ideal?

Well, numerous scholars say that many of Yeshua’s followers during the time of Jerusalem’s destruction

in 70 AD still observed the Sabbath. Therefore, Yeshua told them to pray that their observance of the Sabbath wouldn't be interrupted during the coming times of war.

Donald Hagner writes:

While the point of the reference to the Sabbath is hardly clear, probably what is meant is that an urgent flight on the Sabbath would make any Sabbath observance impossible.

-Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, (Dallas: Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33B, 1995), p. 701-702

William Shea agrees:

Christians were exhorted to pray that their flight, at the beginning of the Roman war, would not have to occur on the Sabbath out of respect for their observance of that day. They could flee on that day if they had to, but they were to pray that they would not in order to keep that day as one of rest and worship, rather than a day of travel.

-William Shea, "The Sabbath in Matthew 24:20," *AUSS* vol. 40, No. 1 (Andrews University Press, 2002), p. 35

Tim Hegg agrees with this interpretation and gives insight into why an attack on the Sabbath would present additional challenges:

[T]he reason one would hope that an attack would not take place on Shabbat would be the interruption of the sacred day itself as well the difficulty that members of the family might not be in close proximity to each other. For example, mothers with infants to care for might have remained at home while their husbands attended the Shabbat meeting in the synagogue. Given such a scenario, one could well imagine that an attack on Shabbat would cause even greater disruption among families as they were separated from each other in their attempts to flee the city.

-Tim Hegg, *Matthew* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2013), vol. 5, p. 1111

Again, these proposed reasons that flight on the Sabbath would be less-than-ideal are based on the assumption that Yeshua's followers would be keeping the Sabbath.

Given these considerations, what Yeshua's instructions imply is that he expected continued Sabbath observance among his followers in the future. He did not intend his followers to derive the idea from any of his teachings that the Sabbath was no longer important. As William Shea writes:

[I]t appears that Jesus was giving his believers advice that they were to pray that they would still be able to keep the Sabbath even in those coming times of war. This in turn suggests that Jesus considered the Sabbath to be binding upon Christians of that future time.

-William Shea, "The Sabbath in Matthew 24:20," *AUSS* vol. 40, No. 1 (Andrews University Press, 2002), p. 23

Craig Evans cites this verse as another example of Yeshua upholding the Law of God, which of course

includes the command to keep the Sabbath:

By having Jesus urge his disciples to pray that the day of emergency not occur “on a Sabbath,” Jesus is once again seen as upholding the Law (cf. Matt 5:17-20).

-Craig A. Evans, *Matthew* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) p. 406

Skip MacCarty also comments on the implications of Yeshua’s instructions in Matthew 24:20:

Jesus’ instruction safeguarding the quality of His followers’ Sabbath observance would be expected of one who assumed the universal and permanent character of the Sabbath.

-Skip MacCarty, “The Seventh-Day Sabbath,” *Perspectives on the Sabbath: 4 Views*, Christopher Donato, ed. (Nashville, TN: B& H Academic, 2011), p. 23

For good measure, Walter Specht also puts it well:

[I]f this is a genuine dominical saying, it indicates that our Lord expected His followers to regard the Sabbath as sacred as late as the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. He instructed them to pray that at that time of crisis they would not find it necessary to flee on the Sabbath. But the implication is that conditions could be such as to make instant flight necessary even on the day of rest. But the fear, bustle, and confusion that a hasty flight on Sabbath would bring were not in harmony with the worship, peace, and joy that should characterize the sacred day of rest. Hence, Jesus’ followers were urged to pray that the flight would occur on a different day of the week.

-Walter F. Specht, “The Sabbath in the New Testament.” In *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, Kenneth A. Strand, ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), p. 103

There are two other common interpretations of this passage. In contrast to the perspective we’ve outlined, these alternative interpretations do not require us to believe that Yeshua’s followers within Matthew’s community were still faithful to the Sabbath.

The first interpretation we’ll consider is that fleeing the city on the Sabbath would be difficult due to certain physical challenges Yeshua’s followers would encounter. For instance, it’s believed the gates of Jerusalem would have been shut on the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:19-20), making it difficult to leave the city. Also, stores would be closed, making it hard to purchase supplies for travel. Therefore, Yeshua’s concern wasn’t so much with his followers being able to observe the Sabbath. Instead, his concern had more to do with the external obstacles that would be in their way at that time.

However, when looked at in detail, these supposed physical obstacles to flight would not have been significant considerations. For instance, as William Shea explains, the gates of Jerusalem were usually open on the Sabbath. And in times of war, the gates were closed *every day*:

In peacetime [the gates] had to be open on Sabbath to enable worshipers to enter the temple precincts. In at least two instances the eastern gates of the temple also served as the eastern gates to the city. This was the case for the Golden Gate, blocked up from the time of Suleiman the Magnificent in the sixteenth century, and for the Sheep Gate through which the sacrifices for the temple were brought. Those coming from the eastern side of the city to worship in the temple precincts on Sabbath would have entered the city through these gates that were kept open in

peacetime [...] In times of war, all of the gates were closed all of the time, including the Sabbath.

William Shea, "The Sabbath in Matthew 24:20," *AUSS* vol. 40, No. 1 (Andrews University Press, 2002), p. 31

Given these facts, it's unlikely that Yeshua's mention of the Sabbath was because he was concerned about the city gates being closed, since they would have been closed *every day* during times of war. Additionally, people would still be able to flee despite the gates being closed. Again, as Shea explains:

The physical obstacles to a mandatory flight on the Sabbath day would have been minimal. People from inside of Jerusalem could have exited through the eastern gates of the temple, which also served as gates of the city. Other gates probably were open in peacetime to permit worshippers to take the most direct route to the temple area. Having cleared the Mount of Olives, travelers would have encountered no obstructions in their path down to Jericho other than the problem of having to traverse a barren area.

- William Shea, "The Sabbath in Matthew 24:20," *AUSS* vol. 40, No. 1 (Andrews University Press, 2002), p. 32

So the gates being closed would not be insurmountable. And the fact that the gates would have been closed *every day* during wartime, not just on the Sabbath, indicates that the gates were not Yeshua's primary concern when highlighting the Sabbath in his instructions to pray.

Regarding the idea that Yeshua would be concerned about his followers not being able to purchase supplies on the Sabbath—again, this concern would apply to *any* day and not just the Sabbath. Yeshua explicitly says there wouldn't even be enough time to take what is in their house or turn back to grab one's cloak when it was time to flee (Matthew 24:17-18). They were to escape with whatever they had on them. Furthermore, one wouldn't need supplies to flee for one day, and provisions could be purchased the following day if needed. So again, this concern is an insufficient explanation for Yeshua's mention of the Sabbath in Matthew 24:20.

The second interpretation we'll consider is that Yeshua was concerned that his followers fleeing on the Sabbath would antagonize Sabbath-observant Jews and invite further persecution. So again, Yeshua wasn't concerned so much with his followers being able to observe the Sabbath; he was concerned about his followers being persecuted by their Jewish opponents over perceived violations of the Sabbath when they fled. But this second option is also unlikely.

First, it presupposes that Yeshua's followers were no longer keeping the Sabbath. However, every indication from the New Testament is that Yeshua's followers remained faithful to the Sabbath even after his death and resurrection. The Book of Acts records several instances of the apostles and other followers of Yeshua observing the Sabbath alongside the broader Jewish community (Acts 13:13-52; 17:2; 18:4).

Second, it presupposes that fleeing on the Sabbath would have been offensive to the broader Jewish community. However, when we consider the historical Jewish sources, we discover that the generally held view among the Jewish people was that the Torah allowed for a suspending of the Sabbath to preserve life. For instance, the resolution outlined in 1 Maccabees 2:39-41 confirms that taking up the sword in self-defense was permissible on the Sabbath. This view is also reflected in the later rabbinic literature (b.Shabbat 19a). Moreover, Josephus informs us that the Jews during the time of Pompey

believed they could defend themselves against attacks:

[O]ur law gives us leave then to defend ourselves against those that begin to fight with us and assault us.

-Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.63 (Translated by William Whiston)

Since Jewish people of the day believed that the Torah permitted one to save their own life on the Sabbath, it seems reasonable that Jews in general, as well as Yeshua's followers, likewise would have fled on the Sabbath if they recognized the threat in the same way. Given these facts, Yeshua's followers fleeing on the Sabbath would not have antagonized their Jewish opponents, who—again—*would likely have joined them* in their flight.

Now, as we pointed out earlier, numerous Christian scholars agree that Matthew's original readers continued to keep the Sabbath and that Matthew 24:20 may imply the Sabbath has continuing relevance. However, some might say that since Matthew's original audience was primarily made up of Jewish followers of Yeshua, Yeshua's instructions in Matthew 24:20 are not intended for anyone beyond his Jewish followers. But this idea can be countered in two ways.

First, if we can dismiss some of Yeshua's teaching because the original audience of Matthew's gospel was Jewish, then what is to stop us from dismissing *any* or *all* of his teaching in Matthew's gospel? The Sermon on the Mount was originally given to a Jewish audience and recorded in a gospel with an original Jewish readership. Should we throw that out? Of course not. There is no good reason to dismiss the implications of Matthew 24:20 just because Matthew's original audience was Jewish.

Second, while originally written for a Jewish audience, Matthew's gospel itself indicates that the teaching contained therein is meant for all who follow Yeshua. Matthew records Yeshua's command to make disciples of "all nations" and to teach them to observe all that Yeshua commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). Clearly, for Matthew to record this command from Messiah, indicates that he intended the teaching contained in his gospel to reach beyond the Jewish people.

For more information on how God desires *all* his people—Jew and Gentile—to keep his commandments, including the Sabbath, see our teachings: [Grafted In](#), [The 7 Laws of Noah](#), and [What was the Mixed Multitude?](#)

In conclusion, it appears most likely that Yeshua's primary concern in admonishing his followers to pray that they would not need to flee on the Sabbath is the disruption of the Sabbath itself that such a flight would cause. Yeshua did not come to do away with the Sabbath but reaffirmed its validity and sacredness. Fleeing on the Sabbath would interfere with the Sabbath's peace and joy, and therefore Yeshua's followers should pray that any flight on the Sabbath could be avoided—even though they *could* flee on that day if they had to. These instructions addressed to his followers of that future time implies that Yeshua did not foresee the Sabbath being abolished or replaced after his death and resurrection. Instead, he presupposed the Sabbath's ongoing relevance for his followers, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

We'd also note, and many agree, that Yeshua's teaching in Matthew 24 extends far beyond the historical events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, but actually has relevance for a future time before the return of Messiah (Matthew 24:3). Many have proposed that the Abomination of Desolation, referenced in Matthew 24:15, will occur in a rebuilt Third Temple in which the Man of Lawlessness will

declare himself to be a god (2 Thessalonians 2:4). When these events take place in the future, Yeshua's followers in Jerusalem and Judea are warned to flee.

What this might suggest, then, is Yeshua's instructions in Matthew 24:20 pertained not only to his followers during the Roman war but will also pertain to his followers in the end days. Therefore, as times of tribulation draw near, may we pray that we will still be able to enjoy the Sabbath.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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