

Christ's Greatest Prophetic Discourse Part 3 of 8

We turn once again to our study of Matthew 24. It's a wonderful thing to be able to study the prophetic Word of God, when we have an opportunity to get a glimpse into the consummation of all things. We have an opportunity to gaze, as it were, at the glory and majesty and excellency of Christ Jesus, our coming Savior.

We will be looking at verses 9-14, but I will read verses 3-14. "And as He was sitting 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?' And Jesus answered and said to them, 'See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many. And 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, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name. And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come.'"

Before we look carefully at these passages of Scripture that are so important, may I say that I appreciate your willingness to allow me to get technical at times. I fear in many cases Christians have become victims of a society that has a relentless desire to "dumb down" everything. I don't want to "dumb down" the truth of God. Sometimes passages require great detail and a lot of thinking. The wonderful thing is that our faith is strengthened the more we know. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.

In light of that, we want to begin with a question that has been asked of me recently, which is, "Dr. Harrell, are you a dispensationalist?" A lot of people hear that term and think, "What is that? Is that some kind of disease?" Well, no. In fact I would be called a dispensationalist, and maybe you would be too. Let me explain this term briefly. It is a term mainly used in theological circles. When you look at the Word of God, you see that in His eternal purposes, to glorify Himself, God administers His rule over His creation in different ways, in different eras. A dispensation is merely an administration of that rule. Some dispensationalists have a rather elaborate system that labels eras of redemptive history based on nuances and inferences. I would like to say that a dispensation is merely a term referring to the varying administrations in the outworking of God's divine plan.

The way God worked in the Old Testament is very different than the way He works today. The way that He worked with the nation Israel is very different that the way He works with the Church today. Someday when He comes to rule and reign on the earth during the millennial kingdom there will be a very different way that He functions. Dispensationalism is merely a system of biblical interpretation that interprets and applies the Word of God—including the prophetic literature—in a normal, literal way. It therefore takes into account the differing ways that God rules within a given era. And therefore, that method of interpretation would see a distinction between God's program for Israel and God's program for the Church, even though there are many overlapping theological concepts.

For example, His plan of redemption remains the same. All through the Word of God we see that salvation is always by grace through faith. But the way He administers His plan differs from one

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dispensation to another. For example, Israel was God's unique focus of redemption in one dispensation, while the Church, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, has been His focus since the Jews rejected Jesus, especially since Pentecost. Ultimately we're going to see that right before God returns again, during Daniel's 70th week, that time of tribulation, I believe that His focus will once again return to Israel in particular, especially during His millennial reign. The prophetic literature is filled with the pivotal role that the nation of Israel, the Jew, plays during that time.

John MacArthur says, "Dispensationalism teaches that all God's remaining covenant promises to Israel will be literally fulfilled, including the promises of earthly blessings and an earthly messianic kingdom. God promised Israel, for example, that they would possess the promised land forever (Genesis 13:14-17; Exodus 31:13). Scripture declares that Messiah will rule over the kingdoms of the earth from Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:9-11). Old Testament prophecy says that all Israel will one day be restored to the promised land (Amos 9:14-15); the temple will be rebuilt (Ezekiel 37:26-28); and the people of Israel will be redeemed (Jeremiah 23:6; Romans 11:26-27). Dispensationalists believe all those promised blessings will come to pass as literally as did the promised curses."

So having addressed the implications of that crucial system of biblical interpretation, we return to Jesus' greatest prophetic discourse in Matthew 24. We will obviously apply that same method of interpretation to this passage of Scripture. At the end of verse 3, the disciples asked Jesus, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" May I remind you that in verses 4-14 He describes six very specific signs, they are called birth pangs in verse 8. These are things that will occur just before His appearing. What are they? The first sign is that there will be false messiahs in verses 4-5. In verses 6 through the first part of 7 there will be nations at war, in the end of verse 7 through verse 8 there will be natural disasters of epic proportions, in verse 9 persecution of tribulation saints, the fifth sign in verses 10-13 is the defection of and betrayal by false believers, and finally in verse 14, the sixth sign will be mass evangelism.

We've looked at the first three, so we will look at the last three, which would be, beginning with number four, the persecution of tribulation saints. Notice verse 9, "Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name." This fourth birth pang will be the inevitable consequence of the first three. People will know that they are enduring the wrath of the Lamb, according to Revelation 6:17, and the people during that time are going to hate anyone who worships the Lamb that is causing all of this suffering upon the world.

In this verse Jesus tells us three things that are going to be happening to the people of that day, the saints of that day. First of all they are going to be delivered to tribulation. "Delivered" in the original language is *paradidomi*, which is the idea of someone being arrested by authorities and handed over to an executioner. That's how the term was used. So people are going to be delivered to tribulation. They are also going to be killed, He tells us, and they are going to be "hated on account of My name."

Down through redemptive history, saints have always been persecuted. But friends, never to this extent. The severity and the scope of these persecutions far exceed anything that the world has ever seen. As human suffering intensifies under the mighty hand of God, so too will the attacks on His people. In fact, the apostle Paul reminds us of this in Galatians 6:17 that he bore, "The brand marks of Jesus" in his body. Likewise, all who worship Christ have and will suffer for His sake. The wounds and the scars that the saints bear are ultimately meant for the One that we and they someday will serve, none other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's interesting in Mark 13:9 Jesus is quoted to say this, "They will deliver you to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them." Most likely the courts here would be a reference to the Gentile authorities, and synagogues to the Jewish authorities. But I would submit to you that we already see the stage set for these kinds of persecutions today, especially as we see the worldwide escalation of hatred for Christians. Now when I speak of Christians, I'm not referring to apostate religious systems such as Roman Catholicism, or even some of the neo-evangelical, prosperity cult, seeker sensitive, mega-church, fad-driven type of things that are out there. Most of those organizations are sort of pseudo-Christian, religiously and politically correct, but for the most part are not genuine Christians.

What I'm talking about is the persecution that we see today. That will escalate during the time of the tribulation for Bible-believing Christians. To be a little bit more specific, those who believe in a six-day creation, and that God is the Creator and Sustainer and Consummator of all things. And that there is only one God, who exists in three persons, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and that there is salvation in no name other than the Lord Jesus Christ, and that His Word is infallible and so on. Frankly some of the things I just said are outlawed in many nations around the world today.

It is estimated that more Christians have died for their faith in the twentieth century than in any other time in history. Global reports indicate that over 150,000 Christians were martyred just last year around the world, chiefly outside the United States. One organization that watches these things, Open Doors International, has a ranking of nations. Let me give you the top ten, which would be, in my mind, a "preview of coming attractions." The top ten of the nations that are most hostile to Christianity are: North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Laos, Iran, Maldives, Somalia, Bhutan, China and Afghanistan. It's interesting that Islam is the majority religion in five of the top ten countries, and as you look at the rest of the list, they are the majority of those nations. Four countries on that list have Communist governments: North Korea, Vietnam, Laos and China. Bhutan is the only Buddhist country in the top ten list. And of course Saudi Arabia, Iran, Maldives, Somalia, and Afghanistan are all Muslim.

In one of the articles that I read about North Korea, they state the following, "The Stalinist country of North Korea is characterized by a complete lack of religious freedom and of many other human rights. For the third year in a row, North Korea heads the ranking as the worst violator of religious rights. Christianity is observed as one of the greatest threats to the regime's power. The government will arrest not only the suspected dissident but also three generations of his family to root out the bad influence...It is believed that tens of thousands of Christians are currently suffering in North Korean prison camps, where they are faced with cruel abuses. North Korea is suspected to detain more political and religious prisoners than any other country in the world."

Saudi Arabia is second on the list—supposedly one of our allies. Here is what an article says about them. "Saudi Arabia is high on the top of the World Watch List. Religious freedom does not exist in the Wahhabist kingdom. Its citizens are not allowed to adhere to any other religion than Islam. The legal system is based on Islamic law (sharia). Apostasy—conversion to another religion—is punishable by death. Christians and other non-Muslims are prohibited from gathering for public worship." With Islam's determination to gain world domination, which has been historically their goal, if you read anything about their history or the Koran you will see that. With that as their determination, these things will only escalate.

Friends, even in the United States we see persecution beginning to mount. Frankly, this is a pattern that many notice as reminiscent of Jewish persecution in pre-war Germany. As you study, you will see that the people were first mocked and ridiculed, and then discrimination against a certain group of people—the Jews in that day—was socially acceptable, and we see that even today as people bash Christians in our country. And then the prejudice turns to hatred, the propaganda machine gets cranked up more and more, and finally it results in outright persecution. Virtually anything today that is rooted in basic Christian beliefs is now considered ridiculous at best and a hate crime at worst. You see this especially in the relentless attack on Christianity from organizations like the ACLU.

If you don't believe me, just get on television, or anyplace, especially in a public school or a college or university, and speak out concerning your belief in a Creator God, and you will see the reaction. If you speak out that Jesus is the only way, you'll be branded as an intolerant bigot. If you speak out and tell people that the Bible is the infallible, inspired record revealed by God, people will think it's utter foolishness and you're some knuckle-dragging Neanderthal that needs to live in a cave. If you tell people that you believe that abortion is morally wrong, you will find that instantly that will incite almost a murderous rage in the opponents. All you have to do is refer to the recent Judge Alito hearings of late and you will see that played out over and over. If you speak out against something like homosexuality, you'll see the same response.

Friends, at our colleges, universities and even seminary campuses you will see that what we teach here at this church, and many other Bible-believing churches, is not only considered utter folly, but considered dangerous to society. All of this grows with every graduating class. One article I read said, "The entertainment industry and syndicated media increasingly vilify Christians as sewer rats, vultures, and simple-minded social ingrates. The FBI and the Clinton White House branded fundamentalist Christian groups as hate mongers and potential terrorists. The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago warns that plans by Southern Baptists to hold a convention in the Windy City next year might foment 'hate crimes' against minorities, causing some Christians to fear that speaking openly about their religious beliefs will soon be considered a crime. All this, while Christianity itself is often a target of hate-crime violence." Friends, I give you this as a sample, and I'm sure you're very aware if you know anything that's going on in our culture today. But this is nothing to be compared with what will come.

In Revelation 6:9-11 we read of Christ breaking the fifth seal of the scroll. By the way, these again parallel Jesus' signs in Matthew 24, especially the one in verse 9 that we're looking at. There we read of the prayers of those that will be martyred during the time of the tribulation, prayers of divine vengeance. Here's what we read there, "and when He broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' and there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, should be completed also."

The Holy Spirit gives us a sense of the magnitude of the saints that will be killed during this time. We read about this in Revelation 7:9-10. There John sees "a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the

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Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" And then, as we go on and read, one of the elders, representing the raptured church, reveals the identity of those who were slain. In verse 14 we read, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

Some will ask, "Well if the church has been raptured," as I believe it will be, "where do these saints come from?" The answer is that they will be saints who trust in Christ after the rapture during the tribulation. I'll speak more about that in a moment. But first, we have to assume that the Church will be raptured before the tribulation.

As I've said before, there are those whom I love and respect who don't agree with my position, but I think it's fair to you for me to explain why I believe that the Church will be translated before the tribulation, and not during or at the end of it. Let me give you a brief list here, getting a bit technical for a moment. This is not an exhaustive list, but my first reason is that I believe that only a pretribulational rapture preserves the New Testament doctrine of imminency, that the Lord could come at any time. I believe this is a doctrine that is essential to a proper understanding of sanctification, not to mention the comfort the apostle Paul gave those in Thessalonica. I covered that in part one of this series.

Secondly, I believe there are specific promises in the Word of God that tell us that the Church will not be exposed to this time of divine judgment. Look at Revelation 3:10 where we read, "Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world (literally the "inhabited earth"), to test those who dwell upon the earth."

Now, I understand that this is a promise to one of the seven churches in Asia Minor, the *ekklesia*, or the "called out ones" specifically, of the church of Philadelphia. But dear friends, as we look at the seven churches, I believe that each church represents a unique type of church that has existed perennially throughout the Church Age. I believe that what is spoken here is relevant to all churches, not just the church at Philadelphia. I would substantiate that by the general call to all churches in Revelation 3:13 where he says "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Back to Revelation 3:10, what must we hear from his word to Philadelphia, and therefore to all churches? Well that we're going to be "kept" from "that hour," literally "the hour," and the context here in Revelation is that hour of divine judgment described in Revelation 6-19, designated specifically in 14:7 as "the hour of His judgment." The word is "kept," and you Greek students understand that, *tereso ek*, "I will keep you from the hour of trial." He did not use the preposition *en* (in) or *dia* (through) the trial, He didn't use either of those prepositions in the genitive case. If He had, then that would clearly indicate that there would be a preservation through or in the midst of the hour of trial. But He did not use that. That would make no sense in my mind to say that the saints are going to go through the tribulation but they are going to be specially protected. Why be preserved from the consequences of these catastrophic judgments and still die a martyr's death as many of them will do?

Moreover, I find it interesting that Jesus used a similar phrase in John 12:27, the phrase in Greek "soston me ek tes horas tautes" which says "save me from this hour." It's the same phrase that is used in Revelation 3:10. Jesus was saying, "Save Me from the hour of my crucifixion, deliver Me out of it,

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exempt Me from the agony of the suffering." He wasn't saying, "Help Me to survive somehow without consequence, as I go through this time of suffering." That's not what He was saying. Again, the argument that the Church will endure the pre-kingdom judgments by some kind of miraculous intervention simply does not stand the test of Revelation 3:10, or other passages.

There are other texts that support our deliverance out of that hour. The Lord Himself promised in John 5:24, "He who hears My word, and believes Him who sent me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life." And also in John 14, Jesus speaks of going and preparing a place for us. He is in keeping here with Jewish marriage traditions where the groom would go and prepare a place for his bride and would come unannounced to receive his bride. I believe Jesus is speaking of coming for His bride, the Church, describing the rapture, which by the way is clearly presented in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15.

In John 14:2-3 Jesus says, "In my father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself that where I am, there you may be also." Now think of this, Jesus is in essence saying, "I have paid the dowry, I have bought you with my very blood. I love you with an everlasting love. I've gone to prepare a place for you." Now catch this, "Even though I have said to you in John 5:24 that 'you will not come into judgment, but you've passed out of death into life,' bride, what I want you to understand is that before I come to you and take you to Myself as My beloved bride, I want you to suffer the birth pangs of My wrath for a period of time and even die a martyr's death." That makes no sense to me.

The birth pangs again, always in the Old Testament were used to describe a time of divine wrath, a time of divine judgment. But no, I don't believe there's anything in John 14:2-3 that speaks of Christ coming in judgment, of His coming in power and great glory to somehow destroy the wicked. Instead, dear friends, I believe He's coming to snatch away His bride, to take away His church, to celebrate the marriage supper of the Lamb, where we receive our rewards. The glorified church will return with Him at the second coming as His Church is established in the kingdom.

In Romans 5:9 it says "...we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him." In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 it says we are to "wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come." In 1 Thessalonians 5:9 he says, "For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." Again, those were to be words of comfort for Thessalonian believers who thought they had missed the rapture and now they were in the time of divine judgment.

I understand the Church has and will suffer persecution. We live in a satanic system here. In fact, in 1 John 5:19 we read that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. He is the prince and the power of the air. Romans 8 says that all of creation, even the saints, groan inwardly, we are waiting to be snatched away from this place. And so we are going to suffer, but not from the hand of God in the sense of His divine wrath.

Beloved, as I think about the Church, this is His very body, we are the body of the messianic King. There's nothing that can be more intimate than the body. We are joint heirs with Christ. We've been destined to reign with Him. He has given us the enormous and lofty privilege of authority in the kingdom, represented by the fact that we are, according to Matthew 16:19, given the keys of the

kingdom of heaven. I know people will say, "The Church has always suffered persecution, why can't they do it then as well?" That's true, but friends, I would argue that there is nothing that has ever happened in the history of the world comparable to the suffering that will occur in this great day of divine wrath. Think about it. The Word of God tells us that the Holy Spirit is going to be taken out of the way, He's going to step aside, as it were. Then, "...the beast that comes up out of the abyss" according to Revelation 11:7, "will make war with them, overcoming them and killing them." That's never happened before in the history of the world. This will be a time when the Antichrist will be given unprecedented power according to Revelation 13:7. That says power "will be given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them; and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation."

There's a third reason why I believe the Church will be snatched away before the tribulation. It's interesting that in the book of Revelation, John uses the Greek term *ekklesia*, the word for the Church, the "called out ones." He uses it twenty-one times. Twenty of those times he uses it in reference to the seven churches mentioned in the first three introductory chapters of the book of Revelation, and it's always in connection with the churches on earth, never in connection with the saints in heaven.

Then he uses it one more time in the epilogue when Jesus testifies to the churches to whom the prophecy is given, and he's offering words of admonition and comfort. Here's the point: Never one time does the term *ekklesia* appear in chapters 4-19, during all of those periods of judgment. To me, this would be a very odd omission if in fact the *ekklesia* were present upon the earth during that time. However, although no references to the *ekklesia* are found in Revelation 4-19, we do find three fascinating references to a vast body of saved individuals in heaven. Each one is designated by terms that are used in the New Testament to describe the Church, the *ekklesia*, during the Church Age. What are they? In chapters 4-5 we read of the twenty-four elders, a description of the raptured Church. Always the elders were described as the leaders of the Church. A second mention is in Revelation 13:6 where we discover that the Antichrist blasphemes three objects of his utter hatred. They are: God; His name; and also His tabernacle, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Antichrist is blaspheming the raptured Church.

Thirdly we read of the bride who has made herself ready for the Lamb in Revelation 19:1-9. Use of the term *ekklesia* would reinforce my position. A fourth reason I believe the church will be raptured before the tribulation is because of the unique chronological sequence of judgments in Revelation 6-19 that not only parallel Jesus' prophetic discourse in Matthew 24, but also Daniel's 70th week found in Daniel 9. Remember, Daniel's 70th week is to be the template that Jesus says we are to use to determine the chronological sequence of events that indicate the beginning of birth pangs. Jesus describes that in Matthew 24:15-16 and Mark 13:14. All of this template that we're to lay over the text is undeniably and distinctly Jewish. It focuses on the Israel of the Old Testament, not the Church.

Again, although God's economy in dealing with Israel finds numerous fulfillments in the Church, nevertheless Daniel 70th week is a distinctly Jewish context pertaining to God's covenants with Israel. I just can't see how they can be describing anything in the Church Age. When Israel enters, as Jeremiah 30:7 says, "the time of Jacob's trouble" we read that this will be a period of unprecedented oppression for Israel, and the context describes her final restoration, just before their Messiah returns, as described in detail in Revelation 6-19.

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Jesus clearly indicates in Matthew 24:15-16 and Mark 13:14 that the 70th week prophecy is to be the template for this chronological sequence of the beginning of birth pangs, and that these pre-kingdom judgments therefore I believe, are consistent with God's purposes and plan for Israel, not the Church.

Daniel 9:24, part of the template that says, "Seventy weeks (which is really referring to weeks of years) have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place." You see, while the nation of Israel was set aside temporarily, we read about that in Romans 11:11-15, the normal reading of Scripture would make it clear to me that they will once again emerge as the object of divine attention.

As I read these prophecies, I am struck with the "Jewishness" of all of it, of this coming period of time. For example, as we read in Revelation, we read how God is going to supernaturally save and seal 144,000 sons of Israel, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes, as it says in Revelation 7:4-5. They will become a massive missionary force preaching the gospel. In Revelation 11 we read how the temple is going to be measured. That was always symbolic in the Word of God to describe ownership. The temple: this speaks of the people who worship in the temple and how the Gentiles are going to tread it underfoot for three and a half years.

And in Revelation 11:19 there's going to be an appearance of the ark of the covenant. This doesn't match with my understanding of God's dispensation with the Church. Later in Revelation 15 there are seven angels of judgment that appear and they come out of "the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven." And even the news of the last bowl judgment that will be emptied out comes forth from this same temple in Revelation 16:17. The "two witnesses" in verse 3—the Jews always required two witnesses to confirm a testimony—are supernaturally granted special power to prophesy for 1260 days. Even the plagues in Revelation 11:6 are reminiscent of those enacted upon the enemies of Israel in the days of Elijah and Moses.

And if that's not enough, in Revelation 12 there's clearly identified, "the woman." And who is that? The Word says that it's the nation of Israel, consistent with the Israel of the Old Testament. This woman is going to be persecuted by the beast, the Antichrist, during this diabolical reign. And indeed, all of her persecutions, Israel's persecutions, past, present and future, have come from Satan. He remains the chief antagonist in the prophetic record all the way to the end. Ultimately in the final conflict the Word of God reveals to us that the great angel Michael is the one that defeats Satan. Who is Michael in the Old Testament? He is the great protector of Israel. So again, I just cannot see the Church, the bride, in any of this.

Back to Matthew 24. If the Church is raptured, and I know there are people who differ with me on this, but if it is raptured at the beginning of the tribulation, then who are the saints that Jesus refers to in verse 9? They are going to be those who come to Christ during the tribulation. Many people are going to come to Christ as a result of the preaching of the 144,000 and the two witnesses.

Back to Jesus' sign gifts now. He's telling us that during this time, right before He comes, there will be false messiahs, nations at war, natural disasters of epic proportions, persecution of tribulation saints, and fifthly, in verses 10-13, the defection of and betrayal by false believers. Notice what it says. "And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another. And many false

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prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved."

You know, especially those of you who have sat under my teaching, that Christianity has many tares amongst the wheat. Those who profess Christ but do not possess Him. Churches are filled with such of people. Many people join up with Christianity because it's kind of the cultural thing to do. Many people are just born into it, they don't know anything different so they assimilate into it but really don't know Christ. For some people it's just a nice social club. It's a great place to meet nice people, to meet friends, maybe find a husband or a wife or network your business. For a lot of people Christianity has a sentimental charm, all of the Christmas stuff and so on. And who knows, there may be some supernatural thing with it, as some people might think. There's some supernatural mystique about Christianity. Who knows, maybe you can join up with it and get rich like a lot of these guys say you can. Maybe you can just exercise your faith in some special way and now all of your diseases are going to be healed. What do you have to lose?

My point is, there are many people that have entered by the wide gate of easy believism, that cheap grace. They have not come to Christ through brokenness over their sin, through genuine repentance mourning over their sin, pleading for divine mercy that the Lord instantly gives, coming and denying themselves, taking up a cross, hungering for righteousness. There is no genuine humility, no real devotion to God's glory, no real love for the lost, no real separation from the world. It's just a cultural thing to do.

I believe these will be the type of people that will defect and betray others during the time of tribulation. It's interesting in Matthew 13 in the parable of the seed and the sower Jesus talks about how that gospel seed even falls on rocky places. In verse 20 He says, "This is the man who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away." Jesus is describing the ones who will fall away here in Matthew 24 as well. Fall away not from salvation, we don't read that in Scripture. You have to torture the biblical text to somehow say that you lose your salvation.

Genuine believers never lose their salvation, they are not falling away from salvation. What they are falling away from, what they are departing from is their phony profession. In 1 John 2:19 we read that, "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us." You see even in what Jesus is saying in Matthew 24, He's warning of a time when the refining fires of persecution will purify the church, separating the dross from the pure gold of genuine saving faith.

Historically, persecution and suffering have always been God's method of purification. The writer of Hebrews warned in 3:12, "Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God." I know a lot of people will say, "That's not me, I would never fall away." Ask yourself, to what extent are you willing, today, to take a stand for Christ? How easy is it for you to start clearing your throat and backing away and changing the subject when it's time to stand up for Christ around the water cooler, or when you're at the hairdresser, or when you're sitting across from some friends at a restaurant. If you're a coward in those simple, easy scenarios, think what a coward you would be when your very life is at stake.

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This will be a time of unprecedented betrayal and persecution. In fact, Jesus says there will be ones who “will deliver up one another and hate one another.” In Mark’s Gospel we have even more detail of what He’s saying there. In Mark 13:12 Jesus says, “brother will deliver brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death.” Can you imagine that? You see friends, this will be a time of such persecution and suffering that the only thing that matters is self-preservation. Even if it means giving up your child.

In verse 11 of Matthew 24 Jesus goes on to say, “And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many.” False prophets will undoubtedly be serving the many false messiahs that Jesus warns of as the father of lies feeds them his deceptive doctrines. They will mislead many. In Revelation 17 there is a description of the great religious system that will exist in that day, a system that will encompass a variety of counterfeit religious systems. A toxic soup of grand ecumenism, the whole “people of faith” thing, where it doesn’t matter what your faith is in, as long as you are spiritual and religious. Then you are a “person of faith.”

It’s described in Revelation 17:15 as “Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth.” This Babylon the great was spawned at the ancient tower of Babel. We read about this in Genesis 11, when Satan first attempted to establish his kingdom on the earth and the triune Godhead came and dispersed the people and foiled his plan, and all of his religious systems went out all over the world. Once again, when Satan tries to establish his throne this last time before Jesus comes, all of those phony religious systems are going to come home to mamma: Babylon the great, the mother of all harlots.

“People of faith.” They have faith in everything imaginable, but not in the one true God. They will hate Him. Revelation 9:21 says one of the chief components of this final counterfeit religious system “will be their sorceries” or *pharmakia* in Greek. We get our word “pharmacy” from that. Basically it denotes the ingestion of drugs. Down through history, if you look at pagan religions you will see that they are notorious in using mind-altering hallucinogens in their worship. Given our modern addiction to so many drugs, it’s very easy for me to see how this could play a major role in Satan’s future religious deceptions.

Jesus goes on in Matthew 24:12-13 and says, “And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved.” What is lawlessness? 1 John 3:4 says, “Sin is lawlessness.” This will be a disregard for God’s law, and even man’s law. We saw that in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, didn’t we? Which, if you multiply that on a global scale, is what the Word of God is describing, only even worse. Jesus says this will be increased. The term in the original language means to multiply. There will be an exponential multiplication of sin, of lawlessness, and this will make most people’s love grow cold. Those who claim Christ but really don’t aren’t going to want to be known, because everybody knows it’s because of Christ that all of these horrible things are happening to the world. Their love for their family will grow cold. Self-preservation will be the only thing that matters during that time.

Verse 13 says, “But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved.” This is always the glorious promise for those who persevere in the faith, isn’t it? Genuine believers never apostatize. We are partakers of the divine nature, we have an enduring faith that is empowered by the indwelling Spirit of God. What did Paul say in Philippians 1:6? “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” I rejoice in that. Yet what is so precious to me, especially in light of all these

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inconceivable persecutions: the false messiahs, false prophets, sorceries, the betrayals, the worldwide wickedness of the Antichrist's rule, do you know what's amazing to me? To see in the midst of it all, the amazing grace of a merciful God. This is the sixth and final sign in verse 14, that of mass evangelism. "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come."

Again, the prophecies tell us there will be 144,000 sons of Israel that will become missionaries. They estimate right now that in terms of genuine Bible-believing missionaries that are out there today, it's probably in the neighborhood of 50,000. So this is going to be much greater than that. There will be the two witnesses talked about in Revelation 14:6-7. We read that He's even going to have an angel of evangelism that He sends, and in that text we read that he will preach "an eternal gospel to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people," saying, "Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters." What a longsuffering, merciful, faithful, loving God we serve.

Hallelujah what a Savior
Who for sinners once did die
Who conquered sin, from death arose
And opens sinner's eyes.

Hallelujah what a Savior
With mercy He delays
Ever seeking, ever pleading,
"Oh sinner come today!"

[All Scripture quotations are NASB unless otherwise noted.]

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