

WHAT IS THE SIGN OF THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

by Ron Ritchie

At this moment in the city of Jerusalem there are men looking for the ark of the covenant containing the tablets of the law in the many caves around and under the foundation of King Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6-8). (This search is based on rabbinical tradition following the instructions King Solomon gave to the builders to prepare a hiding place for the ark for times of war and possible destruction of the holy city. Some four hundred years later, before the Chaldean invasion, King Josiah ordered the Levites to "put the holy ark in the house which Solomon son of David king of Israel built" [2 Chronicles 35:3].) Further, a group of young men is being trained to serve in the third temple as the Levitical priesthood, and a group of artists is beginning to make all the utensils necessary to carry out the many sacrifices and offerings in the temple services and feasts.

To put a little more tension in the air, in the city of Jerusalem there is also a group called the Temple Mount Faithful led by Gershon Salomon, a soft-spoken Israeli war hero, distinguished university professor, and scholar. His dream is to convince the Arabs to give the temple mount back into the hands of the Jews so that they can start to build the third temple. To that end, he has led pilgrimages up to the mount in the hope of laying the cornerstone of the third holy temple, only to be turned back by Moslem police. He was quoted as saying, "We have sovereignty over all of Jerusalem, but only on paper. Real sovereignty means being able to pray on the temple mount."

Since we know that from Daniel's prophecy of the seventieth week the temple will be rebuilt in the city of Jerusalem in the time of the great tribulation these words spoken by Gershon Salomon only highlight in our days the amazing prophecies of the destruction of the temple spoken of by Jesus to His disciples on the Mount of Olives. As you recall our Lord began to answer three questions the disciples had asked him once they sat down on the side of the mountain overlooking the city of Jerusalem and the thirty-four acres on which the Temple of Herod rested. The disciples wanted to know when will these things be the destruction of the city and the temple? What will be the sign of your coming? and...

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

In this passage (Luke 21:5-20), it was still Tuesday of the final passion week of our Lord Jesus. He had visited the temple and continued to teach about the kingdom. Then he moved out of the temple area with his disciples to Mount Olivet until he could turn around and see Herod's beautiful temple where it sat on thirty-four acres of land surrounded by the holy city. It was at this time that he began to answer the three questions his disciples had put to him after he told them of the destruction of the temple: (1) When will these things be? (2) What will be the sign of your coming? And (3) What will be the sign of the end of the age?

In Luke 21:5-19, our Lord began to answer the third question first. He warned his disciples that the age ahead would be filled with confusion and many false signs before the end: false messiahs, political events such as wars, and environmental crises of all kinds. They were not to be misled or terrified by these events, which would just be the "birth pangs" before the end of the age. And even before these birth pangs, his followers would suffer religious persecution in order that the gospel of the kingdom be "preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations," and then the sign of the end of the age (but not the end of the world) would come as the "abomination of desolation." Let's look at Luke 21:20:

"But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at

hand."

The abomination of desolation would occur in the great tribulation, or Daniel's seventieth week. In Matthew 24:15-28 and Mark 13:14-22, he referred to Daniel 9:27, written some five hundred years earlier, when he said, "Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation-in a word, get out of Jerusalem!"

God had sent the angel Gabriel to Babylon (perhaps around 530 B.C.) to show Daniel the future of Israel after its Babylonian captivity. In Daniel 9:24 the prophet was told, "Seventy weeks [490 years] have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity [all accomplished by Jesus on the cross], to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place [all to be accomplished at our Lord's second coming]." The first 7 weeks (49 years) would begin in 445 B.C., when the Persian King Artaxerxes gave the Jews permission to rebuild the temple. Then after 62 weeks (434 years) the Messiah would be cut off and would have nothing. Forty-nine years plus 434 years brings the prophecy up to the time of the cross with 7 more years to go before the second coming of Christ. However, from the cross to the time of the great tribulation, or from the close of the 69th week to the beginning of the 70th week, there is a gap of 1959 years so far.

The angel continued to tell Daniel (9:26b-27), "...and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary [the Roman general Titus in 70 A.D. foreshadowed the Antichrist's war against Israel and the holy city in the 70th week]. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined. And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate [Christ's second return in judgment]."

Who is this man? We can get a pretty clear picture of his character by the many descriptions of him in the word of God. In Daniel 7:7-8, 20-26; 8:23-25; 9:26-27; and 11:36-45, he is seen as the powerful political leader of the world. In 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10, he is called the man of lawlessness and the son of destruction. And, in Revelation 13:1-10, he is the first beast out of the sea who gets his power from the dragon. We can also get a picture of him based on his activities in the last days of the great tribulation. We do not have the time or space to mention every detail about this well-known figure, but let me give you just a few helpful insights from the above scriptures.

Politically he will be a Gentile leader who will come out of the revived Roman Empire (perhaps out of the Common Market or the Western Alliance--Daniel 2:33, 41-42). He will come into the spotlight as the head of the world soon after the Lord's invisible return to take his bride home to be with him (which will leave the world without the Restrainer [the Holy Spirit and the body of Christ] in the great tribulation). This man's rise to world leadership will come about because of his peace program. He will bring peace to the world, and everyone will be amazed at his power, cunning, and political skill. He will even make peace between the Arabs and the Jews (for a price that has to do with the land). Everyone will be stunned, because no one else will have ever been able to accomplish that. So for about 3 1/2 years he will be well-received.

Once he becomes the world ruler with absolute authority, he will change the laws and customs of the world. He will make a seven-year covenant with Israel, and it may be that at this time he will encourage the rebuilding of the third temple and allow the Jews to worship God on the temple mount for the first time since 70 A.D. However, after 3 1/2 years the Son of Destruction will outlaw Jewish temple worship as well as all other religions. He will empower the false prophet of Revelation 13 to set up a lifelike image of him in the holy of holies in the temple, and to force the world to worship him as God upon penalty of death. He will symbolically take God out of the temple and place his own image there, and that is the abomination of desolation.

I don't know how he is going to do that, but I was at Disneyland, where I watched Abraham Lincoln sit in a chair talking to me. I was ready to ask him for his autograph! It was awesome, he was so real. Now if Walt Disney can do that, I don't know what technology is going to produce by the middle of the great tribulation, but it is going to

be incredibly lifelike and terrifying to those who have come into a relationship with Jesus Christ in the tribulation (Revelation 13:14,15).

Robert Shank wrote in his book *Until*:

The world is ready for an authoritative Leader, ready to submit to his rule-even to worship him if he can offer deliverance from the dire distress and peril which now engulfs the world. In a radio broadcast shortly before his death, the eminent British historian Arnold Toynbee said that by confronting the world with fantastic weapons of mass destruction and at the same time making the world interdependent economically, "technology" has brought mankind to such a degree of distress that we are ripe for the deifying of any new Caesar who might succeed in giving the world unity and peace. The new Leader will be such a man. The admiration of the world, kindled by his brilliant achievement in resolving the Land dispute and the whole Middle East impasse and saving the world from the threat of global holocaust, will be escalated to the point of worship...."

The sign of the end of the age and the beginning of the terrible part of the seventieth week, or the great tribulation, will be when the Jews and the world stand by helplessly as "...the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet...[stands] in the holy place...." as Jesus warned in Matthew 24:15. This defiant act will cause great spiritual and moral disgust in God himself and in his people--an abomination that will produce only spiritual desolation, or emptiness of soul and spirit, for all who place their faith in this man. That is why Jesus calls this the "abomination of desolation."

Behind the sign is a spiritual principle. Ray Stedman in his book *What is this World Coming To?* wrote:

There is a "holy place" in the human spirit. It is the place that was intended by God to be the royal residence for his Holy Spirit. Thus man can become what God intended him to be: the human expression of the divine life, the means by which the invisible God is made visible in human affairs. But in that holy place man enthrones himself instead of God, renounces all other forms of authority, and declares there is nothing greater than man.

This act is an abomination to God and leaves all who are willing to follow this lie into physical, emotional, and spiritual desolation, an emptiness of life, a waterless desert.

Anne Marie and I have been to Europe dozens of times since we left Morocco, North Africa in August 1957. But this last trip in May was the most interesting because of the shifting political currents. We saw the signs of the higher level of integration of the European Common Market at the Paris airport in the form of the new maroon-colored passport that permitted travelers to move very quickly through customs for twelve countries. And for the first time we drove through five countries without being stopped at any border to show our passport. We were told that in December the common market nations will all do business with one new common currency. They have just chosen their first president and are looking forward to leading the world into a new age. But overshadowing this wonderful dream are the problems of the human heart: racism, civil wars, political rivalries, and corruption. Among the hundreds of political leaders within the new Common Market, no one seems to be emerging on the political scene to provide solutions for these problems. They need a strong leader to bring peace to this current political and social mess. So you talk about the prophetic dominoes getting lined up...!

Now let's move from the question, what is the sign of the end of the age, to the question, when will these things be, or more specifically...

What is the sign of the destruction of the temple?

"Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are in the midst of the city depart, and let not those who are in the country enter the city; because these are days of vengeance, in order that all things which are written may be fulfilled. Woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land, and wrath to this people, and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will

be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." (Luke 21:21-24)

In verse 20, we saw the impending destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus spoke to his disciples as the rejected Prince of Peace and prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. by the Romans, foreshadowing the final destruction of the city at the end of the great tribulation. (See Daniel 11.) In the siege in 70 A.D. some 1,100,000 men, women, and children died of starvation or by the sword of Rome. Some 97,000 others were taken into slavery. All this happened because when the Jews heard that the Roman army was coming to bring judgment on their rebellion, they came into the city from the hills and villages of Judea, hoping that the city walls would save them from destruction. But the followers of Jesus who heeded his warning were able to flee the city in time to save their lives. Now in verses 21-24, as our Lord looked beyond 70 A.D. to the final destruction of the city, he warned his followers in the distant future that the final period of tribulation would be the worst that the world had ever experienced at the hand of godless man. Those will be days of war and bloodshed according to Daniel 11 when the king of the south (Egypt) attacks the King of the North (Syria) with Israel in the middle. The King of the north then counter attacks and defeats the Egyptians as well as the countries of North Africa. While he is in Africa he hears a rumor from the north that his supply line is being cut by a greater army from the East. He rushes home and meets them on the battle field of Armageddon in the land of Israel. It is during this horrible season of the last three and a half years of the great tribulation that our Lord gave the future Christians, Jews, and Gentiles alike who had come to faith in Jesus as their Messiah by the preaching of the 144,000 Jewish evangelists, the warning "Let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains... because these are the vengeance, in order that all things which are written may be fulfilled... and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." Those days will be so difficult that the Lord said, "And unless those days had been cut short no life would have been saved; for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short." No life will be spared including those of the million of Jews and Gentiles who accept Jesus as their Messiah in the tribulation, unless God steps in and arrests the fullest expression of all hell from breaking loose. But He will stop the Antichrist in his tracks. And the Lord promised in Luke 21:24 that "the time of the Gentiles" which began with the overthrow of Jerusalem by the powerful Gentile nation Babylon in 586 B.C., will finally be fulfilled, and Jerusalem will never again be overthrown or ruled by the Gentile nations.

The Lord told his disciples that the sign of the end of the age would be the abomination of desolation set up in the third temple by the Antichrist, and that the sign of the final destruction of Jerusalem would occur in the tribulation when they would see their holy city surrounded for the last time by Gentile armies. Now Jesus answered the question...

What is the sign of your coming?

"And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth dismay among nations, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:25-28)

The disciples had seen clearly that the religious leadership had rejected Jesus as their Messiah on Palm Sunday. But they kept hoping that somehow he would still be able to be declared Israel's Messiah and to set up his political kingdom on earth in the near future. So when they asked Jesus, "What is the sign of your coming?" they were not thinking of his second coming in the heavens after his death, burial, resurrection, and Ascension. The disciples' question was literally, "What is the sign of your presence [*parousia* in Greek]?" And what they meant was, "What will be the sign of your presence in Israel as its king?" We can see that they were still confused even after his death, burial, and resurrection when, just before his Ascension in Acts 1:6, they asked, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Now, in Matthew 28 our Lord said he is always going to be (invisibly) present with us. And we know now that according to such scriptures as Matthew 24:38-44 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11, our Lord will also be very visibly present to all his children (but not to anyone else) when he takes his bride to be with him before the Antichrist enters the temple during the tribulation. Then, as he describes in this

passage in answer to the disciples' question, he will be visibly present in judgment against the nations at the end of the tribulation.

Immediately after the tribulation, according to verses 25-26, there will be (1) signs in sun and moon and stars, (2) upon the earth dismay among nations, (3) in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, and (4) men fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world (the unveiling of his presence). Jesus told them in Matthew 24:29-30, referring to the prophets Isaiah (13:10; 34:4), Ezekiel (32:7), and Joel (2:10, 31; 3:15) that "...immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken...and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky [see Daniel 7:13] with power and great glory."

His glory will be like the *shekinah* glory over the tabernacle in the wilderness and over the temple of Solomon that indicated that God was dwelling with Israel (and also in his appearance on the Damascus road in a bright light before Saul). The whole world will be in physical, spiritual, and emotional darkness, and suddenly there will be a great light! Everyone will look up, and they will be expecting the sun, the moon, the stars, a fireball, a meteorite, or some other natural source of light-but it will be the person of Jesus Christ. Like a perfect diamond in the center of dark velvet cloth they won't miss him! And Israel will mourn when they see the one they have pierced (Zechariah 12:10-11).

He will be coming with all his saints to set up his rule on earth in righteousness and justice forever. And he will send forth his angels with a great trumpet, and they will gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other (see Isaiah 27:13). The millions of Jewish and Gentile men, women, and children from around the world who accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior during the terrible days of the tribulation will join the saints from all the ages (see Isaiah 11:11, 12). So there is good news in the midst of amazing environmental upheaval, and Jesus encouraged them: "Straighten up, lift up your heads, because Israel's redemption is drawing near!"

Now in verses 29-33 he told a parable of the fig tree:

And He told them a parable: "Behold the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near. Even so you, too, when you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away."

Jesus was saying, "If you see leaves on a fig tree you know that summer is near, and in the same way when you see all these things I told you about, I want you to know three things: (1) Recognize that the kingdom of God is near." ("He is near, right at the door." [Matthew 24:33.]) "(2) This generation, or this race of people, the Jews, will not pass away until all these things take place." God made certain promises to his people, and every one of them is going to be fulfilled. And Christ will gather them from the ends of the earth to accomplish his promises. "(3) Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. I told you that I am coming again; trust me, I am coming again, and I am going to set up my kingdom. I am going to be the King of the Jews as well as of the nations of the world, and I am going to rule in righteousness and justice-my words will not pass away."

This Olivet teaching all began when Jesus told his disciples that the temple they admired so much was going to be destroyed. This led the apostles Peter, James, John, and Andrew to ask three important questions: What is the sign of the end of the age? Our Lord said that the sign of the end of the age will be when the Antichrist sets up a lifelike image of himself in the third temple and proclaims himself God. Then, what is the sign of the destruction of the temple? The Lord answered that "when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, get out of town quickly...." And what is the sign of your coming? Our Lord said he was not coming at that time to set up his earthly kingdom; but after his death, resurrection, and Ascension he would first come again invisibly for his bride before the difficult days of the tribulation. Then he would come visibly for the elect and bring judgment on the nations at the end of the tribulation when the environment would be turned upside-down. In the midst of the darkness the *shekinah* glory would appear in the heavens, and all the world would see their King of kings and Lord of lords: "...every

knee [shall] bow and...every tongue [shall] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."
(Philippians 2:10-11.)

In summary our great Shepherd gave them a word of warning and encouragement in verses 34-36:

"Be on guard, that your hearts may not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day come on you suddenly like a trap; for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. But keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

The Shepherd of Israel and of the Gentiles addressed the hearts of his flock who would be living in the tribulation, but these are words of warning and encouragement for all of us as we await either his invisible coming or his visible second coming: (1) Be on guard that your hearts may not be weighted down with dissipation (wasteful living), drunkenness, and the worries of life (as in the days of Noah) and that day come on you suddenly like a trap; for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of the earth. (2) But keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place and to stand before the Son of Man. He wants us to be people of knowledge and understanding about the things of the last days. He wants us to know his word and what the Spirit is doing. And he wants us to bring hope, confidence, and the love of Christ to others.

Let's read Revelation 7:9-12 to close:

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen."

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