

WHAT IS THE SIGN OF THE END OF THE AGE?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

by Ron Ritchie

Ever since Desert Storm I have been a great fan of CNN TV with its 24-hour world news coverage. It has made me something of a cross-eyed Christian--one eye on the political, environmental, religious, and cosmic events around the world, and the other eye on the prophetic portions of the Scriptures (Daniel, Matthew 13 and 24, Luke 21, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 John, and Revelation, to mention a few). When you read about the budding European Common Market, you can't help but want to turn to Daniel to see if this has anything to do with the rise of the ten kings in the end times. When you see the Jews back in the land of Israel, struggling daily to find a way to live in peace with their Arab neighbors, while a small group of Jews are making plans to build a third temple, you want to turn to Daniel again as well as to Matthew 24 and Luke 21, to look for signs that may line up with all the promises that Jesus is coming again (both his invisible return for the church; see 1 Thessalonians 4:15-5:11; and his visible return in judgment; see Luke 21:27).

What a time to be living--so much instant history, so much fulfillment of prophecy beginning to take shape before our eyes! It is a time of excitement, confusion, and danger, and we are called to be faithful to the responsibility God has given us in his wonderful plan of redemption. So we need to be aware of what is happening and how we should react to it.

As we turn to Luke 21 we will discover that the disciples were very interested in current and future events, just as we should be today. Their hearts were filled with both confusion and curiosity about future events in Israel. Our Lord knew the hearts of his disciples, so the first thing he did was set up a teachable moment.

The teachable moment

And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. And He saw a certain poor widow putting in two small copper coins. And He said, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on."

And while some were talking about the temple, that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts, He said, "As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down." (Luke 21:1-6)

On the last Tuesday of our Lord's life on earth he could be found teaching and preaching in the courts of the temple, in spite of the reality that the spiritual leadership of Israel had rejected him as their Messiah and Prince of Peace and were making plans to kill him. In verses 1-4 he was sitting with his disciples and watching the rich and poor put their money into the treasury, making an evaluation of each. As he watched a certain widow put in two small copper coins, he concluded that the rich gave to God out of their surplus, but this widow gave out of her poverty and put in more than all of them. Why? Because she was totally committed to God, whereas the leadership who rejected him on this Passover were financially rich but spiritually bankrupt. The leadership symbolized the spiritually bankrupt nation of Israel, and the widow symbolized the believing remnant.

As the Lord and his disciples were walking out of the temple, one of them, perhaps in a moment of uncertainty, nervously said, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" (Mark 13:1). He was talking about the wrong things at the wrong time, wasn't he? The disciples were struggling to understand what was really going on in the life and times of our Lord. They had already forgotten what he had said through tears just

two days earlier as he approached the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation." (Luke 19:42-44). This remark about the stones and the buildings reminds us once again that the disciples really did not understand that our Lord was just two days away from becoming "the Lamb of God who [would take] away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) on the cross of Calvary. Here they were talking about the physical beauty of the temple! But you can kind of understand where the disciples were, because they had been raised with the temple always in their sight.

So Jesus reminded them, "As for these things which you are looking at [the beauty of the temple], the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down." This statement would have been very difficult for any faithful Jew to fully comprehend, for this temple was Herod the Great's masterpiece. That Jewish king began rebuilding the four-hundred-year-old second temple in 20 B.C., and the work continued into the 40s A.D. The Jews could never get over the beauty that met their eyes when they entered the temple courtyard through the Beautiful Gate. Josephus wrote: "Now the outward face of the temple...was covered all over with plates of gold...and at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away..." (Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*).

Now, you can imagine sitting there as one of the disciples and saying, "What?! We've always had the temple--this is where God dwells! What are you saying, Jesus? Who would mess with the temple?" Jesus had said, "...not one stone upon another..." And that was the way the Romans destroyed cities. They made sure every stone was taken down, then plowed over, then covered with salt so that when subsequent generations came by and saw this empty place they would say, "What was there?" And no one would know.

Jesus as the true prophet of Deuteronomy 18 was able to predict that over the next thirty-seven years and within the lifetime of some of the apostles, the political tension would become so great between Rome and Israel that Rome would have to send General Titus and his army to lay siege against Jerusalem. This siege caused the death of some 1,100,000 Jews. The women began to eat their children, and this so incensed the Romans that they came in and enslaved some 97,000 men, women, and children; burned the city; and tore down the buildings, temple, and walls. And just as our Lord saw ahead to the immediate future of Jerusalem, he was also able to see across a valley of time to the final destruction of the city of peace and its third temple at the end of the Great Tribulation.

It was very difficult for the disciples to even think of a time when not only the temple but the whole city would be totally destroyed. In that regard nothing is really that much different today for the Jews or for much of the Christian community. If you read the Jerusalem Post, watch the weekly TV program "Inside Jerusalem", or have the privilege of visiting Israel today, you are overwhelmed by the amount of building that is going on in the holy city and by all the new settlements on the hills surrounding the city (as well as on the Judean hills in the West Bank). The Jews are coming back into the land by the thousands. The newest statistic is that there are almost five million Jews there now, plus an additional one million Arabs and one million Christians, and the hills are blossoming with new buildings because all these people need places to live. In no way do you get a sense that Jerusalem will once again suffer total destruction, and yet because of the words of the Lord to his disciples about the first destruction, we as Christians need to be asking the same question they asked:

What will be the sign of the end of the age?

And they questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, when therefore will these things [about the temple] be? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" (Luke 21:7)

The Lord and the disciples left the temple, walked half a mile east, and began ascending Mount Olivet until they came to a spot where they could sit down and face the whole city and the temple area below them. It was at this time, prompted by our Lord's comments about the temple, that Peter, James, John, and Andrew privately questioned him. According to Matthew 24:3 they asked the Lord three questions: (1) When will these things

happen to the temple? (2) What will be the sign of your coming? And (3) what will be the sign of the end of the age? Our Lord will answer the third question first. (This message and the next will cover his response in two parts.)

When Jesus began to answer the disciples questions about the future He was aware of what they were thinking about when they used the term "the things to come." They were taught that there were two ages: (1) The present age in which the Jewish nation was waiting for the Messiah to come in power and glory. But just before his coming to Jerusalem, at the end of the Great Tribulation, the city would be found in siege by the Gentile armies from around the world. Then the Lord will appear on the stage of History at the end of the Tribulation and he will destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. (2) The age to come was the time when the Messiah would be king of all the earth and he would fulfill all the promises and covenants with Israel and Israel would finally receive all her blessings from the Messiah. (Zechariah 14:4). What was missing in the mind of the disciples was the understanding of God's timetable and the gap as we shall see between the 69th and 70th week as recorded in Daniel 9.

When the disciples used the word "sign," it was not without scriptural reference. They were aware of the prophecy in Daniel 9 about the sixty-nine weeks that would pass between the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity and the arrival of the Messiah who would be cut off. As they looked at Daniel's prophecy they sensed the beginning of the seventieth week, but they were blind to the sign that would set it in motion. And they didn't know about the gap (which now has spread over some two thousand years) between the sixty-ninth week and the seventieth week, just as we still don't know how long it will be. Every generation, you know, thinks Jesus is coming back in its time. That is the expectation God sets up in our hearts, and it is a good thing to have in your heart. It affects how you live and makes you a strong witness, and it doesn't make a liar out of God, as we will see.

So the disciples asked the Lord to give them a sign for the close of the age. Notice that in this discussion of the future our Lord will live up to "the things to come" religiously, politically, environmentally, and cosmically before the end of the age (but not the end of the world). The close of this age, as we will see, will come at the beginning of "Jacob's distress" (Jeremiah 30:7) or Daniel's seventieth week for Israel. But before our Lord gives them the sign of the close of the age, he will give them a sweeping overview of not only their personal futures, which will include the history of the early church, but also, from our perspective, some twenty centuries of human history, and the temptations and struggles his followers will have until the close of the age, that is, the beginning of the Great Tribulation, and his second coming as our eternal King.

This message is also recorded in more detail in Mark 13:1-37 and Matthew 24:1-25:46. As we study this passage in two parts, I would suggest that you keep your finger in Matthew 24 as we look at Luke 21. Please note the following principles: (a) When our Lord speaks about the destruction of the temple, he will have in mind what we call a double fulfillment, for the second temple will be destroyed in 70 A.D., and then the third temple will be destroyed at the end of the great tribulation. (b) When our Lord answers the question, "What is the sign of the end of the age?" he will give them certain religious, political, natural, and cosmic "birth pangs" that get more intense in each generation before the specific sign that will occur in the temple, which is followed by the destruction of Jerusalem for the final time before his visible return as King. (c) Finally, keep in mind that as our Lord spoke to his apostles he was speaking to them both as representatives of the church, which would need this truth for the present age, and to Israel, which would need this truth in its time of trouble to come at the end of the age. (For more on this subject, you might want to read Ray Stedman's excellent booklet, *What's this World Coming To?*)

Our Lord started out by giving his disciples four warnings about the various false signs before the close of the age. Let's take them one at a time. The first one is in verse 8:

And He said, "See to it that you be not misled; for many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and, 'The time is at hand'; do not go after them."

They were not to be misled by false messiahs. He was saying, "Beware lest you be led astray; that is, do not be deceived; do not follow a strange shepherd who proclaims himself the Messiah and tells you that "the time is at

hand," who would lead you, along with many others, into destruction." The Jews have a saying they pass on to their sons: "Son, if you are planting a tree and someone comes and tells you that the Messiah is at your gate, continue to plant your tree." But on the other hand, there is a stone slab on Mount Zion in Jerusalem on which the following words appear in Hebrew: "I believe in the coming of Messiah, and even if he is delayed, I will wait for him daily until he comes." Many Jews today believe that Jesus is the Messiah for the Gentiles, and they are still waiting for their own Messiah.

Church history is filled with stories of false messiahs who come to the Jews and to the church, and we have our fill of them today. Our current messiah is Dr. Sun Moon of Korea, who claims he received a revelation in 1945 that he was the one through whom the world would be saved, and so he founded the Unification Church. But after he dies new ones will keep appearing on the stage of world history until the final one, known as "the antichrist" or "the man of sin," seeks to replace God in the third temple during the great tribulation. (See 1 John 2:18-19.) But if we want to see a false messiah we don't need a person like Dr. Sun Moon; we need only realize that we are surrounded by the spirit of antichrist. Every philosophy, religion, group, or human being who seeks to replace Jesus Christ with their solution for the problems of humanity is speaking out in the spirit of antichrist. For example, when the riots in Los Angeles took place recently, many people stood up and made public statements to the effect that the key to correcting the problem was education, or the key was money, and so forth. But when the question was put to Billy Graham, he said that the key was the change of man's heart by Jesus Christ. Every one of them except for him spoke in the spirit of antichrist.

Jesus' second warning is found in verses 9-10:

"And when you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately."

Then He continued by saying to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom..."

They were not to be terrified by political events. This is an interesting comment, because Israel was enjoying Pax Romana, the great Roman peace, and would until shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Then over the next 250 years Rome would experience a time of great turmoil and defeat from within. In our own day, since the beginning of World War II we as a nation have experienced with more and more intensity wars and rumors of wars. It appears that since the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, the establishment of the Common Market in Europe, and Desert Storm, we are now in a season of nation against nation and civil wars throughout Eastern Europe, not to mention the conflicts in South Africa, those between the Arabs and Jews, and those among the Arab nations.

The third warning is in verse 11:

"...and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven."

They were not to be terrified by environmental crises. Nine years after the fall of Jerusalem, Mount Vesuvius erupted violently, destroying the Italian city of Pompei and its surrounding suburbs. We are told in the Book of Acts that eight years after our Lord's resurrection, Agabus the prophet "...stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius" (43-54 A.D.). A friend who works at SRI in Menlo Park told me that about a hundred earthquakes are recorded each day around the world. Our current communication abilities keep us aware of the many famines and plagues such as AIDS that are taking their human toll daily. The great terrifying signs from heaven could refer to comets, meteors and even eclipses in the first century. In our day it could refer to the hole in the ozone layer, acid rain, the lack of rainfall because of the clearing of the rain forest in South America, and so forth. We do know that just before the visible appearance of the Son of Man in the clouds, the powers of the heavens will be loosed.

According to Matthew's account of our Lord's message, he summarized all the above as "...merely the beginning

of birth pangs" (Matthew 24:8). This is a common figure of speech used to describe the time of Israel's tribulation (see Isaiah 13:8; 26:17-19; 66:7-9; Jeremiah 30:6-7; Micah 4:9-10; and 1 Thessalonians 5:3), which is the initial phase of "the day of the Lord" in the Scriptures. This period of growing human agony will be climaxed by the Messiah's second coming to earth.

The fourth warning is found in verses 12-19:

"But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute. But you will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, and you will be hated by all on account of My name. Yet not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives."

They were not to be terrified by religious persecutions. Luke makes an interesting point here when he says that even before these things, that is, the arrival of the religious, political, and environmental upheaval, they were encouraged to prepare their minds and hearts to face into religious persecution for the name of their Messiah, Jesus Christ. Only fifty-two days later at the feast of Pentecost, the Christian community began to experience this reality. Stephen, for example, would lose his life on behalf of Christ (Acts 7). And Luke tells us in Acts 9:1-2, "Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." But then Saul himself met the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus and accepted him as his Lord and Savior. And the Lord appeared in a vision to the disciple Ananias and instructed him to go and meet Saul, "...for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:15-16). Saul, who became Paul, would have to stand as a criminal before governors and kings (see Acts 24-26), and he would eventually lose his life for the sake of Jesus, his Lord and Savior.

Luke 21:13-19 also gives us the purpose of this religious persecution and some promises concerning it. According to the early chapters of Acts, thousands of Jewish believers were placed before unbelieving Jews and Gentiles in the most trying of circumstances because it led to an opportunity for their testimony. Our risen Lord would tell the apostles just before his Ascension, after they had asked whether it was at this time that he was restoring the kingdom to Israel, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses [you shall testify of Me]" (Acts 1:7-8).

In every generation, the persecution of the followers of Christ has increased in intensity up to this day, and it will continue until the Lord takes believers home by death or by the "rapture." Then it will continue for all the new believers in the great tribulation until our Lord's visible return as King. He told us not to prepare any speeches to defend ourselves because he would give us utterance and wisdom that our accusers could not refute. Within a day and a half Jesus would celebrate his Last Passover, and during that dinner he would tell his disciples, "They will make you outcasts from the synagogue; but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God" (John 16:2). But at the same time he promised all the disciples that his Father would send them the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who would stand by them in the days ahead and give them the power and wisdom to testify on behalf of Christ.

A beautiful example of this promise was fulfilled by our risen Lord in the lives of Peter and John when they healed a lame man in the temple, were arrested, and then had to stand before the supreme court of Israel and answer the question, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?" Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said, "By the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead...And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:5-12). This is what we mean when we say, as we do so often in this church,

there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:5-12). This is what we mean when we say, as we do so often in this church, "Just show up," and God will speak through you. (It is not that you don't need to have the truth in your heart; Peter and John certainly did, and they were able to use it.)

Jesus told them that their own family members would turn them in to the religious authorities because of their love for him. Some of them would lose their physical lives, and some of them would be hated, but they would not be harmed, and they would know that they were truly his followers because they would be able, by the power of the Holy Spirit within them, to endure until he came again.

I read a recent article in the *San Francisco Examiner* that told of an experience the East Germans have been struggling with since the unification of their country. As you know, after forty years behind the Iron Curtain, East and West Germany became one, and as a result of this freedom the East German secret police opened their files on the citizens they had already arrested for political crimes against the state and citizens under investigation. (If these files were lined up in a row they would cover a bookshelf extending 125 miles.) When these files were opened, many of the political, social, and religious victims were shocked to learn that friends, neighbors, and even family members had betrayed them. There is evidence that thousands of clergymen and other religious workers, including some of the country's most senior religious administrators, were Stasi informers. But if you have a background in church history you know that all of this religious persecution of the Jews and the Christians has been going on in every generation up till now, and it will continue until Jesus returns as King.

In Matthew 24:14 we find this promise: "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." So behind all of these "birth pangs" and religious persecution is a loving God who wishes for none to perish but that all would come to repentance (see 2 Peter 3:9). The good news of the kingdom is that God wants each of us to invite his Son Jesus to set up his spiritual rule in our hearts. And the way he will get this good news out to the whole world is by our witnessing and preaching it. That doesn't mean that everyone who hears the good news will accept it, but it does mean that all the nations will at least have the witness through the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom and the testimony of his people that Jesus is the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, the Messiah, Lord, Savior, and only hope of humanity.

The disciples asked, "Lord, what will be the sign of the end of the age?" His reply was, "Don't be misled by false messiahs; and don't be terrified by political upheavals between nations, environmental changes, great destruction of the world's population, or religious persecution in the age of the Spirit or in the great tribulation. All of this is necessary because men's hearts are evil and have been hardened with pride, power, and position. They need to be faced with issues they cannot deal with, and they need to come to a place of spiritual bankruptcy so that they can hear your testimony of Me and the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom. And then the end of this age will kick in with the events listed in Daniel's seventieth week." What will be the sign of the end of the age? According to Daniel 9:27, Matthew 24:15, and Luke 21: 20 it will be "the abomination of desolation," which we will look at in our next message.

As I read and thought about these scriptures, I had to stop and consider my own willingness to become a witness for our Lord during this difficult generation. I had to question whether I was being misled or terrified by all the current religious, political, environmental, and cosmic events; or in fact I was more focused on participating in the "preaching of the good news of the kingdom." This is the message of hope for all of humanity, a message offered by God about how he sent his son Jesus with the power to deliver all who are willing to place their faith in him from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of life and light. History is God's story of redemption. The question we need to ask ourselves is, how are we going to be involved in the redemption story until the end of the age? Our role is to preach and testify so men and women can come into the kingdom before Jesus comes again visibly as Judge.

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