

RUSSIA, RELIGION, AND RUIN

Chapter Six. Matthew 7:21-23; Revelation 17:1-6

by Ray C. Stedman

Are you having difficulty in accepting some of these predicted events as true? Or do you perhaps accept them without difficulty, but yet wonder what your friends would think if you told them you believe all this? There are some who cannot tolerate detailed prediction in Scripture. They are quite content to hear prophecy as long as it deals in sweeping generalities and ambiguous figures which may be full of sound and fury, but, to them, signifies nothing. But when Scripture becomes specific and detailed, as it frequently does, they feel distressed and want to retreat to firmer ground—perhaps to the Sermon on the Mount or to some of the Lord's less explosive parables.

To talk of a Second Coming or of The Great Tribulation is, to them, almost as though you were describing an experience with little men from a flying saucer! They view the book of Revelation as a kind of eschatological Disneyland, quite unrelated to the world of space and time with which they are so familiar, or think they are. Instead of giving to prophetic Scripture the careful, thoughtful study it deserves, they throw up their hands in confusion and turn on Alfred Hitchcock or pick up a who-dunit and try to unravel that mystery instead. Yet it seems obvious that Jesus speaks as freely about the abomination of desolation as he does of forgiveness or love. Certainly he regards the prophecies of the Old Testament in the most literal terms, adding his own predictions to them in simple, unambiguous language. He gives no hint whatever that prophecy in the future will be fulfilled in the past, that is, simply and literally, in exact accord with what has been predicted.

Two Powers---Political and Religious

In this chapter we will meet two forces which will be at work during the close of the age, but which are not specifically mentioned by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse. He attempts to give only a general outline of the events of that time, and we must look to other predictive Scriptures to give us the details. Jesus indicates that the Lawless One will be exercising worldwide power at the time of the Great Tribulation, but there is no specific mention of two other powers which are present during part of that time and which must be removed before the Antichrist reigns unopposed. One is a political power and the other religious.

The political power is Russia and her satellite nations. The religious rival is the false Church which is left behind when the true church is removed. Already these forces are at work in today's world and form part of "mystery of lawlessness" which has been continually growing since the first century. At present there is much good intermingled with the bad but when the restraints are removed the bad will quickly become much worse. Dr. Charles Malik, formerly President of the General Assembly of the United Nations, was once asked some, "What can Christians learn from the meteoric rise of world Communism in little more than forty years?" His answer was:

"The most important thing to learn is that we are still living as the Germans say 'zwischen den zeiten' (between the times) when demonic forces can quickly soar very high and can take possession of the world in very short order. If it isn't Communism it will be something else: this battle between Christ and the devil is an eternal thing until Christ comes again. Christians cannot watch too closely. Christ told us to watch day and night. We don't know when he is coming again. The greatest lesson we can learn is that there is no security between the times, no security whatever."*

The Bible deals with the downfall of Russia in very short order. When you consider the amount of space that Scripture gives to what is truly important in God's sight, it is remarkable that the threat to the world and to God's cause from atheistic Russia is dealt with sobriety. The story is contained largely in two chapters in the Book of Ezekiel, chapters 38 and 39. These are supplemented by passages in Daniel 11, Joel 2 and Isaiah 10. Read these at your leisure for they help fill in the story of the great power of the north, Russia and her satellites.

The prophet Ezekiel, in 38:1,2 identifies a great power which is coming from the north against the land of Israel. These are his words:

"The word of the LORD came to me: 'Son of man, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, and prophesy against him.'"

The land of Magog, which is mentioned also in Genesis 10, is a general term for an undefined area centering around the Caspian Sea. But the term "chief prince" is even more specific. In Hebrew it is actually "the prince of Rosh" and there is much evidence that the name Russia is derived from that word, Rosh. Scholars also identify Meshech and Tubal with the ancient capitals of Russia and Siberia, namely Moscow and Tobolsk.

Through Ezekiel, in verses 8,9, God delivers the following message to the prince of Rosh:

"After many days you will be mustered; in the latter years you will go against the land that is restored from war, the land where people were gathered from many nations upon the mountains of Israel, which had been a continual waste. You will advance, coming on like a storm, you will be like a cloud covering the land, you and all your hordes, and many peoples with you."

It would be fascinating to trace through in detail the full revelation of Scripture concerning this coming invasion of Israel. We learn from the prophet Joel that Jerusalem will be taken and Zechariah, in his 14th chapter, gives us the details of this. Daniel adds the fact that the northern army will sweep down into Egypt and North Africa and there, having conquered these areas, the commander (Daniel calls him the "king of the north") will hear tidings out of the east and north that will trouble him and he will return into the land of Israel. There on the mountains of Judea, the very same mountains where Jesus and his disciples walked, he is to be overwhelmed and destroyed. Ezekiel 38:22, 23.

"With pestilence and bloodshed I will enter into judgment with him; and I will rain upon him and his hordes and the many peoples that are with him, torrential rains and hailstones, fire and brimstone. So I will show my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD."

It is apparent from the description that God himself will assume the prerogative of dealing with the Russian threat. Whether it will involve nuclear warfare, or be purely a natural disaster, is difficult to determine. At any rate it is quite clear that the earth will never be governed from Moscow. The general consensus of biblical scholars would date this destruction of Russia some time during the first half of Daniel's seventieth week, and before the onset of the Great Tribulation.

Religious Babylon

The one roadblock to power that will remain before the Lawless One can completely have his way with the world will be the towering religious monolith which is left in control of religious affairs after the true church has been removed. The apostle John gives us a symbolic picture of this church in Revelation 17:

"Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who is seated upon many waters, with whom the

kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the dwellers on earth have drunk.' And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations.' And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus."

The ten-horned beast which this woman is seen riding is a symbolic description of the Lawless One who is the head of the political hierarchy of the western world. The woman here is the false church and she is seen riding the beast, that is, in some sense exercising control over the Lawless One.

The name of this woman is "Mystery Babylon the Great." It indicates that false Christianity is in some way linked with the ancient city Babylon. Since Babylon is the city that grew up around the tower of Babel, as described in Genesis 11, we have in that story a strong hint of what the error of Babylonianism is. The tower of Babel was the earliest attempt of man to gain power and prestige by the exercise of religious authority. Thus there originated in the great city by the Euphrates a false religion which masqueraded as the true one and throughout all history has been infiltrating all religious systems to deceive and delude men. Its characteristics have always been the same: love of power and prestige, obtained by exercising religious authority.

Babylonianism is not confined to any one group or ecclesiastical organization today. Like the true church, the false is scattered everywhere, permeating everything. But there is this difference: the true church is an organism, a living body, made up of members who share the same life, the life of Jesus. The false church is an organization and therefore lays much stress on external membership. Wherever you find those who bow to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and love and obey him, there you have the true church. Wherever you find those who, though outwardly religious, love self and hunger after status, prestige, and the world's acclaim, there you have the false church, Babylon the Great.

It is obvious that ecclesiastical merger is the spirit of the day. Almost monthly we read of some new merger of churches or religious organizations. It appears as though the church has been infected with the Rotary Club spirit, for Rotarians love to sing, "The more we get together the happier we'll be." Despite this external merging and blending of organizations it will be impossible to separate the true church from the false until God himself will remove the true and leave the false.

Many Christians are asking, "What shall we do about this growing octopus of churches? Should we withdraw and form our own separate, purified group, where unbelief is excluded and only true Christians are admitted?" That is utterly impossible. Jesus said specifically, "Let [the wheat and the tares] grow together until the harvest." The World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the various independent bodies, all have genuine Christians in their membership, as well as those who are Babylonians at heart. No man, or group of men, possesses the wisdom to distinguish between the true and the false. Until God makes this distinction it is necessary for each individual to judge his own heart.

Marks of Counterfeit Christianity

But can you know which side you are on? Yes! The Bible indicates that there are certain attitudes which clearly mark a false Christian. Let's take a look at three incisive passages that will unveil the mark of the counterfeit. The first is from Philippians 3:18, 19:

"For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things."

One clear mark of the false is a set of wrong values. The most important thing in life to anyone is what he

regards as his god. Here in this verse the god is the belly. These people are not concerned about the work of the Lord, the extension of the "good news," or meeting the needs of heart-sick, hungry, or deluded people. To them the most important issues are, "What shall I eat, what shall I drink, and with what shall I be clothed." Their glory is their shame. They glory in what really ought to be the source of shame, like a man boasting that he has bad breath. "Hallelujah, I've got halitosis!" They should be ashamed of their pride, their prejudices, and their pettiness, but instead they boast of these things and even claim they are "Christian" attitudes.

Also, they mind "earthly things." They have no vision beyond what can be seen. The earthly things are not wrong but they are not enough. The ultimate decisions of life are not to be based on immediate issues-making money, gaining or losing status, pleasing others-but on the absolute values which God declares. Jesus said "Seek first his [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." But those who mind earthly things are always ready to forget the Lord's words when material values are at stake. Another passage that marks a counterfeit Christian is Matthew 7:21-23:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evil-doers.'"

These are people characterized by a false sense of ministry. They are certain what they have done will win commendation from Christ, but they are terribly mistaken. What they have done seems quite worthy: teaching, healing, and helping. "Did we not prophesy in your name?" That is the ministry of teaching and it is apparently Christian teaching, for it is done in the name of Christ. "Did we not...cast out demons?" That is the ministry of healing, of counselling and delivering from oppressive powers. "Did we not...do many mighty works?" It includes such deeds as establishing schools, building hospitals, lifting literary standards and many other activities which the world would recognize as "mighty works."

But there is one thing wrong. It is all accomplished for the sake of self. It is an attempt to gain prestige and favor by doing religious things; therefore it is Babylonianism. There has been no new beginning, no new birth in Jesus Christ. It is perfectly sincere, deeply earnest, even completely dedicated, but it is all directed at the deadly magnifying of self which God completely set aside.

One additional passage from the lips of Jesus completes the trilogy of the counterfeit. This one is found in Revelation 3:15-17:

"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

This group suffers from a false sense of power. They think they are Christians and call themselves Christians. They even see themselves as an especially powerful church and they reckon their power from three apparent sources. The first of these is wealth. "Money talks," they say. "Money is power." But money cannot change hearts, or break evil habits, or open deluded eyes. Because they rely on money these people can never do anything more than the nearest bank or government agency can do.

Furthermore, they say, "I have prospered;" that is, increased in numbers. Is this not the standard for measuring power in many places today? "We have the largest church in town." "Our congregation is made up of the finest people and all the top leaders come." "With the votes we can sway we can do almost anything." One hears this kind of talk on every side today, but it is all a delusion of power.

As a third source of power they demonstrate a tremendous sense of confidence. "We have need of nothing," they say. "We have all that it takes to do whatever needs to be done." That is the spirit of Babylonianism. In the face of this remarkable esprit de corps Jesus says, "[You do not know] that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked."

The ultimate fate of this false church is revealed to us by John in Revelation 17:15-17:

"And he said to me, 'The waters that you saw, where the harlot is seated, are the peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the harlot; they will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and giving over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled.'"

Shorn of its real power by the removal of the true Christians, the whole ecclesiastical structure becomes nothing but a hollow mockery. Though it still attempts to ride the beast, and thus to continue the moral control and political influence it has always exercised, yet this soon becomes no longer possible. Morality without faith is empty and vain and it cannot long survive for it has no power. When the hypocrisy of this false church becomes no longer concealable the nations will turn on it like wild pigs and rend the whole hypocritical structure to the ground.

There was an historical foreview of this in the days of the French Revolution. Then during the revolt against religion, cathedrals were torn down or turned into market places, altars were violated, prostitutes were invested as priests, and religious teachings were held up to scorn. So also the nations will hate the harlot and make her desolate and naked, devouring her flesh and burning her with fire. Then the Lawless One will be free to carry out his cruel will upon all the peoples of earth.

If in searching your own heart you find continual manifestation of self-centeredness, of concern for yourself and lack of concern for others, of bitterness or resentment all these mark the path of unbelief. Though you may have received the Lord Jesus into your heart, you are not yet living the life he came to give you. Ask him to deal with the pride and love of position within you and to make your heart flame with his life, love, grace, glory and joy. If life is dull and meaningless to you, uncertain and filled with darkness, then somewhere you've failed to take what he came to give.

He did not come to give you darkness, dullness and drabness. He came to give life-abundant life; the kind that he himself lived in the days of his flesh. If he has entered your heart then expect him to live that kind of life in you, for that is what the Christian life is: all of him being all that he is, in you! Nothing less than this is true Christianity.

Prayer

Thank you, Heavenly Surgeon, for the sharp knife of your Word which pierces into the inner parts of our lives and cuts away the cancerous growths of pride and self-sufficiency. Thank you also for the life of the Lord Jesus which is given to us by faith. Teach us how to live in continual expectation of his activity in us, that we may be real, and not counterfeit, Christians. In his name, Amen.

* *A Christianity Today Reader*, Meredith Press, New York 1966.

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