

35. The Signs of the Times

4/4/2004

Many people are interested in future things, including search for the biblical prophecies. "What is going to happen in the Middle East? Who is the antichrist? Is he from Europe or from Israel?" There are so many questions, and so many books have been written about them. Many of you have read and read the series of books called "Left Behind." That is exactly a case in point. But it is easy to be wrapped up in biblical prophecies for the sake of satisfaction of knowing future. The biblical prophecies is there to shows the glory of God and faithfulness of Jesus. Any other purposes should be eliminated from our hearts regarding the biblical prophecies.

This morning and next week, we are going to study the prophecies which were given from the lips of our Savior Jesus on the Mount of Olives. It is known as the Olivet Discourse. Chapter 24, the prophetic portion of the discourse, is basically a three-point message. In verses 1 through 14 Jesus speaks about the end times as they relate to the nations. In verses 15 through 31 He speaks about the end times as they relate to Israel specifically. In verses 32 through 51 He speaks about the urgency of the rapture of the church.

A. A PROPHECY OF DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE

Matt 24:1-2 Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

The temple was huge. Herod's rebuilding work started in 19 B.C., and was only completed in 63 A.D., taking more than eighty years. The temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. But the temple wasn't just big, it was also beautiful. The Jewish historian Josephus says that the temple was covered on the outside with gold plates. Where there was no gold, there were blocks of pure white marble.

When Roman soldiers set fire on the temple, the fire was so intense that it melted the gold and the gold ran down to the cracks of the stones. To retrieve the gold, the Roman soldiers disassembled every stones.

That is why if you go to Jerusalem today, all you will see is the Wailing Wall, a part of the temple foundation. When God predicts the future, you can take it to the bank. Every prophecy He mentioned in the Bible has happened and will be happen exactly.

By the way, speaking of going to Jerusalem, we are planning to go to Israel in Nov. 8-18, 2005. Start to save your money. I will let you know more about it.

B. THREE QUESTIONS REGARDING JESUS' PROPHECIES

Matt 24:3 Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

These are loaded questions. We already got the answer for the first question the disciples asked.

Jesus' predictions have been the source of tremendous disagreement among Christians who have tried to understand them. Why didn't Jesus simply say it so clearly that there was no possibility anyone could misunderstand Him? One reason why prophecy may seem "vague" is because God wants every age to

have reasons to be ready for Jesus return. We should not think of Jesus' return as an event far off on a time line, but always be ready.

C. THE BIRTH PAIN OF THE TRIBULATION - THE FIRST HALF

Matt 24:4-8 And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.

This Matt 24 is very much related to Revelation ch. 6. From the beginning, Jesus warns the disciples that many will be deceived as they anticipate His return. We still have some churches in America that they don't care about anything else except being physically ready for rapture. They sell everything they have and move into some hillside and wearing white robes, eat bird seeds and waiting for Jesus to come and get them. Then they get disappointed and disillusioned and fall away from God. That is not what the Lord tells us to do.

With the stockpile of 60000 thermo nuclear bombs that gives the human race the power to destroy our planet for 17 times over, mankind has armed himself to teeth. One scientist was recently asked which weapons would be used in World War III. This atomic scientist gave an answer that I thought was insightful when he said, "I'm not sure exactly which weapons will be detonated in World War III. But I'll tell you which ones will be used in World War IV: rocks." "Rocks?" "Yes. Rocks will be all that's left if World War III ever takes place."

Famine is the result of a population explosion and wars. It took from the time of Adam until 1857 for the population of this planet to reach one billion. Since then, we add a billion people every twenty years. We now have well over seven billion people. It's getting crowded, folks. And the effects are felt particularly in the third world.

The Greek word translated "pestilence" implies unusual pestilence. Consider the AIDS virus. As of May 2001, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) claimed that over one million Americans had been infected with AIDS. But the Brookings Institution and others dispute that figure, claiming the number of Americans infected is much higher, possibly three to four million. Homosexual people don't want the rest of the world to know about the truth of AIDS result. If AIDS is not enough, we have SARS, Monkey Pox, West Niles Virus and more. It sure is a frightening time.

In 1976 a geological survey team discovered an interesting change happening in the tectonic plates upon which the earth rests. These gigantic plates are shifting in such a way that earthquakes now occur with greater frequency and intensity than at any time in recorded history. For an example, according to U.S. Geological Survey's report, from 1890 to 1969, there were 39 earthquakes that were magnitude of 6.0 or greater. But between 1970-1979, there were 51; between 1980-1989, there were 89; between 1990-1999, there were 1365; between 2000 and present date, a little bit over four years, there were over 600 earthquakes already.

Jesus said when we begin to see pestilence, superpowers at war, famine, and earthquakes, we are to know the end is near.

Matt 24:9-14 Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

After the rapture and during this first part of the tribulation which is known as "The time of Jacob's Trouble", there will be many converts among the people who will be left behind, because they don't have personal relationship with Jesus before. They will become the believers. If you are thinking that you are going to be one of them later, since you are not a born-again Christian now, I hope that you think again. According to 2 Thess:1-12, the Holy Spirit will depart with the born-again Christians at the time of rapture. If you don't want to be a born-again Christian now, what does make you to think that you will be a believer when the Holy Spirit who helps you to be one will not be around you? Most likely, you will not be a believer later. It is better to be one now.

During that time, those newly converted people are going to be persecuted and get killed for the sake of Christ. There will be many false prophets from false religions and extreme violence and maximum perversion.

V14 becomes the basis of many controversies. Some say that we must evangelize the world so Jesus can come back. That is another wrong prophecy interpretation we often face. Jesus will come back at a time already appointed by the Father. Surely the Gospel is to be preached, and surely we are to participate in the process. The rapture nor the second coming of Christ are not dependent upon us, but the Father's timetable. There is no prophecy need to be fulfilled for the rapture to happen.

D. THE GREAT TRIBULATION - THE SECOND HALF

Matt 24:15 "Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand),

As Jesus teaches us that it is prophesied in Daniel 9:27. After the rapture, the antichrist will come on the scene who will make a seven-year peace treaty with Israel. Appearing to be her friend and protector, this leader will seem to defuse all of the problems in the Middle East. He will be charismatic and persuasive, an impressive intellectual, and a skilled orator. He will capture the heart and attention of the entire world. Although he will initially come across as a man of peace, in the middle of his seven-year peace treaty, 2 Thessalonians 2 tells us he will set up his image in the temple and demand to be worshiped as God. This is the Abomination of Desolation Jesus prophesied.

Matt 24:16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

Zechariah declares that following the abomination of desolation, the Jews will indeed flee. But only one-third of them will make it to safety (Zechariah 13:8, 9). Most Bible teachers believe the remainder of the Jews will run to the ancient city of Petra.

Located in present-day Jordan, Petra is a mysterious, miraculous city. In approximately 2000 B.C., Jacob's brother Esau settled in a volcanic crater that was approximately a mile in length. It was an incredibly secure place. To get into the crater, one

had to go through a narrow canyon only twelve feet wide in many places with a rock face between two hundred feet and one thousand feet high on either side. The entire city could be easily guarded by only fifteen soldiers marching along the ridges above its narrow entrance. The descendants of Esau, called the Edomites, dwelt in this city of Petra for centuries, believing they were invincible. Over the years, they constructed amphitheaters, banks, temples, and an aqueduct system that baffles scientists to this day. With a population of one million, no one can figure out how they got enough water into the city to sustain the inhabitants. Eventually, the Edomites were wiped out entirely due to widespread plague according to a God's prophecy by Obadiah.

For many years, people considered Petra as the lost city of Atlantis—a mythological place that never really existed.

In 1812, however, a Bible teacher/explorer/adventurer named Johann Burckhardt was determined to find Petra. And when he finally did, he couldn't believe what he saw, for although it had been abandoned for centuries and remains desolate to this day, he was amazed by its grandeur and splendor. Perhaps most arresting, however, were the two huge eagles' wings carved into the rock at the very entrance of the city, for the Book of Revelation declares that the remnant of Israel will be saved by the wings of an eagle (Revelation 12:14). A number of years ago, W. E. Blackstone, another Bible teacher, was so convinced that Petra will be the place in which the Jews are kept safe, he purchased thousands of Hebrew New Testaments, underlined passages like Matthew 24 and Revelation 12, and left them in earthen jars throughout Petra. When the Jews get there, the Bibles will be waiting for them. Ain't that totally cool?

Matt 24:17-22 Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.

Pray that the abomination of desolation doesn't come on the Sabbath day. Why? Because in Israel, transportation comes to a standstill on the Sabbath. This is another indication that Jesus is speaking to the Jews.

There are those who say that since the church is called "the elect," the church must be in the Tribulation period. There are three groups in the Bible who are called by that name: Israel, the church, and those saved in the Tribulation. Keep in mind that in verses 15–36 with references to Judaea, the Sabbath, and the temple – Jesus is still speaking to Israel.

Matt 24:23-28 Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.

No one should be deceived about the nature of Jesus' second coming. It will not be secret or private, but as plain as lightning that flashes across the sky. But in the midst of such tribulation, there will be a temptation to look for false messiahs.

Jesus didn't say, "I'm coming again to Brooklyn in 1921 to reveal Myself to the Watchtower Society." Or He didn't say, "I'm coming again in the late 1800s to reveal Myself through magic spectacles to Joseph Smith." No, when He comes, everyone will see.

E. THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS

Matt 24:29-31 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth 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 His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Several prophetic passages describe the cosmic disturbances that will precede and surround the return of Jesus.

Do you see the differences between the Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ?

Rapture: It will happen when no one expect it.
So we must be ready.

The Second Coming: It will happen in public, so that everyone can see.

Rapture: Jesus alone comes down.
The Second Coming: Jesus comes down with His saints from heaven.

Rapture: Jesus comes down to take His saints to heaven.
The Second Coming: Jesus comes down to judge the world.

Rapture: The Rapture starts the Tribulation.
The Second Coming: The Second Coming ends the Tribulation.

The key to understand the biblical prophecies is understanding what God is doing with the nation of Israel.

The events we just have studied is very close. As Jesus said that it is a birth pain for the Tribulation and as the frequency of these pains are closer, the time of the rapture is even closer.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) Without knowing the Word of God, we, too, will be deceived by false doctrines and religions.

2) The Word of God is faithful and accurate about the future.

We need to trust what it says in the Bible more than what the world says about the future.

3) No one knows the date of the rapture. Do not be deceived.

When Jesus says, "No one know," that mean no one knows. Don't let anyone with fancy dancy formulas deceive you.