

## NORMAL TURMOIL

### *SERIES: THE LORD OF HISTORY*

by Steve Zeisler

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I just had the privilege of joining the fifth and sixth graders in their Sunday School class. They had submitted some questions for me ahead of time, which was good, because I had enough trouble answering them as it was. Here are some of them:

"What do we look like in heaven, young or old?"

"What happens if a baby dies the very day it is born? Does it go to heaven or hell?"

"To go to heaven, must you be completely sin-free?"

Of all the people in the world, Christians have the most to say about the future. Children may ask what will happen in heaven, what we will look like there, what is coming up in history, and so on. But most of the rest of us, if we're honest, want to know what's coming in the future as well. The Bible has a great deal to say about that. We know the Lord who has planned it from beginning to end, who is glorifying himself in the events of human history. Jesus had a fair amount to say throughout the course of his ministry about things to come. He did so especially during a session he spent on the Mount of Olives, answering questions from his disciples as they looked over the city, just a short time before he was to be executed.

That Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24-25 (see also Mark 13 and Luke 21) is the subject that we're studying in this series of four messages. The reason we're studying this passage is in large part because this year is filled with questions and foreboding about the future-millennium fever. The stirring of such questions in our culture suggests that we would do well to study Jesus' words in order to receive comfort ourselves and to have answers for those around us. The previous message was an overview; now we'll begin looking at the text in more detail.

There are roughly three sections to this discourse. The first one, which we're going to consider in this message, is summarized in Jesus' warning in 24:4: "Watch out that no one deceives you." In the second, farther on in chapter 24, Jesus predicts events to come. We'll talk about that in the next message. The third and by far the longest section of the Olivet Discourse is a series of teachings Jesus gives about what to do in the interim: What responsibilities do we have? How should we think about life between now and then? What should we give ourselves to? We'll consider that in the fourth message.

Let's read Jesus' warning in Matthew 24:1-14:

**Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."**

**As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"**

**Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."**

The disciples call Jesus' attention to the great edifice of the temple with its massive stones, and Jesus begins to predict the end of the temple. In the passage we'll pick up in the next message, Jesus will talk about the near-term destruction of the temple that stood during his lifetime (Herod's temple), and how that looks forward to a final tribulation, a destructive period at the very end of the end. But before these predictions, he issues this warning: "Don't be deceived."

As important and encouraging as it is for us to understand what the Scriptures teach about the future, as much as we are called upon to long for the coming of the Lord, as often as the wonderful Aramaic prayer "Maranatha [Come, O Lord]" has been on the lips of Christians historically, an orientation toward the future has a difficulty associated with it: We can lose our commitment to the responsibility of staying at the tasks of today.

### **Birth pangs**

Consider the metaphor Jesus uses about the nature of history: "All these things are the beginning of birth pangs." History can well be understood as analogous to childbirth. I was twenty-four years old when our daughter Sarah was born. That was the first up-close and personal experience I had with childbirth. I didn't know very much at all about what to anticipate in pregnancy. I knew it took nine months, and I had some understanding of fetal development. Leslie and I went to classes on preparation for childbirth, where we learned breathing techniques, among other things. I was to be the coach. At various stages along the progression of labor different breathing techniques are called for. It's not so hard at the beginning. The initial contractions are difficult, but they're not unmanageable. Then they grow more and more intense and closer together, more all-encompassing and powerful.

Jesus said history is very much like that. There is going to be a tribulation at the end of history, a worldwide, completely engulfing period of struggle and difficulty, a sense that all is out of control and that there is no good reason for hope left. It will be as dark as it has ever been. It is difficult to find language to describe the tribulation of the end. Those days immediately precede the glorious return of the Lord. Life will come after sorrow, just as in pregnancy the great struggle at the end of the labor precedes the coming of the baby who is so much longed for and who changes everything.

But painful and difficult contractions occur before the final, powerful, overwhelming contraction that leads to childbirth. And before the end of history there will be spasms of difficulty that occur in various places and times. Jesus is saying, "Don't over-interpret them. Don't focus so much on them that you lose your way. Don't be deceived by the difficulties that precede the final difficulty."

There are five categories of circumstances that Jesus wants us to understand, and in each case he's saying that this will happen, but it's not the end. We must not allow ourselves to be deceived or thrown off track, to give up our faith or our focus, to quit our responsibilities.

### **Deceptive voices**

The first category is deceptive voices. Verse 5: "For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ [Messiah]....'" In verse 11 he adds, "...Many false prophets will appear and deceive many people." Now, false messiahs and false prophets are not the same thing, but they are each offering an alternative to Jesus. Their voice, should you listen to it, will replace the voice of the Holy Spirit and the voice of Christ in the Scriptures for us. False messiahs pose as a direct alternative, someone who would be savior in place of Jesus, someone who says, "Rely on me to tell you of God, to make a way into God's presence for you. I am the answer, the one who has come for you." David Koresh was a messianic figure for those who followed him to their deaths. Sun Myung Moon has spoken of himself somewhat obliquely but increasingly clearly over time as a messiah in place of Jesus. The leader of the Heaven's Gate cult was a messianic figure.

False prophets are those who urge us to veer from the clear path of historic, Biblical Christianity. We can go back a hundred years or so and find Joseph Smith and Mary Baker Eddy and those who have founded religious diversions of that sort as false prophets. Many in today's world are harder to identify. They don't often set up completely new organizations or write new authoritative scriptures. Many voices today offer us the promise of financial security. They point to a way of obtaining spiritual authority or personal power, obtaining more of the Spirit by dint of some effort, as if he were a commodity that could be passed from one person to another. They claim to know the place of power, to have the secret to success.

Jesus says that because life will be confusing and tumultuous, and at times history will spasm and seem out of control, at least where we are, we'll wonder if God has forgotten. What used to work won't work anymore, and we'll be vulnerable

to voices that promise to give us what they cannot. And so Jesus issues the warning: "Don't be deceived."

### **Wars and rumors of wars**

The second category about which Jesus warns us is "wars and rumors of wars...nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." That could be taken from recent headlines. But it has been true as far back as we have recorded history that somewhere in the world, virtually all the time, there is war. War is the lasting virus of the human heart.

Even the phrase "rumors of wars" is a telling one, because in war the first fatality is almost always the truth. Propaganda replaces accuracy; we're told in order to fire nationalistic fervor that the opponents have done certain things, we're the innocent victims, and retribution is required. It's difficult to know who is telling the truth. Each side has a stake in controlling the dissemination of information. So whether wars are taking place as reported or we're getting only rumors, it's hard to know.

Wars, like the spasms of labor pains, can be disconcerting. Just what we know of what has befallen some of the people in the Balkans in the last few months is almost beyond description: the wrenching apart of families, the raping of the young, the killing of the innocent, the destroying of identity, the loss of hope. What happens when that struggle, that spasm, is close to home? People give up their faith. They wonder whether God knows or cares. They turn toward the circumstance and away from God. They lose their witness. I can point to scores of folks I knew in my era who went off to Vietnam as believers and came back hardened, jaded, not believing in God or humanity or anything.

Wars will always happen, Jesus is warning. Ancient and simmering hatreds last for generations. National pride replaces reason. The quest for wealth and power are at the heart of sinful humanity, and over and over again they rear up and do terrible things. But this doesn't mean that God has lost control. It doesn't mean that we ought to listen to some phony answer in place of the gospel. Jesus is saying that this is not indicative of the end of everything.

### **Natural disasters**

The third category that Jesus speaks of is natural disasters: "famines and earthquakes." Luke's rendering of this teaching includes the word "pestilences" (21:9). The earth is broken because the human race is broken. In Romans 8:19, Paul talks about the earth's longing for the children of God to be made visible because it wants to be restored. In the course of almost any year, somewhere on the globe a natural disaster of some kind will strike: a flood, famine, earthquake, epidemic. Hurricane Mitch destroyed most of the infrastructure of some Central American countries and produced a famine; the crops were gone and the means to grow them had been destroyed. AIDS has ravaged entire countries in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of this country. We can think of our own experience with earthquakes in California, and the much more terrible experience of countries that don't have the kind of building codes we do, so that great destruction happens in times of earthquake and other natural disasters. There are people who view such things and give up their faith.

### **Persecution**

Fourth, Jesus speaks of persecution by ungodly states and of Christians who fall away and betray their believing friends. I know two men, one in Pakistan and one in Indonesia, who give leadership to Christians who are facing persecution. Towns are destroyed specifically because they are Christian towns. Threats from the government and from neighbors are up front, part of the culture, deliberate. It has been pointed out that in the twenty centuries of the history of the church, the twentieth century has seen more persecution of believers than the other nineteen combined, whether in countries that are or were communist, in countries that are under the thumb of Islam, or in countries dominated by greedy materialism. There are any number of ways and reasons that real faith is persecuted. But Jesus is saying persecution doesn't mean that the world has spun out of control, that God has lost his love for us or his ability to protect and care for his own. It doesn't mean that the end is about to happen and we should throw off all other responsibilities. Don't draw wrong conclusions from such things.

### **Love grown cold**

Lastly, Jesus makes a chilling statement in verse 12: "Because of the increase of wickedness [lawlessness], the love of most will grow cold." Hardness regarding God's law, his truth, his best intentions for humanity, resisting what is good because God says it is good, doesn't lead to freedom or fun. Folks who take standards seriously, who live circumscribed

lives because they reject unrighteousness, get accused of being loveless, uptight, and prudish. But Jesus says it's just the opposite. It is the ones who make themselves a law, who deliberately violate and challenge God's truths, who harden themselves in their lawlessness, who worship only themselves, who lose all humility-those are the people whose love grows cold. But even that is not a sign that the world has spun out of God's control. It's observable, we can see the destruction that lovelessness does to families. We might wonder, but we shouldn't draw wrong conclusions from it.

What is the alternative then? Jesus is saying these things are not indicative of the end. The world will have these contractions in different places and at different times, although the whole world doesn't experience tribulation the same way at the same time. Most people have seasons of life in which they go through some awful struggle, interspersed with periods of relative relief from struggle. What should we conclude from the observations that these contractions will take place, that the age between Jesus' first and second coming will not be filled with happiness, comfort, and predictability?

### **The testimony of standing firm**

Verses 13-14 are the Lord's word to us in this: "...But he who stands firm to the end will be saved." He doesn't mean the end of the age; he means the end of the test, either the end of your life or the end of the contraction. The choice we have when faced with an earthquake or warfare or betrayal, when the light grows dim, when the world is confusing, when hearts get hard, when there is opposition, is to move toward the gospel or away from it. We can let the circumstances dominate our thinking and remove ourselves from active faith in God, or we can say under the most difficult circumstances, "I need God more than ever."

"...And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come." The difficulty can make us more outspoken in our faith. We can go toward the places in the world where there is war and famine and difficulty and hurt. We can go with relief to the suffering. We can go with a message of hope to those in need. Preaching the gospel, telling the good news, is saying that this is not all that's true, that Jesus suffered so that we don't have to suffer death and loss, that the struggles we have in this life are meaningful. Then other people will see us standing tall, confident in the Scriptures, in love with those who are Christian around us, trusting God more in hurtful times and speaking of him more clearly.

Remember the famous dictum: "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." It is our very enduring and standing firm that makes the point that there's something invisible at work, that what our Lord promised is true: He will never leave or forsake us; Immanuel, born in Bethlehem, is "God With Us," our companion. He comforts us. He is merciful and good. His love never fails. His strengthening hand is never taken from us. He is faithful and can be trusted. Enduring and growing strong in painful circumstances is the greatest of all testimonies to the gospel.

That's why Paul says in Romans 5:3-5, "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." The suffering, difficulty, confusion, questions, uncertainties, and loss all become occasions for God to make us stronger, more beautiful, more like him. It's similar to the way gold is refined in fire (see Malachi 3:2-3); the fire brings the impurities to the top so the gold can become more pure and beautiful. The world is tumultuous, unpredictable, and frightening at times, yet those are exactly the conditions in which real Christianity can display itself, in which faith can grow, in which character can become manifest.

The alternative Jesus offers is doing good in the Lord when other people can see only what is hard and wrong and terrible. Let's go to the places where we're needed. Let's offer help to people who are beaten down. Where there's an earthquake, war, or persecution, that's where we ought to be, because we have something to offer.

At the end of the discourse Jesus speaks of how he will surprise his followers when the judgment at the end is offered. He has separated his own from those who don't know him in Matthew 25:34-36:

**"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we [do these things]?'"**

The King will reply, "When you went to Tijuana in the spring of 1999 and gave piggyback rides to kids with dirty diapers

and built houses for poor people. When you went from where it was safe to where it was not safe. When you got involved with people who were failing under the pressure of this world. When you were there for them and clothed them and visited them and fed them and gave them what they needed. When you spoke to them of the good news and didn't let the good news get lost in all of the cacophony of other voices. When you did it for them, you did it for me."

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