

THE GATE CHURCH HIGH DESERT
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WEDNESDAY NIGHTS AT 6:30PM
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BACK TO THE FUTURE

A STUDY OF REVELATIONS AND THE VICTORY OF CHRIST

A PROPER APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING - THE BOOK OF REVELATION

CHAPTER ONE

Developing the Right Hermeneutic (*Interpretation of Scripture*)

Literal, Figurative, Symbolic and Figurative Language
Systems of Eschatology and the Approach to End Times
Preterism, Futurism, Historicism and Idealism
Amillennialism, Pre-Millennialism and Post Millennialism

CHAPTER TWO

Deciphering the Old Testament Prophecies (*Daniel, Zechariah*)

Zechariah's Description of the Temple
Daniel's Vision of the Four Kingdoms
Daniel's Timeline of the Seventy Weeks

CHAPTER THREE

Discovering the First Century Relevance of Jesus' Prophecy (*Matthew 23-25*)

The Temple Experience and a Walk in the Garden
The Disciples Questions and a Curiosity for the Unknown
The Future Unveiled and the Prophecies Unfold

CHAPTER FOUR

Detailing the Observations as Seen in the Visions of John (*Revelation*)

The Purpose of the Book (Christ and His Church Victorious)

The Person of the Book (*Christ*)

Jesus Christ the Lamb of God | Jesus Christ the Lord of All

The Prophecy of the Book (Warnings, Judgments and Outcomes)

Dating the Revelation: Crucial to Understanding the Book

Warnings to the Churches of Asia Minor

Judgments on the Jews, the Romans Empire and the Nations of Earth

Second Coming, the Kingdom of God and New Creation

REVIEW

So, I want to briefly overview where we have come to in our study of ESCHATOLOGY. What I call, our Back to the Future pathway!

We have taught how to read the Bible taking into consideration a proper way to INTERPRET. We outlined the various language sub-types in which the Bible is written. To grasp these many figures and types of speech gives us a clear understanding of what the Bible means when it speaks.

We have defined the many eschatological viewpoints in the Body of Christ - the way one sees the culmination of history and/or the unfolding of God's plan from the past into our future. We defined the lenses through which people view the Scripture. Some see all things in the past; some see all things in the future; some see all things over the course of history; and still others see things as mere type and symbol with no real physical unfolding on planet earth.

We were able to comfortably conclude that our position is one of Optimistic Millennialism - a mixture of A and Post! We hold to a Historicism that sees the gradual revealing of the Kingdom of God over this current millennial period that was inaugurated at Christ's first advent and will continually expand in the midst of tribulation (which we will have with us always) until He (Christ) completes the process of full Kingdom manifestation in the earth at His Second Coming!

We draw these conclusion from a careful and proper interpretation of Zechariah's Description of the Temple, Daniel's Vision of the Four Kingdoms and Daniel's Timeline of the Seventy Weeks which takes us to the first coming of Christ. We do not adhere to any parenthetical pause or gap theory created by futurists to justify their dispensationalism. Nor do we embrace the two covenant theology that says there is a plan for national Israel and one for the church. We embrace the spiritual/natural Israel that is birthed through Christ and His gospel made up of both Jew and Gentile now one and recipient of the promises to Abraham and his seed.

So we are in the millennial - an indefinite period of time between the first and second coming - and we work to reveal the Kingdom that Jesus established through His death and resurrection.

CHAPTER THREE

Discovering the First Century Relevance of Jesus' Prophecy (*Matthew 23-25*)

The Temple Experience and a Walk in the Garden
The Disciples Questions and a Curiosity for the Unknown
The Future Unveiled and the Prophecies Unfold

AGAIN, LET ME ENCOURAGE YOU TO PUT ASIDE ANY BIASED PRESUPPOSITIONS (IF THERE ARE ANY) AND LOOK AT THE SCRIPTURES PURELY AND SIMPLY IN THE LIGHT OF IT'S CONTEXT WITHOUT HAVING TO READ MORE INTO IT THAN WHAT IS THERE.

So, our goal tonight is to begin our ...

UNDERSTANDING MATTHEW 24

This passage is known as the "Olivet Discourse" because Jesus gave this teaching to His disciples while they were gathered at the Mount of Olives.

We will begin in Matthew 24:3, where the disciples asked Jesus some key questions.

"As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciple came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

Introduction to Matthew 24

Questions from Matthew 24

Let me begin by noting that in Matthew 24:3, the disciples asked Jesus not just one question, but three questions.

Question #1: *"When will these things happen?"*

Question #2: *"What will be the sign of Your coming be?"*

Question #3: *"What about the end of the age (world)?"*

Recognizing three distinct questions dramatically changes how we understand the answers that Jesus gives in the verses to follow. We will see how our Lord first answers question number one in Matthew 24:4-28. Then He answers the second question in Matthew 24:29-34. Finally, He answers the question about the end of the age (or the end of the world) in Matthew 24:35-25:24.

Question #1: *"When Will These Things Happen?"*

The first thing asked of Jesus was, *"When will these things happen?"* Before we look at Jesus' answer, we need to identify what are "these things" about which the disciples were asking. Christians who have been taught the popular end-time view immediately think "these things" refers to the events which will precede the second coming of Jesus and the end of the world.

We will come to a very different understanding if we read the context of this Bible passage. So let us go back and see ...

The Context of Matthew 23

Matthew 23 tells about a day when Jesus was speaking in the temple in Jerusalem. First, He warned the crowds and His disciples to watch out for the Scribes and Pharisees (23:2-12).

Then beginning in Matthew 23:13, Jesus turned from the disciples and directed His words directly towards those religious leaders. We can sense the flavor of His message by glancing at the first few words of each verse that follows:

Verse 13: *"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites..."*

Verse 14: *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites..."*

Verse 15: *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites..."*

Verse 16: *"Woe to you, blind guides..."*

Jesus was rebuking the religious leader's right there in their temple. Glance down a few verses and pick up the intensity of His rebuke:

Verse 23: *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!..."*

Verse 24: *"You blind guides..."*

Verse 25: *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!..."*

Verse 26: *"You blind Pharisee..."*

Verse 27: *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!..."*

Verse 29: *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!..."*

Jesus built up to a climax in which He declared a severe judgment against those religious leaders.

“You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? 34 Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, 35 so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.” (Matthew 23:33-36)

At that moment, you wouldn't have wanted to be sitting with the scribes and Pharisees. As Jesus declared coming judgment, He referred to the blood of every righteous person, from Abel to Zechariah. That is significant because in the Hebrew Bible, Abel is in the first book and Zechariah is in the last book. Therefore, Jesus was saying to the religious leaders that the guilt of the blood of every righteous person, from the beginning of their Holy Book to the end, will come upon them and on their generation! Judgment has been decreed!

Typically we understand a generation to be 40 years in length (i.e., the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years until a generation passed away). So if Jesus' words were to come true literally, then we should expect the judgment He declared to fall upon those religious leaders who were listening to His words and to those who would be around during the following 40 years.

In Matthew 23, Jesus went on to tell more specifically how this great judgment was to occur. In verses 37 and 38, He cried out:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 38 See, your house is left to you desolate."

The Judgment

Did the words of Jesus come true? Well, they would have had to be fulfilled by 70 AD, because Jesus made His declaration around 30 AD. Historically, did anything happen? Yes, in 70 AD Jerusalem was destroyed just as Jesus said it would and as Daniel prophesied.

Within 40 years after Jesus declared judgment, 20,000 Roman soldiers, under the command of General Titus, surrounded the city and cut off all supplies of food for four months so the people would starve. Then they came into the city and mercilessly killed over one million Jews. The soldiers set the temple on fire, and they led away 97,000 Jews as captives. At that time the Jewish population was decimated. Historically, little is known about the Jews' actions or lives for the following 60 years. It was not until 130AD that they began reassembling with enough strength to attempt one last rebellion against Rome. Then after three years of battling, the Romans were able to crush that rebellion, and Israel no more was recognized as a nation (until 1948). It also was at that time that the Roman commander ordered the temple in

Jerusalem to be demolished so completely, that each and every stone was carried away, and then the land on which the temple had stood was ploughed over completely. The temple was destroyed totally, as Jesus said it would be.

Historians have a good number of documents from that time period that give us information about that time period and the destruction of the temple as well as Jerusalem. However, most of our information comes from Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived at that time and was an eyewitness of the events. Concerning the war against and destruction of Jerusalem, Josephus wrote many things, including the following:

"... when the Roman soldiers were come to the house to plunder them, they found in them entire families of dead men...that is of such as died by the famine; they then stood in a horror at this sight, and went out without touching anything. But although they had this commiseration for such as were destroyed in that manner, yet had they not the same for those that were still alive, but they ran every one through whom they met with, and obstructed the very lanes with their dead bodies, and made the whole city run with blood, to such a degree indeed that the fire of many of the houses were quenched with these men's blood. (VI: viii: 5)

It is worth reading the whole of Josephus' writings about the fall of Jerusalem. What is so astounding about them is how clearly – sometimes word for word—they fulfilled the prophecy of Jesus in Matthew 23-24. The writings of Josephus are available in most Christian bookshops or libraries, and can be accessed freely on many websites.

In addition, we have church leaders and historians comments such as ... John Wesley and Eusebius.

"This was most punctually fulfilled: for after the temple was burned, Titus, the Roman general, ordered the very foundations of it to be dug up; after which the ground on which it stood was ploughed by Turnus Rufus, this generation of men now living shall not pass till all these things be done. The expression implies that a great part of that generation would be passed away, but not the whole. Just so it was; for the city and temple were destroyed thirty-nine or forty years after." (The Works of John Wesley, 1985)

"All this occurred in this manner, in the second year of the reign of Vespasian (70 AD), according to the predictions of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, III: 7)

The Context of Matthew 24

We will discuss the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple more fully later, but here we are noting the context in which Matthew 24 begins. We know that in the original Greek manuscripts of the New Testament there are no chapter breaks. Matthew 23 flows right into Matthew 24 with no interruption. Matthew 24:1 goes on to say:

"Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 2 But he answered them, "You see all these, do you

not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” (Matthew 24:1-2)

After repeating that the temple would be demolished completely, Jesus walked away from the temple with His disciples. Then the next verse starts off saying, *“As He sat on the Mount of Olives ...” (Matt.24:3)*

Where is the Mount of Olives? It is the hill just outside the temple in Jerusalem. As Jesus sat down with His disciples they most likely were looking right at the temple from which they had exited. Put yourself in the disciples’ shoes. If you had been sitting there with Jesus, what would you ask? On the forefront of the disciples’ minds was the judgment that Jesus had just decreed over Jerusalem and the temple. The disciples asked:

“Tell us, when will these things happen?”

They were asking, *“When will Jerusalem and the temple be destroyed?”* As we mentioned earlier, popular end-time teachers assume that the disciples were asking about the end of the world. It is not until the third question that they asked Jesus about the end.

The reason they asked about the end at the same time that they asked about the temple being destroyed because in their Jewish minds what Jesus had just predicted was so cataclysmic that they must have wondered if it would be the end of the world. They were shocked at the thought of God’s holy temple being destroyed. How could

life go on without it? Could it possibly coincide with the end of the world? If not, when would it occur? We will examine our Lord's answers to the second and third questions, later. But here, we need to realize that the first question the disciples asked Jesus is, *"When will these things— Jerusalem and the temple—be destroyed?"*

Within a Generation

As we go on to study our Lord's answers, keep in mind His time frame. Jesus said Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed within a generation. He repeated that time frame in Matthew 24:34, saying:

"Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."

Can we accept these words of Jesus literally? Yes!

Popular end-time teaching sees all of the events of which Jesus prophesied in Matthew 24 happening not by 70 AD, but 2,000 years later, in our future. Therefore they cannot be the time frame of that generation which Jesus declared in two separate passages (Matthew 23:36 and 24:34). Some popular end-time teachers will explain their position by redefining the word *"generation"* to mean *"race,"* and hence, they can say that the race of Jewish people will not pass away before the end of the world. Others claim that the generation which would see all of the end-time events listed in Matthew 24:4-33 – that generation will not pass away until Jesus returns.

I believe that Jesus knew exactly what He was speaking. Everything that is prophesied between Matthew 23:36 and Matthew 24:24 took place exactly as Jesus declared, during the generation which was alive when Jesus declared those words. This is what I will present to you. Origin of Alexandria, a second century church father, wrote,

"I challenge anyone to prove my statement untrue if I say that the entire Jewish nation was destroyed less than one whole generation later on account of these sufferings that they inflicted on Jesus. For it was, I believe, forty-two from the time when they crucified Jesus to the destruction of Jerusalem." (Against Celsus, IV: XXII)

Jesus Answers the First Question

Jesus gives His answer to the first question in Matthew 24:4-22. We will examine His answer verse by verse.

Matthew 24:4-5: Many Claiming to be Christ

"See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many."

Christians who have heard only the popular end-time view immediately place these words of Jesus in the future, shortly before the end of the world. They are looking for some evil leader or several leaders in our lifetime to start claiming that they are the Christ.

This is the first error we need to correct. Jesus was answering the question concerning when Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed. That event happened in 70 AD, within 40 years of the time in which Jesus prophesied it. Jesus told His disciples that soon many people would come claiming to be the Christ. For Jesus' words to be fulfilled, those imposters would have had to come in the first century of the Church.

Did that happen historically? Yes. Right after the death of Jesus, many leaders rose capturing the hearts of the Jewish people. That may seem difficult for us to understand today, but we need to keep in mind the culture of the day. The Jewish people were desperately looking for a Messiah, someone to free them from Roman domination. Their hope and much of their religious system was based on a coming Messiah. When Jesus died, many of His followers gave up believing that He was the Messiah. Other leaders quickly arose, drawing large followings such as:

Simon of Peraea

Athronges

Menahem Ben Judah

Simon Bar Kokhba

Vespasian

Simon Magus

Dositheos the Samaritan

Each of these and many others claimed to be the Messiah able to set up the Kingdom of God and establish heaven on earth. Eusebius wrote,

"After the Lord was taken up into heaven the demons put forth a number of men who claimed to be gods." (The History of the Church, 1965)

St. Jerome wrote,

“At the time of the Jewish captivity, there were many leaders who declared themselves to be Christ, so that while the Romans were actually besieging them, there were three factions within.” (Cited in: Thomas Aquinas’ Golden Chain, 1956)

The Venerable Bede wrote,

“For many came forward, when destruction was hanging over Jerusalem, saying that they were Christ’s.” (Cited in: Thomas Aquinas’, Golden Chain, 1956)

John Wesley wrote,

“And, indeed, never did so many imposters appear in the world as a few years before the destruction of Jerusalem, undoubtedly because that was the time wherein the Jews in general expected the Messiah.” (The Works of John Wesley, 1985)

Matthew 24:6-7: Wars and Rumors of War

“You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom...”

Approximately 2,000 years ago when Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives with His disciples, He prophesied of coming wars. Interestingly, there were no signs of

"wars and rumors of wars" when Jesus prophesied this. The power of Rome seemed to be stable, strong, irresistible and permanent. Historically, the period was referred to as Pax Romana, that is, "Roman Peace." Of course, the enemies of Rome would not have spoken of the time so graciously, but Rome definitely was established in that region of the world. It was at that time that Jesus prophesied of coming wars. Did the prophecy of Jesus come true within that generation?

Indeed, wars began to break out all over the empire in the decade leading up to 70AD. The Jews lived in constant fear, with 50,000 Jews being slain in Seleucia and 20,000 in Caesarea. Then in 66 AD, 50,000 Jews were killed in Alexandria. Within a period of 18 months, four emperors in Rome were murdered violently. Civil war broke out in the city of Rome. It was a time of great turmoil and there were constant rumors of new rebellions.

Matthew 24:7 - Famines

"... in various places there will be famines"

Did famines and earthquakes occur during the generation of the disciples? In Acts 11 we are told about the "great famine."

"Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius." (Acts 11:28; underlining added)

That famine was so severe in the region of Judah that we can read two places in the New Testament where Christians took offerings to collect money for believers suffering there (Acts 11:29-30; I Cor. 16:1-3). The historian Josephus wrote about the devastation of that period.

But the famine was too hard for all other passions, and it is destructive to nothing so much as to modesty...insomuch that children pulled the very morsels that their fathers were eating out of their very mouths, and what still more to be pitied, so did the mothers do to their infants; and when those that were most dear were perishing under their hands, they were not ashamed to take from them the very last drops that might preserve their lives...but the seditious everywhere came upon them immediately, and snatched away from them what they had gotten from others; for when they saw any house shut up, this was to them a signal that the people within had gotten some food; whereupon they broke open the doors, and ran in and took pieces of what they were eating, almost up out of their very throats, and this by force; the old men, who held their food fast, were beaten; and if the women hid what they had within their hands, their hair was torn for so doing; nor was there any commiseration shown either to the aged or to the infants, but they lifted up children from the ground as they hung upon the morsels they had gotten, and shook them down upon the floor. (v:x:3)

Knowing about this famine and the destruction of Jerusalem to follow, we can see why Jesus said to the women of Jerusalem:

"Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed!'" (Luke 23:28-29)

Eusebius wrote,

"Under (Claudius) the world was visited with a famine, which writers that are entire strangers to our religion have recorded in their histories." (Ecclesiastical History, II:8)

Matthew 24:7 - Earthquakes

"...in various places there will be...earthquakes."

Not only did the Earth quake when Jesus died on the cross (Matthew 27:51-52) and again when He rose from the dead (Matthew 28:2), but history shows that a few years just previous to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD was a time of unusually high seismic activity. The most famous earthquake was the destruction of Pompeii in 62AD that partially destroyed the city before its ultimate demise by a volcano in 79AD. The writers of the period also tell us about earthquakes at Crete, Smyrna, Miletus, Chios, Samos, Laodicea, Heirapolis, Campania, Colossae, Rome, and Judea.

Matthew 24:8 Birth Pangs

"But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs."

It is common today for people trained in the popular end-time view to look at present-day natural disasters and claim that they are signs of the imminent return of Jesus, yet that is not what Jesus said. He was very clear that these signs would happen within that generation, furthermore, they would not be signs of the end of the world but “merely the beginnings of birth pangs.” These birth pangs were to precede the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

Matthew 24:9 Persecution

“Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name.”

First came the persecution instigated by the Jewish religious leaders. Saul was among those leaders who oversaw the men who were putting Christians to death. The book of Acts describes that persecution saying:

“And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”
(Acts 8:1)

That “great persecution” continued to spread and soon government officials such as King Herod got involved (Acts 12:1). The persecution became even more intense in the year 64 AD. That was the year when over one-third of the city of Rome burned to the ground. The significance of that event is difficult for modern people to grasp. If we compared it with the recent destruction of the Twin Towers in New York, we would

have to say that the fire in Rome was far more devastating. Rome was considered the center of the civilized world during the first Century and over one-third of the city was destroyed. Nero, who was the Emperor at the time, blamed Christians for that terrible fire, and then he began what Church historians call "The Great Persecution." Not only were thousands of Christians tortured, but Nero actually had Christians covered in tar and then lit on fire so that the light given off would light up his gardens while he entertained guests there in the evenings. *Cornelius Tacitus, Annals of Imperial Rome (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), XV,44).

Matthew 24:10-13: Apostasy and False Prophets

"At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise and mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end. He will be saved."

Soon after the death of our Lord, false prophets began appearing on the scene. Several times Paul warned his followers to watch out for the false prophets. John explained that during his lifetime ...

"Many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1)

Similarly Peter warned that ...

“False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies...” (II Peter 2:1)

The first major group was the Judaizer’s who taught that the Gentiles had to become Jewish proselytes and adhere to the Law of Moses, as well as have faith in Christ. Then came the Gnostics. History tells us that by the year 150 AD, about one-third of all Christians were involved in Gnosticism. To grasp the influence of this heresy, imagine how it would be today if one-third of all Christians in the world or in your own community were taken in by a certain heretical teaching. That is exactly what happened during those early days when the church was struggling to survive.

Since our understanding of Gnosticism is key to understanding the problems of the First- Century Church, it is worth taking a moment to explain.

Gnosticism in the first and Second Century

At the foundation of Gnosticism was a worldview in which the spiritual world was separated from the natural world in the minds of its followers. The spiritual world was considered good and the natural world was thought to be corrupt and evil. As certain leaders attempted to merge this worldview with Christianity, they concluded that God could not have taken on flesh nor come into this evil world in Jesus. This led to several false teachings about the nature of Jesus (which we discuss below). Thinking of this natural world as evil also led them to believe that a person must be very spirit-conscience to be a good Christian. Hence, they developed mystical understandings

and taught that a person must have secret knowledge to know God. From this the word Gnosticism came, for it literally means “knowledge”.

Gnosticism took many forms, but one of the most influential groups completely rejected the Old Testament. They declared that the God of the Old Testament was the devil and Jesus had come to reveal an “unknown Father” to us. Other Gnostics taught that the Old Testament rituals were still valid for Christians. Some were hyper-ascetic and taught vegetarianism and were opposed to any sexual expression – even within marriage, while others taught “freedom” from all laws and held orgies as part of their rituals.

One of the most prominent Gnostic teachers was a man called Cerinthus. He was a Jew who lived in Asia Minor, teaching that Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary (not born of a virgin) –an ordinary man. A heavenly spirit called “the Christ” Jesus at his baptism and left him at the crucifixion. Jesus had brought secret teachings which would enable people to overcome enslavement to the physical world, but the Jewish customs also had to be observed. Those who proved faithful to these teachings and observances would live for a literal 1,000 years of sensual pleasures. These teachings of Cerinthus flourished throughout Asia Minor.

Knowing that Ephesus was in the region of Cerinthus’ influence gives us insight into Paul’s words when he warned the church elders in Ephesus of false teachers springing up around them:

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Acts 20:29-30)

Cerinthus claimed that he had received "another gospel" from an angel. In light of this, it is interesting to note that Paul wrote to the Galatians who were also in that region:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! (Gal. 1:6-8)

Historical records tells us that John was so horrified at Cerinthus' teachings that on one occasion when John walked into the public baths with his disciples at Ephesus, he saw Cerinthus, and so, John ran out of the bath-house warning his disciples that the house may fall down because "*Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within.*" (Pamphilius Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, New York: Harvard University Press, 1980), III,28)

It was to fight Gnosticism that John wrote his first two epistles. Knowing this helps us to understand his teachings. For example, I John starts with a declaration that is diametrically opposed to the Gnostic view of Jesus.

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us. (1 John 1:1-2)

Do you see how profound this statement is? Because the Gnostics thought of the natural world as evil, they could not believe that Jesus could have been God and at the same time have taken on human flesh. Therefore, John started off his letter by declaring that he and the other apostles heard Jesus, saw Him, and touched Him with their hands. Jesus was God and He took on flesh. He manifested in this world.

John goes on with his letter dealing with one truth after another opposing the cult of Gnosticism. Toward the middle of his letter, John warns against the false prophets of Gnosticism.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the spirit of God, every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. (1 John 4:1-3)

Knowing that John was addressing his letter to first century Christians who were being swept into Gnosticism by the thousands, we more easily can understand his warnings to judge various teachers, the most fundamental basis for judging them, John

declared, pertains to what they teach about Jesus Christ. The true prophets and teachers will teach that Jesus has come in the flesh. The false will deny this and/or deny that Jesus is from God. Not only do we get a glimpse here of the cultish tendencies infiltrating the early Church, but John also referred to the "antichrist," another topic which is key for our discussion of Matthew 24 and end-time events.

The Antichrist

When modern Christians hear the word "antichrist," the images that come into their minds are determined by whether they have been trained to believe the popular end-time view or to embrace a victorious perspective. Christians raised with the popular end-time view believe that shortly before Jesus returns to Earth, there will be an evil ruler, possessed by Satan, who will try to rule over the world by taking control of the world's economic system. That coming leader is referred to as the antichrist.

Is that image of the antichrist really in the Bible?

Actually, the word "antichrist" is mentioned only in four passages of the bible. All four are in First and Second John. We will look briefly at each of those passages to learn what the Bible actually says about the antichrist, but first you should realize how little the Bible has to say about this topic. Some Christians trained with the popular end-time view think that the book of Revelation is about the coming of the antichrist and his activity in the world during the end days. In truth, the word "antichrist" is never mentioned even once in the book of Revelation. This fact can be shocking to Christians who have sat for years under popular end-time teaching, because the

antichrist is discussed so much in those circles. Since popular end-time teaching associates the antichrist with the book of Revelation, Christians assume that it actually is the revelation of the antichrist in the end days.

BREAKDOWN OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

We have seen that Christ's discourse on the Mount of Olives, recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, deals with "the end"—not of the world, but of Jerusalem and the Temple; it has exclusive reference to the "last days" of the Old Covenant era. Jesus clearly spoke of His own *contemporaries* when He said that "this generation" would see "all these things." The "Great Tribulation" took place during the terrible time of suffering, warfare, famine, and mass murder leading up to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. What appears to pose a problem for this interpretation, however, is what Jesus says next:

"But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and all of the tribes of the land will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the heaven to the other." (Matthew 24:29-31)

Jesus seems to be saying that the Second Coming will occur immediately after the Tribulation. Did the Second Coming occur in A.D. 70? Have we missed it? First, let us

be clear about one thing at the outset: there is just no getting around that word *immediately*. It means *immediately*. Acknowledging that the tribulation took place during the then-living, generation, we must also face the clear teaching of Scripture that whatever Jesus is talking about in these verses happened *immediately* afterward. In other words, these verses describe what is to take place at the *end* of the Tribulation— what forms its climax.

In order to understand the meaning of Jesus' expressions in this passage, we need to understand the Old Testament much more than most people do today. Jesus was speaking to an audience that was intimately familiar with the most obscure details of Old Testament literature. They had heard the Old Testament read and expounded countless times throughout their lives, and had memorized lengthy passages. Biblical imagery and forms of expression had formed their culture, environment, and vocabulary from earliest infancy, and this had been true for generations. The fact is that when Jesus spoke to His disciples about the fall of Jerusalem, He *used prophetic vocabulary*. There was a 'language' of prophecy, instantly recognizable to those familiar with the Old Testament. As Jesus foretold the complete end of the Old Covenant system— which was, in a sense, the end of a whole world — He spoke of it as any of the prophets would have, in the stirring language of covenantal judgment. We will consider each element in the prophecy, seeing how its previous use in the Old Testament prophets determined its meaning in the context of Jesus' discourse on the fall of Jerusalem. Remember that our ultimate standard of truth is the Bible, and the Bible alone.

The Sun, Moon, and Stars

At the end of the Tribulation, Jesus said, the universe will collapse: the light of the sun and the moon will be extinguished, the stars will fall, the powers of the heavens will be shaken. The basis for this symbolism is in Genesis 1:14-16, where the sun, moon, and stars ("the powers of the heavens") are spoken of as "signs" which "govern" the world. Later in Scripture, these heavenly lights are used to speak of earthly authorities and governors; and when God threatens to come against them in judgment, the same collapsing-universe terminology is used to describe it. Prophesying the fall of Babylon to the Medes in 539 B. C., Isaiah wrote:

"Behold, the Day of the LORD is coming, Cruel, with fury and burning anger, to make the land a desolation; And He will exterminate its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth with their light; The sun will be dark when it rises, And the moon will not shed its light." (Isaiah 13:9-10)

Significantly, Isaiah later prophesied the fall of Edom in terms of *de-creation*:

"And all the host of heaven will wear away, and the sky will be rolled up like a scroll; all their hosts will also wither away As a leaf withers from the vine, Or as one withers from the fig tree." (Isaiah 34:4)

Isaiah's contemporary, the prophet Amos, foretold the doom of Samaria (722BC) in much the same way:

"And it will come about in that day," Declares the Lord GOD, "That I shall make the sun go down at noon and make the earth dark in broad daylight." (Amos 8:9)

Another example is from the prophet Ezekiel, who predicted the destruction of Egypt. God said this through Ezekiel:

"And when I extinguish you, I will cover the heavens, and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you and will set darkness on your land," Declares the Lord GOD." (Ezekiel 32:7-8)

It must be stressed that none of these events literally took place. God did not intend anyone to place a literalist construction on these statements. Poetically, however, all these things *did* happen: as far as these wicked nations were concerned, "the lights went out." This is simply figurative language, which would not surprise us at all if we were more familiar with the Bible and appreciative of its literary character.

What Jesus is saying in Matthew 24, therefore, in prophetic terminology immediately recognizable by his disciples, is that the light of Israel is going to be extinguished; the covenant nation will cease to exist. When the Tribulation is over, old Israel will be gone.

The Sign of the Son of Man

Most modern translations of Matthew 24:30 read something like this: *“And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. ...”* That is a mistranslation, based not on the Greek text but on the translators’ own misguided assumptions about the subject of this passage (thinking it is speaking about the Second Coming). A word-for-word rendering from the Greek actually reads:

“And then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven . . .”

As you can see, two important differences come to light in the correct translation: first, the location spoken of is *heaven*, not just the sky; second, it is not the sign that is in heaven, but the *Son of Man* who is in heaven. The point is simply that this great judgment upon Israel, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, will be the sign that *Jesus Christ is enthroned in heaven at the Father’s right hand, ruling over the nations and bringing vengeance upon His enemies*. The divinely ordained cataclysm of A.D. 70 revealed that Christ had taken the Kingdom from Israel and given it to the Church; the desolation of the old Temple was the final sign that God had deserted it and was now dwelling in a new Temple, the Church. These were all aspects of the First Advent of Christ, crucial parts of the work He came to accomplish by His death, resurrection, and ascension to the throne. This is why the Bible speaks of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Church and the destruction of Israel as being the *same event*, for they were intimately connected theologically. The prophet Joel foretold both the Day of Pentecost and the destruction of Jerusalem in one breath:

“And it will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; And your sons and daughters will prophesy, Your old men will dream dreams, Your young men will see visions. And even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days. And I will display wonders in the heaven and on the earth: Blood, fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, Before the great and awesome Day of the LORD comes. And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be delivered; For on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem There will be those who escape, As the LORD has said, Even among the survivors whom the LORD calls.” (Joel 2:28-31)

St. Peter’s inspired interpretation of this text in Acts 2 determines the fact that Joel is speaking of the period from the initial outpouring of the Spirit to the destruction of Jerusalem, from Pentecost to Holocaust. It is enough for us to note here that the same language of judgment is used in this passage. The common dime-store interpretation that the “pillars of smoke” are mushroom clouds from nuclear explosions is a radical twisting of the text, and a complete misunderstanding of Biblical prophetic language. It would make just as much sense to say that the pillar of fire and smoke during the Exodus was the result of an atomic blast.

The Clouds of Heaven

That, appropriately, brings us to the next element in Jesus’ prophecy of Jerusalem’s destruction: *“and then all the tribes of the land will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”*

The word 'tribes' here has primary reference to the tribes of the *land of Israel*; and the "mourning" is probably meant in two senses. First, they would mourn in sorrow over their suffering and the loss of their land; second, they would ultimately mourn in repentance for their sins, when they are converted from their apostasy (see Romans 11). But how is it that they would see Christ coming on the clouds? This is an important symbol of God's power and glory, used throughout the Bible. For example, think of the "*pillar of fire and cloud*" through which God saved the Israelites and destroyed their enemies in the deliverance from Egypt (see Exodus 13:21-22; 14:19-31; 19:16-19). In fact, all through the Old Testament God was coming "on clouds: in salvation of His people and destruction of His enemies:

"He makes the clouds His chariot; He walks upon the wings of the wind" (Psalms 104:3)

When Isaiah prophesied of God's judgment on Egypt, he wrote:

"Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud, and is about to come to Egypt; the idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence" (Isaiah 19:1)

The prophet Nahum spoke similarly of God's destruction of Nineveh:

"In whirlwind and storm is His way, and clouds are the dust beneath His feet" (Nahum 1:3)

God's "coming on the clouds of heaven" is an almost commonplace Scriptural symbol for His presence, judgment, and salvation.

More than this, however, is the fact that Jesus is referring to a specific event connected with the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the Old Covenant. He spoke of it again at His trial, when the High Priest asked Him if He was the Christ, and Jesus replied:

"I AM; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:62; cf. Matthew 26:64)

Obviously, Jesus was not referring to an event thousands of years in the future. He was speaking of something that His contemporaries — "this generation"— would see in their lifetime. The Bible tells us exactly when Jesus came with the clouds of heaven:

"And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight." (Acts 1:9)

"So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God." (Mark 16:19)

It was this event, the *Ascension to the tight hand of God*, which Daniel foresaw:

"I kept looking in the night visions, And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented

before Him. And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a Kingdom that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His Kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13-14)

The destruction of Jerusalem was the sign that the Son of Man, the Second Adam, was in heaven, ruling over the world and disposing it for His own purposes. At His ascension, He had come on the clouds of heaven to receive the Kingdom from His Father; the destruction of Jerusalem was the revelation of this fact. In Matthew 24, therefore, Jesus was not prophesying that He would literally come on the clouds in A.D. 70 (although it was figuratively true). His literal “coming on the clouds: in fulfillment of Daniel 7, took place in A.D. 30, at the beginning of the “terminal generation.” But in A.D. 70 the tribes of Israel would see the destruction of the nation as the result of His having ascended to the throne of heaven, to receive His Kingdom.

The Gathering of the Elect

Finally, Jesus announced, the result of Jerusalem’s destruction will be Christ’s sending forth of his “angels” to gather the elect. Isn’t this the Rapture? No. The word *angels* simply means *messengers* (cf. James 2:25), regardless of whether their origin is heavenly or earthly; it is the *context* which determines whether these are heavenly creatures being spoken of. The word often means *preachers of the Gospel* (see Matthew 11:10; Luke 7:24; 9:52; Revelation 1-3). In context, there is every reason to assume that Jesus is speaking of the worldwide evangelism and conversion of the nations that will follow upon the destruction of Israel.

Christ's use of the word *gather* is significant in this regard. The word, literally, is a verb meaning to synagogue; the meaning is that with the destruction of the Temple and of the Old Covenant system, the Lord sends out His messengers to gather His elect people into His New Synagogue. Jesus is actually quoting from Moses, who had promised:

"If your outcasts are at the ends of heaven, from there the LORD your God will synagogue you, and from there he will take you" (Deuteronomy 30:4, Septuagint)

Neither text has anything to do with the Rapture; both are concerned with the restoration and establishment of God's House, the organized congregation of His covenant people. This becomes even more pointed when we remember what Jesus had said just before this discourse:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to synagogue your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your House is being left to you desolate! (Matt 23:37-38)

Because Jerusalem apostatized and refused to be synagogue under Christ, her Temple would be destroyed, and a New Synagogue and Temple would be formed: the Church. The New Temple was created, of course, on the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit came to indwell the Church. But the fact of the new Temple's existence would only be made obvious when the scaffolding of the Old Temple and the Old Covenant system was taken away. The Christian congregations immediately began

calling themselves "synagogues" (that is the word used in James 2:2), while calling the Jewish gatherings "synagogues of Satan" (Revelation 2:9; 3:9). Yet they lived in anticipation of the Day of Judgment upon Jerusalem and the Old Temple, when the Church would be revealed as the true Temple and Synagogue of God. Because the Old Covenant system was "obsolete" and "ready to disappear" (Hebrews 8:13), the writer to the Hebrews urged them to have hope, "not forsaking the *synagoguing* of ourselves together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25; cf. 11 Thessalonians 2:1-2).

The Old Testament promise that God would "synagogue" His people undergoes one major change in the New Testament. Instead of the simple form of the word, the term used by Jesus has the Greek preposition *epi* prefixed to it. This is a favorite New Covenant expression, which *intensifies the* original word. What Jesus is saying, therefore, is that the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 will reveal Him as having come with clouds to receive His Kingdom; and it will display His Church before the world as the full, the true, the super-Synagogue.