

# The Secret Presence

Chapter Seven. Matthew 24:23-38

by Ray C. Stedman

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Do you know the first question ever asked in the New Testament? It was asked by Wise Men who came out of the East to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" A little later Herod the king asked the same question of the scribes, "Where (is the Christ) to be born?" They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea." Thus the New Testament opens with a search for Christ, "Where is he?"

As Jesus stands on the Mount of Olives with his disciples and previews for them the remarkable period to come which he calls, "the close of the age," he indicates that during that time men will still be asking, "Where is the Christ?" But then, he says, it will be a trick question; be careful of it! In Matthew 24:23-28, he says:

"Then if any one says to you, 'Lo, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is,' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Lo, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, 'Lo, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out; if they say, 'Lo, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man. Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together."

Do not miss the time word with which Jesus opens this section, "Then if any one says to you," etc. "Then" clearly refers to the time of the Great Tribulation which he has briefly but terribly described with the words, "if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved." As we have seen, this is the last three and one-half years of Daniel's predicted seventieth week. During this terrible time of persecution and judgment the Lord Jesus will support and sustain his own by appearing to them frequently in a variety of places. These appearances will certainly be made to the 144,000 in their world wide ministry, and perhaps also to that "great multitude" of Gentile believers who will come out of the Great Tribulation.

As a result of this rather unusual state of affairs rumors will apparently spread like wildfire that Jesus Christ is somewhere around.

In John 7:11, 32-36 Jesus himself predicted that a situation like this that would occur during the forty day period after his resurrection:

"The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, 'Where is he?' [There's the question again! A little further on John says:] The Pharisees heard the crowd thus muttering about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him. Jesus then said, 'I shall be with you a little longer, and then I go to him who sent me; you will seek me and you will not find me; where I am you cannot come.' The Jews said to one another, 'Where does this man intend to go that we shall not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, 'You will seek me and you will not find me,' and, 'where I am you cannot come'?"

To these Jews Jesus was nothing but a tub-thumping, rabble-rousing, troublemaker from Nazareth and they intended to put him to death as quickly as possible. Jesus knew this and knew that they would succeed in their

plans. But now he puzzled them completely by telling them that after they had done their worst, they would look for him but would not be able to find him. That could have only been true during his forty-day post-resurrection ministry. After he ascended into the heavens they did not look for him, for the disciples were then declaring throughout Jerusalem that he had gone to the Father. But during that forty-day period there must have been many disquieting rumors, which came to the authorities' ears, that Christ was still somewhere around.

When the soldiers came from the grave of Jesus with the report that he had risen from the dead, they had to be bribed to say that his disciples had come and stolen his body away, and thus to quiet that rumor. But soon other rumors were buzzing. Mysterious appearances of Jesus to his disciples were reported and the authorities must have sent other search parties to try to locate him. But as Jesus had predicted, they searched for him but they could not find him. They could never understand the reason, but it was exactly as he had said, "Where I am going you cannot come." In the new relationship to his own into which he had entered, it was impossible for them to intrude.

During that forty-day period the disciples of Jesus were what we might call "Pre-church Christians." They believed in Jesus but they were not yet members of the church, for the church was not formed until the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out. During the close of the age, the disciples (or as Jesus calls them "the elect") will be what we might call "Post-church Christians." The church has been removed from the world, at least from any visible participation in world affairs. Since we know that Christians will be given glorified bodies like their Lord's (and Paul says that, once removed from this life, the church will be forever "with the Lord"), it seems highly likely that church Christians will join the Lord Jesus in this ministry behind the scenes during the tribulation. They will be like Moses and Elijah who appeared with the transfigured Christ on the Mount. The picture then is clear. Jesus will come for his church and take the members into a new relationship with him. Then he, with them, will remain throughout the "end of the age" period, appearing only to those whose hearts are ready to believe in him. Rumors of his presence will continually be spread abroad, so that men will be saying in that day as they said during the forty-day period, "Where is he?" Authorities will search for him and will not be able to find him, but false prophets will claim to know where he is.

## **Masters of Deceit**

Part of the tribulation of the end times will be a fresh and powerful campaign of deceit which will break out against any who are tempted to believe in Jesus. Just as the Lord foresaw and described the great forces of deceit which would be at work until the close of the age arrived, so he also described the Great Tribulation. Their first element will be the presence of authoritative personalities. "False Christs and false prophets will arise" (Matthew 24:24). No program of falsehood among men ever existed without a masterful or powerful leader. The human heart inveterately loves a good showman. Men tend easily to follow those who speak with authority and who manifest drive and dash in his personalities. And there is no road to error quite so compelling as a religious one. History confirms the idea that more people are misled religiously than any other way. Let a blatant atheist utter an attack against Christianity and no one is greatly disturbed or changed. But let a bishop of the church, dressed in religious garb and using pious language say the same thing and immediately it is discussed and openly or secretly admired all over the world.

So false Christs shall arise, taking full advantage of the superstitious expectancy of the times, for as Jesus said in another place, "Men [will be] fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming in the world." They will come with a display of signs and wonders, misleading many, and playing ultimately into the hand of the Lawless One.

Not only will there be false Christs, but also false prophets. We have already seen that this can have a secular sense; the pace-setters of thought, the philosophers, philosophers, professors, scientists; clever men of great intelligence who are listened to when they talk. While the church is yet on earth it acts as salt, pervading every section of life, and there are men of true faith found among the prophets of the world everywhere today. But in that day there will no longer be room for the gospel of the supernatural; there will be no place among intellectuals for what Paul calls a "secret and hidden wisdom of God." which none of the princes of this world

knew, for had they known it, they would never "have crucified the Lord of Glory" (1 Corinthians 2:7, 8).

Since there will no longer be a place among the leaders of the world for those who live by faith, there will arise men of tremendous intellectual capacity and ability who will become the instruments of error-false prophets-who will convince millions that the lie of the Antichrist is the only reasonable basis for life.

Augmenting the pull of masterful personalities in the last days, will be the power of persuasive propaganda. As we have already noted, powerful rumors of the mysterious presence of Jesus Christ will sweep the nations. There will be many who will claim to have authoritative information to where he may be found. They will offer themselves as privileged companion of Christ, claiming that they alone may be trusted to lead the seeker to him.

Lest this seem unbelievable, let me share a personal experience which occurred a few years ago. I was invited to meet a certain Bible teacher in a private home. He told me without much preamble, "Christ has already returned to earth and I happen to belong to a group of people who know where he is. If you are really interested in preaching the truth, I can tell you how to get in on the inner secrets."

I was not deeply impressed, and said to him, "Where is he, then, since you know?"

"Oh, he is in a special place in the desert, here in California," he answered. "I have seen him many times and others that I know have seen him. Only we know where he is."

To learn what he would say, I turned to this very passage of Scripture and read these words to him: "If [a man says] to you, 'Lo, he is in the wilderness,' do not... believe [him] (Matthew 24:26)."

"Oh," he said, "Jesus didn't mean our group!"

Well, that is the crack-pot approach to prophecy. But the false Christs and false prophets and their followers in the last days will say the same thing. They will relate their offer to various longings of the heart. To some who have grown tired of the rat race of life and are especially fed up with city living, they will say: "Lo, he is in the wilderness." They will suggest that the nature of the Messiah's message is a call to return to nature, to simplify life and get back to the primitive struggle of wrestling with the elements.

Others will make appeal to the lust for knowledge. They will say that the Christ can only be found in the race to unlock the mysteries of the universe. The answer will be found in the inner rooms of knowledge. When we know what we are and who we are and how we operate, then we will be able to find the mysterious presence of the Messiah. He is in the inner rooms, if anywhere at all."

Does this sound familiar? In the end of the age it will not be necessary to invent any new ideas. It will only be necessary to augment the ones that are already current in life.

As a final clincher, Jesus says that these false leaders will

"...show great signs and wonders, so as to lead stray, if possible, even the elect."

Even this is nothing new. The man on the street today is so impressed by the wonders science has brought about that he is ready to believe anything is possible.

When the first H-bomb was exploded in the Pacific one reporter described the blast as, "White and hot, like the flash of a breaking electrical circuit. It turned almost instantly to bright bilious green, a color so unexpected that watchers on the beach gasped. Great green fingers of light poked out through the clouds. From the center of the blast a red glow began expanding upward. It was not the familiar orange of the tropical sunset, but a deep solid red, and the people afterwards groped for words to describe it. The glow bubbled aloft and boiled into the sky. A quarter moon-some people thought it was the fire-ball-showed through occasionally as the clouds broke and its face glowed, not pale, but a rich, strange yellow."

Another reporter on the island of Samoa reported seeing a rainbow with colored lights dancing. "Later," he said, "the rainbow faded but it left something behind that I had never felt with rainbows-elation, awe, and an unearthly fright." When man can conjure up spirits as frightful as that, who is not ready to listen? What a witches' brew of wonders will be released when the "mystery of lawlessness" in its final form makes a last, final, desperate effort to capture men's minds and sweep them over the precipice of deceit to destruction.

## **The False-Now the True**

In contrast to the false propaganda of the last days, in Matthew 24:27,28 Jesus unveils the true method for locating him in the day of his presence. To do so he uses a parable from nature and a proverb from life: "For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man. Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together."

The word the Lord uses for "coming" here is the now familiar "parousia." It is quite a different word than he uses a few verses farther on when he speaks of "the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." It is easy to confuse these two comings because of his reference to lightning in verse 27. Since lightning is a form of power and glory, many feel the Lord is using it as a symbol of his coming in glory. But note carefully what he says.

Lightning flashes in the east, but the effect of it is seen all over the sky. Yet the flash itself does not involve the whole inverted dome of the heavens from east to west. When he uses the symbol of lightning, therefore, he is not describing a universally visible manifestation of his glory, but the universal effect of his presence behind the scenes. Like lightning flashes he will be seen by his own in different places, at all different times, but the effect of those appearances will be felt throughout the earth.

Furthermore, lightning is sovereign, unpredictable, uncontrollable. So will be the presence, the parousia, of the Son of man. He will appear and disappear at will. Whenever there is need for him he will be there, just as he was during the postresurrection period. There will be no need to search for him for he cannot be found that way. There will be no need to look for him in the wilderness nor in the inner rooms, for he will come whenever and wherever he finds a heart ready to know him. In the passage parallel to this in Luke 17, Jesus says, "For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of man be in his day." A "day" used in that sense always refers to a period of time, not a sudden, climactic event.

Then, using a common proverb of the day, Jesus indicates the proper way to find him in that day, "Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together." Rather than eagles, the margin gives the proper word, vultures: "there the [vultures] will be gathered together."

When I was a boy in a remote high school in Montana, we were having basketball practice one night. At the close of the practice period the coach called one of the team members aside. I watched him go to the other side of the room. The boy was a close friend of mine and came from a rather poor family who were trying to eke out a living on a ranch about ten miles north of town. As I watched the lad's face while the coach was talking to him, I saw it blanch and after a bit the boy walked off with his head down. The coach came over to us and said, "I just gave Joe some bad news. His dad has been found dead." Then he told us how he was found.

One of the neighbors owned a ranch about four or five miles away, but separated from Joe's home by a deep canyon. The man had looked over and noticed that there was no smoke rising from the ranch house, so he saddled a horse and rode over. When he came to the silent cabin and found no one around, he began to wonder if anything had happened. As he looked about he saw in the sky about a half mile off, a number of buzzards, a type of vulture. Mounting his horse again he rode off to investigate. Beneath the spot where the buzzards circled he found the body of Joe's father. I have never forgotten that incident, and every time I read this verse I think of it. "Wherever the body is, there the [vultures] will be gathered together."

## Unmistakable Marks

What does our Lord mean by this? Does he mean that he is a body, a decaying corpse? No, he is simply taking a common parable which meant that whenever the question of "where" arises about a subject, then look for some identifying activity. We have a similar proverb today, "Where there's smoke, there's fire."

In that day men will ask, "Where is Jesus Christ? How do you find him? Where is he?" The answer is, wherever you see the signs of his activity. They are always unmistakable. He comes to transform life, to make it over anew. He comes to remove delusion and deceit and to lead instead into truth and reality. He comes to deliver from guilt, from fear, and from hate. Even in those terrible days of unheard-of violence, cruelty, and death, he will be busy with his everlasting ministry. If you want to know where he is working, look for the sign of transformed lives.

It has always been true. It will be true in the days of his glorified presence on earth, but it is also true now, in the day of his spiritual presence. He is sovereign, uncontrollable, unlimited by geography. False faiths forever say "We have a corner on Christ," but the true faith says he is universally available. He is at the instant disposal of any heart which in humility and contriteness is ready to do business with him.

## Prayer

Heavenly Father, it is wonderful to know that we find Jesus Christ, not by searching up and down the earth, nor by delving into esoteric realms of knowledge, nor by probing into secret and mysterious teachings from the past, but by a simple, honest facing of our own need and a response to his invitation to us. Save us from the awful blasphemy of pretending to be Christians without having known a transformed life. Keep us from the false front, the facade. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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