

# WHEN THE DAM BREAKS

Chapter 4. Matthew 24:21-22

by Ray C. Stedman

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Jesus is now describing to his disciples the end of the age. That end will not be a single climatic event but a chain of events, all of which are the inevitable consequence of forces that have been at work in society throughout the whole course of this age. The scriptures agree that the "desolating sacrilege" our Lord refers to is a man; a man of world prominence who enters the rebuilt temple in the city of Jerusalem and assumes the prerogatives and claims the powers of Deity. So serious is this act that it precipitates the greatest crisis the world ever will face. In Matthew 24:21,22 Jesus says of it:

"Then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened."

Many have found these words hard to believe. They clearly refer to an hour unlike anything else in history. Till recent times it had been thought incredible that humanity could ever sink to such an ebb as to bring on a judgment of this character. But we must always remember that political leaders only express ideas which have been lying half hidden in human hearts, waiting only for the precise moment to emerge. Hitler did not teach the Nazis to hate the Jews; he only dared express in voluble terms the hatred and smoldering resentment of thousands of Germans who were scarcely aware of the terrible passions hidden in their own hearts. When this man of lawlessness takes his position in the temple of God he will only be expressing what long has lain dormant in human hearts.

But though this philosophy is recognizable within us and around us, this act of man's self-deification, expressing worldwide agreement, could never occur today! You ask, "Why not?" Because there are forces at work now which restrain its full manifestation, so that it cannot take over as a dominant philosophy of the race until these restraining forces are removed. In Matthew 13:30 Jesus said, in another place "Let both [the wheat and the tares, i.e., good and the evil] grow together until the harvest." In verse 39 he said, "The harvest is the close of the age." Till that time arrives, good and evil grow together, but the dominant philosophy is not evil, but good. It is only when the harvest arrives that evil is let loose to dominate the earth.

There's a little jingle that expresses the way most of us feel about right and wrong.

"Our race had an excellent beginning,  
But man spoiled his chances by sinning.  
We hope that the story,  
Will end in God's glory,  
But at present the other side's winning!"

It seems to many that evil is triumphant in our day. But every athletic team knows the ease by which the rival team can appear invincible, made up of players ten feet tall. They do everything right, while we do everything wrong. Thus it looks to many as though wrong prevails more often than right, and that we are already in the last day. The dominant thinking of our day, strange as it may sound to our ears, is not evil, but good! Despite widespread injustice and the terrible prevalence of violence and crime, the scales have not been tipped in favor of the wrong. Quite rightly do we sing, "Though the wrong seem oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."

The proof of this is that evil must constantly disguise itself as good to be able to survive. Swindlers try to appear respectable. They never boldly and blatantly label themselves crooks. Prostitutes want to be called ladies. Tyrants pose as benefactors. Liars strive to appear truthful. Cheats and misers and perverts, and a whole host of others, hunger after more respectable titles. Only good is really acceptable. Evil must dissemble and appear what it is not, to gain acceptance. This alone is ample proof that against the massive power of evil so evident today is arrayed an even more massive power for good.

Man often lives in open rebellion today, but he lives also in guilt. He knows that he needs God and in the hour of his need he often seeks God. Even communists, who in theory deny the existence of God, in practice often take great pains to disguise their evil to make it look moral and just. Occasionally they even drop expressions which indicate their own deep hunger for God. Evil is under restraint today, hemmed in by forces for good. The majority view for centuries has been truth and justice; evil in the minority. It is powerful, but it is controlled. It is forever breaking out as cruelty and violence, in individuals, in homes and in nations, but it is ceaselessly being beaten back, overpowered and subdued again.

This accounts for the brief optimism of many who profess faith in what they call "human goodness." In their blindness they ascribe this overpowering abundance of good to man himself, and reject utterly the biblical revelation that goodness stems from the kindness of God on our behalf. In his consummate darkness man views good as an inherent trait of the human race.

## **Restraints Removed**

Jesus reveals the truth. In the end of the age, he says, it will be different. Then evil will reign in triumphant, malicious glee. All bonds will be broken, restraints will be cast aside, and lawlessness will fill the earth. God will move in judgment, terrible catastrophes will sweep the earth, but still man will not repent. Fear will not drive men to prayer but to further defiance. They will not wish to be delivered but only to be destroyed. They will take no delight in good, but will be made happy but the triumph of evil.

It is easy to document this by three very vivid pictures from the book of Revelation. The larger part of that book traces the course of events in the Great Tribulation. It especially reveals the condition of human hearts during the time of worldwide crisis.

The first picture comes from Revelation 9:20, 21:

The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot either see or hear or walk; nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries, or their immorality or their thefts.

The second is from Revelation 6:12-17 and depicts the fear men experience, but the stubbornness they cherish: "When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?'"

The third picture, perhaps the most hideous of all, is found in Revelation 11:7-10:

"And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that ascends from the bottomless pit will make war upon them [the two witnesses from God] and conquer them and kill them, and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which is allegorically called Sodom and

Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. For three days and a half men from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth."

You can see that these are very different days from those in which we live. They may not be very far removed in time, but they are very far removed in point of character. We are drawing nearer to them all the time, but we have not yet reached the point of such blatant, unblushing and worldwide delight in evil. What will happen to bring this about? Why this terrible difference?

## **Restraining Forces**

To put the question another way: What is it that restrains the enormity of human evil today? What force is it that prevents the grinning ghouls of darkness from beginning their macabre dance of death right now? The clue is found in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5. There Jesus said to the little band of disciples gathered around him-ordinary men, fishermen, tax collectors, farmers-these amazing words: "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world." (vv. 13, 14).

What did he mean? He meant they were light because they had life. John's Gospel says, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." (John 1:4) Men have light only when they are in touch with the life that comes from Jesus Christ. Here were men, simple men, who possessed life. And because they had life, they had light. They were salt, because they had savor. Jesus spoke of salt which is without savor. It is good for nothing, he said. Men will cast it out and tread it under their feet. But here were men who had savor, a different flavor. The life they possessed, the life of Jesus Christ, made them different. It gave them a different kind of character. It made them a different kind of people. They had a different light on their faces, and a different reason for living. They had a different authority in their lives and a different power than other men.

Because of this, they were salt, arresting corruption. That is the purpose of salt. We use it in meat to stop it from spoiling, to arrest rotteness. So Jesus said they were as salt pervading society, molding human thought, challenging evil, restraining, controlling, limiting, binding, resisting the malignancy of evil in human affairs. It is for this reason that Christians must not isolate themselves from society. They must not attempt to create "Bible Cities," Christian communities set off from the world, away from the flow and stream of life around them. Christians are intended to permeate every level of life. They are salt, but salt is of no value while it remains in the salt shaker!

## **A Revealed Secret**

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians about the coming of the Lawless One, he said, "You know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time" (2 Thessalonians 2:6). The restraining force was evidently something they knew about themselves. They had only to look into their own lives to see what restrained lawlessness within them. They knew, as we also know, that the "desires of the flesh are against the Spirit" (Galatians 5:17). But they were also discovering that "the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh...to prevent you from doing what you would." The restrainer of evil is the Holy Spirit within the Christian. It is the glorious secret that Paul calls "Christ in you, the hope of glory," the life of Jesus, imparted by the Holy Spirit, acting as a dam against the manifestation of evil.

Again Paul told the Thessalonians: "He who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed." All restraints must be removed before what man is without God can be fully revealed. The salt must be taken out of society to allow the rotteness to be evident. When the restraints are removed man's arrogant pride will soon break out in an assumption of Deity. Then the sirens will moan, the powers of darkness will be set free, the witches of terror will ride through the sky, and the dark night of judgment will begin. "Then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the

world until now, no, and never will be" (Matthew 24:21).

## **God's Timetable**

When does this removal of the salt of society occur? That is the question that shrieks for an answer now. If we expect to tie it to some specific date on the calendar we are doomed to disappointment. Jesus continually warned against any attempt to set dates. But we can know the time of this removal in relation to other events at the close of the age. Since Paul says plainly that it will be before the Antichrist is revealed-"And then the lawless one will be revealed" (2 Thessalonians 2:8)-we know that this removal occurs somewhere between the events recorded in verse 14 of Matthew 24, and those referred to in verse 15. It will be sometime before the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel stands in the holy place.

Exactly how long before no one knows. Many Bible scholars feel it will be at least three and a half years before (at the beginning of the seven year period which is Daniel's seventieth week). This would allow some time for the corruption of society, which has been held in restraint by the presence of Christian "salt," to spread and entrench itself, and ultimately produce the worldwide delight in the blasphemies of the Lawless One when he is revealed in the temple. When all references in Scripture to this event are taken into consideration this seems to be the most likely time for the great removal to occur.

How will it take place? By what means is the Holy Spirit taken "out of the way" so that evil is permitted to run rampant? From many Scriptures the answer comes: the church is suddenly taken out of the world! This does not mean the organized, institutional church, as such. It means the true church, consisting of Christians in all denominations (and in no denomination) who possess, through the new birth the indwelling life of Jesus Christ. As we have already seen, it is through such Christians that the Holy Spirit exercises his restraining work in society. So to remove the Christians is to remove the restraints and take the wraps off evil.

To expect such a fantastic event as this would be nothing but extreme religious fanaticism unless the Bible itself teaches that is true. Does Jesus say anything about this? The answer is yes! And right here in the Olivet Discourse too! He does not mention it at the time it occurs chronologically (before verse 15), but late in the message he describes it (verses 36-42), and introduces it with a warning that it cannot be tied to any specific date:

"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming [parousia, presence] of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming [parousia, presence] of the Son of man. Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left. Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

## **Two Phases of His "Presence"**

When Jesus speaks about his return he is not referring to a single moment of time when he will appear, but his talking about a return that covers a period of time. It will begin with a secret arrival, when he will come like a thief in the night. This will be the beginning of his "presence." But that presence will continue throughout all the time of trouble on earth, but behind the scenes, as it were, invisible to the world. Then, "after the tribulation of those days," he will manifest his presence visibly, appearing in power and great glory.

This invisible presence of Jesus on earth is not something wholly new. During the forty days after his resurrection he was in exactly this condition. He appeared and disappeared among his disciples and they never knew when he was coming or when he would go. He was suddenly there, and just as suddenly gone. He was

here, but not here. For forty days this manifestation went on until he ascended into heaven. When he comes again he will resume the same relationship to the believing Jews and Gentiles of that time. The church will be caught up to be with him, to join him in that remarkable presence during the terrible days of trouble on earth.

## **The Church Removed**

The removal of the church is described also in other passages. Paul writes to the Thessalonians about that, too in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18:

"For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming [parousia] of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep [died]. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words."

This event is called the departure of the church. An older word for it is the "rapture" of the church. As you will note in what Paul says about it, it is intended to be a source of comfort to Christians. It is called in Titus 2:13 "our blessed hope." It means that one whole generation of Christians will not physically die, but will pass directly into a glorified state, as Jesus did on the Mount of Transfiguration before the astonished eyes of Peter, James and John (Matthew 17:2). No wonder one Christian said, "I'm not waiting for the undertaker; I'm waiting for the upertaker!"

Don't let your imagination run away with you in trying to conceive what this event will be like. It is highly likely that it will not be visible to the world. It will be unseen and unfelt, with no disturbance of graves and nothing to indicate that anything has happened other than the strange disappearance of thousands. Just as the body of Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and passed out through the tomb in which he had resided without any physical manifestation whatever, so this event will take place. The stone was not rolled away from Jesus' tomb to let him out; it was rolled away to let the disciples in-so they could see what had happened. When Peter came in and found the grave clothes still lying as though wrapped around a body, but with the body absent, he was convinced that something unusual had occurred.

So this will be a silent event, recognizable only by the unexplained disappearance of many. Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 15:51,52:

"Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed."

The whole point of our Lord's revelation of this fantastic event is, as he puts it, "Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." Do not be deceived, do not be misled or swept off your feet by the persuasive lies of unbelief in this day. Do not be distracted by the siren sounds of a deceived society which vainly imagines that all will go on forever as it does now. Do not be deterred in your service by the growing power of evil or the dark gloom of deluded men who can switch suddenly from glowing optimism to shuddering despair. The great removal can come at any time. Are you watching?

## **Prayer**

Thank you, Father, for the marvelous power at work in human society, arresting evil, limiting the awful rottenness of fallen human nature, so that it does not manifest itself in full power yet. Help us to be alert, aware, undeceived, available to you as you are prepared to be as available to us, till the hour strikes when the

restraints of grace will be removed. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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