

Christ's Greatest Prophetic Discourse Part 1/8

As you look around the world you tend to see two different groups of people. One group believes that God is not at all involved in history and the other group believes that God controls history; two radically different perspectives. The first group believes that either God doesn't exist or if He does exist He's really not involved. They believe history is just cyclical, endless cycles of meaningless existence fueled by the process of evolution. For these people there's really no purpose in life, there is no ultimate plan, they really have no destiny. If you stop and think about it, they ultimately believe that they are merely sophisticated germs that came into existence by accident, and have evolved over billions of years by random chance. There's no design to anything because there's no Designer. There's no Creator, and certainly there is no Judge to whom we would be accountable. Therefore there are really no ultimate consequences to anything we do. The philosophy that flows out of that worldview is that we can eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow, we die. The vast majority of the world holds to this view.

The second group however, believes God controls history. They believe that God is indeed the Creator, the Sustainer, and the Consummator of history. These people would be called Bible-believing fundamentalists, no doubt the most hated group of people on the planet. These people believe that history has a beginning and it has an end, that history is linear, not cyclical. That everything is moving toward a final day of consummation. That everything is being controlled by a sovereign God who is working out His plan to ultimately glorify Himself. They would even go so far as to say that particular plan of God is delineated in one book called the Bible.

If you are in group one, the claims of the Bible will be utter foolishness to you. The hundreds of prophecies that are found in the Bible that were fulfilled literally, to this date, will be nothing more than an amazing set of coincidences. For you, there's really no hope in anything, except perhaps your own perceived goodness that may make you acceptable to God, if in fact He even exists. But frankly, you know nothing about God and your life therefore, if you're honest, is filled with the endless pursuit of pleasure, until your days of randomness and meaninglessness are over.

If you are in that second group, the Bible to you is the Word of the living God and you long to know all you possibly can about His plan. Especially about His plan for you. You crave every tidbit of insight that is available in this glorious record, this infallible record of our sovereign God who has revealed Himself to us. You want to know as many details as you possibly can about His coming, because He has promised to come again. And you will therefore be like the disciples in Matthew 24:3 that said to the Lord, "...what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

If you are in the first group, I challenge you to ask God to reveal Himself to you, because down deep you know that what you are hearing is truth, and you know that He exists, as hard as you may try to suppress that reality. Someday as you stand before Him He will be either Savior or your Judge. That choice will be yours.

For those of you who join me in the second group, I challenge you to embark with me upon an amazing journey into the future. I pray that you will be like an adventurer, committed to going to an undiscovered region, an undiscovered land. That you'll be willing to do the hard work of Bible study so that you can see all of the wonderful truths that God has for you. That together we will scale the glorious mount of prophetic truth until we get to a point where we can gaze out upon all the glories of God's sovereign plan, and we will be able to see our glorious King face to face in the pages of Scripture.

Turn to Matthew's gospel, to chapter 24, where we will begin to understand this great discourse of the Lord Jesus Christ; the greatest prophetic discourse that He gave to us when He was here on earth. It's for this reason that I've entitled this sermon, which will be part one of eight, *Christ's Greatest Prophetic Discourse*.

Now before we look at the text let me give you the context so that you remember what has been going on in the life of our Lord there in that first century. In Matthew 23 we have observed Jesus in the temple courts. He has cleansed the temple and He has debated with the Pharisees. They have tucked their tails between their legs in embarrassment. They hate Him with a hatred that is almost beyond description. They are plotting to kill him. It is now Wednesday evening of the Passion Week in Matthew 23, in the final hours of Jewish rejection. When Jesus gave His last public sermon, in which He detailed very clearly His denunciation of false shepherds—the Pharisees and the scribes—the religious leaders that represented apostate Israel.

After pronouncing seven curses of divine judgment upon them, He concluded in one final and climactic pronouncement, saying to them in Matthew 23:33 “You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?” And He then gave one final proclamation in verses 34-36 where He promised judgment would fall upon that generation of people. Indeed, all of the multiplied wrath of God throughout redemptive history to that point in time would be poured out upon those people of that day. And just forty years later in A.D. 70 over 50,000 elite Roman troops marched upon Jerusalem. They immediately captured 500 of the Jewish leaders—some of them, no doubt, were the very ones that Jesus had just denounced—those leaders were captured and crucified. Then the Romans systematically slaughtered 1.1 million Jews. They also took 100,000 Jewish people to Egypt, flooding the market of slavery.

Now what Jesus was saying in Matthew 23, this prediction of things that were about to happen, was utterly shocking to the people. But these things were infuriating to the religious elite and all of their followers. But what is interesting, and you must understand this before we look at Matthew 24, is that Jesus concluded His deadly pronouncement upon Israel with a farewell promise. In verse 38 He says, “Your house,” in other words the temple, “is being left to you desolate!” but, in verse 39 He says, “I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’” Notice again Jesus did not say *unless*, but *until*. There's a glorious promise here, a promise of a future day of conversion, a future day of genuine repentance and belief. And all of this is now a promise to them. It's all been carved, shall we say, in the granite of divine sovereignty. Jesus gives no hint as to when, the interval of time is wholly indeterminate, He simply says *until*.

In fact, He used the very text the multitudes quoted only a few days earlier. Remember in His triumphal entry, that of Psalm 118:26 when they said, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.” Jesus is saying that there is going to be a time when you are going to say, what you once said in ignorance and unbelief, you will say it in full knowledge and genuine faith. After His scathing denunciation of their religious hypocrisy, of their phony religious system, and after His ominous prediction of the temple's demise, He concludes with a message of hope. Then He quietly withdraws from the presence of the scribes and the Pharisees, and all of the multitudes there in the temple courtyard.

Christ's Greatest Prophetic Discourse Part 1/8

Now if you had been a disciple following Jesus that day, and you'd just heard all of this, and you were absolutely convinced that He was the Messiah and that He was ready to set up His kingdom and conquer Rome, what would you be doing right now? You would be scratching your head in utter confusion. What is going on? Obviously this prediction of judgment upon Israel's temple aroused an intense desire in the disciples for more information. Obviously they're thinking, "Wait a minute, what will be the nature and the duration of Israel's desolation? If we have no temple we have no religious system. God, what are You doing here? What is going to happen? What do You mean that "...you shall not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD?'" They just said that a few days ago. You see, in their mindset, their Messiah King had just passed final judgment upon the nation of Israel, and the disciples are now confused about the kingdom. They are wondering in their minds and hearts, "Jesus, You're the Messiah. When are You going to flex the inexorable power of Your might and destroy the enemies of Israel and establish Your glorious kingdom?" This is what is on their minds.

Notice what happens next in Matthew 24. Beginning in verse 1, "And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to him. And He answered and said to them, 'Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.' 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?'"

Mark and Luke add further insight as to what really happened with this departure from the temple mount. They came off the mount, down the Kidron valley and they began their steep ascent up the Mount of Olives. Perhaps they stopped, as I had to do the first time I made that very trek, stopped to catch their breath a little and look back over at that temple mount. Mark and Luke add that the disciples were pointing to the temple and they said, "Teacher, behold, what wonderful stones, what wonderful buildings!" (Mark 13:1) You must understand that indeed, this was an amazing piece of architecture. Herod the Great, as villainous as he was, had a real penchant for opulence and architecture. He had spent a fortune refurbishing the modest temple structure that had been erected many years before in the reign of Cyrus by the Jews that had returned from Babylon.

In fact, Herod was even putting the final touches onto the temple during the days of Jesus. He finally finished it in 64 A.D., only 6 years before it was utterly destroyed. It was a magnificent architecture that the disciples and Jesus were looking at. Some of the stones measured 40x12x12 feet and weighed up to 100 tons. Even now you can look at the stones that remain around the actual grounds of the building and see that even those massive stones fit together perfectly. Those stones weren't part of the temple itself, as all of those stones were destroyed, but there was a retaining wall around it that you can see to this day. It's an amazing piece of architecture. In that day the walls were a luminous white marble that glistened in the sun, with decorations on them of pure gold. Wealthy worshippers contributed countless precious stones and priceless ornaments to adorn the walls. The opulence was utterly mind-boggling. Its splendid grandeur was even described in the Babylonian Talmud, which stated, "He that never saw the temple of Herod never saw a fine building."

In fact, the eastern side of the temple that would have been visible to Jesus and the disciples, was one that was covered with pure gold. Can you imagine that? When the sun would rise in the morning it would cast a golden reflection all along the whole western slope of the Mount of Olives. This was an astonishing edifice. And they now viewed it from the adjacent mountain, from the Mount of Olives.

Christ's Greatest Prophetic Discourse Part 1/8

All of this, combined with what Jesus had just solemnly predicted: that this house, this temple, was going to be left desolate, and that not one stone shall be left upon another which will not be torn down; all of this caused enormous confusion to the disciples.

By the way, history records that when the Romans attacked the temple mount, they set fire to the main structure. The fire was so hot that the stones literally crumbled into powder. As a reminder, the stones that we see today are merely the retaining wall stones around the temple. After the stones had all turned to powder, obviously all the precious stones and the gold and silver was left there upon the ground, and they sifted through all of that. So indeed, just as Jesus promised, not one stone was left remaining. In fact, the ancient historian Josephus remarked that when the Roman army finished with the temple area, that it looked like a wilderness that had never been inhabited.

So, to the disciples now, all of their messianic hopes have been dashed. Their beloved temple and their nation were doomed. They're confused. They need answers. So they ask in verse 3, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" And as they sat upon the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave the longest answer to any question posed Him in the New Testament. This is why Matthew 24 and 25 are often called the Olivet Discourse.

It's crucial for you to understand that when we approach this text of Scripture we must approach it with the same hermeneutic, or the same system of Bible interpretation, that we use all throughout the rest of the Bible. There's no need to change here. Therefore we would approach this with a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic. When you do this you will see a clear delineation of a sequence of prophetic events that sweep the disciples into the future far beyond their understanding, until later on in their lives.

To help you get the big picture, we can actually divide the Lord's prophetic discourse into three topical categories. There are really three topical sermons here in Matthew 24. The three headings would simply be, firstly the Gentile, secondly the Jews, and thirdly the Church. Verses 4-14 are prophecies concerning the Gentile nations. Verses 15-31 are prophecies concerning His covenant people, the Jews. Verses 32-51 are prophecies concerning the Church.

John Phillips makes an interesting observation concerning these three unique topics. He says, "The Lord dealt with His three topics in the order of history. For the first 2000 years of Bible history, God dealt solely with the nations. After the call of Abraham, He dealt supremely with the Jews; the nations were still there, but the divine focus had changed. That period of history also lasted for about 2000 years. For the 2000 years since Pentecost He has been focusing on the church. Critics of this interpretation say that when we relate the end of Matthew 24 to the church, we imply that the church has to go through the great tribulation. This objection is invalid because the sermon is topical in nature. Each of the three topics is a separate sermonic entity. In dealing with the church, the Lord made no reference to the tribulation at all, and for very good reason. The tribulation will affect the nations and Israel, and thus it is in the first two sections of the sermon that the Lord dealt with the subject. Since it has nothing to do with the church, the tribulation is not mentioned in the third section."

Now because I would approach this text like I would all the rest of Scripture, with a literal method of interpretation, I ultimately come to the conclusion that Christ is going to come before the millennial kingdom, and therefore I am unashamedly a premillenarian. A premillennialist is one who believes that Christ is going to come and establish His kingdom. I also believe that the Church will not go

Christ's Greatest Prophetic Discourse Part 1/8

through the tribulation. I would be called a pretribulationist, or somebody that believes that the next thing to happen will be the rapture of the church.

I know that there are godly believers that I love and respect who differ with me in my position. Many people come to the prophetic literature, like Matthew 24, and they resort to a different system of interpretation. They will allegorize the prophetic literature, or spiritualize the texts. For example, when they come to prophetic literature, they will say that in essence this is describing spiritual battles of good and evil, and that we shouldn't consider it to be anything literal. Whenever they come to references to Israel it's really a reference to the Church so they wouldn't take it literally that it's Israel. They would say that the millennial kingdom is really nothing more than the Church Age; that texts relating to the rapture are nothing more than texts that symbolize God redeeming His people; that there's really no such thing as an Antichrist; that there will not be a literal Antichrist, but that's simply metaphorical imagery describing false prophets and satanic systems; and that when Jesus talks about certain judgments being like birth pains that's really just hyperbolic language describing Rome conquering Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and on it goes.

Many people will hold these positions not because of textual or exegetical considerations, but rather because of certain theological views to which they adhere. It is beyond the scope of this series to critique in detail all of these different positions. However, from time to time as the text warrants, I will point out what I believe to be some of the fallacies of some of the competing positions. And by the way, I might say that my position has problems. All of the positions have problems, because this is a mystery. God hasn't given us all of the answer. You could say that all of the positions have holes in their buckets. I just believe that mine has fewer than others. And so with all of my heart I will preach to you and teach you what I believe is to be truth, so that someday I can stand before the Lord and say from the very depths of my heart, "I rightly divided the Word of God as best I knew how."

All positions have some problems. There's much mystery surrounding Bible prophecy, and we want to be very careful that we don't become proud. We don't want to become absolute dogmatists on some things that may be nothing more than inference. We certainly want to avoid the shameful calling of names. Eschatology should never be considered a fundamental test of Christian orthodoxy, unless a position violates the fundamentals of the faith. For example, hyper-preterism, sometimes it's referred to as realized eschatology or full preterism. These people insist that Christ's second coming, the resurrection of the dead, the great white throne judgment, all of those things are already over, all of that is past. They don't believe that there is any future hope of Christ's return. They believe that the universe in which we now live is the "new heavens and the new earth" promised in 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21. They believe that sin and Satan will never be eradicated. They believe that at death believers simply become an eternally disembodied spirit that passes occasionally into the presence of God. They deny the future resurrection of the dead. They even deny that Christ was raised bodily from the dead, that He was only raised spiritually and there's no such thing as a bodily return.

All of this would put them in the position of heretics. To that extent there are some positions where you can judge orthodoxy, but you want to be careful not to confuse hyper-preterism with preterism. *Preter* is a Latin prefix for *past*. And the preterists believe that the tribulation prophecies in Matthew 24, and even in the book of Revelation, were all fulfilled in A.D. 70, so all of that is over with, all of it is in the past.

Christ's Greatest Prophetic Discourse Part 1/8

Many people hold this view without having the extremes of hyper-preterism. There are others that believe what's called amillennialism, "a" meaning "no", there's no such thing as the millennium. They believe Christ has already come, that He reigns now as King of kings and Lord of lords in a spiritual sense in the hearts of men. They believe that there's no literal thousand year reign as Revelation 20 and other passages talk about, and that the next event on the prophetic timetable is that Christ is going to return and immediately after that will be the judgment. There are many people I love and respect that hold this view. I don't.

There are others that believe in what's called postmillennialism. This is a very optimistic view. This is one that believes that *post*, at the end, Christ is going to come at the end of the millennial kingdom and that the Church is going to establish the earthly kingdom. They believe it's going to happen through great preaching and political means. That ultimately we are going to bring in the kingdom and that there will be an earthly kingdom but that Christ is going to rule over that kingdom from heaven.

These views and others like them coalesce rather well as a system, but their respective systems do not fit the facts of Scripture, nor do they fit the text exegetically. I believe that only a literal interpretation fits the facts. Nevertheless we must interact with opposing views with love and civility. As we look at the Old Testament, we can see that it is filled with promises of a coming Messiah, a coming Deliverer. There are 333 of those prophecies to be precise. And since more than 100 of those prophecies were fulfilled literally at the first coming of Christ, I am just foolish enough to believe that all the rest of the prophecies will be fulfilled literally as well. There's no need to spiritualize or allegorize the prophetic literature. If the plain sense makes good sense, don't fabricate some other sense!

Imagine interpreting some of those Old Testament prophecies in a figurative or symbolic way. Imagine Isaiah 7:14 where we read that Christ would be born of a virgin. How would you interpret that in a figurative way? Imagine interpreting Micah 5:2, that He would be born in Bethlehem, as some kind of a symbol. Zechariah prophesied that He would enter into Jerusalem riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey in Zechariah 9:9; that He would be forsaken by His closest disciples in 13:7; he even predicted the exact price of Judas' betrayal, that it would be 30 pieces of silver, as well as what would become of the money. What do you do with that? Are you going to tell me that you interpret that figuratively simply because it was prophetic?

Isaiah foretold many details of the crucifixion in Isaiah 52-53. David described the tortures that Jesus would endure on the cross, including His last cry to the Father, the piercing of His hands and feet, and the parting of His garments, in Psalm 22. He even predicted that none of His bones would be broken in Psalm 34. Scholars before the New Testament, scholars before Christ, could have interpreted all of these prophecies figuratively, that these were mere symbols or allegory. But we all know that the New Testament clearly indicates that these prophecies were fulfilled in the most literal way possible. As Jesus said in Matthew 26:56, "That the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled." A literal interpretation that takes into consideration those figures of speech and those literary devices that are sometimes used will ultimately lead us to a premillennial position. This will naturally emerge from the text. And because I am convinced that premillennialism alone has genuine exegetical support, that is what I will preach to you with good conscience before the Lord.

As a footnote, even among premillennialists there are a variety of positions on the timing of the rapture, none of which I find compelling other than the one I hold, even though all of them have some problems. It's important to remember that much of eschatology, especially the doctrine of the rapture,

Christ's Greatest Prophetic Discourse Part 1/8

is very controversial. It is dependent upon very finely tuned nuances and inferences in Scripture. Just because that's the case, we shouldn't ignore these studies as many people do, and throw up our hands in dismay and say we just can't figure it out so let's forget it. Whatever position we do take we want to do so with great care and kindness towards those with whom we differ. My purpose will not be to critique all of the different positions on the rapture or on the millennial reign, but I will interact with opposing positions from time to time when the text warrants such treatment.

Back to the text. The disciples say at the end of verse 3, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" When will these things be? In other words, when will You destroy the temple and establish Your kingdom? Will it be next week? Maybe next month? When will You destroy the nations and purify Jerusalem? After Passover? When? That's their attitude. "What will be the sign of Your coming?" The *parousia*, in the original language, which means the *presence*. It can even mean the *arrival*, but it has much more the meaning of a *manifestation*. "When are You going to manifest yourself as the King? When are You going to ascend the throne of Israel as our triumphant Messiah King? That's what we want to know."

"...and what will be the sign...of the end of the age?" The word *end* in the original language is a compound term denoting the ultimate consummation, the ultimate culmination or completion of a planned series of events. They are literally saying, "What can we look for that will indicate that You will manifest your power and your glory as Israel's Messiah King? What sign will tell us that this age of wickedness and rebellion will be over?" It's important for you to understand that the disciples now are thinking that these mysterious events are going to happen very shortly, in quick succession, a single continuum, if you will. They had no idea that Jesus was going to soon leave. And certainly they had no comprehension of the Church Age that would intervene, before His ultimate *parousia*, His ultimate appearing and manifestation. In fact, in Luke 19:11, the twelve suppose that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately, the text says. You might recall that even after the resurrection, just before Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples ask in Acts 1:6 "Lord, is it at this time that You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" So they could only comprehend a swift sequence of dramatic events culminating in the promised messianic kingdom.

Beginning in verse 4 Jesus begins to answer their questions, but you must understand this: He does so in reverse order. He begins by addressing the signs of His coming, and we will see that Jesus uses the term *parousia* in the technical sense, referring to His second coming. And in verses 4-14 He describes six very specific signs. He calls them in verse 8 "birth pangs." These of course will occur just prior to His appearing, a sequence of events analogous to a woman entering into labor. Events that will increase, just like birth pangs, in severity, and in frequency until the messianic kingdom is ultimately birthed.

So, typical of Old Testament prophecies where God speaks in the second person, often addressing people that weren't even born yet, Jesus now answers the disciples. But in doing so even in the second person, He's not just speaking to them. He's speaking to all of us, as we've seen all through the Old Testament. He's speaking to all of us and all who will follow, especially those who will be alive in that day of His arrival. By the way, He doesn't answer their question regarding when all of this is going to happen until verse 36, and then He says, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone."

Christ's Greatest Prophetic Discourse Part 1/8

What are these six signs, these six birth pangs, that He predicted in this first section of His great prophetic discourse? This first division in Matthew 24 verses 4-14 focuses primarily on the Gentile nations. We'll go into this in much more detail next time. Let me give you the six signs in a summarized fashion. Verses 4-5 will be false messiahs, great deceptions leading to the worship of that ultimate false messiah, the Antichrist. In verses 6 through part of 7 the next sign is nations at war. The third sign is the end of verse 7 through 8 where there will be natural disasters of epic proportions. Verse 9 says there will be the persecution of tribulation saints. In verses 10-13 you will see the defection and betrayal by false believers, and verse 14, the sixth sign, will be mass evangelism. Follow along as I read this so you get the flow.

“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.’”

Six signs: false messiahs, nations at war, natural disasters of epic proportions, persecution of tribulation saints, defection and betrayal by false believers, and mass evangelism. Now dear friends I would submit to you that what Jesus just said is all future, way beyond the events that took place in A.D. 70. Indeed certain aspects of these signs have occurred down through history, but nothing compares to the scope and the severity of these staggering events. These six signs are merely the beginning, Jesus says, and they will get far more severe and increase in frequency, just like labor pangs.

Now to insist, as many do, that these events all took place in A.D. 70 when Rome conquered Jerusalem simply does not fit the facts of Scripture. In fact if you think about it, birth pangs do not occur at conception, nor do they occur during pregnancy. They occur just prior to birth. Therefore it makes no sense to apply this to the destruction of Jerusalem, an event that occurred at the very beginning of the Church Age. In fact in 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul reminds us that Christ will return as a thief in the night. In other words suddenly, unexpectedly, and he uses the same comparison to birth pangs that Jesus used here in Matthew 24, and there in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3 he says, “While they are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.” Friends, we still await these labor pangs that will ultimately culminate in the inconceivable and unprecedented catastrophes that Jesus describes.

It's important for you to know that these six signs have an undeniable parallel with the seal judgments of Revelation. By the way, the fact that they parallel the book of Revelation, which was written in A.D. 96, way beyond A.D. 70, should be proof enough to say that all of these events didn't find their ultimate fulfillment in the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Now there are some that will torture every conceivable historical and exegetical argument to get an earlier dating of Revelation to somehow refute that, but I have certainly not found that even remotely compelling.

It's interesting in Revelation that the Lamb breaks the seals. The seals no doubt will take years, the trumpets will take weeks, and the bowl judgments may take days or hours. That would be analogous to this whole idea of birth pangs. They begin to happen and would increase in severity as do the judgments, not only do they increase in severity but also in frequency. In fact, at the end of those seal judgments that parallel these judgments here, which Jesus gives us in the six signs, the seal judgments are so severe that the people of that day say to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb" (Revelation 6:16). Again, I'm not looking for the wrath of the Lamb, I'm looking for the lover of my soul. I'm looking as the bride for her groom.

What does this have to do with us today? Dear friends, I believe in the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ for His bride. I believe that the Bible teaches that the Lord could come at any moment, and that's the next thing to happen on the prophetic timetable. After that you will have the outpouring of wrath and worldwide tribulation which ultimately will result in the inauguration of the kingdom and the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I believe that this view is consistent with the New Testament. As I look at the New Testament, I read the epistle of James, which by the way is probably the earliest of all the New Testament epistles. James challenged us to "Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand...Behold, the Judge is standing right at the door!" (James 5:8-9, NKJV). Peter said something very similar in 1 Peter 4:7, where he said, "The end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers" (NKJV). In Hebrews 10 beginning in verse 24 the writer says, "Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (NKJV). And then in verse 37 he says, "For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry" (NKJV).

All through the New Testament the writers consistently convey the idea that Christ's appearing would be imminent. In fact in 1 Thessalonians Paul uses personal pronouns indicating that even he himself considered that he might be caught up alive to meet the Lord in the air. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15 and 17 he says, "...we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord...we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (NKJV). Even Paul believed that the next thing to happen would be the rapture of the church. In Revelation 1:1 the apostle John prefaced his entire prophetic treatise by saying "(These) things which must shortly take place." Beloved, all these amazing promises that Jesus made should stir our hearts to holy living, to faith, to be excited about the One who is coming. We are, as Paul said to Timothy, "...looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us" (Titus 2:13-14, NKJV). In 1 John 2:28 John tells us, "And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming" (NKJV). My friends, will you be ashamed if He came today?

In 1 John 3:3 he says, "And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." Beloved, I don't believe there is anything else that must occur before the Lord comes to snatch us away. I believe, therefore, that a pretribulational view of the rapture preserves this wonderful New Testament doctrine of imminency, a doctrine that I believe is essential to a proper understanding of sanctification. In fact Paul speaks of this in Romans 13:11. By the way, this is not *chronos* time in Greek, it's *kairon*, in other words, the age, the season, the era. He says, "And this do, knowing the time (the era, the season) it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to

Christ's Greatest Prophetic Discourse Part 1/8

us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day (a reference to the day of Christ's return) is at hand." He goes on to say, "Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave (or literally, walk) properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife or jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts."

An imminent view of the return of the Lord increases our sense of readiness and of the need to be holy as He comes to take us to Himself. Paul used the same imagery of darkness and light in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-9, particularly in verses 8-9 he says, "Let us, who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." The signs that Jesus describes in Matthew 24 will indeed point to His glorious bodily appearing, His second coming. That time described ultimately as the wrath of the Lamb, the time when He reveals Himself. But as Christians, "God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." Therefore, we await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We await the coming of the Groom for His bride, and the great snatching away.

Paul spent the entire first epistle to the Thessalonians pleading with them to be watchful, to be waiting expectantly for Christ to snatch them away. He constantly said to them to encourage one another with that wonderful hope of His imminent return. And yet many of the Thessalonians were confused. We read that false teachers had convinced them that their sufferings and persecutions, all of the things that they were experiencing in that day, were really divine judgments associated with the day of the Lord. The *day of the Lord* is an expression that always referred to a time of apocalyptic judgment. So Paul writes to them in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3 where he's going to clarify this. I believe this is a clear reference to the rapture. He says, "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come" (NKJV). *The day of Christ* could be translated *the day of the Lord*. By the way, that is how it's translated in some of the older manuscripts. In other words he's saying, "The sufferings that you are now experiencing are not the apocalyptic judgments that will signal the day of the Lord. You haven't missed the rapture." What comfort would that be, to say that you are going to have to go through all of these things? He's saying, "You haven't missed that."

You see, he's telling them ultimately "You're looking for Christ. You're not looking for Antichrist." And he goes on to say in verse 3, "Let no one in any way deceive you for it (a reference to the day of the Lord) will not come unless the apostasy comes first," which is clearly a reference to the abomination of desolation that we read about in Daniel 9:27 and other places. So that's not going to happen until the apostasy comes first and "the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God." He's saying hey, none of that has happened. What comfort would that be if you knew you had to go through that? All of those things are consistent with the day of the Lord, so relax. Again, you're looking for Christ, you're not looking for Antichrist. And we'll see these amazing truths unfold as we study Matthew 24.

If you are without Christ and you know in your heart that all of these things are just silliness to you and you really don't have a relationship with Christ, you don't really love Him and worship Him, and you have never confessed your sins to Him, you've never asked Him to be your Savior and your Lord, and

Christ's Greatest Prophetic Discourse Part 1/8

you certainly don't believe that He's coming again, all I can say to you dear friend is that you will repent while there is still time. He is coming someday, and He will either come as your Savior or as your Judge.

Child of God, for those of you that love the Lord, we need to be ready, don't we? We need to be watching. Will He find you watching? Will He find you faithful? What bride would be indifferent towards the unexpected arrival of her groom? I close with a quote of an old expositor, James Denney. Here's what he says, "The hope that Jesus would soon come again...it was this hope which more than anything gave its color to primitive Christianity, its unworldliness, its moral intensity, its command of the future even in this life. That attitude of expectation is the bloom of Christian character...the Christian who does not look upward wants (or literally, lacks) one mark of perfection."

Remember, dear friends, 1 John 3:3, "Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (NKJV).

[All Scripture quotations are NASB unless otherwise noted.]

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