

A Study
of
Biblical
Eschatology

by

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Preface

Is there a significant difference between *our* view of the Bible, today, and that of the great Reformers of the 16th century? I believe there is. I do not think this is intentional. But I do think it is a fact. Our fathers said *“All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them”*¹ I also believe that two of those doctrines “which are necessary to be known, believed and observed” are the doctrines of *creation* and *consummation*. It is necessary to know how we had our beginning. And it is also necessary to know what is planned by God for us in the future. And it is my contention that both of these (because they “*are necessary to be known*”) have been clearly revealed in Scripture. And by this I mean revealed in such a clear way that even the non-scholars can understand what God says about them.

It is this conviction that has led the author to write this study. It is not a big study. But it does not need to be big. There are already hundreds of ‘big books’ about the future and just look at the confusion. There is nothing plain and simple about most of them and they leave the non-scholarly with one basic impression. It is this: *‘ordinary people like me are simply not competent to reach any firm conclusions about eschatology. It is too difficult. It is another of those things (like the doctrine of creation) where we will have to defer to the experts.’* In other words much of the church today is not unlike the way it was at the time of the Reformation when the people who were not expected to read and understand the Bible for themselves, but were supposed to defer to the experts. So it is the conviction of the writer of this study that what we need, today, is the very same thing that was needed in the 16th century. We need to encourage people to seriously study the text of the Bible themselves. And then to have the courage to be willing to test the experts.²

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith 1:7

² See 1 John 4:1 and Acts 17:11

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The apostle John wrote that this is exactly what we are supposed to do. “*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.*”³ This is possible because God can hide from the wise and prudent what he reveals to babes.⁴ John says believers “*have been anointed by the Holy One*” with the result that they “*know all things*”⁵ (Greek: οἶδατε πάντα). The Greek language has different words for ‘knowing’ and ‘knowledge.’ This term means close to what we mean when we speak of ability to *discern* things. As a pastor for some 60 years I can testify that this is true. Some of God’s seasoned saints have a keen sense of discernment. They can ‘see’ through many things that dazzle and confuse other people. So they *can* and do test the experts even though they do not know Hebrew and Greek, and haven’t been to Yale or Harvard.

I wrote this book, then, for one reason. It is because I do not believe that God gave us a difficult maze or labyrinth—a complicated irregular network of scripture passages in which it is difficult to find one’s way and is almost impossible to decipher. No, but in a certain real sense the word of God is quite simple! “*Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’*” or “*Who will descend into the abyss?’*”⁶ You do not have to be an expert in astronomy, or a deep-sea explorer to have a right view of the future. You simply need to study the text — paying close attention to every word — because “*the word is near you*” (Rom. 10:8) because God has spoken his truth to us in our human language. And it is my hope that this small book will help you to ‘see’ for yourself that this is true.

³ 1 John 4:1

⁴ Matthew 11:25

⁵ 1 John 2:20

⁶ Romans 10:6-7

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is a modest one. It is to set forth some of the certainties of Biblical eschatology. It is our conviction that no one has all the answers to questions about the future. It is also our conviction that the history of the Christian Church teaches us to be modest in our claims, and tentative in many details of doctrine of the future. Yet, having said this, it is also our conviction that the main things we need to know about the future are clearly revealed in the Holy Scriptures. The material that we present in this study is intended to demonstrate this fact.

We begin, then, by clearly stating the following time-tested principles of sound Bible interpretation that we will follow in this study.

[1] We begin with the things that are more clear, and then work at the problem of understanding the things that are less clear. For example: we do not begin with the book of Revelation, and then — after we interpret it — go back and impose our interpretation on the Gospels and the Epistles. No, we begin with what the Gospels say about future things, and then go on to more difficult passages in the book of Revelation.

[2] The only infallible interpreter of the Bible is the Bible itself, and the Bible is sufficient. There are those, for instance, who say that there are things in the Bible — concerning the future — that cannot be understood today because we do not have the resources that we need to be able to understand them. We believe this is incorrect. It —in effect — denies the sufficiency of the Bible. But the truth is that our problems are not due to some imagined deficiency in the Bible. No, the source of the problem is rather in us — we do not study the Bible with sufficient diligence and care.

[3] The Westminster Confession of Faith is correct when it says “the true and full sense of any Scripture. . .is not manifold but one. . .” It is often assumed, for example, that there is such a thing as a double (or even a triple) fulfillment of specific prophecies in the Bible. But in this study we will present the evidence that will show why we cannot agree with this assumption. It is our conviction that Bible prophecies are quite specific, and that they refer to singular events. This does not mean that there can be no *application* of the truth contained in a specific prophecy to other times, places and events. There are many things spoken of in the Bible that can only happen once — for example, the world-

wide flood. To expect another world-wide flood is wrong, yet this event does provide many lessons — and teaching principles — which can rightly be *applied* to people throughout subsequent history. The apostle Peter does this very thing when he compares the folly of sinners at the time of the world-wide flood with the folly of those who refuse to believe in the coming day of destruction and judgment.⁷ But what this shows us is that the *application* of abiding principles of truth taught through this event is by way of *analogy*, and not by double fulfillment.

[4] The Reformers were right when they taught the *perspicuity* of Scripture. By this term they meant that the Bible was written clearly enough to be understood by God's 'little' people. This is what perspicuity means: *we* can understand what the text of the Bible means by reading it ourselves, if we make good use of things that God himself has provided to enable us to do so. These are things such as the historic creeds of the church, a good dictionary, an exhaustive concordance, and the use of the kind of commentaries that men such as John Calvin wrote comparing scripture with scripture in order to clearly understand the text of the Bible.

[5] It is therefore our conviction that the logical place to begin, in developing a correct view of the future, is the Book of Genesis.

In the book of Acts we read of one Jewish Synagogue existing in the Apostolic age that accepted the teaching of the apostle Paul. The people of the Berean Synagogue accepted his teaching because they found — by a careful study of the text of the Old Testament — that *his* teaching was in full accord with those inspired Scriptures.⁸ So we begin this study with a summary of the eschatological teaching of the Old Testament. After this we will deal with material found in Matthew 23-25 (and parallel passages in Mark and Luke), and then we will go on to other New Testament material that deals further with the same subject.

Questions:

1. How many principles of Bible interpretation, quoted in the introduction, can you restate from memory?

⁷ 2 Peter 3:5-7

⁸ Acts 17:11

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2. Why is it unwise to try to begin to develop a doctrine of last things by starting in the book of Revelation?
3. How would you prove that God's written word was intended to be read and understood by other than scholars?
4. Name some prophetic predictions that cannot possibly have a double fulfillment.
5. Does the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture mean that it is easy to understand the Bible? (Can a thing be clear and yet difficult at the same time?)
6. Give at least one good reason for starting the study of Eschatology in the book of Genesis.

Chapter 1

THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

What is meant by the word eschatology? One dictionary defines eschatology this way: *“It is: (1) a doctrine of the last or final things, especially death, judgment, heaven, and hell; (2) the branch of theology dealing with these doctrines.”* **But in this study we will take the word to mean whatever God has revealed concerning things still in the future at the time when God revealed them.**

Reliable information about the future is one of the distinguishing marks of the true Christian religion, which is taught in the holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. No other religion has anything like the amount of information about the future that we find in the Bible. Likewise, no other religion has anything that even begins to compare with the evidence the Christian religion provides in terms of the historical verification of its predictions.

It is also a fact — contrary to popular misunderstanding — that biblical eschatology is essentially clear and simple. The Bible does not give us a detailed, chronological account of the future, as if it is a kind of history book written before things happen. Neither does it tell us everything that we might like to know. But it does provide information about the main things that are going to happen — all of those things that we need to know — and that is what matters.

From Creation to the Fall

Eschatology has been a reality, in God’s inspired word, right from the beginning. God began to reveal his plan for the future right after the human race fell by Adam’s first sin.⁹ God told Satan there would be conflict

⁹ Genesis 3:15

between his seed and the seed of the woman, and that he (Satan) would be crushed by her seed [the word *seed*, here, is masculine singular and was fulfilled by Jesus as the promised descendant of Eve]. The rest of the Bible is essentially (1) the story of the manner in which God *prepared for* the sending of this promised ‘seed of the woman’ person, through the historical events recorded in the Old Testament, and (2) then of how God *fulfilled* that ancient promise in the person and work of his ‘only begotten son,’ our Lord Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament.

From the Fall to the Flood

In preparation for his promised victory over Satan God determined, first of all, to allow the fallen human race to display its true character. This is exactly what we see in the early chapters of the book of Genesis. As the descendants of Adam multiplied there was an increasing prevalence of moral and spiritual deterioration. As one generation succeeded another and yet another, the world was more and more filled with violence,¹⁰ and wickedness.¹¹ Yet in spite of — and in the midst of — this process of degeneration, God gave a wonderful indication of his ultimate intention to bless mankind by his translation of Enoch.¹² The fact that Enoch, who was known as one who walked with God, was taken to heaven by God, must have made a profound impression on the ancients.

Finally, when the wickedness of the human race had manifested itself fully, God sent the world-wide flood. And while the flood was an awesome revelation of God’s wrath against human sin, the preservation of Noah and his family proved that God’s promise remained steadfast.¹³

From the Flood to the Tower of Babel

After the world-wide flood God revealed to Noah a general outline of the future history of mankind, in which he also revealed his intention to show redemptive favor to two of the three major branches of Noah’s posterity.¹⁴ And “*although*” — by God’s own announced verdict after the flood that, as before — “*the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his*

¹⁰ Genesis 6:11

¹¹ Genesis 6:5, 12

¹² Genesis 5:21-24

¹³ Genesis 9:9-11

¹⁴ Genesis 9:26,27

youth,"¹⁵ he promised that he would never again destroy every living thing as he had by the flood.

God also acted at that time to impose new restraints on the inherent wickedness of the human race. (1) He gave mankind permission to put murderers to death;¹⁶ and (2) divided the human race into factions by confusing their speech.¹⁷ It is commonly thought that division is a great evil, and sometimes this is indeed the case. And it is certainly a result of evil. But it can also — as in this instance — be a great blessing because it tends to divide Satan's forces, by bringing it about that one group of his servants works against another. Just imagine how difficult it would be for us Christians today if all of the ungodly forces of the world were united? (It is for our benefit, for example, that there are sharp divisions among the Islamic people!) God instituted division in the first instance by causing a confusion in language. This resulted in the scattering of the human race over the entire world (Gen. 11:8).¹⁸

The Patriarchal Era

After the human race finally did begin to multiply and disperse over the earth, God called Abram¹⁹ out of the traditional idolatry of his family line²⁰ in order to establish his covenant of grace in the world saying "*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*"²¹ This promise was repeated and enlarged upon throughout the patriarchal period (the era of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob).²² Especially, as recorded in Genesis 22:17,18, God made it clear that while his promise was concentrated in Abraham's 'seed' [the word 'seed' is singular, meaning one person (cf. Galatians 3:16)] it would nevertheless also embody a multitude of people comparable in number to the grains of sand on the seashore, or of the stars of heaven.²³ Later promises — centering in and revolving around the nation claiming Abrahamic paternity — were never such as to eclipse the grandeur of that original promise.

¹⁵ Genesis 8:21

¹⁶ Genesis 9:6

¹⁷ Genesis 11

¹⁸ Genesis 11:8

¹⁹ God later changed his name to Abraham.

²⁰ Joshua 24:2

²¹ Genesis 12:1-3

²² See Gen. 18:18, 22:18, 26:4 etc.

²³ Genesis 22:17

Abraham himself prophesied that his descendants would suffer affliction and servitude for about 400 years, and yet emerge from that ordeal as a nation.²⁴ And the patriarch Jacob — as he was dying — prophesied the special Kingly role which was to emerge from the tribe of Judah,²⁵ an event that was then still hundreds of years in the future.

The National Israel Era

Then, over three hundreds of years later, God raised up Moses to deliver his people from bondage in Egypt, and to establish them as a nation. Without question, therefore, the nation of Israel was favored by God — for many centuries — more than any other nation.²⁶ Yet even during this early history true believers in the nation of Israel always recognized that their special status was not given to them because they deserved it.²⁷ Even Moses, who was given a place of unparalleled authority over God's people, did not exalt himself to any kind of supreme or ultimate status, but spoke of a future prophet whose word would have an authority surpassing his own.²⁸

Throughout the entire history of the nation of Israel, inspired prophets always kept in mind the original promise (that in Abraham's seed all nations of the earth would be blessed) or, in other words, that the promised Messiah's dominion would be world-wide in extent.²⁹ So, in spite of Israel's long-held — and highly privileged — position, it must never be forgotten that there was a constant manifestation of antagonism toward God *within* that nation. The writings of prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah are full of proof of Israel's unfaithfulness. And Jesus himself summed up the truth about Israel's constant tendency to depart from God in his parable of the Wicked Vinedresser.³⁰ In this parable Jesus showed how, again and again, the nation of Israel persecuted the prophets that God had sent to them, and then, in the end, were even ready to kill the son of the owner of their nation. He ended this parable with a warning: *"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits."* And *"when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard*

²⁴ Genesis 15:12-14

²⁵ Genesis 49:8-12

²⁶ See especially Deuteronomy 4:1-14

²⁷ Deuteronomy 7:7-8

²⁸ Deuteronomy 18:15-22

²⁹ Psalm 72:8, 11, 17; Isaiah 49:6 etc.

³⁰ Matthew 21:33-44

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his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them."³¹ What this shows is the inescapable fact that the unfaithfulness of the nation of Israel was reaching its climax in that generation. This was further emphasized by our Lord himself in his lament over Jerusalem. "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,*" he cried, "*the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is left to you desolate.*"³²

As the Old Testament period of history drew to a close, then, we see that there was a seemingly insoluble problem! How could God [1] deal justly with an increasingly apostate people and yet — at the same time — [2] keep the promise he had made to Abraham (that all nations would be blessed in his seed)? The answer to that seemingly insoluble problem was [1] the person and work of Jesus Christ and [2] the emergence of the Christian Church. Jesus commanded his apostles to begin the task of taking the message of salvation to all nations.³³ And that message was to the effect that any and all people who repent of their sins and believe in him as the promised Messiah are, by that very fact, "*Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.*"³⁴ For—as the Apostle Paul put it—"in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made both one...for through him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father."³⁵ "*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*"³⁶ "*For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation...so as to create in himself one new man from the two, thus making peace...Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom*

³¹ Matthew 21:43, 45

³² Matthew 23:37-38.

³³ Matthew 28:18-20

³⁴ Galatians 3:29

³⁵ Ephesians 2:13-14, 18.

³⁶ Galatians 3:27-29

*you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.*³⁷

This astonishing change — *termination* of the special status of the Jewish people while *enhancing* the status of the Gentiles — surely ranks as one of the most momentous events in all history. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that it was difficult for people to adjust to this change. It was even difficult for Peter³⁸ and for the other apostles.³⁹ It is also clear that this momentous change was a constant issue that Paul encountered in the Jewish Synagogues that he visited throughout the Roman Empire. It is no doubt for this reason that he dealt with this issue in his letter to the Romans. In Chapter 11:1 he asks: “*Has God cast away his people?*” His answer is: “*By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.*” To many Jews living at that time Paul’s teaching seemed to them to imply the very thing he was careful to deny. But no, he says, “*God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew*” (v. 2). He then goes on to prove that this ‘problem’ which seemed so strange to them was not really anything new. He cites as proof the fact that when the Northern Kingdom of Israel — as a whole — became idolatrous, yet God reserved 7,000 in the midst of the apostasy who did not bow the knee to Baal.⁴⁰ Then he says “*so too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.*”⁴¹ In other words, God has never allowed *all* of the members of his church to fall into unbelief and ungodliness. No, he has always preserved at least a small remnant.

It’s not possible to go into much detail here, but in his Epistle to the Romans the Apostle brings out certain principles that vindicate his claim that God did not go back on his word. For proof he cites two unarguable principles: (1) The first is the fact that “*they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham...*”⁴² In other words, being born a Jew never was enough, in and of itself alone, to guarantee salvation. There always were some descendants of Abraham who were not true believers. (2) The second principle is therefore the fact that “*no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical, but a Jew is one inwardly, and circumci-*

³⁷ Ephesians 2:14...22.

³⁸ Acts 10:9-16, 28.

³⁹ Acts 1:7-8.

⁴⁰ 1 Kings 19:18

⁴¹ Romans 11:5

⁴² Romans 9:6

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sion is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God."⁴³ Far more important than being born of Jewish parents is the new birth which spoken of by Jesus (John 3). If you have that new birth, from above, then you will be saved even though you are not a physical descendant of Abraham.

Old Testament history clearly proves that these two principles have always been evident in God's dealings with people. The following facts demonstrate this conclusively. (1) When Abraham was given circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant it was also given to several hundred men⁴⁴ in his household none of whom were descendants of Abraham according to the flesh — except for one, Ishmael, who turned out to be an unbeliever.⁴⁵ (2) Throughout Old Testament history there were some Gentiles who were assimilated into the Jewish Nation, in other words they became Jews (think of Rahab, Ruth, and the Rechabites).⁴⁶ (3) The Old Testament history also shows that significant numbers of those who were born Jews (even ten of the twelve tribes, in later Jewish history) were cut out of the covenant nation.⁴⁷ These undeniable facts prove that God's covenant was never based on mere fleshly descent. (From the beginning having Abrahamic blood in one's veins was not required for full membership with the covenant people, nor was it a guarantee of continuance in it).

What all this confirms is that God did not go back on any of his promises when he reduced the special status of the nation of Israel, and transformed the remnant out of that nation into an international entity called the Christian Church. Indeed: this is precisely what was promised from the beginning! As Paul himself put it: *"Just as you [Gentiles] were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they [the Jews] too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"*⁴⁸

⁴³ Romans 2:28-29.

⁴⁴ Genesis 14:14

⁴⁵ Genesis 17:23

⁴⁶ Also consider Exodus 12:43-49

⁴⁷ 2 Chronicles 11:13-17, 2 Kings 17:6

⁴⁸ Romans 11:30-33

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In other words even though Israel's loss of special status was — in and of itself — a momentous event in a *negative* sense (a great calamity) *for them*, it was also a momentous event in a *positive* sense *for us*, because it ushered in the final period of redemptive-history (in which the stone of Daniel 2:35 — or the mustard seed of Matthew 13:31,32 — began its course of incredible enlargement in accord with the original promise to Abraham).

This was clearly revealed to Daniel the prophet some 600 years before the first advent of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. In a series of visions that God gave to Daniel the course of world history, until the time of Christ, was unveiled before him. The chart on page 15 shows clearly that the various visions that Daniel received and interpreted, had to do with the four great world Kingdoms that were destined to precede the coming of the promised Messiah.

There are a number of things here that merit comment.

- (1) **It is clear that God used a variety of visions to cover the same future historical period.** He first gave a representation of four great Empires under the figure of a great statue or image of a man. There were four distinct sections visible in this image, the first being the most glorious (represented by the head). The three sections below the head were each less glorious than the one preceding it. Then, later on — in subsequent visions — various characteristics of these same four successive Empires were revealed under the symbolism of various animals.
- (2) **We learn from this series of diverse visions in the book of Daniel that when God gives a number of different visions we are not to just assume that each vision is meant to indicate something later in time than what was disclosed in a previous vision.** The visions contained in the book of Daniel, to a large extent, are meant to give us more and more information about different aspects of the same historical events of the future.
- (3) **The third thing which is self-evident is this: the sequence of events revealed in these visions was to culminate in an event of momentous importance.** As we see in the first vision, a stone was destined to come down out of heaven and it would bring to nothing and replace the first four kingdoms of men. It would be something far greater than any — and all — of these man-made kingdoms. It

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was to be the kingdom of God, and it was destined to grow until it would fill the whole earth.

(4) What should impress us most of all is both the essential simplicity — and continuity — of biblical eschatology. The true God does not change. Later prophesies are therefore in harmony with earlier ones. The future can only be what God has decreed, and therefore in full accord with his promise to Abraham. In Abraham’s seed — the Lord Jesus Christ — all nations of the earth will be blessed.

(5) It follows, therefore, that biblical eschatology is not — and was never meant to be — so difficult that ordinary believers cannot ‘get it.’ No, but like all the doctrines of our faith, there is perfect harmony between old and new revelations. The *new* only makes the old clearer than it was in the beginning.

A PARALLEL COMPARISON OF THE PROPHEESIES OF DANIEL

<u>Chapter 2</u>	<u>Chapter 7</u>	<u>Chapter 8</u>	<u>Chapter 9</u>	<u>Chapter 11–12</u>
(The vision of a great image)	(The vision of the four beasts)	(The vision of the two beasts)	(The prophesy of the 70 weeks [or sevens])	(The final vision)
The head of Gold (Babylon)	Lion with eagles’ wings			
Chest of silver (Medo-Persian)	Bear rising higher on one side	Ram with 2 horns last one higher	70 weeks (or sevens) beginning with ‘the going forth with a word	3 Kings remaining in Persia
Belly of brass (Greece)	Leopard with 4 wings & 4 heads	He goat with 1 horn becoming 4	(divided as 7 sevens then 62 sevens, then a final 7	Great King of Greece 4 divisions
Legs of iron & toes of iron & clay (Rome)	Dreadful beast with 10 horns		in last 7 six accomplishments 1) Restrain iniquity 2) Complete sin 3) Cover iniquity 4) bring in eternal righteousness 5) End vision/prophesy 6) Anoint holy of holies	fighting of K. of S. vs K. of N. — until Antiochus Epiphanes (the vile one)
Stone become a mountain fill the earth	Ancient of days & Son of man coming on the clouds			Abomination of Desolation and end of all sacrifices

Another common mistake that people make with respect to Biblical prophecies is their failure to recognize that the same truth can be expressed in various ways. The last 8 chapters of Ezekiel, for example, present visions of an enormous future temple. But it is quite clear that the things pictured under the likeness of a building are not meant to be a literal building. When Ezekiel tells us that God showed him “*a structure like a city*” (40:2) it should be immediately clear to every reader that he

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did not see a literal city. As the great Scottish commentator Patrick Fairbairn has demonstrated, what Ezekiel saw was a *representation* — under Old Testament forms — of the Israel of the future and as, itself, a much more glorious Temple. The New Testament clearly shows that God’s final Temple is not a building made by human hands, and not something made of stone and mortar, but is the Christian Church.⁴⁹ The final Israel of God is the totality of his believing people.⁵⁰ It is an assembly that no man can number made up of both believing *Jews* and believing *Gentiles*.⁵¹ In other words, under an entirely different symbol or figure, Ezekiel was predicting the very same thing that Daniel predicted — a vastly expanded Israel of God, made up of people from all the nations of the world just as God had long before that time promised the patriarch Abraham.

Questions:

1. What did God promise — or predict — right from the beginning?
2. State the two principles, clearly revealed in earlier Bible history, that many Jews failed to understand.
3. State the biblical Acts that prove these principles to be true.
4. In what way are Daniel’s vision of the stone and Ezekiel’s vision of the city and temple alike?
5. Why is it very important to distinguish between the “what” and the “how” of things God has predicted.
6. Which of these was clearly revealed to Old Testament people?

The Final Crisis for National Israel

From the very beginning of God’s prophetic revelation he made it clear that great things were going to happen for the benefit of the whole human race. It may well be that many — perhaps even most — of the people of Israel tended to forget this. It may also be that they concocted their own ideas of just how this great future would come about. It seems clear from the New Testament that the very apostles themselves still

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

⁵⁰ Galatians 6:16

⁵¹ Ephesians 2:19-23 and Revelation 7:1-9

clung, to a great extent, to wrong ideas about the future. Even after Jesus had risen from the dead, and had commanded them to go into all the world to make disciples of the nations, they were still asking: *“Lord, will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?”* (Acts 1:6).⁵² This sounds very much as if they continued to think that fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham had to be a kind of triumphant political supremacy for the Jewish nation (like a revival of ‘the good old days’ of Kings David and Solomon). Yet we know from the parables of our Lord that this sort of thing was a mistaken expectation. Did our Lord not say, himself, *“My Kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world”*?⁵³

It was at a unique moment in the history of God’s dealings with the nation of Israel, when our Lord spoke clearly to the Jews to challenge — and leave them no excuse for holding on to — misconceptions and false expectations. This becomes clear as Jesus, having described the deeply ingrained wickedness of the Jews of that generation,⁵⁴ said *“See, your house is left to you desolate.”*⁵⁵ This could only mean that the Jerusalem temple (which they so highly prized) was about to be — if it had not already been — rejected by God. It would henceforth be *their* house, not *his* house. This was made even clearer when Jesus went on to say that upon them [the Jewish people of that generation] would come God’s judgment because of *“the blood shed on earth from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Barachia, whom”* he said to them, *“you murdered between the temple and the altar.”*⁵⁶ In other words, their guilt was cumulative. Every time the Jews repeated the sin of apostasy, which God had clearly revealed to be the most heinous sin in the past history of the Jews, they became even guiltier than those who had committed that same sin before them.

Our conclusion, then, is this: there is no other event in the history of the world that rises to the level of importance of that momentous time when the Jewish nation, as a whole, was disenfranchised by the Lord Jesus. As Paul explains this in Romans 11 this did not mean that *all* of

⁵² Acts 1:6

⁵³ John 18:36

⁵⁴ Matthew 23:2-31.

⁵⁵ Matthew 23:38

⁵⁶ Matthew 23:35

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the Jews — every last one of them — were now to be disenfranchised.⁵⁷ No, far from it: the Christian Church itself was mostly Jewish to begin with. It is also true that there has always been a remnant of Jewish people who have believed in Jesus as the true Messiah since that time. But it is also true that from the first century to the present time the vast majority of the Jews have remained under “*a spirit of stupor*”⁵⁸ so that the truth of the Bible is hidden from their eyes. Indeed, as Paul said in his second Corinthian letter “*their minds were hardened, for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains un-lifted, because only through Christ is it taken away.*”⁵⁹

This lamentable era — in which most Jewish people refuse to believe in Jesus as the Messiah promised by God — will yet come to an end. But it will only happen when the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of those who call themselves Jews to enable them to believe in Jesus. Only then will they regain the right to be called God’s people. To confess that Jesus (his name as a human) is *LORD* (in other words God) and *Christ* (the one anointed to be our savior) is just as necessary for the Jew as it is for the Gentile.⁶⁰ What happens they will recognize — as did the converted Jew, Paul — that all who believe in Jesus Christ (and they only) are “*Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise.*”⁶¹ For, as Paul says in Galatians 6:16, it is only those who “*walk according to this rule*” who can rightly be called the “*Israel of God.*”

To put it another way, it was never God’s intention that the Old Testament nation of Israel would be the final form of God’s church or kingdom. It was always God’s intention to terminate ‘the middle wall of partition,’ and to extend the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant to all nations. This is not something that was added later on. No, it was clearly implied in God’s promise to Abraham from the beginning. In other words it was always God’s intention to terminate the historical period in which the Jews, in a certain sense, had exclusive possession of the means of grace. The Christian Church, in contrast, is clearly set forth as the final form of the covenant people until Christ’s second coming. It will not be terminated as the Jewish Temple was in 70 A.D. No, the Christian Church *is* the final

⁵⁷ “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1).

⁵⁸ Romans 11:8

⁵⁹ 2 Corinthians 3:14

⁶⁰ “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:12

⁶¹ Galatians 3:29

temple (1 Co. 3:9-17).⁶² And because — as our Lord Jesus said — “*the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*” (Mt. 16:18) the Christian Church will continue until the consummation.

It should be obvious that this does not mean that everything that is *called* a christian church really is a christian church as God sees it, and as possessing a guaranteed immunity to apostasy and consequent desolation. Certainly not. If the Jewish church was not immune to fatal degeneration, then surely that is also true (if not even more true) of any and all predominately Gentile assemblies. But our Lord’s prediction and promise does guarantee that there will always be some churches that really are true churches on earth until his second coming [παρουσία].⁶³ Wherever believers gather in the name of Christ (or in other words, are in real submission to *him* by way of submission to his word preserved in the inspired scriptures), he will be there in the midst of them, and he will preserve them.

This means that there will never be another calamity in the history of God’s people comparable in spiritual magnitude to that which came upon his church during that final generation, while it was still confined to the Jewish nation. This was clearly stated by Jesus, himself, in his great Eschatological Discourse. “*For then*” said Jesus — speaking of what was about to happen in that generation — “*there will be great tribulation such as has not been from the beginning of the world until this time, **no, nor ever shall be.***”⁶⁴ The long historical period in which the Jews and the Gentiles were (by God’s own design) separated by what Paul called “*the middle wall of division*”⁶⁵ was ordained by God’s sovereign will. But so was the termination of that division that came in what this same apostle called “*the fulness of time.*”⁶⁶ It came to an end just as God had planned from the beginning. It came to an end as a result of the sinless life, the substitutionary death and resurrection — *yes, bodily resurrection* — of our Lord Jesus Christ. For as Paul said “*He himself is our peace, who has made both one...that he might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.*”⁶⁷ In other words,

⁶² 1 Corinthians 3:9-17

⁶³ As the Westminster Confession of Faith 25:5 says: “The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will.”

⁶⁴ Matthew 24:21

⁶⁵ Ephesians 2:14

⁶⁶ Galatians 4:4

⁶⁷ Ephesians 2:14, 17.

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in the church which the risen Christ is now building⁶⁸ the old separation between Jew and Gentile is ended. Any person who believes in him now is one of Abraham's children.⁶⁹

It is therefore clear that the events which took place in the first century — including the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. — were *then* (and *now*) of momentous importance. There will never be another 'moment' in history in which such a momentous change will take place. And in all of this one thing is clear: the only hope of either Gentile *or* Jew is to be born again, from above, in order to be able to see and enter the Kingdom.

In the historical period ending with the momentous events of 70 A.D. God removed most (but not all) of the natural branches from his great 'olive tree' (his own symbolic representation of the redeemed people of God).⁷⁰ This excision has now continued for 2,000 years! But God is able to do seemingly impossible things. He is able to "*banish ungodliness from Jacob.*"⁷¹ "*For*" as Paul said to Gentiles in Rome, "*just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.*"⁷² There is no reason to assume that there will ever be a time when *all* Jews will become Christians. Just as there were some who did believe when most did not, so there may come a time when many Jews do come to believe, while yet some remain stubbornly unbelieving. God does move in mysterious ways too perform his wonders. And it all goes back to God's covenant promise to the patriarch Abraham.⁷³

The following illustration gives an overview of the 'olive tree' symbolism as it gives a representation of the over-all eschatology of the Bible.

⁶⁸ Matthew 16:18

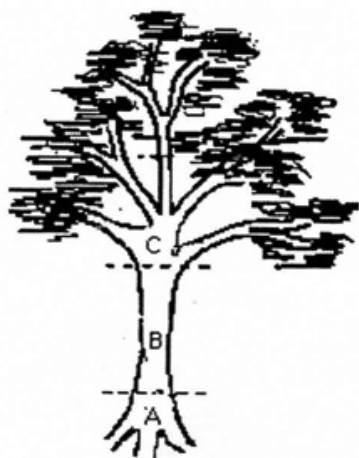
⁶⁹ Galatians 3:29

⁷⁰ See Romans 11:11-32

⁷¹ Romans 11:26

⁷² Romans 11:30-32

⁷³ Remember too that God's great work is not always recognized by blind and sinful people, even when it is happening. There are many Jewish people, today, who have come to believe that Jesus is indeed the Christ. So it may well be that what Paul wrote of as within God's power to bring to pass — in Romans 11 — is perhaps happening even now without any fanfare.



A - Represents the Patriarchal Period. It began with God's promise to Abraham that in his seed all nations of the earth would be blessed. (Genesis 12:3, 18:18, 22:18 etc.)

B - Represents the Old Testament Period from Moses to the coming of Jesus Christ, during which the Church was confined to the Nation of Israel. (Deuteronomy 7:6-11, John 4:22).

C - Represents the New Testament era (which continues today) during which the Church is being extended to all the nations. (Romans 11, Ephesians 2:11-16, 19-22).

Also: compare this diagram with Matthew 13:31,32; Mark 4:30-32; and Luke 13:15-24, and 31:18,19.

In the book of Romans the apostle Paul himself pictures redemptive history under the figure of a great Olive Tree. Speaking of Jews, during the Apostolic age, he says *"some of the branches were broken off."*⁷⁴ He also says it was *"because of unbelief (that) they were broken off."*⁷⁵ He also says that I — as a Gentile — can even say that those *"branches were broken off that I might be grafted in."*⁷⁶ But he also solemnly warns that we must *"not be haughty, but fear"*⁷⁷ because what happened to *them* could also happen to *us*, if we are not careful. Our sovereign Lord has power to bring about another reversal, if we repeat the same sin that they sinned. And there certainly are those, today, who sin the same way the Jews did in the time of the apostles. Because certain Christian people today can look back upon their fathers and say "my ancestors were God's covenant people, they were the apple of his eye" and so on, they too can assume that the organization they inherited from their ancestors is immune to apostasy and destruction. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, bases its arrogant claim on the premise that it is the organizational continuance of the

⁷⁴ Romans 11:17

⁷⁵ Romans 11:20

⁷⁶ Romans 11:19

⁷⁷ Romans 11:20

only true church, and that *therefore* God will never reject it. Surely, what happened to the nation of Israel should be a sufficient warning against falling for such a delusion!

There are many examples, in Church History, of people succumbing to this delusion. Our loyalty must therefore never be to any organization merely because it *says* it is Christ's church — not even if it can trace a line of organizational continuity back to a time when it really was deserving of that title.⁷⁸ This explains why our Reformation Fathers refused to define the identity of a true church by mere organizational continuity or connection, but rather defined it by certain doctrinal and spiritual qualities set down in the Bible — which have always marked the church when it has been faithful — and which also are lacking when it is not faithful. What counts, in other words, in identifying who the people of God really are is determined by answering a few important questions: (1) Does this church faithfully teach God's true and final revelation in Jesus Christ and the Bible? (2) Does this church faithfully administer the signs and seals of his covenant (Baptism and the Lord's Supper)? And (3) does it faithfully uphold the biblical standards of righteousness and truth by faithful discipline?

We need to remember what Jesus said, as pastor of a small congregation: *"Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom."*⁷⁹ At that time most of the Jews thought the true church — the *true* Israel of God — was their nation because it could trace its history back to the time of Moses, and continued to exist at that time under the authority of the Scribes and the Pharisees as successors of Moses. But they were wrong. The claim to be *true* Israel really belonged then — as it does now — to those who qualify according to our Lord's own definition of true church people. *"Who is my mother and who are my brothers?...whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."*⁸⁰

Questions:

1. What did the apostles say they expected after Christ's resurrection and before his ascension? (Acts. 1:6)

⁷⁸ In Revelation 2:10 we read about a Jewish Synagogue that became "a synagogue of Satan."

⁷⁹ Luke 12:32

⁸⁰ Matthew 12:48, 50.

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2. What did Jesus say about the immediate future of the Jewish nation and Temple? (Mt. 23)
3. How did the apostle Paul describe this momentous event in Rom. 11?
4. Was this development contrary to the original promise of God to Abraham? (Include scriptural proof for your answer).
5. Is there a better future in store for the mass of Jewish people?
6. Why did the Reformers identify the true church by spiritual qualities rather than organizational continuity?

Chapter 2

THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AS EXPRESSED IN MATTHEW CHAPTERS 23-26

INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons for much of the confusion today in eschatological thinking is the loss — or at least a serious weakening — of reformation principles of biblical exegesis. The Reformers strongly emphasized the importance of what has been called “grammatico-historical exegesis.” As R.C. Sproul put it *“Discerning the original, intended meaning is called grammatico-historical exegesis. We do not have any right to look at a biblical text from the perspective of the twenty-first century and change its meaning.”*⁸¹ In other words we need to look at any biblical text with a serious effort to read it in such a way as to understand its originally intended meaning — the way the original hearers (or readers) would have understood it. This means that we need to discern (1) the historical situation of the time and place in which the text was written, and (2) the rules of grammar recognized by people then living. When we keep these simple, but vital, truths in mind we are amazed at how often these rules are neglected in much present-day eschatological thinking and writing.

In Matthew 10:23 we find these words: *“When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. For truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the towns of Israel before the Son of man comes.”* It was Jesus who spoke these words. They were spoken to the twelve men he had just chosen to be his apostles.⁸² We therefore believe his words should be understood in the same way that you would understand me,

⁸¹ *Truths We Confess, A Layman's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, Vol. 1, p. 29. Published by P&R, 2006.

⁸² Matthew 10:2-4.

today, if I warned **you** of some danger, and asked **you** to do something that could expose **you** to persecution. But — because of commonly made false assumption as to the meaning of the final phrase “*the son of man comes*” — this verse has been taken to mean one of two things (neither of which is in accord with the principles of ‘grammatico-historical exegesis’). (1) One way of wrongly dealing with these words is by simply saying Jesus was mistaken. The famous organist, missionary and New Testament scholar Albert Schweitzer came to this conclusion because he insisted that Jesus was speaking here of his second coming [παρουσία]. And since this event did not happen in that generation he concluded that Jesus was mistaken. (2) Another way is also by first assuming that Jesus was referring to his second coming and then—in addition—assuming that his words were primarily addressed to people who were not destined to exist until the time of his second coming. Both of these choices, of course, do violence to the grammar. For it is a fact that Jesus was speaking to real people who were standing right there in front of him as he spoke. He addressed **them** with the word ‘**you**’ and **to them** he said ‘*you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the son of man comes.*’ To pretend that Jesus wasn’t really speaking **to them**, in a clearly understandable way, is to handle the word of God deceitfully.

Another text that has received a similar wrong treatment is found in Matthew 16:28. Here Jesus said — to his disciples — “*Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*” Everyone knows that the disciples who were living at that time — when Jesus said this — are no longer with us. How, then, can anyone possibly avoid saying that Jesus was mistaken **if** he meant that they would see his second coming before they died? One way is to simply imagine that Jesus was really addressing these words to any and all ‘disciples’ — including those who would come into being many centuries later. Another way is to take his words to mean that, a short time later, three of those disciples (Peter, James and John) would see him transfigured.⁸³ But when we remember what Jesus said to the Sanhedrin, some time later — *after* his transfiguration and shortly *before* his crucifixion — it becomes quite obvious that these attempts are simply evasions of the clear meaning of the text. When the high priest said to Jesus “*I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.*” Jesus said **to him**, “**You** have said so. But I tell **you**, from now on **you** will see the Son of Man seated at the right

⁸³ Matthew 17:1-9

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hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”⁸⁴ There is no escape from the meaning of these words of our Lord. Jesus was telling **him** (the high priest of Israel at that time) that, within the lifetime of many people who saw and heard him while he was here on earth, he would be “*coming on the clouds of heaven.*” So the question that cannot be avoided is this: was Jesus mistaken? It is our conviction that he was not mistaken. How could he be mistaken about a thing like that if he was the promised Messiah — the Son of God — who came down from heaven?

This leaves only one other possibility: perhaps the problem is not in the *text* of the Bible, but in *people* who are prone to misread it. When the writer of this study was growing up in central Iowa — in what was then called ‘the Bible Belt’ — these texts seemed to him to pose a serious problem. The reason for this was that whenever these texts were discussed almost everyone just assumed that Jesus was talking about his second coming [παρουσία]. But then, in order to avoid saying that Jesus was wrong, people would impose a sense on the words of Jesus that contradicted their natural meaning. It was only after years of study that it became clear to the writer of this material that the solution is really quite simple. Jesus *did* mean what he said to those people. Many of them *did* live to see Jesus “*coming on the clouds of heaven.*” You see, those words (“*coming on the clouds of heaven*”) are quoted from the Old Testament book of Daniel. And the truth is that they were never intended to be misunderstood as referring to Christ’s second coming [παρουσία]. No, they were intended to be understood as describing what we call the ascension — not the coming of Christ *from* heaven *to* earth, but rather the going of Christ *from* earth *to* the right hand of God in *heaven*. Read the words of Daniel yourself, carefully, and you will see that it is so:

*“I was watching in the night visions, and behold, one like the Son of Man, **coming with the clouds of heaven.** He came **to** the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before Him. Then to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed.”*⁸⁵

There is no need whatsoever to say that Jesus was wrong. And there is no reason to think that he was not speaking specifically to those whom he

⁸⁴ Matthew 26:63-64.

⁸⁵ Daniel 7:13-14 (NKJV).

was addressing, face to face, to tell *them* what they would soon experience. Grammatico-Historical exegesis removes all of these evasions by faithfulness to *language* and *historical context*.

Questions:

1. Why is it that Matthew 10:23, 16:28 and 26:64 have been so perplexing for most people?
2. Where do we need to go in the Old Testament to properly understand them?
3. What words in Daniel 7:13,14 make it clear that the misunderstood words do not refer to Christ's second coming?
4. Why should we think of Christ's ascension rather than his second coming whenever the Bible says "coming on the clouds"?
5. What grammatical violation is removed by this understanding?

Part 1 - THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

What was happening when Jesus said the things narrated in Matthew 23? Is it not an accurate historical description of Jesus Christ as he pronounced the knell of doom upon the apostate Jewish 'Church?' Again and again our Lord pronounced woes on the Scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders in Israel in that generation. Yes, for in the majority of the Jewish people of that time — the people to whom he was speaking — the history of the persistent apostasy of the nation of Israel had reached its culmination.⁸⁶ Jesus made it very clear that the doom that he was threatening would not be long in coming. "*I tell you the truth*" said Jesus, "***all these things*** will come upon ***this*** generation."⁸⁷ "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem*" cried our grieving Savior "*How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! See, your house is left to you desolate.*"⁸⁸ Up to this time in Israel's history, the Temple in Jerusalem had been acknowledged — even by Jesus himself — to be the house of God. That is why Jesus cleansed the Temple, denouncing the way in which the

⁸⁶ Read Matthew 23:34-35 especially.

⁸⁷ Matthew 23:36.

⁸⁸ Matthew 23:37-38.

Jews of that time had made his father's house a den of merchandise.⁸⁹ So now, at this critical hour in their history, he spoke of a day rapidly approaching — a day which was to arrive within the generation then living⁹⁰ — when the Temple would no longer be acknowledged as God's house. No, said Jesus to the unbelieving Jews who were standing right there before him, when that day arrives it will be *"your house,"* and it will be left to you *"desolate!"*

We can well imagine the shock-waves these words must have caused, as they reverberated through the tradition-bound mind-set our Lord's own disciples. "What?! This house left desolate?! — the great Temple of God in Jerusalem?! — Surely not that?!" This was very unpleasant to hear, and even more difficult to accept. So, as Jesus and his disciples were leaving the Temple that day, *"his disciples came up to point out to him the buildings of the temple"* [Mt. 24:1]. 'Look, Lord' they were saying — in effect — as they pointed to those great buildings: 'surely you can't mean that these things are going to be reduced to desolation!' To them this was almost unthinkable. But that is indeed what Jesus meant. We know this because he answered them saying *"Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."*⁹¹ When they heard *that* they were utterly astounded. This shattered all of the fixed ideas in their minds. It turned their whole idea of the future upside down. You see, they too were expecting that when the Messiah finally came he would restore the Kingdom to Israel, making the 'good old days' of Kings like David and Solomon live again, as it were. We know this because the disciples of Jesus still tended to think that way even after he rose from the dead.⁹² Yet here was their Messiah himself plainly saying the time for the destruction of the Temple was drawing near. No wonder his disciples began to jump to conclusions. Isn't that what we all tend to do when we have to deal with highly emotional issues — especially when it comes to predictions of the future?

So the disciples asked Jesus the question that, by its very structure, indicates the conclusion to which they had 'jumped.' *"Tell us,"* they said, *"when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of your coming* [Greek: *παρουσία*] *and the end of the age?"*⁹³ From this question it is clear

⁸⁹ John 2:16

⁹⁰ Matthew 23:36

⁹¹ Matthew 24:2

⁹² Cf. Acts 1:6

⁹³ Matthew 24:3

that they simply assumed that these two momentous things would happen together (at the same time). *If* Jesus was right, they were thinking, and their house really was going to be left unto them desolate—and within that generation—*then* surely his second coming (παρουσία), and the end of history would also have to come in that generation.

But it was right there — jumping to that conclusion — that they made their big mistake. And the amazing thing is that so many Christian people keep right on making virtually the same mistake today. No, they do not make it in exactly the same way. But what is the common interpretation, today, of Matthew 24? Is it not that Christ was talking about two entirely different things *as if* they were one? Yes, this is the most common interpretation. Many say that Jesus — in Matthew 24:4-35 (as he answered his disciples) — was describing *not only* (1) the coming destruction of Jerusalem (which was destined to take place, and did in fact take place, in 70 A.D.); *but also* (2) a similar series of events, destined to take place right before his own second coming [παρουσία] at the end of the ages (which is still in the future even now). And because of this assumption they go on to insist that Jesus listed a number of signs that apply, equally, to both of these events. So, they insist that false Christs, false prophets, wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, etc., *were* not only intended as signs for *that* generation, to warn *them* of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, but *are* also intended to serve as signs to enable a generation destined to live many centuries (now some 20 centuries) later to know when the second coming [παρουσία] of Christ is about to happen. This view is the most popular view today in Evangelical circles.

We cannot possibly agree with this interpretation. The reason is that we do not think our Lord uses one set of words to predict two entirely different events. No, in answering the disciples — as we will seek to demonstrate — the Lord divided the disciples question into two parts, and then proceeded to discriminate carefully between the two things they were confusing.⁹⁴ In the first section of Matthew 24 (vv. 4-35) our Lord deals specifically with “*all these things*” about which he had solemnly warned the Scribes and Pharisees.⁹⁵ In speaking of “these things” he was not talking about things destined to happen far off in the future, at the time of his second coming [παρουσία] and the end of world history. This is made very

⁹⁴ The first part deals with the “when” question (“when will these things be”); the second deals with the “what” question (“and what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?”)

⁹⁵ See all of Matthew 23, but especially v. 36, where he says “Assuredly, I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation.”

clear from chapter 24, verse 34, where he says again (just as he had in 23:36) “**this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened.**” This answered the ‘**when**’ question.

Then, after making this point very clear, our Lord went on to deal with the ‘**what**’ question (as recorded in Mt. 24:36-25:46). And the main thing Jesus emphasized concerning the *what* question is the fact that **there will not be any signs at all to enable us to know the time of his second coming** [παρουσία] and the end this present age. We could sum it up this way: Jesus clearly and carefully distinguished between the two things his disciples had mistakenly merged together. They just assumed that these two important things — (1) the destruction of Jerusalem and (2) the ‘parousia’ (final return of Jesus to the world) — were things that would have to happen at the same time. Our Lord therefore carefully and patiently explained things to them so that they would not keep on making this wrong assumption.

We will go on to discuss this in the next part of our study.

Questions:

1. Underline as many phrases as you can in Matthew 23 which show that the final crisis had arrived for the Jewish Church.
2. To what erroneous conclusion did our Lord’s disciples jump?
3. Why did the disciples do this?
4. Were these disciples the last to make this mistake? Explain.
5. Our Westminster Confession (Chap. I, sect. ix), says the ‘*full sense of any Scripture...is not manifold, but one.*’ Give a few examples of Bible prophecies that could not possibly have a double fulfillment.
6. What is the difference between (a) multiple *fulfillments*, and (b) multiple *applications*?
7. Why do you think our Lord repeats, in 24:34, the statement already made in 23:36?

Part 2 - “ALL THESE THINGS”

Unless we are prepared to give a strained interpretation to Matthew 23:36 and 24:34, we must believe that “*all these things*” predicted by Jesus *did* indeed happen in that generation.

(A) But there are those who say ‘No, this cannot be the true understanding of what Jesus said because these things did not *all* happen in that generation.’ In order to try to make sense out of the passage, then, they are forced to change the sense of the word *generation* to mean ‘*race*’ (as in ‘the Jewish race’ as a distinct ethnic group of people) instead of a specific generation (as in ‘our generation’ — describing a particular time in history). The meaning, with this change, would be that the Jewish race will not pass away until all of these things have been fulfilled. We are convinced that this is not a legitimate solution. If you, the reader, will take a good concordance of the Bible and study the use of this word ‘generation’ [in Greek: γενεά] in the New Testament scriptures, it will soon be apparent that the word has a well-defined meaning. It means the average or common time span of human life that we ourselves are familiar with. All that we can say about this interpretation is that it cannot possibly be right, because it imposes a sense on a Greek word which has no support in the rest of the Bible. When Jesus said “*O unbelieving and perverse generation...how long shall I stay with you?*” (Matthew 17:17) he was not referring to the entire Jewish race as perverse and unbelieving. No, he was characterizing that portion of the Jewish race which was living in Palestine while he was here on earth. When he said “*This is a wicked generation*” (Matthew 16:4) he was not saying the whole Jewish race of people were wicked. No, he was saying Jews who were living at that time in Israel, while he was here on earth were wicked. He did not say this as if *all* Jews, at all times, were unbelieving, but because most of the Jews at that time — while he, the very Son of God, was standing among them — were so unbelieving.

(B) Therefore, if we understand the words in Matthew 24:34 in their normal sense, there is no escape — Jesus was referring to the generation of Jewish people who were living while he was here on earth. So, what needs to be demonstrated is that “*all these things*” did indeed take place in *that* generation just as Jesus said they would. It is to this that we now turn as we proceed with this study.

[1] To begin with, then, Jesus warned the people who were standing before him to beware of being deceived by claims of false-messiahs. His words were not intended as a direct and specific warning to people living today. And that there were false claims by pseudo-messiahs in that generation we have abundant evidence. Acts chapter 5:36,37 informs us that the famous Rabbi Gamaliel⁹⁶ spoke of two such pseudo-messiahs, Theudas and Judas the Galilean. This did indeed happen in that generation. We also learn from 1 John 2:18,19 and 4:1-4 that there already were “*many antichrists*” at the time when that letter was being written. This too was a thing that happened in that generation. And it is interesting that we even have further confirmation from the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus,⁹⁷ showing that the phenomenon of pseudo-messiahs was well known in the period of time leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. So the historical record shows that this specific prediction was, indeed, fulfilled in that generation. This fact is further confirmed by Luke’s account of the words of Jesus. Luke, who was himself a Gentile by birth, wrote his gospel account with special effort to be understood by Gentile readers. He therefore explained some things for their benefit that needed no explanation for Jewish readers. In Luke’s gospel 21:8 we read that Jesus said “*the time is near*” as he warned his disciples not to be misled by pseudo-messiahs. Jesus said this to *his disciples*. He warned *them*. How strange the interpretation is, then, which ignores this self-evident fact, and treats the words of Jesus as if they were spoken to people many hundreds of years (even thousands of years) later.

[2] In the second place we read about “wars and rumors of wars” (v. 6). In Josephus [Book IV, chapter 9], we read that (prior to 70 A.D.) “sedition and civil war prevailed, not only over Judea, but in Italy also.” And again, in Book IV, chapter 10, he says “about this very time it was that heavy calamities came about Rome on all sides.” Was this not exactly what Jesus predicted? For that generation — since it only ‘lived once’ — a warning such as this had urgent meaning. When they saw the dark clouds of war beginning to gather over their own heads, as it were, they had a very clear sign — warning them of the soon coming destruction of their Temple and the city of Jerusalem (70 A.D.). But according to the common and popular interpretation which holds that there will be a se-

⁹⁶ Gamaliel was a prominent Rabbi who taught in Jerusalem during the Apostolic period. Acts 22:3 says the Apostle Paul himself studied under Gamaliel before he was converted.

⁹⁷ “Now as for the affairs of the Jews, they grew worse and worse continually, for the country was again filled with robbers and impostors, who deluded the multitude. Yet did Felix catch and put to death many of those impostors every day” (*The Wars of the Jews*, Book II, chapter 8).

cond and even greater fulfillment at the end of this age, there is constant confusion. Was World War I a ‘sign’ of the second coming of Jesus (παρουσία)? Evidently it was not. Neither was World War II. But if these great wars are not enough to serve as signs of the near coming of Jesus, what wars could be? The writer can remember — when the war clouds were gathering back in 1939 — that more than a few preachers were confidently saying that things which were happening then were signs of the nearness of the second coming. Some even put a limit on the time that they thought was still left before that event came. And (as usual) they were wrong. They were wrong because wars and rumors of wars are *not* a sign of the second coming [παρουσία]. But wars and rumors of wars *were* signs indicating the nearness of the destruction that came during that generation — signs to assure believers that the city of Jerusalem and the apostate Temple would soon be a scene of desolation.

[3] In the third place we note that, after repeating the basic warning of war — by saying that nation would rise against nation — our Lord next spoke of various calamities in the realm of what we today call ‘nature.’ He said there would be “*famine and earthquakes in various places.*”⁹⁸ And, again, anyone who reads Josephus’ history of the Jewish people will have no difficulty in seeing that this was fulfilled “in that generation.” Here is a typical excerpt taken from his account:

“The madness of the seditions did also increase together with their famine, and both of these miseries were every day inflamed more and more...children pulled the very morsels that their fathers were eating out of their mouths ...so did the mothers do as to their infants; and when those who were most dear were perishing under their hands, they were not ashamed to take from them the very last drops that might preserve their lives.”⁹⁹

Later, in the siege of Jerusalem, the famine became so intense that it “confounded all natural passions; for those who were just about to die looked upon those who were gone to their rest before them with dry eyes and open mouths. A deep silence also, and a kind of deadly night, had seized upon the city.”¹⁰⁰ We also note — in addition to the data in Matthew 27:54, 28:2, Acts 4:31 and 16:26 which is decisive — that Josephus records a great earthquake in Book VI, Chapter 5.

⁹⁸ Matthew 24:7b

⁹⁹ Book VII, Chapter 10

¹⁰⁰ Book VII, Chapter 12

[4] In the fourth place, it is interesting to note that Luke — writing in a way designed to be understood by Gentile readers — again adds important information. He tells us that Jesus said this to his disciples: “*but before all this, they will lay hands on **you** and persecute **you**. They will deliver **you** to synagogues and prisons, and **you** will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in **you** being witnesses to them.*”¹⁰¹ As we see it the meaning is clear: Jesus was speaking to people who were living in Palestine while he was here on earth; he was telling *them* what was going to happen *to them*. Think, for example, of what happened to Stephen. When he spoke unpleasant truth to the Jewish leaders “*they gnashed at him with their teeth...cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and...cast him out of the city and stoned him.*”¹⁰² So the very things predicted by Jesus as things that were to happen in that generation, did indeed happen within that generation. What strange exegesis it is to imagine that these words were addressed to people far removed (even thousands of years removed) from that generation! Anyone who has carefully studied the book of Acts will know that “*all these things*”¹⁰³ did happen to the apostles and their associates. If words are to be interpreted in their natural sense, there is no reason whatsoever to take these statements out of the context of that generation. Our fourth point, then, is the fact that this also happened in that generation.

[5] The fifth thing that Jesus predicted¹⁰⁴ was apostasy from the faith, with betrayal and hatred. One could argue that this could be taken to refer to the apostasy of the Jewish people, and to their factional conflicts. We know, again, from the writings of Josephus that this was one of the most terrible aspects of the calamity that came on the Jews during the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans. They were bitterly divided. However, when our Lord spoke of turning “*away from the faith*” it is more likely that he had Christians in mind — those who had professed that he was the promised Messiah, but then went back on that profession later on. And here, again, there is clear proof that this did happen in that generation. The New Testament was written in that generation. And there is evidence in it of the apostasy and declension of some professing Christians. How soon, for example, did the people in Galatia turn to what Paul calls “*a different gospel — which is really no gospel at all.*”¹⁰⁵ We are

¹⁰¹ Luke 21:12

¹⁰² Acts 7:54, 57-58

¹⁰³ Matthew 23:36, 24:3, 34

¹⁰⁴ Matthew 24:10

¹⁰⁵ Galatians 1:6-7

also informed that the church of Corinth was sadly divided into factions. And some churches were at, or at least near, the point of being repudiated by Jesus during the lifetime of his apostles.¹⁰⁶

We tend to idealize the apostolic age. But we should not do this. There was a veritable thicket of problems in the churches. There were some who had professed themselves to be Christian believers who then turned away from the faith. Jude characterized them as “*godless men*” and as “*unreasoning animals*.”¹⁰⁷ The book of Hebrews has many references to Jews — Jews of the very generation Jesus himself had personally confronted — Jews who had professed faith in him as the Messiah, and were later in grave danger of falling away.¹⁰⁸ So there is no question about this item in our Lord’s list of things that would happen in that generation — this also happened in that generation!

[6] The sixth item of information was the fact that there would be false prophets. And here, again, we not only read about such things in the New Testament,¹⁰⁹ but Josephus also speaks of the false prophets that came along to stir up vain hopes among the Jewish people during the siege of Jerusalem. “*A false prophet was the occasion of these people’s destruction, who had made a public proclamation in the city that very day, that God commanded them to get upon the temple, and that there they should receive miraculous signs of their deliverance. Now there was then a great number of false prophets suborned by the tyrants to impose on the people, who denounced this to them, that they should wait for deliverance from God; and this was in order to keep them from deserting, and that they might be buoyed up above fear and care by such hopes.*”¹¹⁰

Now with reference to the predictions we have now considered, and their fulfillment in that generation, there has been rather general agreement. Even those who apply these things partly to the future are usually willing to admit that these things — described above — did indeed happen in that generation. But they then go on to say that from here on in Matthew 24 [down to verse 34] there are several things that did *not* happen in that generation. Therefore, they argue, we are forced to admit that our Lord also predicted things that would only come to pass toward the end of the age in which we, today, are living, and *not* in that generation.

¹⁰⁶ Revelation 3:15-18

¹⁰⁷ Jude 4 and 10

¹⁰⁸ Hebrews 2:3; 4:1, 11; 6:108 etc.

¹⁰⁹ Romans 16:17-18, 1 John 4:1; Galatians 1:6-7; Acts 13:6, etc.

¹¹⁰ Book VII, Chapter 5

At this point it may be well to say that the writer also, at one time, went along with this view — and yet, at the same time, was never satisfied with it. The reason is that it required a very forced interpretation of the 34th verse. The more the writer studied the word ‘generation’ [Greek γενεά] as it is used in the Greek New Testament, the more clear it became that a choice had to be made between these two alternatives: (1) either *Jesus* was wrong in what he said in verse 34,¹¹¹ (2) or *I* was wrong in thinking that some of “*these things*” are still future things even today. It was therefore necessary to study “*these things*” that Jesus predicted as things that were to happen in that generation much more carefully. And when the author did this it became clear — to his surprise — that these other things, too, did indeed happen in that generation. It is to these things that we turn in the next section of this study.

Questions for Further Discussion:

1. Consult your concordance to see, from the context, if the word generation can mean ‘race.’
2. Luke’s gospel cites our Lord as having said ‘the time is near.’ From the context of that statement can you see what time Jesus refers to?
3. Why is it that a conjunction of ‘*wars and rumors of wars*’ and ‘*earthquakes and famine*’ could serve as signs for that generation, when they can’t to our generation?
4. To what did Jesus refer when he said “but the end is not yet” (v.6)? The end of what?
5. Underline any words in the verses 4-13 that clearly indicate that Christ’s warning had to do with that generation:
6. What significant word does Luke add (in 21:9) to help Gentile readers understand these things?
7. To what does v. 8 (see also Mark 13:8) refer when it speaks of ‘travail’ or ‘birth pains’? (Hint: Isaiah 13:6-10)
8. Luke 21:13 says: “*But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony.*” How does this tie in with the ‘birth pains’ idea, and how does it go against the common interpretation?

¹¹¹ This was the conclusion reached by Albert Schweitzer.

Part 3 - COMMONLY MISUNDERSTOOD ITEMS

In this section we are concerned with the material found in Matthew 24:14-31. Several items here are commonly assumed to be ‘yet in the future.’ It is our conviction that this assumption is wrong, and we hope to show this as we comment on each of these items in the discussion that follows.

[1] In Matthew 24:14 we read: *“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 supposed problem here is quickly solved if we consult Greek language usage. For the Greek term translated “world” here does not mean the entire world or globe in the geographical sense. No, what this term means is the entire civilized world of that day — or, in other words, the entire Roman Empire. Take, for instance, the statement of Luke 2:1 that Caesar Augustus sent out a decree that *“all the world”* should be taxed. The word translated “world” in this text is the Greek word οἰκουμένη which meant the Roman Empire.¹¹² And the fact is that the gospel **was** preached throughout **that** ‘world’ — the entire Roman Empire — in that generation. We see this, for instance, in Luke’s statement in Acts 2, verse 5. He tells us that already — even on the day of Pentecost — there were *“devout men out of every nation under heaven”* in Jerusalem to hear Peter’s preaching. So fulfillment was already beginning. And thirty years later in Paul’s letter to the Colossians he could already say that *“all over the world [οἰκουμένη] this gospel is producing fruit and growing”*¹¹³ Paul even went so far as to say that the gospel **“has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.”**¹¹⁴ To us this may sound like an exaggeration, and it may be an instance of the use of hyperbole (a deliberate exaggeration used for effect). But when scripture speaks as plainly as this, it is not our place to argue with what it says. There is therefore no valid reason to insist that the fulfillment of Matthew 24:14 can only be in the future! When Jesus said *“and then the end will come”*¹¹⁵ he meant that after *“all these things”* had happened — including the seemingly impossible spread of the Christian faith throughout the entire Roman Empire — the final destruction of the Temple (and the special status of the Jewish nation) would immediately follow. And the fact is that something that had existed for many, many centuries did come to an end in 70 A.D. But already even be-

¹¹² It is used the same way in texts such as these: Luke. 4:1, Acts 11:28, 17:6, 19:27, 24:5, and Romans 10:18.

¹¹³ Colossians 1:6

¹¹⁴ Colossians 1:23

¹¹⁵ Matthew 24:14

fore *that* happened “*all these things*” — including the Empire-wide spread of the gospel — had been accomplished just as Jesus had predicted.

[2] The second problem that many see with our view is this prediction: “*So when you see ‘the abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.*”¹¹⁶ It is common among Christians today to see, in this, a prediction of a still future Antichrist. But again, we are convinced that there is good reason to see this too as fulfilled in that generation — the generation of the people to whom our Lord was speaking. For the sake of the greatest possible clarity we will here list our reasons for coming to this conclusion.

- 1) It is clear that Christ said “**this generation** will not pass away until ***all these things are fulfilled***” (v. 34). The only natural interpretation of this statement is that the abomination of desolation (which was one of “*these things*”) also took place in that generation.
- 2) With this agrees the direct reference, here, to these disciples to whom Christ was speaking. He said “*when you see... ‘the abomination of desolation.’*” This clearly indicates that *they, themselves*, would see it. What meaning could this statement have had for those disciples who heard Jesus say this, if the event spoken of was not to happen in that generation, but only thousands of years later?
- 3) With this also agrees the statements in the verses that immediately follow.¹¹⁷ Our Lord instructed the people living in Judea as to what ***they*** should ***do*** when this momentous event took place. *They* were instructed to flee. If *they* were on the housetop *they* were warned not to come down into their houses in order to try to take anything with them. In Jerusalem, in those days, the roofs of the houses were flat. So one could go across housetops to get to a wall to escape (as the story of Rahab indicates in Joshua 2). This was common in ancient cities in that era. This would not have much relevance today, where people are seldom up on housetops, and cannot go anywhere without first com-

¹¹⁶ Matthew 24:14-16

¹¹⁷ Matthew 24:16-17 “*then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house...* ” etc.

ing down into the house. By what principle of Biblical interpretation is this simply ignored by those who talk of a future fulfillment?

- 4) Luke wrote his gospel with special effort to communicate the truth to Gentile readers. Here, then, is how he speaks of this same event. *“But when **you** [again note this important word **you**] see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near.”*¹¹⁸ Jews could be expected to understand the meaning of that phrase ‘the abomination of desolation.’ They were familiar with the Old Testament, and knew that this phrase is found in the book of Daniel.¹¹⁹ Gentiles, however, would not be expected to be so familiar with the book of Daniel. They therefore needed further explanation, and Luke gave it to them. The Gentiles who saw Jerusalem surrounded by the Roman army were seeing the very same event that the Jews recognized as another ‘abomination of desolation.’
- 5) Our fifth point is the confirmation we find in the writings of Josephus as an eye-witness of Jerusalem’s desolation. He says the Roman army surrounded the city. And those who took the words of Jesus seriously acted accordingly. When they saw the Romans coming they wasted no time in getting out of the city, and fleeing to the little town named Pella. Can there be any doubt, then, that this prediction of our Lord was fulfilled in 70 A.D., and fulfilled in such a way as to make it rather strange, to say the least, to speak of a future fulfillment?

[3] In Matthew 24, verse 21, we come to a third alleged ‘problem.’ Here it says *“then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until now, **no, nor ever shall be.**”* What should not be overlooked here is the fact that Jesus does not speak of this event as something that will come at the end of world history. No, quite the contrary: he speaks of it as an utterly unparalleled event — unparalleled in the sense that nothing *before* that time, *and nothing after that time*, would ever be its equal. Now it should be obvious that if our Lord had been speaking of something which was only going to take place at the end of world history he would never have added the words: *“**no, nor ever shall be.**”*¹²⁰ It is obvious that he would never have said this if he envi-

¹¹⁸ Luke 21:20

¹¹⁹ Daniel 9:27

¹²⁰ “[W]e should note that ‘nor ever shall be again’ confirms that this passage is about a historical event, not about the end of the world” quoted from *The Gospel of Matthew*, by R.T. France, p. 915. France also notes that Josephus himself “claims that none of the disasters since the world began can be compared to the fate of Jerusalem.” To clearly

sioned a double fulfillment, with the second and final fulfillment being the greater of the two.¹²¹ But if this event, of which the Lord is speaking, was to come in *that* generation — and *only* in that generation — then there was a very good reason for contrasting it not only with all that had happened before but also all that would happen afterwards.

Here, again, the historical report by Josephus supports this conclusion, as he described the horrors that came upon the Jews shut up in Jerusalem by the Romans. Luke's version of our Lord's, written for Gentile readers, also confirms this. "*For there will be great distress upon the land* [Greek: ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς] *and wrath against this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.*"¹²² How could our Lord have made it clearer that he was predicting a calamity which was to come on the unbelieving Jews of that generation?

[4] The next item is our Lord's warning to his disciples, lest they should be deceived by false teachers during this time of distress.¹²³ What deserves special attention here is the emphatic way in which he speaks directly and specifically to the disciples who were standing before him. "*Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it...if they say to you 'Look, he is in the wilderness'...or 'Look, he is in the inner rooms' do not believe it.*" Again we are constrained to ask: what kind of Bible interpretation is it which attempts to remove this from that generation? It is certainly true that Christ speaks in verse 27 of his 'parousia' [Greek: παρουσία] meaning his second coming. "*For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming [παρουσία] of the Son of Man.*" But the reason for mentioning the second coming, here, is obvious. Our Lord mentioned his second coming at this point in order to make an important contrast.¹²⁴ He

understand the force of this kind of statement consider Exodus 10:14 which speaks the same way about the locusts of the 8th plague in Egypt "The locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever will be again."

¹²¹ Commonly assumed by those who think "the great tribulation" is still future.

¹²² Luke 21:23-24

¹²³ Matthew 24:23-27

¹²⁴ "This verse is a sort of 'aside' which draws a sharp distinction between the events of the siege and the still future *parousia*...The time of the siege and capture of the city will be

was warning his disciples not to be misled or deceived when *they* — *in that generation* — would hear false rumors suggesting that his *parousia* (second coming) had already happened.¹²⁵ (Josephus¹²⁶ too, says there were many false rumors at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem). In order to prepare his disciples to be able to withstand this danger our Lord reminded them by way of contrast: his second coming — when it does happen — will not be secret. To the contrary, it will be so public that no one will need someone else to tell him that it has happened.

Questions for Further Discussion:

1. How do we know that the Greek word *οικοῦμενη* — usually translated ‘world’ — doesn’t mean the whole planet geographically?
2. What are some of the historical events that indicate that “*the abomination of desolation*” is a thing of the past and not of the future?
3. What phrase in verse 21 clearly shows that “*the great tribulation*” predicted by Christ could not be something that comes at the end of history?
4. What specific information does Luke supply — in 21:23-24 — which confirms the fact that the “*great tribulation*” was to happen in that generation?
5. If this section (Matthew 24:14-28) is not saying Christ’s second coming (*παρουσία*) was to be in ‘that generation’ then why is it mentioned here in verse 27?
6. How do the statements in verses 16-17 argue for a first century fulfillment?
7. How do verses 19-20 argue for a first century fulfillment in Palestine?
8. How does the interpretation defended in this study help us understand verse 28? [Hint: The apostate nation of Israel = the dead carcass. The Roman Army with ensigns = the eagles].

characterized by the claims and counterclaims of those who pretend to a messianic role, but the *parousia*...will need no such claims or proofs: everyone will see and recognize it...He is thus setting the *parousia* and the end of the age decisively apart from the coming destruction of the temple.” (R.T. France, p. 918)

¹²⁵ Paul warned Timothy to be on guard against men who said such things: He even cites examples saying “*Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened.*” (2 Tim. 2:17-18)

¹²⁶ Josephus, *War* 4:503-44

9. What does Luke substitute for the phrase “*the abomination of desolation which was spoken of by Daniel the prophet*” in his explanation intended to help Gentile readers (in 21:20)?
10. What further statement does Luke make (in 21:22) that confirms the view defended here?

Part 4 - THE MOST DIFFICULT POINTS

Many Bible commentators are willing to admit that — up to this point in his eschatological discourse — our Lord was indeed speaking, at least primarily, about things destined to take place in that generation. But, at this point, there are many who still say: “But what about verses 29 to 31? Surely we can’t say that these things have also happened!” It is, therefore, to these supposedly most difficult points that we now turn in our consideration of this chapter. Here is what Jesus said as we find it in Matthew 24:29-31: “*Immediately after the tribulation of those days ‘the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heavens will be shaken.’ Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the land will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the one end of heavens to the other*” [the author’s own translation].

[1] It is not hard to see why many people have difficulty with this part of the Lord’s statement. The writer of this study also, at one time, had difficulty in seeing how this could possibly be one of “*all these things*” that happened in that generation. But closer examination of what is stated here cleared up this problem completely. In the discussion that follows we will now consider the facts that cleared up the problem.

- (1) **In the first place, Old Testament prophets often used expressions very much like the words Jesus used here.** In Isaiah 13:9-11, for example, we find the same kind of reference to ‘the lights going out’ when mighty Babylon was overthrown. “*The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw...Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For **the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.** I will*

punish the world [Hebrew **יָחַד** translated as οἰκουμένη¹²⁷ in the Greek Septuagint] *for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless.*” Ezekiel speaks in much the same way in 32:1-8 when he says, concerning the overthrow of Egypt: “*Son of man, raise a lamentation over Pharaoh king of Egypt and say to him: ‘You consider yourself a lion of the nations, but you are like a dragon in the seas; you burst forth in your rivers, trouble the waters with your feet, and foul their rivers. Thus says the Lord GOD: I will throw my net over you with a host of many peoples, and they will haul you up in my dragnet. And I will cast you on the ground; on the open field I will fling you, and will cause all the birds of the heavens to settle on you, and I will gorge the beasts of the whole earth with you. I will strew your flesh upon the mountains and fill the valleys with your carcass. I will drench the land even to the mountains with your flowing blood, and the ravines will be full of you. **When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord GOD.**’*”

A study of these — and other similar passages in the Old Testament — will show that this terminology was a standard way of prophetic expression. But it never did mean the literal destruction of the physical universe, but rather meant the overthrowing or downfall of a nation or civilization. Amos, for instance, in chapter 8:9-10 says “*‘And it shall come to pass in that day,’ says the Lord God, ‘That **I will make the sun go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation.**’*” The prophet Micah 3:6 expresses the same idea when he says “***The sun shall go down on the prophets, and the day shall be dark for them.***” It is the same concept that Jeremiah expresses when he says “***her sun has gone down while it is day***”¹²⁸ and Ezekiel says “***I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light. All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you; I will bring darkness over your land.***”¹²⁹ It is our conviction that such statements as these Old Testament prophets employed were meant to teach God’s people that there are two kinds of light! There is

¹²⁷ Revisit footnote 12 to understand this term correctly.

¹²⁸ Jeremiah 15:9

¹²⁹ Ezekiel 32:7-8

physical light that God has provided by the sun and moon. And there is spiritual light provided by God through his inspired prophets. It is therefore a fact that it can be dark (in a spiritual sense) while it is not dark at all (in the physical sense).

When these inspired prophets spoke in this manner, in other words, they did not *mean* — and *did not intend to be taken to mean* — the literal end of the physical universe. And the same is true of the prophetic expressions of Jesus. He accepted the divine authority of the Old Testament, and was not ashamed to use the language of those inspired prophets in his own prophetic statements. He was not speaking of ‘the end of the world’ in the sense of the physical universe, but of the end of the Old Testament age in which Israel held the special position as God’s only covenant people (who were, at that time, the bearers of the light of divine revelation). And here, again, Luke clarifies the meaning for Gentile readers. “*And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon and in the stars*” he says, but then hastens to add “*and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring.*”¹³⁰ It is possible, as some of the older commentators supposed, that there could be a reference here to an eclipse of the moon by the earth (when the moon does, as a matter of fact, turn to the color of blood). It is also possible that there is a reference here to an event common in ancient warfare. We refer to the fact that when cities were burned the smoke was often so great that it did — for a time — blot out the light of the sun and moon. But be that as it may one thing is clear: Jesus was not predicting a collapse of the physical universe. What he was predicting was the overthrow of the Jewish nation. Incidentally, this is still the way people speak of this kind of catastrophe. During the Second World War, for example, when the very existence of England was severely threatened, there was a popular song that used a similar expression: ‘*When the Lights Go on again, all over the world.*’ There are some things that ordinary language is not sufficient to express. One of these is the traumatic experience of seeing one’s own nation overthrown, humiliated and defeated. Even today, when something like this happens it is felt to be such a great calamity that it requires the very same kind of language that Jesus was using.

¹³⁰ Luke 21:25

- (2) Another point that should be noted is the fact that Jesus said *"the powers of heaven will be shaken."*¹³¹ I understand him to be referring, by that phrase, to the spiritual powers belonging to Satan.¹³² Christ's victory over the Satan and demonic powers — which had conspired to put him to death — became visibly manifest in the destruction of the Jewish nation and temple when this came to pass just as he said it would. This was what he meant when he warned the Scribes and Pharisees that their house was about to be left to them desolate.¹³³ Christ's victory over Satan began with the end of the historical period during which the visible Church was confined within the Jewish nation. From that time on the Church was destined to spread out to all nations. Nations that had long been held in the chains of darkness by Satan, before this time, now saw the great light sent to them from heaven.¹³⁴ At that very time when the heavens became dark over the Jewish nation,¹³⁵ the glorious light of a new day dawned upon the rest of the world made up of Gentile nations. In other words Satan was now bound, so that he would no longer be able to deceive these nations,¹³⁶ as he had been able to deceive them before, for so many centuries. Now Christ has been exalted *"far above all principality and power and might and dominion."*¹³⁷ So that *"now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places"* God is making *"known by the church the manifold wisdom"* which he *"purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord."*¹³⁸ Having spoiled principalities and powers, in other words, he has made manifest his triumph over them.¹³⁹

So, calamitous as these events were for the Jewish nation, it was anything but the end of what God had planned to accomplish in world history. As was the case many times before in redemptive history, the seeming triumph of Satan (in the great Jewish apostasy, and their rejection of their Messiah) was turned instead into the greatest advance of all time for God's Kingdom (the world-wide extension of the new Israel which is the Christian Church). The conclusion is clear: *this momentous change also took place in that generation.*

¹³¹ Luke 21:26

¹³² Cf. Col. 2:15, Eph. 1:19-22 & 4:8-12,

¹³³ Matthew 23:38

¹³⁴ Cf. Isaiah 9:2 as quoted in Matthew 4:16

¹³⁵ Ezekiel 32:7

¹³⁶ Revelation 20:3

¹³⁷ Ephesians 1:21

¹³⁸ Ephesians 3:10-11

¹³⁹ Colossians 2:15

[2] We now come to what some have called ‘the Achilles heel’ of our interpretation. In Matthew 24:30-31 we read of “*the sign of the Son of man in heaven*” and of his “*coming on the clouds of heaven.*” At this point some who read this study may well be saying: ‘now surely you’ll have to admit that **this** did **not** happen in that generation.’ Yet — amazing as it may seem, at first sight — the fact is that it **did** happen in that generation. This is true for the simple reason that Jesus was not referring here to his second coming [παρουσία]. No, what he was referring to was his ascension to the right hand of God and his present reign in glory. We here present the evidence that demands precisely this conclusion.

(1) **Note first of all, then, that Jesus did not say *the Son of Man* would appear, but rather that a *sign* would appear, and that the purpose of that sign was to indicate that he was in heaven.** The Greek text doesn’t say “then *the Son of Man* will appear,” but “then *the sign* of the Son of Man in heaven will appear.” There is a big difference between the two. Yet how constantly this fact is overlooked. In Bible language a sign is not the same as the thing it signifies. The rainbow is ‘the sign of’ God’s promise that he will never again send a universal flood, but the rainbow is not — itself — that promise. Again, baptism is ‘a sign of’ regeneration and renewal. But it is not — itself — that regeneration. The bread and wine used in the Lord’s Supper are ‘signs’ of the body and blood of our Lord. But they are not themselves — and do not become — Jesus’ literal flesh and blood. There is, in other words, a very important difference between a *sign* and the *thing signified* by the sign. The same is true here. To say “*the sign of the Son of man will appear,*” is one and the same with saying that it will not be Jesus Christ himself who will visibly appear. That is the very reason why the sign is needed! A sign, in biblical language, is a visible representation of something invisible.

(2) **But what does it mean, someone may ask, when verse 30 says “*They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory?*”** The answer to that question is found in one of the prophetic visions of Daniel. Here is Daniel’s account of this vision: “*I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass*

away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”¹⁴⁰ So what Daniel saw in that night vision was not the second coming [παρουσία] of the Lord Jesus Christ. These words—“*coming* [ἐρχόμενον] *with the clouds of heaven*”—do not have that meaning in prophetic language. To the contrary, what they mean is our Lord’s exaltation — his ascension *to* the right hand of God the Father, in glory. Daniel’s vision was a revelation of Christ’s then future enthronement in heaven, when he would come up to heaven and gthen sit down at the right hand of the Father to be given all authority in heaven and earth.¹⁴¹

The prophecy of Daniel, in other words, looked forward to the time when the Kingdom of God and of Jesus Christ would supplant all other human efforts to found a universal Kingdom. And it is perfectly clear that this has been fulfilled by the ascension and enthronement of Jesus, and continues to be fulfilled in the world-wide extension of his Kingdom through the preaching of the gospel. Surely it is clear that when our Savior was exalted to sit at the right hand of God the father, it was in order that he might receive the authority that he now exercises over all things. Yes, this is indeed true. But we cannot see him with our physical eyes at this time. That is why our Lord spoke of this visible “sign” *of* his reigning in glory. And what was that sign? It was precisely the fulfillment of his threat to bring wrath upon the apostate Jewish teachers — and the apostate Jewish nation. When the Romans came, the “lights” went out, as they made the city and temple a scene of complete desolation. The reprobate Jews refused to believe that Jesus could make good on his threat against them. But he *did* make good on it. **That** was the sign which made it perfectly clear that he was reigning in glory. And his ascension *from* earth, *to* heaven, to reign in glory was, in Daniel’s own terminology, a “*coming* [ἐρχόμενον *not* παρουσία] *on the clouds of heaven*.” It meant that Christ’s work was (and still is) moving forward — coming more and more to realization — because he is no longer in a state of humiliation but is now in a state of exaltation (enthroned above the clouds of heaven).

It should be noted here that this fully agrees with other seemingly enigmatic statements of Jesus. Speaking to Jewish people who were near him while he was on earth our Lord said “*Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming* [the Greek word for “coming” here is ἐρχόμενον *not* παρ]

¹⁴⁰ Daniel 7:13-14

¹⁴¹ Matthew 28:18-20

ουσία]¹⁴² *in his kingdom.*”¹⁴³ Just as there are two kinds of light, so there are two kinds of “seeing.” That is why Paul told the Ephesians that he was praying “*that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your understanding enlightened...*”¹⁴⁴ Those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah promised and sent by God, and who had been enabled to understand the truth as he taught it, could “see” things the natural man could not see. One of those visible things by which they could ‘see’ that their ascended Lord was indeed enthroned at God’s right hand, was the destruction of Jerusalem and especially the Temple that he had promised. And it all happened in that generation. How, then, can this possibly be reasonably interpreted to refer to some far-off time, long after the death of all of those people, still future even today? Such interpretations, even though they are quite common, are a wrong handling of Scripture. Jesus was either wrong (which, of course, we deny) or “*all these things*” did actually happen in that generation (which we gladly affirm). And when we realize that he was referring — by his very expressions — to the prophetic witness of Daniel, we can ‘see’ that it really did happen. So, in truth, there is no problem.

- (3) **A third thing that we need to notice is the fact that Jesus said “*all the tribes of the land will mourn*”** [v. 30 my own translation]. The problem here is not in the *text* — *as it stands in the original Greek* — but in unhelpful *translations* of it in English (and even the more recent translations persist in this weakness). The NIV¹⁴⁵ says “*all the nations of the earth will mourn.*” This makes it — in this particular instance — one of the most unhelpful translations. The New American Standard, the New King James and the English Standard versions are slightly better, but still far from satisfactory, when they translate this phrase as “*all the tribes of the earth.*” This still gives an English reader the misleading impression that our Lord, by this statement, meant all of the people groups in the world. But he did not. What he said — and meant — was “*all the tribes of the land* [Greek: τῆς γῆς]” meaning the land of Israel. We see this clearly if we compare Matthew’s version with the parallel passages in Luke. Since Luke’s gospel was written with particular concern to make things clear to Gentile readers, it is

¹⁴² It is worth noting that the Greek Septuagint, the O.T. translation used by first century Christians, used this same word (ἐρχομαι) in Daniel 7:13.

¹⁴³ Cf. Matthew 16:28, Mark 9:1 and Luke 9:27

¹⁴⁴ Ephesians 1:17-18

¹⁴⁵ New International Version

noteworthy that Luke does not even mention this exact statement. If Christ had really predicted that ‘all the tribes (or nations) *of the whole world*’ would be in mourning just before the sign appeared, it is inconceivable that Luke would fail to record that fact. Luke, as a companion of Paul the great apostle to the Gentiles, was intensely interested in the worldwide significance of Christ’s work as savior of all nations. But since *these* words were only intended to indicate what was to happen to the Jewish nation specifically, there was no reason for Luke to mention this to the Gentiles since it was not something that would *directly* affect them. And conversely, there was good reason for Matthew to record this since he wrote primarily for Jewish readers. They were the ones who would (and did) indeed mourn throughout the land when their house was left to them desolate!

- (4) **We do not usually think of the present age in terms of what is stated in Matthew 24:31 which says: “*And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*” Yet this is precisely what began to take place, as never before, in that generation** (and, of course, is still going on now throughout the world). This is true regardless of how we understand the word “*angels.*”¹⁴⁶ Scripture sometimes uses this term to refer to mere men who are sent forth as God’s official messengers. And sometimes it is used to refer to heavenly beings that we usually think of when we hear the word ‘angel.’ And since there is sufficient evidence in scripture to support either of these ways of understanding the reference to ‘angels,’ we think it unwise to be dogmatic on one side or the other. It seems to us, however, that — in this instance — the word probably does refer to heavenly beings, because the Book of Revelation often speaks of them as sounding the trumpet. These trumpets, of course, are not literal trumpets that can be heard by human ears. They are rather symbolic representations of earthly events that signify fulfillment of things prophesied in the word of God.

In any case there is one very important fact that we know for sure. The angels of God are indeed involved in the gathering in of God’s

¹⁴⁶ As R.T. France put it “the ingathering of the chosen people may be expected to be through the work of human ‘messengers,’ and it would be possible to take ἄγγελοι here in this sense, which it carries in 11:10. But in all other cases in Matthew (including 16:28, which is also based on the vision of Dan. 7) it denotes heavenly beings, and in this context of the heavenly authority of the Son of Man it probably refers to the spiritual power underlying human evangelization.” (Op. Cit. p. 928)

elect. This is the very thing the unbelieving Jews found so startling — and offensive! Would God really leave *their* house desolate?¹⁴⁷ Would he really go out into the highways and byways of the world in order to gather others in — even *Gentiles*?¹⁴⁸ And would the very angels of God be involved in such an activity? This was simply unthinkable for most of the Jewish people of that time.¹⁴⁹ Yet, even as Jesus spoke these words, the hour of fulfillment was fast approaching. That is why Jesus went on to say: *“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when **you** see **all these things**, **you** know that he is near, at the very gates.”*¹⁵⁰ Here again it is self-evident that these words are strained to the breaking point if we try to transpose them from *that* generation, to what is still future. If Jesus had intended his words to be understood to refer to something far off in the future, he would surely have said something like this: ‘Now don’t imagine that summer is near, just because the fig tree says it is! No, it is still a long way off. So — when you see these things — don’t get excited. It isn’t going to happen for more than 2,000 years. It’s not at the door for *this* generation.’ But of course Jesus did not say any such thing. The reason was that *“these things”* were *not* in the far distant future, but were going to happen in *that* generation. *“Truly, I say to you”* said Jesus, *“**this generation** will not pass away until **all these things** take place.”*¹⁵¹ Then — as if to add one more hammer blow for emphasis — he said *“heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”*¹⁵² As much as to say: ‘incredible as it may seem to you unbelieving Jews this is absolutely certain — “all these things” are going to happen within this generation.’ Yes, and our Lord kept his word fully — “all these things” did happen in *that* generation.

- (5) This becomes even more certain if we observe the manner in which Christ went on to speak, specifically, about his second coming [παρουσία].¹⁵³ It is not our purpose, in this study, to provide an extensive exposition of the last part of our Lord’s teaching that day. It is sufficient here, simply to emphasize the fact that Jesus sharply con-

¹⁴⁷ Matthew 23:38

¹⁴⁸ Matthew 22:9-10

¹⁴⁹ Matthew 22:1-15, especially v. 15

¹⁵⁰ Matthew 24:32-33

¹⁵¹ Matthew 24:34

¹⁵² Matthew 24:35

¹⁵³ Matthew 24:36 to 25:46

trasted the two things that his disciples had erroneously considered to be simultaneous. Once before¹⁵⁴ Jesus had mentioned his second coming [παρουσία] in order to differentiate it from the calamity he was predicting. He did this in order to remind people then living that his second coming would be like the lightning that comes out of the east and shines to the west. When that event does suddenly come, in other words, there will be no need for anyone to announce it to others, and therefore there can be no excuse for being duped by deceivers who would say “it has happened.” It is this point that Jesus elaborates on in the rest of his teaching recorded in this passage. He first said no one knows the day or hour of his second coming [παρουσία]. This was (and is) one of the secret things known by the Father only.¹⁵⁵ This being the case, it follows that the time when it is to happen cannot be foreknown (or fore-guessed). This is the point of our Lord’s comparison between his second coming and the great flood that came in the days of Noah,¹⁵⁶ and the unexpected thief that comes in the night.¹⁵⁷ If the second coming of our Lord is not known as to the time appointed for it to happen — like lightning that unexpectedly lights up the night sky — like a thief who comes in the night — like the world-wide flood in the days of Noah — then surely it is wrong to try to use material from the earlier part of Matthew 24 in order to calculate when it will happen! Yet this is precisely what has so often been attempted. People often say that Christ’s second coming is very near because of all the *signs* — the wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, and so on. Yet it is this very error that the teaching of Christ was designed to prevent! The one common feature of these three things — the lightning, the thief in the night, and the flood of Noah — is that they come (or came) without any warning signs. And according to Jesus himself, that is exactly the way it will at be his second coming [παρουσία].

Some people find it hard to accept the fact that a majority can be so wrong. But popularity never was a valid test of the true Christian doctrine. The truth is that our Lord was right. “*All these things*” did come to pass in that generation. And the very force — or purpose — of the teaching of Jesus was to warn against the error so common today. It is

¹⁵⁴ In verse 27

¹⁵⁵ Matthew 24:36 (Mark 13:32). As Moses said to the children of Israel, long ago: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and our children forever” Deuteronomy 29:29. The time for the parousia has not been revealed.

¹⁵⁶ Matthew 24:37-39

¹⁵⁷ Matthew 24:42-43

a serious error to confuse the momentous events of 70 A.D. with our Lord's second coming. There were signs to warn of the one. There will be no signs to warn of the other. No, our Lord will return 'as a thief in the night.' His return (παρουσία) will be as sudden, and unexpected as a lightning flash way off on the horizon on a summer night in mid-west America. It will come like 'the flood of Noah.' It will, in other words, be without any warning signs. The only warning will be the constant one found in the words found in the Bible and proclaimed by preachers (just as the only warning of the world-wide flood was Noah's faithful verbal testimony.¹⁵⁸ When the παρουσία does come it will be much like it was then. For as the inspired apostle Paul warned, *"While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape."*¹⁵⁹ It is certainly true that, as Paul wrote to Timothy, *"in the last days perilous times will come."*¹⁶⁰ But we must never forget that the 'last days' began with the ascension of Jesus.¹⁶¹ Can anyone study the history of the Church without seeing that in various places, and at different times, perilous events have happened? Think of the Christians burned by Nero. Think of the Protestant believers tortured during the Roman Catholic Inquisition. Think of the Christians killed under the tyranny of Adolph Hitler. Or think of what happened to churches in China during the rule of Mao. And it could happen to us. If the list of once-faithful churches that have become apostate continues to increase in lands once blessed by the Reformation, there will be perilous times for us too. But this is a very different thing from what we read in Matthew 24:1-34.

Christ was speaking to people who were standing before him about things that were certain to happen in their generation. He gave them a series of 'signs' by which they could know for sure that Jerusalem's destruction was near. But it will not be that way with the second coming of Jesus, for of *that* day and hour God has provided no information to enable us to know when it is about to happen. It has not pleased him to reveal this. That is why Paul, writing to Thessalonian believers, repeats the very teaching of Jesus, saying *"Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will*

¹⁵⁸ 2 Peter 2:5

¹⁵⁹ 1 Thessalonians 5:3-4

¹⁶⁰ 2 Timothy 3:1

¹⁶¹ Cf. Acts 2:17, Hebrews 1:1 etc.

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come as a thief in the night.”¹⁶² The very purpose of Christ was to distinguish carefully these things that differ. How strange it is that so many persist, even today, in confusing them.

What does the future hold? It is our conviction that it holds no such gloomy and pessimistic a scenario as many imagine. Christ is on the throne. He is reigning right now and he will continue to reign until he has put all of his enemies under his feet.¹⁶³ Yes indeed, perilous times will come. But so will seasons of refreshing.¹⁶⁴ Dreadful apostasy may well come *here*, while over *there* God sends another great revival. Meanwhile the world as a whole will simply continue with ‘the wheat and the tares’ growing together until the harvest.¹⁶⁵ Then, without any warning signs at all, the Lord will appear in glory. May the Lord enable us to be ready for that great day.

Questions for Further Study and Discussion:

1. To what does Jesus refer in Matthew 24:29 according to the popular view?
2. To what does Christ refer in Matthew 24:29 according to the analogy of Scripture (comparing Scripture with Scripture)?
3. How do most people today *misunderstand* Matthew 24:30?
4. What was ‘*the sign of the Son of man in heaven?*’
5. What is the common error of interpretation made with respect to the phrase “*coming on the clouds of heaven*”?
6. What does this phrase really refer to?
7. What does Matthew 16:28 (or Mark 9:1 or Luke 9:27) mean?
8. How do Bible translators add to the popular misconception of the meaning of verse 30?
9. What are the two possible ways of understanding ‘angels’ in v. 31?
10. How does v. 32 confirm the conclusion that ‘*all these things*’ (including things in verses 29-31) had to happen in that generation?

¹⁶² 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2

¹⁶³ 1 Corinthians 15:23-28

¹⁶⁴ Acts 3:19

¹⁶⁵ Matthew 13:24-30, 37-43.

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11. What is the main point of Christ's teaching, in the rest of this section (24:36 to the end of Chapter 25)?
12. Read what Paul says about the second coming [παρουσία] of Christ, in I Thessalonians 5, and underline anything that you find which confirms the above conclusions.
13. In what ways is a correct view of the future of great importance to God's people today?

Chapter 3

THE THESSALONIAN LETTERS

The second major prophetic passage in the New Testament is found in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. His two letters to the Thessalonians were probably written early in the apostolic age, probably not later than 55 A.D. This means that approximately 25 years had passed since Jesus delivered the great prophetic sermon recorded in Matthew 24. It also means that Paul wrote this letter about 15 years *before* the destruction of Jerusalem (when "*all these things*" that Jesus had predicted finally happened). Nevertheless it is clear that already, in the Thessalonian church, the very errors that Jesus had carefully warned against¹⁶⁶ were appearing. A careful study of 1 Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:11 will show that there were at least some people in that church who assumed that Christ's second coming (παρουσία) would take place *before* that generation had passed away. It was for this reason that they sorrowed with an unseemly sorrow for those who had already died.¹⁶⁷ They erroneously supposed that such persons would miss out on the blessings to be enjoyed by those who would still be alive when Jesus returned. It was this false notion that the Apostle strongly opposed (4:13-16).¹⁶⁸ But the interesting thing to observe is this: Paul did *not* say it was impossible for Christ to appear in that generation. Indeed, he clearly indicates that he considered this to be a possibility. For he says "*we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming (παρουσία) of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.*"¹⁶⁹ And if our interpretation of Matthew 24 has been correct this is precisely what we would expect Paul to say. Had not our Lord said that no one — not even Jesus himself during his state of humiliation — knew when his second coming would happen? And to say that was one and the same with saying that it might come sooner or that it might come much later. If Paul had denied all possibility that Christ might come back during that generation, he

¹⁶⁶ Matthew 24:4, 23 and 26

¹⁶⁷ 1 Thessalonians 4:13

¹⁶⁸ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-16.

¹⁶⁹ 1 Thessalonians 4:15

would have claimed to know at least something about the time of his second coming. But Paul did not have any such knowledge. No, says Paul, *“concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”*¹⁷⁰ In other words — as we have already pointed out in our discussion of Matthew 24 — the second coming will come without any warning signs. No one, not even an inspired apostle, knew (or could know) when it would take place.

So here, in his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul carries the matter a little further. He again takes up the danger of these people being deceived.¹⁷¹ Because they had rightly believed it to be *possible* that Jesus might return sooner, rather than later, they were dangerously near to being deceived by false rumors to the effect that his second coming [παρ' ουσία] had already happened. Observe what the apostle writes. He urges them *“not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord **has come**.”*¹⁷² The Greek term here is ἐνέστηκεν. It indicates something that has happened with an abiding result. The trouble is that many of our English translations fail to express this faithfully.¹⁷³ The sense, in the original, is that some were succumbing to rumors to the effect that the second coming had already happened. And this was exactly the danger that Christ had predicted 25 years earlier.¹⁷⁴ Were they “so soon” to be “unsettled” or “alarmed” by these false rumors and alarms? Not if Paul could help it. And what better way than to refresh their memory and understanding concerning what was certain to happen *before* the visible return of Jesus? This, as we have seen, was the predicted ruin of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple.

It was *this* that our Lord himself had solemnly promised as an event certain to take place in “*that generation*.” And this being the case, it was, therefore, impossible that “*that day*” (meaning Christ’s second coming or παρουσία) could come before “*all these things*” were fulfilled. Remember this epistle was written about 15 years *before* that awesome destruction came.

¹⁷⁰ 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2

¹⁷¹ “Let no man deceive you by any means” echoes Jesus warning in Mt. 24:23-27.

¹⁷² 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2

¹⁷³ The NIV is excellent here: it correctly translates this word as “has already come”).

¹⁷⁴ Matthew 24:23-24

Part 1 - THE DIFFERING VIEWS

Before we begin our discussion of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, it may be well to describe briefly the three basic types of interpretation that have been made of this passage.

- (1) **The first is that which regards this as a restatement of what Christ had already taught** (as recorded, or summarized, in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21). The falling away, on this view, refers to the great Jewish apostasy. They fell away from God when they rejected Jesus as the Messiah — and continued to reject him even after he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. The man of sin is therefore a description of the one who came and made desolate the Temple and the ‘holy’ city. *According to this view the events predicted by Jesus have already happened* (as promised in Matthew 23:34).
- (2) **The second interpretation is that which was held by many Protestants at the time of the Reformation.** They understood the great apostasy to be the rise of the Papacy, and the false doctrines of Mariolatry, and the like, in the Roman Catholic Church. The man of sin was taken to be the Pope. This view is set forth in the original version of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 25:6. *According to this view the events predicted in 2 Thessalonians have been taking place (and still are taking place) through the last twenty centuries.*
- (3) **The third view is that which takes Paul’s description of the man of sin, and the great apostasy, to be yet future** — something even bigger than what took place in 70 A.D. which is to be fulfilled near the end of time, prior to (and near to) the second coming [παρουσία]. The falling away, on this view, is taken to mean a nearly complete apostasy of the visible Church, near the end of time. And the man of sin is taken to be a person of extraordinary power and authority such as we have not yet seen in history. *According to this view the fulfillment is mostly still future.*

These three views are shown side by side in the following diagram: (with M standing for the appearance of the ‘Man of sin,’ and P for the ‘Parousia’).

Matthew 24 and 2 Thessalonians 2

(Man of sin = M || 70 A.D. = ^ ||= unknown time || Παρουσια = P)

[1] (Jesus)_____ (Paul) M^.....P

[2] (Jesus)_____ (Paul) ^.....M.....P

[3] (Jesus)_____ (Paul) ^.....M/P

Line [1] in the above representation depicts the view defended in this study (with “*all these things*” specifically predicted by Jesus as happening in the generation of the apostles, and so already fulfilled in past history). Line [2] represents the view generally held by Protestants at the time of the Reformation (with the man of sin seen as something of progressive fulfillment, over a long period of time, in the Roman Catholic Papacy). Line [3] represents the view held today by many Evangelical Christians (with the list of events predicted in Matthew 24:4-35 seen as still in the future, as respects their most important and complete fulfillment).

With respect to these views the following should now be clear.

- (1) The third view cannot possibly be correct (popular though it is today) for the simple reason that it contradicts the clear teaching of Jesus. He said there would be no warning sign by which anyone could calculate the time of his second coming. (Remember the three illustrations Jesus used — the thief, the lightning, and the flood of Noah? The thing common to all three of these is the absence of any specific warning signs).
- (2) It is clear that either of the first two views does preserve one main point in the teaching of Jesus: namely, the fact that he will return without warning signs. If the man of sin prediction was fulfilled in the events around 70 A.D. then obviously this cannot be a sign to tell *us* how soon, or when our Lord will return. Likewise, even if what is said about the man of sin is taken as a prediction of the rise of the Papacy (as was the view of some, at least, of the great Reformers), it still cannot serve as a time indicator to tell us when Christ is about to return.
- (3) Again, on either of the first two views it is possible to take seriously the fact that what Paul was talking about was already present in some

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meaningful way when he wrote to the Thessalonians. This point is completely ignored in the third view. The Apostle said “*the secret power of lawlessness is **already** at work*” (v. 7). He also says there is “*one who **now** holds it back*” and he said this “*will continue...till he is taken out of the way*” (v. 7). It is obvious that this fits well with the first view. But it could also be argued that the predicted apostasy, which culminated in later history in the Papacy, had already begun in the Apostolic age when Paul was writing this letter (See 2 Peter 1, Jude, 2 Timothy 2:16-18, 3 John 9, etc.).

- (4) Since we do not see anything in either of the first two views that obviously contradicts what we have already learned from the teaching of Jesus, we will now proceed to consider this passage and then try to determine which of these views seems to have the most evidence to support it as the correct one. In the interpretation of this passage the following points are crucial:

[1] Who is ‘*the man of sin*’ (or lawlessness)?

[2] When does he appear?

[3] What is ‘*the falling away*,’ and how does it relate to the man of sin?

[4] Who is ‘*the restrainer*’?

In the following section we will examine this passage with these questions in mind. (We will also be honest enough to admit it when there are problems we are not able to solve).

Questions for Further Study and Discussion:

1. What was wrong with these Thessalonians (4:13-5:11)?
2. Did Paul think that Christ would return in that generation?
3. What danger predicted by Jesus was on the verge of happening among the Thessalonians?
4. What are the three interpretations of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12?
5. What Scripture contradicts the futurist (to be fulfilled just before Jesus returns) view?

6. Is there anything in the text of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 to help us decide between the first two views? If so, what?
7. What — if anything — in the text of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 would (at first sight at least) seem to be a problem for interpretation type #1?

Part 2 - THE MAIN POINTS

In the previous parts of this discussion we gave our reasons for rejecting the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2 which is popular today, the view that places the final fulfillment of “*all these things*” as at some still future time, just prior to Christ’s second coming. We now want to show why we have been driven to adopt the view that says this prophecy *was* fulfilled in the generation of the Apostles, and also why cannot fully agree with the view that many Protestants had during the time of the Reformation.¹⁷⁵

(1) The first reason is that Paul warned the Thessalonians not to be deceived by those who were being misled into thinking that the day of the Lord had already come (v. 2). No, says Paul, “*for that day will not come, unless the rebellion*¹⁷⁶ *comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed*” (v. 3). Christ’s second coming could not take place, in other words, until this event (the rebellion) had happened. But to what event was Paul referring? We believe it can be none other than what Jesus had already predicted in Matthew 23 and 24:1-35). We have already shown, in our previous discussion, that the Jewish Theocracy was to be overthrown because of its rejection of Jesus as the promised Messiah, and Jesus said that was going to happen in “that generation.” That is why Paul says “*Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you **these things**?*”¹⁷⁷

Please note that the words in bold type, are also found in Matthew 23:36 and 24:34! “***These things***” were precisely the things that Jesus had

¹⁷⁵ It is one thing to say the prophecy concerning the man of sin has had its one and only specific fulfillment in the Apostolic age. But this does not mean that it has no other applications. The false doctrine of the Pope as the Vicar of Christ is very much like the blasphemous claims of the man of sin of which the apostle spoke. It is therefore appropriate to cite this passage of Scripture in condemning the false claims of Roman Catholics. But it is important that we do not confuse things that differ. A legitimate application of a principle taught in a prophetic passage is not at all the same as to say it is that prophecy’s fulfillment.

¹⁷⁶ The Greek term here is ἀποστασία from which we get our word apostasy.

¹⁷⁷ 2 Thessalonians 2:5

spoken of to the apostate Jewish leaders (in Matthew 23) and then to his disciples (in Matthew 24:4-34). Since all of the New Testament scriptures had not yet been written, copied and circulated among all of the churches in those early years, it was therefore necessary for Paul himself to teach the Thessalonians “*these things*.” But having heard “*these things*” from him they ought to have remembered, from his teaching, that Christ could not possibly return until after “*all these things*” had happened. Since they had not yet happened, when Paul sent this letter to them, there was no reason whatever for them to be deceived by these completely false rumors.

(2) The second reason is the presence of time indicators in this 2 Thessalonians passage. Paul did not say “*the secret power of lawlessness*” would come some day in the (far off) future. No, what he said was that it was “*already*” at work as he was writing this letter. He said spoke of “*one who now holds it back*,” but that it had not yet been “*revealed*.”¹⁷⁸ In other words: the man of lawlessness was not spoken of as *nonexistent* at when Paul was writing these words, but only as *not yet revealed*. Paul spoke of him as one who already existed, but who was — for the time being — still held back or hidden.

Observe also that, in verse 10, the apostle describes the rebellion (ἡ ποτασία) as something which had *already* happened. Unbelieving Jews were *already* perishing because they *already had* persistently refused to love the truth so they could be saved. That is why the inspired apostle said “*for this reason God is sending* (Greek: πέμπει) *them a powerful delusion so that they have believed* (Greek: πιστεύουσι) *the lie*”¹⁷⁹ Because most of the Jews of that generation had already rejected Jesus as their Messiah, God himself had hardened their hearts in that unbelief even as Paul wrote. The time indicators quite clearly show that Paul was writing about something that was already a reality as he wrote. This clearly supports the first interpretation listed above.

The Rebellion

The Greek word in verse 3 which is translated “rebellion” in the ESV is ἀποστασία. It is more commonly translated as ‘apostasy’ (which means a fatal falling or turning away from the God of the Bible). It is interesting to note, however, that in the Greek Version of the Old Testament (and in some New Testament passages) this term is also used to mean ‘divorce!’

¹⁷⁸ 2 Thessalonians 2:6

¹⁷⁹ 2 Thessalonians 2:11

That is very significant because, in Biblical language, the greatest divorce in history was the severance of the bond between the nation of Israel and God. But either way we take this Greek word, the historical event that it refers to was indeed both an *apostasy* and a *divorce*. It was also the momentous event prophesied by our Lord in Matthew 23. Think of the woes pronounced by our Lord and predicted to happen in that generation! And already they were coming to pass when Paul wrote this letter. Time after time the Jews — to whom Paul went first with the gospel message — rejected his demonstration from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus was indeed their promised Messiah. But what usually happened was that they stubbornly refused to receive the truth so that they might be saved. Therefore God was already sending them a strong delusion so that they would believe ‘the lie.’¹⁸⁰ Therefore, Paul could already say “*the wrath of God has come upon them at last* [or, as in some translations, *to the uttermost*].”¹⁸¹ It was near, even at the doors, the dreaded hour of spiritual darkness, in which a vast majority of the Jews would be cut out of their own olive tree.¹⁸² Truly this was the great apostasy (and the great divorce) that no other event in history can equal.

The Man of Lawlessness

So who was “*the man of lawlessness?*” [ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀμαρτίας (or, as in some manuscripts, the man of *sin*: ἀνομίας)] It is our opinion that this phrase most likely denotes the government of the Roman Empire as an institution and Caesar as its supreme embodiment. We say this for the following reasons.

[1] “*The Abomination of Desolation*” spoken of by Daniel, was the thing especially warned of by our Lord.¹⁸³ But we know, both from Luke 21:20,21 (written for Gentile readers) and from the book of Daniel that this phrase originated in the desolation of the Jewish Temple by Antiochus Ephiphanes in 167 B.C.¹⁸⁴ Daniel 11:30-32 indicates this clearly.

¹⁸⁰ 2 Thessalonians 2:11 (Cf. 1 John 2:22 “Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the father and the son.”)

¹⁸¹ 2 Thessalonians 2:16

¹⁸² Romans 11:17

¹⁸³ Matthew 24:15

¹⁸⁴ Antiochus called himself Θεος Επιφανής (meaning ‘God manifested’, or just manifested, or illustrious, for short). But most people were of a very opposite opinion. They changed one letter in his name to make it Επιμανής (meaning mad man, or insane) calling him Antiochus Epimmanes. The account of what he did to desecrate the Temple and to alienate the Jews from their spiritual heritage, is found in the Second Book of the Maccabees (a book of Jewish history which, though not considered part of the Old Testament,

We cannot give an extended exposition of Daniel here. But many Bible commentators agree that Daniel's prediction of an "abomination of desolation"¹⁸⁵ was fulfilled by the desecrating activity of this Antiochus. Viewed from the perspective of his standing in the world, at that time, this man was relatively insignificant. He did not begin to compare in fame or stature with such Empire builders as Nebuchadnezzar, or Alexander the Great. But from the perspective of redemptive history Antiochus was very important indeed. During a brief moment in history this man aspired to, and conspired to attain, a sphere of great power and glory. He had ambitions to become a ruler of importance in one of the geographical sections of the empire left by Alexander the Great when he died at the age of 33. But when his grandiose plans were frustrated he took out his frustration by desecrating the Temple. He even compelled Jews to sacrifice swine on the holy altar.¹⁸⁶

Christ expected the Jews who were familiar with the book of Daniel (and probably the Books of the Maccabees also) to understand this historical event and its title. Thus the abomination of desolation which was predicted in Daniel 12:11, was taken up by Jesus in Matthew 24, and meant to be understood to refer to something very similar to what the Antiochus Epiphanes had done.¹⁸⁷

[2] The major error in the popular view is the assumption (without scriptural warrant) that "*the man of sin [or lawlessness]*" has to be someone of world-wide authority (or, in other words, a man of unparalleled importance in all of history, from a worldly point of view). There is no such teaching in this passage, nor is it supported by the analogy of Scripture. It was not the position of the man of sin with respect to the world that mattered, but his position with respect to the Jewish Temple that was still standing when Paul wrote these words.

If it be objected that the Roman Emperors did not make the awesome claims that are ascribed here to the man of sin, we can only reply that they did. In fact, the scripture tells us that it was common for ancient rulers to make similar claims to divinity. In Ezekiel 28:2-10, for example, we are

was published as part of the Apocrypha included in the Greek [LXX] version of the Old Testament).

¹⁸⁵ Daniel 11:32

¹⁸⁶ See 1 Maccabees 1:10-24 for more on this.

¹⁸⁷ We have a similar phenomenon today in our word 'holocaust.' The murder of millions of Jews (and others) by Hitler became known as the holocaust. It is now used to emphasize the wickedness of things, as for example abortion.

told of the Prince of Tyre (hardly a man of world-wide authority and importance) who said “*I am God, I sit in the seat of God*” (v. 2). Similarly, Isaiah describes the Emperor of Babylon as saying “*I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High*” (Isaiah 14:14). So, by the analogy of Scripture, when Daniel (11:35-45) speaks of a “...king who will do as he pleases and magnify himself above every god...etc.,” there can hardly be any doubt that he intends for us to understand him to be like these other arrogant rulers in ancient times who were described with this same terminology. In other words, the analogy shows this to be a common self-designation for heathen civil rulers in history.

We therefore see, from this analogy of the Scripture, that the “man of sin” is almost certainly the Roman Caesar.

The Restrainer

The one who restrained the man of sin for a while can also be determined by comparing Scripture with Scripture. In Daniel’s day, the prince of Persia was Israel’s oppressor. The Lord, therefore, came to Daniel¹⁸⁸ to inform him that his prayer had already been heard from the first day he began praying. “*But*” said the Lord “*the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days.*”¹⁸⁹ So it was the Lord himself — or, to be more precise, the angel of the Lord (whom we take to be the pre-incarnate Christ) — who restrained this Prince. Again, in 10:21, we read: “*there is none who contends by my side against these except Michael your prince.*”

In this we are informed that behind the struggle between a great heathen prince and the Jewish people stood the higher powers of the invisible world. In other words, behind the visible struggle here on earth there was a conflict between the spiritual principalities and powers in the heavenly places. And since, in this Thessalonians passage, this human ruler (“the man of lawlessness”) is described as functioning as an instrument of Satan¹⁹⁰ it follows, as night follows day, that there was no one powerful enough to restrain him but this same great angel of the Lord (Cf. Jude 9). One popular interpretation understands this to mean that (in Paul’s day, at least) the Roman Government itself was the restraining

¹⁸⁸ Daniel 10:10-12

¹⁸⁹ Daniel 10:12-14

¹⁹⁰ 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10

power. But the difficulty with this interpretation is the (well-known) fact that it was the Roman Government that soon (during the first three centuries of the history of the Christian Church) began to persecute Christian believers. It is much more in harmony with history, and the analogy of Scripture, to see the Roman Empire as headed up in Caesar, as being the thing restrained by the Lord. But that restraint was removed in 70 A.D. And when it was removed the Romans came and fulfilled the woeful predictions of Jesus.

The Relationship

It may be objected, on this view, that there is no clear connection between (1) the apostasy and (2) the revelation of the man of lawlessness. This objection evaporates, however, when we remember the analogy of Scripture. In the revelation given to Daniel the inner connection is apparent. When the Old Testament church became grossly unfaithful God permitted the princes of the world kingdoms to oppress them. In other words, the work of Satan has two aspects. On the one hand he works with “*false signs and wonders*”¹⁹¹ in order to deceive those who profess to be God’s people. And then when they *are* deluded — because they did not receive the love of the truth — God permits Satanically directed forces to get a mastery over them. Wasn’t this the very thing that Jesus had promised for that generation?¹⁹² A study of the account of the Jewish historian Josephus (who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple) should be enough to convince the most skeptical that the climactic apostasy of the Jews came on the crest of the wave of just such lying signs and wonders. The final inundation came when Titus — representing Rome’s Imperial power — came to ‘sit down’ in the Temple in Jerusalem.

In the popular misconception prevalent today to say “*he takes his seat in the Temple*”¹⁹³ is taken to mean some kind of [future] supreme authority over the whole Christian church, which will be accomplished by one supremely evil man. The writer of this study once held this view himself, for the simple reason that he had heard it so often in his early life. But a closer study of the original Greek text of this passage finally dispelled this error completely. The Greek word *ναός* in verse 4 is often translated by the word Temple but originally denoted only ‘*the inner sanctuary*’ of the Temple, and not the Temple as a whole. Consequently, in the New Testament, this

¹⁹¹ 2 Thessalonians 2:9

¹⁹² Luke 21:24

¹⁹³ 2 Thessalonians 2:4

term is only used with reference to true believers who have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them.¹⁹⁴ Nowhere in the New Testament do we ever find anything to suggest that people in a state of *apostasy* can to be called God's temple-sanctuary. How, then, could some future "man of sin" sit down in a spiritual temple composed of true believers? Those who reject God's truth are no part of God's ναὸν in the New Testament, but are rather identified as being part of the Synagogue of Satan.¹⁹⁵ Therefore no man who — on this wrong view, would head up a great apostasy — could ever really sit in God's New Testament Temple because, by definition, this term [ναὸν] refers only to those who are true believers.

But on the basis of the interpretation that we have outlined above, it is not difficult to understand this point. Until 70 A.D. there was a Temple in Jerusalem. Up to that time in history God himself had acknowledged it as *his* Temple. Until the great divorce or apostasy — announced by Jesus — it was still God's house. But Jesus warned the unbelieving Jews that soon, very soon, their house would be left to them desolate. And that is exactly what actually happened. The "*man of lawlessness*" came to Jerusalem and sat down in that Temple, as if *he* was divine. And it all happened 'in that generation' exactly as Jesus had predicted.

Questions for Further Study and Discussion:

1. What is the proper translation of the last phrase in 2 Th. 2:2?
2. With what, in Matthew 24, does this tie in?
3. To what does Paul refer when he says these things in 2 Th. 2:5?
4. Find some time indicators in 2 Th. 2:1-12. What do they show?
5. To what does Paul refer when he speaks of 'the apostasy'?
6. Who was 'the Man of sin (or lawlessness)'?
7. What O.T. evidence strongly supports this conclusion?
8. Who was 'the restrainer'?
9. What O.T. evidence supports this?

¹⁹⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19; and 2 Corinthians 6:16

¹⁹⁵ Revelation 2:9

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10. What is the relationship between the apostasy — the removal of restraint — and the revelation of the man of sin?
11. What N.T. data stands in the way of the Reformation interpretation of the man of sin sitting in the Temple?

Chapter 4

THE ANTICHRIST

The antichrist is only mentioned in the New Testament in the Epistles of John. We here quote all of these texts as we find them in the ESV. *“Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.”* - *“Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.”* - *“And every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.”* - *“For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.”*¹⁹⁶

The most common interpretation of these texts is that which envisions a future ‘superman’ of evil. The writer was also, at one time, an adherent of this popular idea, one simple reason: this was what the writer had so often ‘heard’ from other people. But he was never really satisfied with it. And here again it turned out that a closer study of these texts revealed some startling things when we were careful to compare scripture with scripture.

What did John mean when he said *“as you have **heard** that antichrist is coming?”*¹⁹⁷ Did he mean that what the people he was writing to had heard was correct? Or did he merely indicate that they too (those first-century Thessalonian Christians to whom he was writing) had fallen under the influence of an erroneous, but common and popular, opinion? We cannot help but recall that Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, used this very same expression. *“You have **heard**”*¹⁹⁸ Jesus said it, over and over again, in that sermon. But did he mean that what they had heard was the truth?

¹⁹⁶ 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; and 2 John 7.

¹⁹⁷ 1 John 2:18

¹⁹⁸ Matthew 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43

No, that was just the trouble: what they had heard wasn't exactly the truth! That is why Jesus immediately went on to correct serious errors and distortions in what those people had heard repeated so many times. And it was the same, later on, when John wrote about this antichrist doctrine. John did not say there was no truth at all in what people in Thessalonica had been hearing. But he did make it clear that there were serious errors in what they had heard. That is why he, following the example of his Lord, wrote to correct error and clarify truth. So in John's corrective of what they had heard he clearly states that the real antichrist was (1) *not* something in the distant *future*, but rather something already *present*; (2) *not* something to be found in *one* 'big' future antichrist, but in *many* present antichrists; and (3) *not* a super *man* at all, but rather a supernatural *spirit* of error.

What John calls "*the antichrist*" was already present when John wrote this Epistle. How could he have said it more clearly? "*Children*" he wrote "*it is the last hour.*" And how did John know it was the last hour? Well, he knew it because he could truthfully say "*even now many antichrists have arisen.*" The original Greek here is decisive. John said the antichrist had come in that historical era in which he, himself, was living. It was an accomplished fact with an abiding result when John wrote, prior to 100 A.D. Is this not often ignored — yes, even denied — on the common view of the antichrist? It is often said, of course, that there were forerunners of *the* antichrist. But observe: John did not say that. He did not speak of 'little antichrists' in his day leading up to a 'big one' at some time later in history. No, what he said is "*this is the last hour.*" It was, in fact, precisely because so many antichrists had already arisen that John knew it was the last hour. For "*this is the antichrist*" he said "*the one who denies the Father and the Son.*" As Professor B. B. Warfield stated it "predecessors of antichrist might prove that the 'last hour' was approaching; only actual antichrists could prove that 'the last hour' had already come. There can be no question, then, that John volatilizes the individual antichrist (i.e. the rumored superman of evil) into thin air, and substitutes for him a multitude of 'antichrists.'"¹⁹⁹

This conclusion is strengthened further by the teaching of 1 John 4:3. In this text we clearly see that there is what can be called an antichrist spirit in the world. But the remarkable thing is that John said what they had heard of as something that was *going to come* into the world, was in fact *already present*. It "*now is in the world already*"²⁰⁰ said John. In other

¹⁹⁹ From Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield, Vol. 2, p. 360.

²⁰⁰ 1 John 4:3

words “John not only erases the individual antichrist from the scroll of prediction,” to quote Warfield again, “but reduces him just to a heresy.” For “*who is the liar, but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? **This is the antichrist.***”²⁰¹ In fact, says John, “*every spirit which confesses that Jesus is Christ come in the flesh is of God; and no spirit which does not confess Jesus, is of God: and **this is the spirit of the antichrist of which you have heard was coming: and now is in the world already.***”²⁰² The antichrist phenomenon was not a thing of the future even when John wrote these words. It was already a present reality. And it was not there in merely a small, preliminary way. No, it was there in its fullness.

But what difference does it make (someone may ask) which view we have concerning the antichrist? Well, it is our conviction that it makes a big difference. Imagine, for argument’s sake, a young theological student after World War II. The war had just ended. He had just enrolled as a student in a theological seminary that was drifting away from the faith. ‘Ah well,’ he might have said to himself, ‘this isn’t anything to get excited about: at least I don’t live during the terrible time of the coming Antichrist.’ So, in his foolish naiveté, he might have relaxed his guard and the spirit of antichrist could have destroyed him. A false sense of security engendered by the false idea that the real Antichrist — the ‘big one’ — is still some distance in the future, could have led him to become the victim of the many antichrists (controlled by the antichrist spirit of the age) of which this apostle warned in these letters. Suppose, on the other hand, that this same young man came to see the three simple elements of John’s teaching (that the antichrist is *present*, not far off in the future — *many*, not just one — and a *spirit*, not one super man). This insight would at once put him on his guard, and therefore he would not become a victim.

When we look at the sad state of many Churches today, isn’t this lesson apparent? Instead of looking for the one big Antichrist assumed to be coming in the future, Christians ought to have been on guard against the many antichrists that were already present. For — as John has assured us — “*the Antichrist*” is anyone “*who denies the Father and the Son.*”²⁰³ How, we might well ask, could John have made it any clearer? Since “*every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God,*”²⁰⁴ and since “*many deceivers have gone out into the world...who do not acknowledge Jesus*

²⁰¹ 1 John 2:22

²⁰² 1 John 4:3

²⁰³ 1 John 2:22b

²⁰⁴ 1 John 4:3

Christ as coming in the flesh”²⁰⁵ does it not follow (as John has assured us) that “*this is...the Antichrist?*”²⁰⁶ Any theologian, college teacher, or minister of the gospel, who denies the historical truthfulness of the Bible, is under the dominion of the antichristian spirit. All attacks of the antichrist have this as their essence. And the sad thing is that entire churches have been carried away by this spirit while many of the church members remained unaware of what was happening. They thought they were safe because they had always ‘heard’ that the antichrist was still in the future. In actual fact they became victims of the real antichrist of the Scripture.

Yes, it’s a bad thing indeed, when Christians are held in the spell of a wrong view of the future. Yet that is exactly what has happened to many confused Christian people today. They are pessimistic about the future. They think it will be very dark — because they believe ‘the big antichrist’ is coming. The truth is that the future for God’s people is not dark, for — as this same apostle John clearly says so — “*the darkness is past, and the true light is already shining.*”²⁰⁷ This is not said as a kind of ‘whistling in the dark.’ Biblical Christians do *not* believe in any Utopia to be attained in world history, before the return of Jesus. No, but they *do* believe in the victory of the cause of Christ in world history. That is why they realize that they need to put on the whole armor of God in order to fight the good fight of faith in overcoming every manifestation of the spirit of the antichrist. The time of alarm is now, not ‘someday.’ There perils all around us, not just somewhere else. The need to take the whole armor of God is ours, as it will be for those who come later.²⁰⁸ But the encouraging thing is that the future really is bright. Christ has ascended to glory. He sits, right now, at the right hand of God — he is in the process of “coming” (ἐρχόμενον) right now on the clouds of heaven in His kingdom.

We don’t know when Jesus will return to us in the visible glory of his parousia (παρουσία). There will be no signs to tell us when it is about to happen. He simply warns us to be awake — and at work — so that when he does come he will find us as ‘faithful servants.’ What the Church needs today is to go back and carefully study the words of Christ and his apostles. And nowhere is this more needed than in the doctrine of the future. If this brief study will encourage that it will need no other justification.

²⁰⁵ 2 John 7

²⁰⁶ 1 John 2:22 & 4:3

²⁰⁷ 1 John 2:8b

²⁰⁸ Ephesians 6:11-18

Questions for Further Study and Discussion:

1. What is the popular view concerning the Antichrist?
2. To what does the phrase “you have heard” refer in Matthew Chapter 5?
3. Can you state the three basic errors that John refutes in his Antichrist statements?
4. From the texts printed in the first paragraph on page 68 underline the words that show that John did not believe in one big antichrist in the future.
5. What is the main teaching that the spirit of the antichrist seeks to destroy in the church?
6. How does a false doctrine of antichrist harm in the church?
7. Is there any evidence of the antichrist in your community?
8. Do you see it as helpful for your own daily life to understand the doctrine of the antichrist? If so, how?

Chapter 5

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

Introduction (1:1-20)

John wrote to seven churches located in well-known cities in first century Asia Minor (Anatolia).²⁰⁹ Jesus expressly told him that this revelation was about *“things that must soon take place.”*²¹⁰ This is emphasized again, at the close of this book,²¹¹ when he says: *“Behold, I am coming soon;”* *“Surely, I am coming soon.”* Jesus also told John he was **not to** *“seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.”*²¹² Surely then, if words have meaning, the events described in this book were in the near future when this book was written. It is our conviction that this is an intentional indication that what John wrote is in harmony with the repeated declaration of Jesus who said *“Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation”* yes *“Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.”*²¹³

The Book of Revelation, in other words, is not a revelation of many things that were in the distant future when John wrote this book, but rather a revelation of things that were about to happen and therefore — from our standpoint — things which have long since happened. In three of the other eye-witness accounts of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ — which we call ‘the synoptic gospels’ — we have rather full accounts of the eschatological discourse of Jesus.²¹⁴ We therefore know that the eschatological teaching of Jesus was remembered by his apostles as providing information of great importance. Why, then, didn’t the apostle John include this in his gospel, as Matthew, Mark and Luke did? It is our conviction that the reason for this omission was not because he differed from them in his opinion about its importance, but because it was the will of

²⁰⁹ The seven churches were located in what we know today as Turkey.

²¹⁰ Revelation 1:1

²¹¹ Revelation 22:12, 20

²¹² Matthew 23:36 and 24:34

²¹³ Matthew 24:1-42, Mark 13:1-37 and Luke 21:5-36.

²¹⁴ Matthew 24:1-42, Mark 13:1-37 and Luke 21:5-36.

God to have John restate that teaching of Jesus in a special way. And that special way of retelling it was by means of the dramatic visions John received and then wrote down in this book. In other words, *the Book of Revelation is John's restatement of the very same material that Jesus originally gave in his eschatological discourse to his disciples, as recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke.*

As we have already demonstrated²¹⁵ our Lord's eschatological discourse can only be rightly understood by comparing Scripture with Scripture. The same is equally true (perhaps even more so) when it comes to these visions that were shown to John. We can only hope to understand these visions, therefore, if we keep in mind such things as these: **(1)** Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah are especially helpful. **(2)** The number 7 is notably prominent: 7 spirits, 7 churches, 7 seals, 7 trumpets, 7 seals, 7 eyes, 7 horns, 7 plagues. Numbers 3, 4, 10 and 12 are also used in a special way. Where these are used we should not insist on taking them as literally intended. **(3)** Old Testament usage should constantly guide our interpretation.

Finally, concerning the value or use of things revealed in these visions it may seem disappointing, at first, to come to understand that we do not have in these visions a preview of the entire chronological history of the church or the world from the time of John's writing until our Lord's second coming. But there is no more reason to be disappointed *here*, with the book of Revelation, than with our Lord's own teaching. He did not give any detailed account of what was going to happen *after* the destruction of the Temple either, nor did he give us a list of signs to indicate the time of his [παρουσία] second coming. To the contrary — as we have already indicated — he said there would not be any such signs!²¹⁶ So we should not think of Revelation as given to supply something lacking in our Lord's discourse, because in fact nothing was lacking

To some this may seem to subtract from the usefulness of the book of Revelation. But that is to misunderstand the nature of Scripture. There was a time (in the apostolic age) when God sent inspired messages to then existing churches, with infallible teaching concerning the literal needs of those particular churches. This does not happen today because the Canon

²¹⁵ See especially pages 21-54.

²¹⁶ This was the point of his reference to the thief in the night, and the lightning that suddenly shines in the night sky, and the worldwide flood that came without warning in Noah's time. (Cf. 1 Thess. 5:1-3)

of Scripture is closed.²¹⁷ But does this reduce the value of those inspired letters for us? No, of course it doesn't. Although they made specific references to existing churches at a particular time, yet in the infinite wisdom of God, these letters were also intended for us because they contain *doctrines* and ethical *principles* that *apply* — and *were meant to apply by way of analogy* — to our situation too. And the same holds true for the New Testament's eschatological material.

As we pointed out at an earlier point in this study, the Reformers saw in the rise of the Papacy what seemed to them to be the very *man of sin* and the *antichrist* spoken of by two of the apostles, Paul and John. This interpretation even made its way into the original text of the Westminster Confession (25:6). It said: "*There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof: but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself, in the church, against Christ and all that is called God.*" We see this as an example of the common error of assuming a kind of double fulfillment. But there is no need to resort to such a doubtful principle as double fulfillment, as the revision of this article shows. Here is the way this section of the Confession now reads in the revised version adopted by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). "*There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof.*" Period! The difference is that in this shortened formulation a proper *application* is made of *principles* taught in the Bible passages having to do with the man of sin, and the antichrist, without claiming that the pope is *the* (or even *a* second) *fulfillment* of these figures. No, *the* one and only *fulfillment* took place in the apostolic age as Jesus ascended to the right hand of the father, leaving the unbelieving Jews who had rejected him in desolation. This shows how a one-time-only *fulfillment* of a prophecy, may — at the same time — have many proper *applications*.

The simple, but very important, point is that the Scriptures (including those dealing with "*all these things*" that Jesus promised for that generation) have many valid *applications*, just as all of the other New Testament writings do. But they only had *one fulfillment*. Because Jesus said: "*This generation shall by no means pass away until all these things take*

²¹⁷ "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1:6

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place”²¹⁸ While he also made it clear that “*concerning that day and hour* [the day of his παρουσία] *no one knows*”²¹⁹ — even Jesus himself did not know during his earthly ministry — and as Jesus said to his apostles *after* he rose from the dead: “*It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has put in his own authority*” (Acts 1:7). It is therefore a certainty that the book Revelation does not provide information by which anyone can calculate the times or seasons of post-ascension redemptive history in *any* way, shape or form. No, but as John keeps reminding us,²²⁰ the book of Revelation does restate in powerful visions what was to happen in *that* generation.

Questions:

1. What statements in Revelation 1-3 show that it is *not* intended as a disclosure of events taking place in our time in history?

What is the difference between the original and revised (OPC) and (PCA) version of the Westminster Confession 25:6?

Was anything lost by this change?

Was anything gained by this change?

5. What is the great benefit of *not* knowing the times or seasons?

As we consider this awesome book we begin with an Outline of it.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Introduction: title & author, blessing greetings, benediction: Rev. 1:1-8

I. Things which have been seen (past): 1:9-20

- A. Background: 1:9-11
- B. Vision of Christ among seven candle sticks: 1:12-16
- C. Reaction and Interpretation: 1:17-20

II. Things which are (present): letters to seven churches Rev. 2-3

The Churches

The Common Pattern

- A. Ephesus 2:1-7 - the address to the angel of the church
- B. Smyrna 2:8-11 - the character designation of Christ (from chap. 1)

²¹⁸ Matthew 24:34

²¹⁹ Matthew 24:36

²²⁰ Rev. 1:1 “The Revelation...God gave...(of) things that must take place with swiftness [tacei]” - 21:7 & 21:20 “I am coming [ercomai] swiftly [tacu]”

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- C. Pergamos 2:12-17 - the word of commendation (if applicable)
- D. Thyatira 2:18-29 - the word of rebuke (if applicable)
- E. Sardis 3:1-6 - the exhortation to obedience etc.
- F. Philadelphia 3:7-13 - the warning "he that hath an ear..."
- G. Laodicea 3:14-22 - the promise to those who overcome

III. Things about to happen (μελλει) - (in the near future when John was writing - 4:1ff

- A. First Prophecy (**The Big Book**) **The Seven Seals** - God's **plan** of judgment revealed - 4:1 - 12:17 [This book is big because it encompasses the whole human race]
(*Background to the judgment on the first enemy—apostate Jerusalem*): 4:1-8:5
 - a. Setting and main characters: chap. 4-5
 - (1) the heavenly court: exaltation of God's sovereignty in creation: 4
 - (2) the Lamb of God and the scroll: exaltation of sovereign in redemption: 5
 - b. Preview of the contents and preparation for judgment: chap. 6-7
 - (1) the first seals broken: 6:1-17 (4+2+1 pattern)
 - (2) the 144,000 sealed by God: 7:1-17
 - c. Prelude to the judgment: 8:1-5 (scene at heaven: tabernacle)
- B. Second prophecy **The Seven Trumpets** - the **summons** to judgment 8:6-11:19
 - a. first 4 trumpets (natural calamities): 8:6-12
 - b. last 3 trumpets (human woes), including: (8:13-11:19)
 - (1) Interpretation: 10:1-7 (**The Little Book**) God's plan of redemption closed [this book is small because it concerns only part of mankind - the elect]
Note especially v. 7 and compare it with Ephesians 2:11-13, and 3:1-7
 - (2) Foreshadow of next section: 10:8-11 (at sixth trumpet)
 - (3) Elaboration on justice of God's judgment: 11:1-13—the two witnesses
 - (4) Note of finality with seventh trumpet: 11:14-19
 - (5) Declaration of God's victory and reign (kingdom) 11:15-17
- C. Explanation (of Kingdom establishment) & Transition (with reference to Satan)
 - a. Old Israel brings forth the Messiah: 12:1-2
 - b. Satan seeks to destroy both Old Israel and the Messiah 12:3-5
 - c. Out of Old Israel the New Israel (the church) is preserved: 12:6-12.
 - d. Satan then turns to persecute Gentile church: 12:13-17
- D. Background to the judgment on the second enemy (pagan Rome): 13:1-15:8
 - a. Setting and main characters: 13:1-14:5
 - (1) Satan on sea-shore and his followers (two Beasts): 13:1-18
 - (2) Christ on Mount Zion and his followers (144,000): 14:1-5
 - b. Preview of the contents: 14:6-20
 - (1) three angelic messages: 14:6-13
 - (2) two harvests of the earth: 14:14-20
- E. Third prophecy: **The Seven Bowls** 15:1-18:24 the **execution** of God's judgment.
 - 1. Prelude to the judgment: 15:1-8 (scene at heavenly temple)
 - a. first four bowls (natural calamities): 16:1-9
 - b. last three bowls (human afflictions), including: (16:10-19:10)

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- (1) Foreshadow of next section: 16:13-16 (at sixth bowl)
- (2) Note of finality at seventh bowl: 16:17-21
- (3) Interpretation: 17:1-18
- (4) Elaboration on justice of God's judgment: Babylon's fornication and fall 18:1-24
- (5) Declaration of God's victory and reign (kingdom): 19:1-10
2. Resultant Vision of white horse rider, followed by church (kingdom extended) 19:11-21
 - a. Background: main characters 19:11-19
 - b. The victorious outcome of the battle: 19:20-21
3. Explanation (Kingdom establishment & Transition with reference to Satan (20:1-9a)
 - a. Christ's advent 20:1 by which Satan is bound - 20:2,3
 - c. Saints rule with Christ for a millennium - 20:4-6
 - d. Satan loosed for a season with these things 20:3 and 7 (with, not after)
 - e. Christ returns (παρουσια) to sit on the great white throne for final judgment - 20:9b-15
4. The consummation of creation and redemption in the eternal state: *the New Heavens and Earth, the New Jerusalem* 21:1-22:5

IV. **Conclusion:** final certification, instructions, blessings and curses, benediction: 22:6-21

Part 1 - The Things That Are (Revelation Chapters 2 - 3)

Immediately after the opening statements, the salutation and the doxology, the theme of Revelation is announced: "*Behold he is coming [έρχεται] with the clouds, and every eye shall see him, and they who pierced him, and all the tribes of the land [Greek: *πάσαι αἱ φυλαὶ τῆς γῆς*] shall wail over him*" (1:7) [Author's translation].

It is important to notice that these words are virtually the same as our Lord's words in Matthew 24:30: "*Then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the land shall mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.*"²²¹ The common English translation — "*all kindreds of the earth*" — appears to have misled not only many lay readers, but even learned commentators. No Hellenist during our Lord's time on earth would have understood these words to mean all nations of the habitable globe. This phrase is traceable to the Septuagint

²²¹ The author's literal translation

translation of Zechariah 12:12, where all the families of the land of Judah are represented as mourning.

The words *“they who pierced him”* are from Zechariah 12:10, and should here be understood not so much as referring to the soldiers who nailed Jesus to the cross, and pierced his side, as of the Jews, upon whom Peter charged the crime,²²² and who had cried *“His blood be upon us and upon our children”*²²³ To these Jews Jesus himself said: *“Hereafter **you** shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.”*²²⁴

Having announced his great theme, the writer proceeds to record his vision of the A [Alpha] and Ω [Omega], the first and the last — an expression taken from Isaiah 12:4; 44:6; 48:12. The description of the Son of man is mainly stated in the terms by which Daniel described the Ancient of days²²⁵ and the Son of man.²²⁶ It also appropriates expressions from other prophets.²²⁷

The seven golden candlesticks remind us of Zechariah’s one golden candlestick with its seven-branched lamps.²²⁸ The meaning of the symbols is given by the Lord himself, and the whole forms an impressive introduction to the seven epistles.

These seven epistles are full of allusions showing that there was much persecution of the faithful when John was on the Island of Patmos, and that a crisis was at hand. The warnings, counsels, and encouragements given to these Churches correspond in substance to those that our Lord gave to his disciples in Matthew 24. He warned them of false prophets. He told them they would have tribulation. He warned that some would be put to death, and that the love of many would wax cold. But he also encouraged them by promising that all who endured to the end would be saved.²²⁹

²²² Acts 2:23, 36; 5:30

²²³ Matthew 27:25

²²⁴ Matthew 26:64

²²⁵ Daniel 7:9

²²⁶ Daniel 10:5 & 6

²²⁷ Isaiah 11:4; 49:2; Ezekiel 1:26, 28; 43:2

²²⁸ Zechariah 4:2

²²⁹ In our remoteness from that time we can hardly feel the force of these epistles as those to whom they were first addressed.

The first three gospels²³⁰ contain a summary of the great eschatological discourse of Jesus. So the question inevitably arises: Why didn't the apostle John also tell us what he heard Jesus say on that momentous occasion? We again express our conviction that it was not left out of his gospel account because John thought it unimportant! To the contrary, we believe that he, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, was inspired to write the entire book of Revelation in order to communicate the same message even more vividly for our benefit. God enabled him to 'see' it all over again in a series of visions.

In the material that follows we will see, again and again, how the material presented to John in these visions parallels what we have already seen in the first three gospels.²³¹

Part 2 - The Things That Soon Will Be (Revelation Chapters 4 - 20)

A third part of "*things that must soon take place*" (1:1) was "*those that are to take place after this*" (1:19), but even these would happen soon (22:10). For, as Jesus said: "*I am coming [ερχομαι not παρουσια] soon.*"

To understand the visions that John describes in the following chapters of Revelation, it is important to grasp the three indicators so clearly shown in the outline above. These indicators show that the structure of this Book of Revelation is remarkably similar to the structure of the Old Testament book of Daniel. The outline of Daniel's visions, on p. 15 of this study, shows how those prophecies were *parallel* with each other, not *chronologically successive*. The visions covered the same historical period over and over again, with each review giving new insights. And it is much the same — though perhaps even more obviously so — in the book of Revelation. We say "even more so" because of the obvious distinction between the seven *seals that are lifted*, the seven *trumpets that are sounded* and the seven *bowls that are poured out*. (Please consult the outline above to see these in sequence)

(1) **Seals**, in biblical times, were used to *conceal*. Things under seals were secret. The removal of the seals *revealed* what had been secret before. So the first series of visions John received was a series of seals that were removed.

²³⁰ Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21

²³¹ In the material that follows we will use the equal sign = to indicate that something in John's vision has the meaning which follows.

The meaning is virtually self evident: *here God is disclosing his previously secret plan.*

(2) **Trumpets** were used in Biblical times to *announce* and to *summon*. So the second series of visions were meant to indicate that God not only had a plan, but that the time had now come to *announce* it—and *to call for his plan to be executed*/

(3) **Bowls** of wrath were meant to signify the actual *execution* — in earth time and space — of the plan that had been *revealed* and *announced*. What God *planned* from all eternity, and had *announced* and *summoned* by the trumpets of the prophets and apostles of the Lord, *was actually carried out.*

From this it is perfectly clear that we are not to think of the Book of Revelation as a long story — with three chronologically sequential segments — but of one short story about an unparalleled event. And that one unparalleled event in the history of the world was *“the great tribulation”* which surpassed anything that had ever happened before that time, or that would ever happen after that time, in its cosmic significance. This is clearly stated in Matthew 24:21. *“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.”* It came in 70 A.D.

Just as the first vision (the great image symbolizing the four world kingdoms of ancient history) provides the key to understanding the subsequent visions that Daniel saw, so the clear message spoken by Jesus in Matthew 24 is the key to understanding these three series in the book of Revelation. The 7 seals are a vivid picture of the things God planned, and which were predicted by Jesus. So are the 7 trumpets, and so are the 7 bowls of wrath. We may wonder why God, in this way, tells us basically the same thing three times in a row. The answer is, for the same reason that the visions given to Daniel did that same thing long ago. Sometimes, in order to get our full attention, God knows that he needs to repeat what he has said for emphasis. It is just another way of telling us how very important this momentous event was that took place in the apostolic period.

At this point in this study it is important to warn against ‘failing to see the forest because of seeing so many trees.’ It is not wise to focus *primarily* upon this or that particular item in the material that follows. We will express our understanding of each item, verse by verse. But it is important not to allow any particular to loom so large in our thoughts

that we forget the whole structure shown in the outline. And we need to constantly keep in mind the fact that each of these series of seven things — seals, trumpets and bowls — are really about the same historical event. And that unparalleled and unrepeatable event was **‘the great tribulation’** which came upon the Jewish nation in *that* generation (ending in 70 A.D.).

THE SEVEN SEALS Revelation Chapter 4

The prophecy concerning the seven seals opens with the glorious vision of the throne of God,²³² making use of symbols taken from the corresponding visions of Isaiah 6:1-4, and Ezekiel 1:4-28.

The seer is snatched up to heaven and sees a vision pointing to God’s plan of judgment which will be for the benefit of His Church.

v. 1 - the command to go up = to be in the Spirit

- the fact that he is invited into the heavenly realm = it is not easy to attain understanding of heavenly things - one must be detached as it were from earthly cares & fleshly desires, and be given up to heavenly things
- “the things which must be done after these things” = not what always is, but the future as it follows what’s described in Chapters 2 & 3

v. 2 - almost like 1:10 this is intended to show that another vision begins here

- we have here a representation of — not the usual heavenly state — but an assembly of counsel and judgment, in which a momentous decision is made regarding the ungodly
- we’re led to this view by Chapter 5 which shows that everything turns on the opening of the book with 7 seals, which has respect to the punishment of the apostate Jewish nation.

²³² Revelation 5:1-14

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v. 3 - Here is displayed God's infinite glory, his grace toward the Church, his punitive righteousness toward the ungodly, all fitted to inspire with courage the fainting souls of believers

- the jasper = holiness (cf. Chapter 21:11 and 22:5)
- the sardis = anger (red/fire, cf. Ezekiel 1:4,27, and Revelation 8:2)
- the rainbow around the throne = the judgment would be an act of grace for the Church (Genesis 9:8-16)
- 24 elders are seated within the circle of the rainbow showing that the Church is the object of God's grace and protection
- the rainbow is not just the symbol of grace, but of grace returning after wrath

v. 4 - the 24 elders are a complete circle representing the whole Church (as is plain from 5:8-10 - and cf. 5:6,11; 7:11; 11:16; Mt. 19:28 and Rev. 3:21).

- the totality of the saints of the O.T. and N.T. are here represented by their chiefs and their leaders
- there is only one *true* Israel and it is henceforth perpetuated in the Christian Church
- the thrones here are thrones of judgment, and the idea is that these elect people join in the judgment with God
- white = the outshining of glory (Cf. Matthew 17:2, Luke 9:29) here it means the righteous will shine forth in the splendor of their virtues

v. 5 - the lightning, voices and thunders are re-intimations of the judgment about to begin

- never are thunders praises but rather are a standing figure of God's anger/judgment

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- these things are both *frightful* and yet *agreeable* — frightful with respect to the enemies of God — agreeable with respect to his elect

v. 6 - the sea denotes vastness, and thus against the flood of human wickedness stands the infinite ocean of divine wrath.

- the meaning of the vision is: (1) the purity of glass = “*just and true are your ways, O King of the nations*” (2) and the clear and brilliant glitter of the crystal = “*great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty*”
- this great sea of pure glass like crystal represents God’s infinity, absolute glory, and perfect justice (the Church cannot look into this sea often enough — what is needed is to stop fixing our eyes on the flood of evil in the world, and to fix our eyes on this).
- *the four living creatures are composite representations = they symbolize the whole of creation as subsumed under man’s headship (this shows that we are not to deem them to be angels).*

v. 7 – there’s an old Jewish Saying that there are four that take the first place in this world (1) *man* among all creatures; (2) the *eagle* among birds; (3) the *ox* among cattle; and (4) the *lion* among wild beasts - but it is only man who has *the* dominion

- Ezekiel 1:5 says “*and this is their appearance: they have the form of a man*” so all three are man-like except for the face, and one is entirely man-like. In Revelation 4:8 and 19:4 these “fall down” *with* the elders to worship the Lamb (incongruous if some were quadrupeds)

v. 8 - the Cherubim, here, have not four wings, as in Ezekiel, but six like the seraphim of Isaiah 6. (Cf. Genesis 3:24; Exodus 25:18f; I Kings 6:24; Ezekiel 10:20,21). The change in number indicates that this is only symbolic of progress in revelation.

- “the chief virtues are thereby indicated - reverence, humility, and obedience”
- the words “have no rest day and night” = Psalm 19:3

v. 9 - “And when the beasts shall give...etc” = repeated activity

- they throw down their crowns = it was, in a way, heavy and burdensome for them to wear their crowns in the presence of God, so lively was their feeling of their own littleness and unworthiness.
- this is peculiar to all, who reign with Christ; conscious of their own unworthiness, they venerate with deepest reverence the majesty of God and Christ and wish to arrogate no glory and honor to themselves.
- this celebration of God’s praise from the works of creation is intended to awaken the Church’s confidence in the the final victory of the righteous over the wicked.
- the doctrine of creation is cited here as a pledge for the completion of the Kingdom of God. Since he did the earlier he can also do the later.
- anyone holding fast the doctrine of creation will be secure from doubting the completion of God’s Kingdom program.

Revelation Chapter 5

Then appeared in the right hand of him who sat on the throne “*a scroll*” sealed with seven seals.²³³ The Lion of the tribe of Judah — the Root of David — is the only one who can open this book. He is revealed as “*a Lamb standing as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes.*” His position is “*in the midst of the throne.*”²³⁴ (v. 6) [Note: In chapter 22:1, it is called “*the throne of God and of the Lamb.*” The throne belongs to the Lamb as well as to God].

- The eyes and horns are symbols of wisdom and power.
- The slain lamb symbolizes the mystery of redemption.
- The position in the throne suggests heavenly authority

²³³ Revelation 5:1

²³⁴ Revelation 5:6

- All extol the Christ as the great Revealer of divine mysteries.

v. 1 - The book records the sentence of God against the enemies of the church.

- it represents the decrees²³⁵ of God which are secret until they unfold in history (Cf. Deuteronomy 29:29 - cf. Daniel 12:8,9; Isaiah. 29:11)
- it is not a literal book
- the contents are made known as each seal is removed.

v. 2,3 - To know these decrees is only possible for one who is in such unity with God as to share in his divine nature (Cf. Matthew 11:27).

v. 4 - it seemed as if matters were coming to a dismal end for the Kingdom of God: the present despaired of and the future dark!

- John's weeping = weakness of faith. It can only be understood [*"I wept much"*] by those who have seen great calamities in the church and have felt pain with her in her sufferings. *"Without tears the Revelation was not written, neither can it, without tears, be understood."* Bengel

v. 5 - by the overcoming here can only be meant the overcoming of the difficulties which stood in the way of opening the book.

- Opening the book = victory over sin and Satan through the Lord's death and the shedding of blood. The opening of the book is therefore a reward for having finished the work of redemption.
- in Christ the race of David lives anew and the tribe of Judah achieves its destiny or goal.

²³⁵ "What are the decrees of God? The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass." (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q/A 6).

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v. 6 - What the elder had announced to John is now in fact and reality exhibited to him!

- the Lamb was between God and the circle of elders because he is mediator between them.
- the Lamb isn't dead now, but John could see that it once was slain.
- horns = symbols of victorious power, and 7 = perfection of strength
- the 7 spirits/eyes = indicates that the Holy Spirit *of God the Father* is also the Holy Spirit *of God the Son*
- the Holy Spirit is here seen as multifaceted in his operations

v. 7 - The secrets of the future can never be concealed from one who has the seven-fold Spirit of God.

v. 8,9 - Note that the four living creatures and the 24 elders fall down together before the Lamb having golden vials with the prayers of the saints

- the elders represent the whole church of the Old and New Covenant
- the four living creatures represent the redeemed creation as it finds its headship in man
- the subject of the new song is the new reality brought in by the opening of the book
- the kindreds, tongues and peoples remind us of Genesis 10:5, 20, 31, 32 and mark the territory of the conquest of Christ as co-extensive with the whole human race

v. 10,11 - Angels surround the throne, the beasts and the elders, so they are not so near to God as man is! They are *servants*, but we are *sons*.

v. 12 - Angels take a deep interest in our redemption (1 Peter 1:12)

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- the eulogy here contains 7 items and is similar to the 10-fold eulogy of 1 Chronicles 29:11,12. This shows us that Jesus is rightly given the praise and honor that belongs to God alone.
- v. 13 - Here all of creation, in distinction from the angels, joins in praising God and the Lord Jesus (Cf. Psalm 148).
- lifeless things praise God by their very existence.
 - the wicked too must render praise to God and His Christ by being subject to his punishment!
- v. 14 - The personified (symbolized) living creatures of the earth, under man's headship, say 'Amen' to all this.
- they affirm it to be good.
 - and then the part of the creation which constitutes the church worships God (= symbolized by worship of the 24 elders)

Revelation Chapters 6

- v. 1 - "*And I saw when the Lamb*" = I was looking as the Lamb did this
- the first four seals apparently have a close resemblance and connection
 - note too, that each is introduced by the cry 'come' from one of the living beings
 - why? because they are representatives of the land on which the judgments disclosed will be inflicted
 - these judgments are terrible for the unbelieving, but comforting to the Church

A STUDY OF BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY

- the first four seals correspond to the symbols of Zechariah 6:2-3, and denote determinations of conquest, bloodshed, famine, and aggravated slaughter or mortality

v. 2 - note: there's something special about the first announcement

- some Greek manuscripts have *καὶ ἰδε* [*and behold*] (here only) and then "*come and see*" but all manuscripts say "*and I saw, and behold!*" = a sign of something noteworthy.
- To understand the white horse rider as a symbol of Christ per se, as many do, and the other riders as symbols of war, famine, etc., involves the interpretation in confusion of imagery.

If the first rider denotes a person, the others should too; but, in any case, according to analogy of corresponding prophecies, this is a fourfold symbol of impending judgment.

- It may be, however, that the first rider represents the Church going forth to conquer as empowered by Christ (Cf. Acts 1:1 and Matthew 28:18-20, Romans 8:37 and 16:20, etc.)
- This corresponds with our Lord's prediction of empire-wide gospel preaching (Matthew 24:14), wars and rumors of wars, falling by the edge of the sword, famines, pestilences, terrors, days of vengeance, and unheard of horrors.

It is confirmed by:

1) the similarity with 19:11,12 (here the beginning, there the end of the battle.

2) the similarity with Zechariah 1:7-17 where the chief horseman is identified as the Lord.

3) the crown [στέφανος] is the crown of royal dignity (cf. Psalm 45 and Revelation 19:16)

4) the other horses only have significance as 'another' after what He does

A STUDY OF BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY

- “*conquering and to conquer*” = for victory and nothing but victory. The object of victory is the world as hostile to Christ
- the book is primarily for the church’s consolation. The church’s courage is revived when it keeps the vision of this heavenly King before its eyes, as he is even now going forth to battle and to victory

v. 3, 4 - here is the threat of blood, conflict and discord

- one of the chief means whereby Christ subdues an antichristian world, breaking its might, confidence, and arrogance
- to see war and terror overspread the world is to see the hand of Christ and the dawn of victory.

v. 5,6 - black = the color of mourning / the balances = scarcity

- it is not a *complete* famine: some things are spared [as in the 7th plague] wheat, rye were spared — flax, barley were not (cf. Exodus 9:31,32)]
- bad crops and scarcity = one of the scourges in the hand of Christ by which he chastises unbelief and enmity against himself and the church (it continues through this era and it issues in his complete victory)

v. 7,8 - the pale horse is an image of death

- it intensifies the disclosures of the second and third horses.
- yet it only affects 1/4 of the human race = it is not universal destruction it is not the end of the human race — it is a measured chastisement (as in a great war, for instance)
- all these limited judgments are directed to one end — chastening and breaking the pride of enemies of the church, restraining their persecution, and converting those who are to be converted

A STUDY OF BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY

- all that follows is really an aspect of his victory (a deepening disclosure of the means)
- there is no reason to take these chronologically

v. 9 - The fifth seal is a martyr-scene

- the blood of souls crying out from under the altar — slain for the Word of God (6:9-10). This = Jesus' announcement that his followers would be put to death (Matthew 24:9; Luke 21:16).
- The white robes and the comfort given to the martyrs answer to Jesus' pledge that in their patience they should secure their souls = "*whoever shall lose his life for my sake and the Gospel's shall save it*" (Mark 8:35).
- here the impending provisional judgments are more frightful catastrophes which bring that final judgment into view
- so much so that they must suggest the ominous certainty of a coming final judgment
- Hengstenberg says these *souls* are not to be thought of as the literal disembodied souls in the intermediate state (as true as that concept is) but as 'the animal souls' or blood of the martyrs, crying out as it were, in the sense of Genesis 9:5!
- when John received this vision many had already been killed and the thought of a need for vengeance was strong — '*How long, O Lord*' would be the sentiment
- the white garment = symbolic of heavenly glory which suffices until the time when the Kingdom of glory is consummated on earth
- but first they must wait 'til their full number is filled up (cf. Matthew. 23:35,36) — if the completion was precipitately hurried, the precious opportunity would be denied those who come after us of saying, with Paul, '*I have finished my course. . .*'

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- But these souls will only wait for “*a little time*” (verse 11), even as Jesus said all the martyr-blood shed from the time of Abel would be visited in vengeance upon that generation, even on Jerusalem the murderess of the prophets (Matthew 33:34-38).
- And then, to show how quickly the retribution comes — like the “*immediately after the tribulation*” of Matthew 24:29 — the 6th seal is opened to show the terrors of the end (vv. 12-17).

v. 12-17 - the sixth seal

(1) first the calamity is described (in vv. 12-14). This description is completed in the number 7, divided by 4 and 3.

- (a) the earthquake,
- (b) sun becoming black, moon as blood, and the stars falling,
- (c) the heavens disappearing,
- (d) the mountains and the islands moving out of their place.

It is important, here to notice the striking parallel between what is stated *here* in the vision granted to John, and the almost identical things that Jesus’ said in his prophetic discourse on the Mount of Olives:

THE SIXTH SEAL

1. “And behold, there was a great earthquake”
2. “And the sun became black as sackcloth of hair...”
3. “And the moon became as blood”
4. “And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth...”
5. “And the heavens departed as a scroll when it is rolled together”
6. “And the kings, etc., hid themselves...and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us...etc.’

THE OLIVET PROPHECY

- “And there shall be earthquakes in various places” (Mt. 24:7).
- “Immediately after...tribulation of those the sun will be darkened” (v. 29)
- “And the moon will not give its light”
- “And the stars shall fall from heaven”
- “And the powers of the heaven will be shaken” (Mt. 24:29)
- “Then they shall begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us: and to the hills, cover us’” (Lk. 23:30).

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- Can there be any doubt that John's vision is about the same event that our Lord predicted?

(2) Then, in verses 15-17, the impression this makes on the inhabitants of the land is described.

- that things in verses 12-14 are figurative proved from verses 15-17 (in which we are still in the existing state of things)
- of the things that characterize the final hour — the resurrection — the tribunal of Christ (Matthew 25) — not a word is said
- that this to be understood figuratively of the "*great tribulation*" of 70 A.D. is clear from what follows = men are still alive after the catastrophe — Christ's second coming (παρουσία) is still future.

Now to the details

v. 12 - earthquakes are events in the realm of 'nature,' and are intended here as symbols of the destroying omnipotence of God, and precursors of approaching ruin (Cf. Psalm 46:56; Haggai 2:6,22)

- the shaking of earth and heaven denotes great changes in the state of nations brought about by God's omnipotent power
- this is not a literal darkening of the sun, moon, and stars but rather a momentous change in the status of rulers of the world's nations, who see the coming of God's wrath upon them in this way - [Cf. Isaiah 5:30, Jeremiah 4:23, 15:9, Ezekiel 32:7,8 Amos 8:9,10.]
- since such symbolic language is frequent in the O.T. it would be against the analogy of Scripture to take it in another way here

v. 13 - stars are such a natural image of the greatness and splendor of worldly rulers and the employment of them in this sense is found in almost all nations, and pervades Scripture (Cf. Numbers 24:7, Isaiah 34: 4,5, 24:21, 14:12, Daniel 8:10)

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- those who have been leaders in conflict with the Kingdom of God, and in persecuting the Church, will be the first to experience his avenging hand.
- abuse of power will lead to the absolute loss of power and “*the eyes of our hearts*” (Ephesians 1:18) should enable us to ‘see’ that these ‘stars’ are falling by the sovereign hand of Jesus

v. 14 - thus the heaven of v. 14 is the heaven of princes

- the rolling up = the annihilation of the whole civil and ecclesiastical system of the nation under consideration
- as vv. 12-14 describe what was done toward them, so vv. 15-17 describe how they were thereby affected
- Julian’s exclamation ‘*O Galilean, Thou hast conquered*’ was an application of this principle - so was the famous remark of Napoleon on the island to which he was banished to die.

Revelation Chapter 7

The painful concern, which would surely arise even in the faithful on account of the judgments, is here met by a double consolation

(1) God holds — over them — his protecting hand while war and terrors spread over the Roman empire (vv. 1-8).

(2) then there is opened up a view of celestial glory which becons after short tribulation.

v. 1 - the winds have not yet moved = the judgments have not yet begun to take effect.

- winds are symbolic of divine judgments effected (Cf. Ezekiel 1:4, Jeremiah 22:22, 49:36; Daniel 11:4)
- divine judgments were to break on all sides but were to be held in restraint by the four angels until the saints were protected.

- the sea = the sea of men or nations (The writer was reminded of this on V-Day in Chicago at the end of World War II. The 'sea' of faces moved on that occasion like the waves of the sea).
- the trees = kings, strong ones (cf. 8:7, 9:4 and Isaiah 10:18,19, Daniel 4, Ezekiel 31:3 etc).
- hurting of the trees brings injury to those under its branches.

v. 2- Hengstenberg thinks the angel here = Jesus as in the O.T. and Rev. 10:1, and 18:1. This interpretation is favored by (1) the authority he exercises over the other angels; (2) the fact that he comes from the place of the rising of the sun (Cf. Luke. 1:78, Malachi 3:20); and (3) by the fact that he possesses the seal of God.

- Before the impending judgment falls the elect are sealed, and there appear two companies, (1) the elect of the twelve tribes of Israel (the Jews who become part of the Christian Church), and (2) the innumerable company of believers who are called out of all the nations and tongues (the Gentile part of the Church). All — Jew and the Gentile alike — wash their robes to make them white in the Lamb's (Ch. 7).
- This = Jesus' words: *"He shall send forth his angels with a great trumpet-sound, and they shall gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other"* (Matthew 24:31).
- the act of sealing also shows this to be Christ (2 Timothy 2:19; Exodus 12:23 and Ezekiel 9:3-6)
 - + things are sealed either to (a) make them inaccessible, or (b) to confirm them — here the sense of confirmation is more suitable.
 - + this marks the elect of God as those to be protected from ominous threatenings (9:4; 14:1; 22:4; also 13:16,17; 14:9; 16:2; 19:20 & 20:4).

v. 4 - 144,000 = not a statistical but a symbolic number

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- The great multitude no man can number can best be seen this way: 12 is the signature of the church - the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles multiplied by 1,000 - the number of fullness).

+ The tribe of Dan is not named = we are not to understand this as true of the whole Jewish nation

+ It also reminds us that the tribes of Israel were the nucleus and root of the New Testament Church

+ but why is Dan the one that is missing? Probably because the Danites introduced false worship (Judges 8). Those Jews who are *of* Israel but not “*true* Israel” are excluded (cf. Romans 2:28,29).

+ the Book of Revelation can only be understood by those who pay attention to the Old Testament Scriptures.

v. 5-8 - Note too, that Ephraim is omitted, while Joseph is listed. Why? Because the Ephramite Micah (Judges 18) first instituted the false worship which was later passed on to the Danites.

- again note that Judah (who was 4th) is here first. Why? Because Jesus was from the tribe of Judah.
- note that the tribe of Levi is demoted. Why? Because all believers are now prophets, priests and kings!
- there remains, in other words, a basis in the original tribal set up: but there has also been a series of modifications.
- the principle is that in Christ differences of birth and external privilege are abolished. (Cf. Galatians 3:29)

vv. 9-17 - heavenly glory is now presented as an added consolation

v. 9 - the vast multitude is not of the NT only. (Cf. Genesis 13:16, 15:5, Numbers 13:10)

- this symbolism is from the feast of Tabernacles. Cf. Leviticus 23:40 and Deuteronomy 16:14,15.

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- as people rejoiced as Jesus rode through the streets of earthly Jerusalem, so now elect do in heavenly Zion (cf. Zechariah 14:16)

v. 10 - they are constrained to praise God greatly for his love and goodness and Christ for his atonement for them

v. 11,12 - if the angels sang at Christ's birth, how much more now!

- If there's rejoicing at the conversion of one sinner how much more at the great (final) Feast of Tabernacles

v. 13 - there was probably an unexpressed desire in John to *know*. So the elder meets his desire this way — at times we need a question, before we can understand our own deepest need!

v. 14 – this phrase – “*the great tribulation*” - we understand to be what Jesus spoke of in Matthew 24:21. He said nothing comparable had ever happened before, and nothing comparable to it would ever happen again. That is why he called it “*the* great tribulation.”

- the oppression of the church by the world powers = the starting point and central concern of this book. We see the church (as it was in the Jewish nation, which had been its custodian for centuries) here as shattered and broken as respects its Old Testament form.
- but here everything still wears much of a general character: the final catastrophe is only very partly or somewhat described by the profound silence of the lately so noisy world.
- all bears the impress of a prelude to a general plan, which is afterward to be followed by further development.

The opening of the sixth seal brought John to the very verge of the promised desolation, and we might naturally suppose that the seventh would usher in the ultimate description of the end. But it issues in the vision of the seven trumpets, which traverses the same event again, with an awesome portrayal of the signs, wonders, and terrors as indicated by the symbols of the sixth seal [this is similar to going over the same prophetic ground in the visions of Daniel].

Revelation Chapter 8

We understand the **trumpets** to be symbolic *announcements* of the fearful sights and signs from heaven of which Jesus spoke.

- “*the abomination of desolation, Jerusalem compassed with armies*” = the “*signs in the sun and moon and stars; and upon the land distress of nations in perplexity for the roaring of the sea and the billows; men fainting for fear and for expectation of the things coming on the world*” (Luke 21:25,26).

These visions are a general poetical representation of the great revolutions connected with the events of cosmic significance effected through the first coming of our Lord to the world. These images, taken particularly from the narrative of the Egyptian plagues, are used symbolically, and we are not to press the details by our own speculations.

- Thus, the first four trumpet woes fall, respectively, on the land, the sea, the rivers and fountains of water, and the lights of heaven. The imagery is appropriated from the account of the plagues of Egypt, and from other parts of the O.T. Note: these plagues do not ruin everything but, like Ezekiel’s symbols (5:2), each destroys a third.
- Here we have another series of catastrophes, which bear the signature of the half and incomplete
- it is only when we come to 7th trumpet that we find ourselves at the same point that we were when the 7th seal was opened
- so the catastrophes here can only be identical to the others
- this group, like the former, retains a rather general character
- trumpets in the Bible are used (1) to *summon* God’s people to assemble; (2) to *announce* the destruction on God’s enemies (Jericho) and (3) to *proclaim* the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25:13).
- the sound is exciting/joyful for believers, but frightful for the ungodly.

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v. 2 - to stand before God = “*behold the face of the Father in heaven*” as revealed in the exalted Jesus (Matthew 18:10 & John 1:18)

- some angels are higher than others (Cf. Col. 1:16, 2:10 etc.)

v. 3 - in the first persecution of the Christian Church believers prayed with great earnestness.

- the altar is only symbolic = the altar of incense (Leviticus 16:12)
- the prayer = Joel 2:17 or Psalm 9:19
- the fact that it stands before the Lord = the veil is now removed

v. 4,5 - the connection between these prayers and the fiery indignation about to overtake the adversaries is indicated by thunderings etc. = pre-intimations of approaching revolutions on earth.

v. 6 - the angels do not *inflict* the punishment they only *announce* it (except that in the 6th there is a direct angelic agency, but even here the announcing angel is not involved directly).

v. 7 - concentrated in a great and fiery hail-storm John sees the desolations of war, which bursts forth

- the prototype was the 7th plague of Egypt
- to say “*mingled with blood*” = that they are emblems of war in its desolating and consuming power
- as it has respect to the whole land, this shows that all parts of the land of Israel were to be affected
- the object of judgment is the whole land but, at the same time, it is only a third part that is destroyed = this is *not* the final judgment
- the trees = symbols of the high and mighty

v. 8 - the expression “*like a great mountain*” = not a literal mountain. In O.T. mountains were symbolic of kingdoms

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- in Zechariah 4:7 the great mountain before Zerubbabel was the Persian Kingdom. It set itself against the temple. In Revelation 17:9 there are 7!
- the meaning therefore is that the worldly powers will be punished by war and conquest
- it is not the Roman Empire in a narrow sense which is seen in 17:15 where it is said to be “*peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues*,” but also those who are allied with it.
- and the sea = mankind

v. 10,11 - the star falls from heaven (i.e. heaven causes it to fall)

- denotes the sudden unexpected nature of the occurrence
- the sea = masses of people - the rivers and waters are an image of affluence, prosperity, success
- the star contrasts with the wood cast into the bitter waters by Moses (for his people God makes the bitter waters sweet; for the unbelieving world, he makes the sweet water bitter)
- the fire = wrath and plunder

v. 12 - the shining lights of heaven = the true God's favor shining on men just as the darkening symbolizes his anger and the withdrawal of his blessings.

- God's smiting is the *cause*, the darkenings that take place are the *effect*.

v. 13 - The last three trumpets are announced as signals of still more severe woes (8:13).

- the typical English translation of v. 13 gives the impression that these woes are pronounced upon the entire world. But, as Milton Terry said: “*The common English Version ('of the earth') appears to have misled not only many common readers, but even learned commentators. No*

Hellenist of our Lord's day would have understood ἔπι τῆς γῆς as equivalent to all nations of the inhabited globe. The phrase is traceable to Zechariah 12:12, where all the families of the land [LXX τῆς γῆς] of Judah are represented as mourning." And as J. Stuart Russell says: "The rendering of γῆς by earth instead of land, and of αἰών by world instead of age, have been most fruitful sources of mistake and confusion in the interpretation of the New Testament."

Revelation Chapter 9

Tormenting locusts from the abyss are introduced by the 5th trumpet

- They assume the form of a mighty army after the manner of Joel's description (Joel 2:1-11), and are permitted to torment those who have not the seal of God upon them.
- They = unclean spirits of demons, which were permitted to come forth in those days of vengeance and possess and torment those who had given themselves over to wickedness.

v. 1 - the star = a ruler, or one who has (or, had) a high position

- The star fallen from heaven — to whom was given the key of the pit of the abyss — can scarcely denote any other than the Satan whom Jesus saw falling like lightning from heaven (Luke 10:18), and the two descriptive titles Abaddon (destruction) and Apollyon (destroyer) were appropriate designations for Satan, the prince or chief of the demons. It should be noted also that in Revelation 17:2 fallen Babylon (old Jerusalem) is described as *"become a habitation of demons and a hold of every unclean spirit, and a hold of every unclean and hateful thing."*
- The fact that this star falls from heaven indicates that there is a supernatural background to events taking place on earth. It also indicates that even deeds of the fallen angels are under God's sovereign control.
- God places these in a fitting position where they have the opportunity of spreading through a wide circle the hellish spirit!

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- Was it not some fact like this before the mind of Jesus when he spoke of that unclean spirit that took seven others, more wicked than himself, and returned to occupy the house from which he had been cast out? He said: *“So shall it be with this wicked generation”* (Matthew 12:43-45).

v. 2 - the smoke = the hellish spirit of evil that covers the earth

- darkening of sun, moon and stars = spiritually dark and distressing times come on the land in consequence of the apostasy of those in positions of authority and leadership (Mt. 23)

v. 3 - out of the general climate of darkness (having rejected the light of divine revelation) from hell comes a multitude of errors

- often invading hosts are compared to locusts in the Scripture (Judges 6:5 Jeremiah 46:23, 51:27).
- symbolically this shows warlike devastations.
- destructive of trees and plants = the effect on persons in high positions and those under them

v. 4 - the fact that it hurts only some while others are protected shows that it is not literal (i.e. believers are all exempted spiritually. They would not be literally)

v. 5 - the effect of this ‘woe’ will be very great!

- The purpose of these demons is to promote sin and its pleasures, and evil passions and their results, so that reprobate men follow them to the full, only to be tortured in the end by these same demons on the rack of pessimism and despair!
- This doesn’t mean that suicide is literally impossible: but that there will be a general, cultural, death-wish and yet life will continue.
- Describing the impiety of the Jewish leaders that Jesus condemned, Josephus remarks: *“No age ever bred a generation more fruitful in wickedness than this was from the beginning of the world...I suppose*

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that had the Romans made any longer delay in coming against these villains the city would either have been swallowed up by the ground opening upon them, or been overwhelmed by water, or else been destroyed by such thunder as the country of Sodom perished by; for it had brought forth a generation of men much more atheistical than were those that suffered such punishments; for by their madness it was that all the people came to be destroyed...” [Whiston’s Josephus; Wars, Book. 5, Chapters 10:6, and 13:6.]”

v. 7-11 gives a description of the symbolic locusts

- The key we find in Abaddon and Apollyon, meaning destruction or destroyer (synonymous words).
- This = a picture of opposition to Christ. It is a *power*. It is a *force*. It is *lawlessness* (men with hair as women [1 Cor. 11:14,15]). The barbarian Parthians wore long hair. It was a symbol in ancient times of people whose lust was uncontrolled.
- Again we see this person as purely symbolic — like the Russian Bear of old newspaper cartoons — a figure of the world system as it stands against Christ (under various leaders) — “*we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers*” (Ephesians 6:12).
- this smoke = the influence of Satanic darkness in the multiplied errors, delusions, evil compulsions etc., as these came upon the Jews in the last days when the Jewish nation expired. (2 Thessalonians 2:11)

v. 12 - the 6th trumpet now sounds and we have the second woe

- Four angels bound at the Euphrates river are loosed to execute God’s vengeance
- They spread over the land with a vast number of horsemen.
- One third of the people (ανθρωποι = humans) are destroyed, but there is still no repentance. So they must expect the final woe.

v. 13 - the voice comes from the altar — it is the place where the prayers of the saints are offered

- They *desire* the loosing of the 4 angels; its in response to their prayers that it happens
- They were bound by God's decree (i.e. unable to move until he allowed) — these warlike hosts can do nothing, but what they are foreordained to do by God

v. 14 - here, again, we quote Rev. J. Stuart Russell

- *"It is in these crucial instances, which defy the dexterity of the most cunning hand to pick the lock, that we prove the power of our master key. Let us fix first upon that which seems most literal in the vision, 'the great river Euphrates.' That, at least, can scarcely be symbolical. There are said to be four angels bound, not in the river, but at, or on, the river [ἐπὶ τῷ ποταμῷ]. The loosing of these four angels sets free a vast horde of armed horsemen, with the strange and unnatural characteristics described in the vision. What is the real and actual that we may gather out of this highly wrought imagery? How is it that these horsemen come from the region of the Euphrates? How is it that four angels are bound on that river? Now it will be remembered that the locust invasion came from the abyss of hell; this invading army comes from the Euphrates. This fact serves to unridle the mystery. The invading army that followed Titus to the siege and capture of Jerusalem was actually drawn in great measure from the region of the Euphrates. That river formed the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire, and we know as a matter of fact that it was kept by four legions, which were regularly stationed there. These four legions we conceive to be symbolized by the four angels bound at, or on, the river. The 'loosing of the angels' is equivalent to the mobilizing of the legions, and we cannot but think the symbol as poetical, as it is historically truthful. But, it will be said, Roman legions did not consist of cavalry. True; but we know that along with the legionaries from the Euphrates there came to the Jewish war auxiliary forces drawn from the very same region. Antiochus of Commagene, who, as Tacitus tells us, was the richest of all the kings who submitted to the authority of Rome, sent a contingent to the war. His dominions were on the Euphrates. Sohemus, also, another powerful king, whose territories were in the same region, sent*

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a force to co-operate with the Roman army under Titus. Now the troops of these Oriental kings were, like their Parthian neighbors, mostly cavalry; and it is altogether consistent with the nature of allegorical or symbolical representation that in such a book as the Apocalypse these fierce foreign hordes of barbarian horsemen should assume the appearance presented in the vision.” (Parousia p. xxx)

v. 15 - the preparation = the time that God has foreordained

- the word translated ‘mankind’ (ἄνθρωποι) in Greek from which we get our term anthropology. It does not mean men/man in the masculine sense, but people of both genders. Here it does not refer to the whole of mankind, but to the people of Judea.

v. 16 - the number is enormous (200,000,000) which symbolizes a vast number with seemingly invincible power.

v. 17 - everything is symbolic of ferocity and destruction

- When the results of godless, humanistic rule and the degeneration of life by Satanic delusion bring no repentance, then the Lord sends a terrible judgment through the instrumentality of other nations.
- In other words, this world-power is seen as a thing of which Satan is the moving Spirit — yet God controls and uses it for his purpose
- It is a judgment of God upon the unrepentant land of Israel, and neither the calamities, nor the judgment expressed by them, produce the requisite repentance
- and so we go on to the second part of the book which reveals the destiny of the Church. Notice at this point the reference to the “**Little Book**” (cf. Luke 12:32) whereas, up to this point, it was the “**Big Book**.”

Revelation Chapter 10

At this point — when we might expect the seventh trumpet to sound — there is a pause, and behold, “*another mighty angel*” comes down from

the heaven, “*clothed with a cloud, and rainbow was on his head; his face like the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire*” (10:1).

- The attributes of this angel, and their correspondence with the description of the Son of man in chap. 1:13-16, point him out as no other than the Lord himself.
- He is “*the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory,*” which Jesus himself foretold as destined to come to pass in that generation (Matthew 24:30-34). His glorious appearance at this point seems like a prelude to the sound of the last trumpet, but there is delay. It is not to defer the catastrophe, but to furnish an opportunity for the voice of the seventh angel to say the mystery of God is about to be finished (vv. 6 and 7).²³⁶

In 10:1-11:13 we have a kind of interlude prior to this.

- First, by symbolic action — then by an express word — a strong angel announces that when the trumpet of the 7th angel sounds, full and perfect realization of all of the promises made to the Church will be accomplished (vv. 2-7)
- Then he gives to the prophet **a little book** having painful contents. It is designed to enable him, and the church, to endure with a courageous spirit.
- He swallows the little book, and is thereby endowed with the ability to utter the prophecy which follows
- The Church (up to that time contained in the nation of Israel) had become subjected to the power of the world, not only externally, but

²³⁶ It is in accord with apocalyptic usage that the Son of man should appear in this book under various forms. First the glorious *Christophany*, then as a *Lamb* with 7 horns and 7 eyes (v, 6), then as the mighty, rainbow-encircled *Angel* of this passage (10:1), then as *Michael* (12:7), and as *the Son of man on a cloud* (14:14), then as *the rider on the white horse* (19:11), and finally as the *Judge* on a great white throne (20:11). Thus the Apocalypse fittingly reveals him in manifold aspects of his character and glory. So, also, the arch-enemy, or antichrist, appears under various forms of manifestation, as *Abaddon*, or *Apollyon*, the *angel of the abyss* (9:11), the *great red dragon* (12:3), the *beast* out of the land (13:11), the *scarlet-colored beast* on which the harlot is sitting (17:3).

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partly also internally. The elect, however, remained steadfast. And the Church is purged by God's judgment

v.1 - this strong angel must be Christ: for these attributes are not given to creatures (*"I will not give my glory to another"* Isaiah 42:8)

- planting feet on the *sea* (= the rest of mankind) and the *land* (= Israel) indicates his approaching possession and merging of both under his dominion in a world-wide church
- the fire images the consuming character of God
- the pillars = the omnipotence

v. 2-7 what is stated here is designed to counter the doubt and disquiet which the partly distressing contents of the little book elicit

- That the big book was sealed = no one but Christ can explain God's plan for the world and the Church's victory over it
- So the little book is now opened = the subject treated in it is something that is self-evident (Luke 12:32)

v. 3 - that the loud voice had a hostile sound is made clear by its comparison with the roar of a lion (Joel 3:16 *"The Lord will roar out of Zion"*)

- The first beast rising out of the sea = the ungodly world power (which was then concentrated in the Roman Empire)
- the second beast rising out of the land = the ungodly regional power (which was preeminently the apostate Judaism)

v. 4 - intelligible speech is attributed to the thunders — otherwise it would have been impossible to write what they spoke

- The meaning is seen in Dan. 8:26 and 12:4 and 9 — *there* it was permanently, *here* only temporarily, kept secret
- The reason *here* is that the basis for understanding is still wanting.

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- Hence the injunction not to seal = the fulfillment would soon illuminate the meaning (cf. *“this generation will not pass until...all these things”* are fulfilled – Matthew 24:34).

vv. 5-7 - the oath forms a commentary on the meaning of the planting of the foot on earth and sea -

- He who made heaven and earth will not be satisfied with less than complete victory and dominion over the land (Israel) and the sea (the Gentile world)
- the object of the oath is that no more delay will be allowed.
- The mystery is the realization of the dominion of Christ (all of this was revealed to John for consolation. Only then was content of the little book, with its pain-causing contents, revealed to the Apostle).

v. 8 - from Ezekiel 2:8f we see the analogy.

- From this we expect (1) the little book to be mournful in nature, (2) to have to do *also* with the destiny of the world, (3) but *primarily* with the destiny of the church because of what God does in judging the world.

v. 9 - [Cf. Jeremiah 15:16] Even the most bitter divine truths have (for a spiritually minded man) a joyful and refreshing side.

- Sweetness is attributed to the mouth because this is the organ of God’s spokesman, the prophet.
- But in spite of this privileged task and great honor the prophet (John), as a member of the Church, suffers with it!
- What is said here of John applies to all, especially teachers of the Church = we too must eat and swallow not only Bible texts we like, but all that it teaches — even if it causes us pain.

v. 11 - The one who has eaten must prophesy just as the one who has not eaten cannot prophesy!

- the command to prophesy corresponds to the activity which is described in 11:1-13.
- It falls into two divisions: (1) vv. 1-2 gives the promise that the faith of the elect will not fail, and (2) vv. 3-13 certifies uninterrupted continuance of the office of witnessing

Revelation Chapter 11

The measurement of the temple, altar, and worshipers (11:1), and treading under foot the holy city for 42 months (= three and a half years = time, times, and a half a time) = that the whole will be given over to desolation.

- This, too, corresponds to our Lord's words (Luke 21:24): "*Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.*" From the analogy of the language of Daniel, the "*times of the Gentiles*" (καίροι; cf. Luke 21:24, in agreement with the Septuagint version of Daniel 7:25; 11:7) are the "*time, times, and half time*" during which the destructive siege was to continue. During this same time sequence the two witnesses prophesy within the doomed city. (Daniel 12:1, 5-7).
- but who (or what) are we to understand these two witnesses to be? One commentator says: "*The allusion to Zechariah 4 may suggest that these were two notable persons who alone remained in the city after other Christians fled. These thus became the sole representatives there of the Christian Church.*"

The author of *The Parousia* gives several plausible reasons for supposing they were James and Peter who abode in Jerusalem to the end (70 A.D.) [See *The Parousia*, pp. 430-444].

- My own view is that we should *not* take this to refer to two literal people. My reasons are:

(1) This is against the consistent non-literal symbolism that characterizes this book.

(2) Even more important is the fact that v. 8 speaks of "*their dead body* [το πτώμα] *in the street of the great city which, spiritually, is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.*"

If John intended to identify two literal men he would hardly refer to the two of them as having only *one* body. But, if he intended us to understand a collective body of Jewish and Gentile believers, he could indeed personify them in this way. This we believe to be the correct understanding. It is an historic fact that in Jerusalem — during “the great tribulation” — both *were* subject to persecution and even martyrdom (Cf. Acts 7-8).

- With this revelation, which stands as an episode between the sixth and seventh trumpets, we are more fully prepared to feel the tremendous significance of the last trumpet. In the lingering hour of the sixth trumpet — an awesome pause before the final blast — there is suddenly “*a great earthquake, and a tenth part of the city fell.*”

[Russell says: We could cite from Josephus an almost literal fulfillment of these words. (Wars, Book 4, Chapter 4:6 and. 5:1.)]

v. 1- the Church appears under the symbol of the temple.

- The temple = the true, believing, spiritual body of believers.
- The outer court = those who are superficially affected.
- The significance of *measuring* is determined by its opposite, the *throwing out* - where the measuring line ends the abandoning begins.
- With the overflowing of the Church by the world brings it comes to pass that from many who ‘have not, shall have taken away from them even that which they (seem to) have.’
- Read, for example, what Eusebius says at the beginning of his eighth Book on *the Diocletian Persecution!* “*A serious degeneracy in the Christian Church preceded it - many were shaken by it - many more made shipwreck - yet true believers remained steadfast, and the Church was built up...*”
- this is the first (main) point: the Church will not be utterly destroyed!

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v. 3-13 - the second major point is that even in times of most profound darkness etc., the witnessing office and possession of the gifts of the spirit will still be perpetuated in her.

- For all who feel themselves to be weak, there is much consolation in this *“I will give to my two witnesses”*
- But at the same time it points to the heavy responsibility
- The two witnesses (the two olive trees) = ideal personification representing the entire church’s work of witnessing (concretely realized in a multitude of faithful Christians).
- Why two? - because of the law of Moses (cf. Exodus 7:15-25 as when Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus (Matthew 17:3 etc.)

They are designated as olive-trees and lamps because light and the source of light are concentrated in them. It’s by their faithful witness that the Temple of God (the true Church) is preserved.

vv. 5,6 - what Moses and Elijah had done separately, is here said to be done by these two witnesses unitedly

- As Christ is both Lamb and Lion - so the faithful witness of the true Church has two aspects (like a two-edged sword).
- Whatever therefore strikes against him (and his two witnesses) in a hostile manner, will be destroyed by him, as by a consuming fire

v. 7 - they will only be vulnerable when they have finished their testimony, when God has no further need for their service, and when their death can produce more fruit than their life. And, even then upon their overthrow and death, glorification follows!

- They die only to be glorified. (If this was rightly considered it would banish fear — and foolish concessions!)
- The beast here denotes the ungodly state of the reprobate — hence the pain, mockery, death etc., as the godly share Christ’s reproach

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v. 8 - “*the great city*” = Jerusalem. But the honorable name is not used here because it is reserved for something better.

- We do not have here a statement about the city of Jerusalem considered as a political entity, but rather as the degenerate church in contrast with the purified new Jerusalem. As the Lord was *literally* crucified in the city of Jerusalem, he is *spiritually* crucified again in the corrupt church (cf. Hebrews 6:4-8).
- The degenerate church (the Jewish nation at that time) kills the witnesses, as formerly it had part in killing our Lord (cf. Acts 7:54-60)
- The three and a half days are an imitation of the history of Jesus, whom his faithful servants must follow — as this also indicates the transitoriness of the world’s victory
- God’s true Church has no weapon of offense but the Word.
- The power of the true Church is such as to torment the ungodly — this will always be in evidence if we are faithful!

v. 11,12) - The form in which the triumph of the two witnesses is described, after apparent defeat, is (again) taken from our Lord’s history.

- *Ascent* to heaven followed crucifixion — in a sense this is recapitulated in the lives of believers.
- We see this concretely in the recurring victory of truth through men who were reviled in their day (Athanasius, Calvin, Machen) but are honored now, even in the world, while those who were honored then are now despised.

v. 13 - It is the great privilege of the church that while she may be chastened she is not given over to death.

- However frightful these time may be, the result is that her true members always give glory to God.
- Yet there are heavy judgments (not only on the world, but on the visible church also) — and this brings the spirit of repentance

- One olive tree = true Israel from which the false seed is excluded and into which believers of all nations are grafted (Romans 11:17 etc.).
- The position of the two witnesses becomes incomprehensible unless vv. 1-2 are referred to the Christian Church, because they are equally hated by the world-power *and* by the city “*which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified*” (= apostate Judaism and the Jerusalem establishment).

v. 14,15 - If the prayers of the saints result in the appearance of the angels with the 7 trumpets, it can be no other than these saints who here triumph and give thanks, when the work of these 7 angels is complete

- “*The Kingdoms of this world*”, which had long been in enemy hands, are at last recovered — possessed by the Lord and his anointed

vv.16-18 - The Saints thank the Lord that he has come!

- This is not by his providential government (which has always existed) but by a new revelation of his glory through the church.
- Note the emphasis on the small = encouraging the weak and the unworthy.

v. 19 - the temple is only opened after the veil is removed.

- “*lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail*” = symbols of judgment on the ungodly counterpart of the heavenly temple which was the earthly temple below.
- This imagery is like the trumpet that signaled the fall of Jericho. So, “*quickly*” (11:14) this 7th trumpet sounds, and voices in the heaven say “*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever*” (v. 15). = The old age has passed, the new has begun, and the heavenly hosts shout a paean of triumph.
- The blood of the souls that cried from under the altar (6:10) is avenged, and prophets and saints receive their reward (11:18).

- The old temple disappears and the new (and final one) appears in heaven, revealing the long-lost ark of the covenant (v. 19), which is henceforth accessible to all, Jew and Gentile alike — indeed, all who are washed in the blood of the Lamb.

The last part of Revelation (Chapters 12-22) is not to be taken as describing events chronologically later in time than those described in chapters 4-11. It simply traverses the same ground again. The two parts have a relation to each other somewhat like the dream of the great image, followed by the visions of the various beasts in the Book of Daniel, or the two dreams of Pharaoh which were interpreted as being one message by Joseph (Genesis 41:17-32). They cover the same historical period, but view it under different aspects.

- The first part previewed the terrible vengeance of the Lamb upon his enemies, as if contemplating everything from the idea of the king *“who sent forth his armies and destroyed those murderers, and burned their city”* in the parable of Jesus (Matthew 22:7).
- The last part presents a vivid outline of the struggle as the Church passes her first crisis, and rises through persecution and danger to triumph and glory. In other words, we see the same great catastrophe that appeared in the first part, but under different symbols and with a different perspective.

Revelation Chapter 12

v. 1 - By the woman we understand the Church!

- The man-child (v. 5) represents her children — the faithful believers of the Gospel who constitute the spiritual body of Christ called the church. The imagery is taken from Isaiah 66:7,8. These are the children of *“the Jerusalem which is above,”* and which Paul calls *“our mother”* (Galatians 4:26).
- The statement that this child was to rule all nations with a rod of iron, and be caught up to the throne of God, has led many to suppose that this is a literal reference to our Lord Jesus Christ himself, *by himself*. But the language of the promise to the church of Thyatira (Revelation 2:26,27), and the vision of the martyrs who live and

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reign with Christ for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4-6), show that Christ's faithful martyrs whose blood was the seed of the Church, are associated with him in the authority and administration of his Messianic rule.

v. 3 - The dragon is the old serpent, the devil. His standing ready to devour the child as soon as born is an image taken from Pharaoh's attitude toward the infant Israelites (Exodus 1:16).

- Michael (meaning "who is like God?") and his angels (or messengers) are symbolic names of Christ and his apostles.
- The war in heaven was fought in the same element as that in which the woman appeared, and the casting out of demons by Christ and his apostles was the reality to which these symbols point (Cf. Luke 10:18; John 12:31).
- The soul-conflicts of Christians are similar. [Paul fully recognized the spiritual and demoniacal character of the Christian's struggle when he wrote: *"Our wrestling is not against blood and flesh, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places"* (Ephesians 6:12). Such conflict = war in heaven].

v. 13ff - The flight of the woman into the wilderness = the scattering of the Church by reason of persecution (Cf. Acts 8:1)

- The flight of the church in Judea Jesus authorized when his disciple's were to see the signs of the end (Mt. 24:16; Lk 21:21).

Revelation Chapter 13

v. 1 - Being cast down from heavenly places, the dragon stood on the sea shore, where he reveals his power by means of a wild beast, seen as coming up out of the sea.

v. 2 - This beast combines features of a leopard, a bear, and a lion — from the first three beasts of Daniel's vision (Daniel 8:4,6).

The dragon imparts to this beast all the malignity, the blasphemy, and persecuting violence that characterized Daniel's fourth beast at the ap-

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pearance of the little horn (cf. Daniel 7:7,8). Here we note the particulars of the description:

1. The beast comes from the sea.
 2. He has 7 heads, and 10 horns and 10 crowns on his horns.
 3. He bears names of blasphemy upon his heads.
 4. He unites characteristics of beasts seen by Daniel (Chapter 7).
 5. It is invested by the dragon with his delegated power.
 6. One of its heads is mortally wounded; but is healed.
 7. It receives the homage of the whole world.
 8. Divine honors are paid to it.
 9. It blasphemes God, and wars against the saints.
 10. The duration of his power is limited to 42 months.
 11. Its number is 'the number of a man,' declared to be 666.²³⁷
 12. He was, and is not, and shall again come (cf. Chapter 17:8).
 13. He ascends out of the abyss, and goes to perdition (Chapter 17:8).
 14. He is a king: one of seven, and yet the eighth (Chapter 17:11).
- This beast we understand to be the Roman Empire, as represented by Nero, under whom the Jewish war began, and by whom the woman's seed, the saints (Cf. 12:17 and 13:7), were most bitterly persecuted.

His rising out of the sea = a foreign power as viewed from a Jewish (land of Palestine) point of view.

The 7 heads and 10 crowns = fulness of power and universal real.
Names of blasphemy = he/it claims divine prerogatives

One of the heads being wounded = representing the violent end of Nero

- He was the very incarnation of wickedness and corresponds in every essential with "*the man of lawlessness...the son of destruction,*" of whom Paul wrote to the 2 Thessalonians 2:3. He was said to be more like a wild beast than a human. He murdered his own brother, and

²³⁷ In Chapter 17 other particulars complete the beast's description (but they do not make discovery of his identity easier. Diligent effort is required).

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mother, and even his wife. He also set the city of Rome on fire and then blamed the Christians for it. He made himself a slave of the most brutal passions, and arrogated to himself the claim of deity.

1. It is self-evident that the writer intended his readers to be able to identify the person he alludes to. He meant not to puzzle, but to enlighten, his readers.

2. It is equally evident that the explanation does not lie on the surface. It requires wisdom to understand; only one “*who has understanding*” is competent to discern the meaning.

3. It is plain that what he intends to convey to his readers is the name of the person identified with the beast. His name expresses a certain number (or, the letters forming his name, when added together, amount to a certain numerical value).

4. The name or number is that of a man (so literally a man and not a beast, or evil spirit, or abstraction.)

5. The number which expresses the name is in Greek characters $\chi \xi \varsigma$ or in numerical value $600 + 60 + 6$.

We have already, on other grounds, arrived at the conclusion that the beast = the Roman Empire, then ruled by Nero. It is his name, therefore, that ought to fulfill — not indeed obviously, nor without some research — yet satisfactorily and conclusively, all the conditions of the symbolism. That emperor’s name could be written in three different ways: in Latin, *Nero Caesar*; in Greek Νερώων Καίσαρ ; and in Hebrew, נְרֹוֹן קֶסֶר and it is in the Hebrew that the mystery is solved. (Hebrew reads from right to left!)

נ = 50	ק = 100
ר = 200	ס = 60
ו = 6	ר = 200
נ = 50	

v. 11 - Along with the first beast another beast was seen coming up out of the land having two horns like a lamb. It was only a satellite — alter ego and representative — of the first beast, and it exercises its authority.

- If our conclusion as to the identity of the first beast is correct, it ought not to be difficult to discover who or what was intended by the

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second beast. In many ways there is a strong resemblance between them: they are of the same nature — though one is supreme and the other subordinate; but there are also points of difference.

- We here list the various particular characteristics:

1. The second beast rises up from the land (Greek: τῆν γῆν).
2. It only has 2 horns and they have a lamb-like appearance.
3. It speaks, however, like a dragon.
4. It is clothed with authority delegated from the first beast.
5. It compels men to pay homage or worship the (first) beast.
6. It pretends to exercise miraculous powers.
7. It rules with tyrannical force and cruelty.
8. It denies civil rights to any refusing to submit to that beast.

In interpreting this second beast the following facts are clear:

- 1 - Its rising out of *the land* (while the first beast rises out of *the sea*) indicates that it is a domestic authority ruling Judea [John's readers would understand this from his use of the term [τῆς γῆς] 'the land' in their Greek O.T. translation], while the other is a foreign power
- 2 - Its having two horns like a lamb, while the first beast has ten, means its sphere is smaller, and its power limited, in comparison with that of the Roman Empire.
- 3 - Its having 'two horns like a lamb' denotes the *appearance* of being other than a wild beast
- 4 - That it (the second beast) speaks as a dragon or serpent, denotes its true character as crafty and deceitful
- 5 - Its being clothed with the authority of the first beast indicates that its really in willing submission to Rome rather than to the true God.

- 6 - So the conclusion is that this represents the sad fact that the government of the province of Judea up to the time of “the great tribulation” was that of a puppet of Caesar.²³⁸

It is a well known fact that Christians at this time were required to either worship the image of the emperor or face death, and procurators were the emperor’s agents to enforce this measure. Its strange that learned critics will, with an air of contempt, reject an explanation of the “*image of the beast*” so natural and simple as that given above, and find satisfaction thinking that this image denotes the images of saints set up in papal churches (Faber); or the pope considered as the idol of the Roman Church (Newton, Daubuz); or the temporal power of the pope, and the patrimony granted by Pepin in A. D. 754 (Glasgow); or the papal kingdom or hierarchy which the priesthood established (Lord); or the empire of Charlemagne, regarded as the image of the old heathen Roman Empire (Bede); or the pope’s decretals (Osiander); or the Inquisition (Vittinga); or the papal General Councils of Western Europe (Elliott).

- The second beast is appropriately called “*the false prophet*” (Revelation 16:13; 20:20). It should be remembered that the Jewish hierarchy was in willing submission to Caesar (cf. John 19:12,15; Luke 23:2).

Revelation Chapter 14

This vision of Mount Zion is a glorious contrast to the preceding revelations. It reveals the heavenly side of this period of persecution and trial, and sets it forth in seven exhibitions:

- 1) First vision is of the Lamb on Mount Zion (heavenly Zion),
- 2) With him were many thousands of his redeemed out of old Israel who believed in him, and recognized his glory (vv. 1-5). They are part of the woman’s seed that was caught up to God’s throne (12:5), but are now seen from another point of view.

²³⁸ Judea was ruled by procurators, and two procurators specially noted for their tyranny and oppression were Albinus and Gessius Florus. (See Josephus, Ant., Book 20, Chapter 9:1 and Chapter 11:1. Wars, Book 2, Chapters 14 and 15.)

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- 3) Next follows the vision of a flying angel bearing eternal good tidings to every nation (vv. 6-7), a symbolic representation of the gospel beginning to be carried to the nations.

This is accomplished in spite of the dragon and his agents. While the dragon — wielding the forces of the empire — seeks to annihilate the Church, the true children of the heavenly Jerusalem are caught up to be with Christ in glory; *and* in spite of the persecution the Gospel is still preached in all the world,²³⁹ accompanied with warning and promise. Thus the saints are triumphant “*on account of the blood of the Lamb, and on account of the word of their testimony*” (Chapter 12:11).

- 4) Then an angel — in anticipation — announces the fall of *Babylon the great* (v. 8), followed by another angel,
- 5) He warns men not to worship the beast or his image (vv. 9-12).
- 6) And a voice from heaven then pronounces them blessed who die in the Lord from that time forth (v. 13); as if from that eventful epoch the dead in Christ should enter at once into a rest which the dead of the previous life could not know.
- 7) The sixth scene depicts the Son of man as wearing a golden crown, holding a sharp sickle in his hand (vv. 14-10).
- 8) With this soon appeared another angel having a sharp sickle, and the land was reaped, and the winepress, trodden outside the city, spread rivers of blood that seemed to deluge all the land. (This is but another picture of the same catastrophe, seen from another point of view).

Revelation Chapters 15 & 16

The vision of the seven bowls (φιάλας, or vials) full of the wrath of God which are called the seven last plagues (Rev. 15,16) is another symbolic review of what was previously indicated by seven the seven seals (Chapters 4-7), and the seven trumpet-woes (of Chapters 8-11), with which they minutely correspond.

Note the parallels:

²³⁹ As the apostle Paul put it in 2 Timothy 2:9 “*I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!*”

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The Trumpets	The Vials
1. Plagues poured on the land	Plagues poured on the land
2. Affects the sea, which becomes as blood	Affects the sea, which becomes as blood
3. Affects the rivers & fountains	Affects the rivers & fountains
4. Affects sun, moon & stars	Affects the sun
5. The abyss (seat of beast) opened Men tormented	The abyss (seat of beast) opened Men tormented
6. Angels at Euphrates loosed to muster hordes of cavalry	Angels at Euphrates loosed to muster for battle of great day
7. Catastrophe, judgment on King- dom proclaimed. Terrible phen- omena - voices, thundering, & earthquake	Catastrophe, proclamation of the end. Awful natural phenomena voices, thundering, and an earthquake

We understand these to be parallel visions of one and the same judgment of God (similar to the parallel visions in the book of Daniel). They are like the two dreams of Pharaoh (Genesis 41:1-36), showing that these things are firmly decreed by God, and that he will certainly and shortly bring them to pass (Genesis 40:32).

Revelation Chapters 17 - 18

Many interpreters have held it to be virtually self-evident that the Babylon of the Book of Revelation is the city of Rome: ‘Empress of the World’ in John’s day, and since that time the seat and centre of the most corrupt form of Christianity that the world has seen (the Roman Catholic Church). This is thought to be placed beyond question by the apparent identification of the harlot, in the vision, as the “*city of the seven hills*” and “*that great city which reigns over the kings of the land*” (the Greek here is τῆν γῆν which should be translated “*the land*” instead of the common and misleading translation: “*the earth*”). The way this designation is used in the Septuagint version of the O.T. shows this to be the case.

It may seem presumptuous as well as hazardous to challenge the long-standing and popular view which sees Rome as the Babylon of Revelation. Nevertheless, there are such weighty reasons to challenge this that we cannot ignore them — here they are:

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- 1) There is an a priori presumption of the strongest kind against Papal Rome being the Babylon of the Apocalypse. *John was clearly dealing with a then existing threat.* To wander into all ages and places to interpret these visions is forbidden by the express limitations laid down in the book itself.
- 2) On the other hand it is to be expected that prominence would be given in this Revelation to the city of Jerusalem. And if Revelation is a restatement of our Lord's Mount of Olives prophecy we would expect to find the same essential things in it. *So it would be as unreasonable to try to find Papal Rome in the Book of Revelation as to look for it explicitly in our Lord's prophecy.*
- 3) It deserves particular attention also that in Revelation there are *two* cities — and *only two* — brought prominently, and by name, into view by symbolic representation. *And each is the very antithesis of the other.* The one is the embodiment of all that is good and holy, the other is the embodiment of all that is evil and accursed.

We believe these two contrasted cities are *New Jerusalem* and *Babylon the Great* (symbolizing *Old Jerusalem*).

- There's no room for doubt as to what is signified by the *New Jerusalem*: it is the city of God, the heavenly habitation, the inheritance of the saints in light.
- But what, then, is to be understood as the proper antithesis to the *New Jerusalem*?
- Surely, it can be no other than the *Old Jerusalem*. In fact, this antithesis between the *Old Jerusalem* and the *New* is drawn out for us so distinctly by Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians (4:21-31). This, we believe, is the key to a correct interpretation of this symbol in the book of Revelation!
- The apostle contrasts the then existing city of Jerusalem, which was destroyed in 70 A.D., with the Jerusalem that replaced it: the Jerusalem in bondage with the Jerusalem which is free: the Jerusalem which is beneath with the Jerusalem which is above (Galatians 4:25,26).

New Jerusalem

Old Jerusalem

Heavenly	Earthly
Has foundations	Non-continuing
Builder is God	Builder is man
Yet to come	Now is
Comes from above	Is from beneath
Free	In bondage
Holy	Wicked
Bride	Harlot

- 4) If it is objected that other symbolic names were already given to old Jerusalem ('*Sodom and Egypt*' in 11:8), that is not a valid argument against this identification. All of these names — Sodom, Egypt, Babylon — are alike suggestive of evil and of ungodliness, and therefore proper designations of "*the wicked city*" whose doom was to be like theirs. (Note that there are many different symbols and titles used to denote even Christ himself in this book).
- 5) It deserves notice that there is a title in the book of Revelation which is applied to one particular city par excellence. Its the title "*that great city*" [In Greek: ἡ πόλις ἡ μεγάλη]. If, then, "*the great city*" of 11:8 designates old Jerusalem, it follows that "*the great city*" of 14:8, styled also *Babylon*, and "*the great city*" in 16:19, must also signify Jerusalem. By parity of reasoning, then, "the great city" [ἡ πόλις ἡ μεγάλη] in 18:18, and elsewhere, must also mean Jerusalem.
- 6) In the catastrophe unveiled in the fourth vision (that of the seven mystic figures) the judgement of Israel is symbolized by the treading of the winepress. It also says "*the winepress was trodden outside the city*" 14:20. It follows that "*the city*" outside of which the grapes are trodden is Jerusalem. The only city mentioned in this chapter is Babylon the great (v. 8). It must therefore represent Jerusalem. It is inconceivable that the vine of Judea should be trodden outside the city of Rome.
- 7) In 16:19 it says "*the great city*" was divided into three parts by the unprecedented earthquake mentioned in v. 18. What great city? Probably this is an allusion to a figure employed by the prophet Ezekiel in

describing the siege of Jerusalem (Ezekiel. 5:1-5.) The prophet is commanded to take the hairs of his head and beard, and, dividing them into three parts, to burn one part with fire, to cut another part with a knife, and to scatter the third part to the four winds, drawing out a sword after them; while only a few hairs were to be preserved, and bound in the skirt of his garment. Then follows the emphatic declaration in 5:1: *“Thus says the Lord God, This is Jerusalem.”* It is fitting that to a prophecy so full of symbols as Ezekiel we should look for light about the symbols in Revelation. And how vividly this three part division depicts the fate of Jerusalem in the siege of Titus it is needless to say. It is hardly possible to imagine a more truthful description of the historical facts than that which is summed up in v. 12 of that same chapter: *“One third of you shall die by the pestilence, and be consumed with famine in your midst; and one-third shall fall by the sword all around you; and I will scatter another third to all the winds, and I will draw out a sword after them.”* But whether this be an allusion to that vision or not, it makes no sense at all if we try to apply it to any other city. In what reasonable sense could it be said that Rome would be divided into three parts. Is it Rome that comes to special remembrance before God? Is it to Rome that the cup of wine of the fierceness of the wrath of God is given? This last figure ought to have suggested to commentators the true interpretation — a symbol appropriate to Jerusalem. *“Awake, awake, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his fury; you have drunk the dregs of the cup of trembling and have drained it out”* (Isaiah 51:17).

8) But a still weightier argument against Rome being taken as the Babylon of Revelation (and at the same time proving the identity between Jerusalem and Babylon) is that which is derived from the name and character of the woman in the vision.

- The vision of Babylon (in chapters 17-18) concerns the *“great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt where also our Lord was crucified”* (11:8). This woman or city is also styled a harlot — *“that great harlot...mother of harlots and abominations of the land.”* This is familiar figure is well known from the Old Testament but is not at all appropriate or applicable to Rome. Rome was a heathen city, and was consequently incapable of that greater and damning sin which was only possible, and, alas, actual for Jerusalem. Rome was not capable of violating such a betrothal covenant with God because she was never the covenanted wife of Jehovah. This was the crowning guilt of Jeru-

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salem alone among all the nations. As Isaiah put it: “*How is the faithful city [Jehovah’s wife] become an harlot!*” (1:21)

- The vision of “*Babylon the Great*” is, in other words, an apocalyptic picture of the apostate Church of the old covenant.
- It is that murderess of prophets against whom Jesus uttered the terrible words of Matthew 23:34-36. From the beginning of the Roman Empire Jerusalem sought and maintained a heathenish complicity with the Caesars, and the empire became, politically, her maintainer and support.
- There was constant strife among ambitious rulers to obtain the so-called “kingdom of Judea.” Jerusalem was the chief city of that province, and therefore properly said to “reign over the kings (not of the earth, and not over emperors and monarchs of the world, but) of *the land*” (8:18). It is the same land (γη), the tribes of which would mourn over the coming [ερχομαι not παρουσια] of the Son of man (chapter 1:7).
- “*The kings of the land*” who (in Psalm 2:2), set themselves against Jehovah and his Christ, are declared by Peter to be such civil rulers as Herod and Pontius Pilate (Acts 4:27). These, he declares, “*were gathered together with Gentiles and peoples of Israel.*” Josephus says: “*The city of Jerusalem is situated in the very middle (of the land), on which account some have called that city the navel of the country. Nor indeed is Judea destitute of such delights as come by the sea, since its maritime places extend as far as Ptolemais. It was parted into eleven portions, of which the royal city Jerusalem was supreme, and presided over all the neighboring country as the head does over the body.*” - [Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Book 3, 3:5].

v. 12 - The language of the angelic interpreter, even when ostensibly explaining the mystery, is manifestly enigmatical. Just as when, in chap. 13:18, he that has understanding is called upon to “*count the number of the beast,*” so here the clue to the mystery of the seven heads and ten horns is itself another riddle. “*Here is the mind which has wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits*” (17:9). This probably refers — enigmatically — to manifold political alliances, considered as so many seats of power or consolidated kingdoms, and called seven because of covenanted arrangements.

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But like other instances of use of the number seven it can hardly refer to literal mountains! *“The mountains,”* says Glasgow, *“are, like other terms, to be understood symbolically. If the woman is not literal, why should the mountains be so thought? And to call the woman a literal city, built on seven [literal] hills, is equally gratuitous, whether a Protestant says it of Rome or a Romanist of Constantinople.”*

The fact that reference to seven mountains is followed by reference to 7 kings further indicates that these mountains represent political power structures, not literal geographical features. And the fact that the reference to 7 mountains and 7 kings is followed by a reference to 10 horns, which are also kings, surely indicates the shifting turmoil and changing political situation in the world at that time.

v. 12-18 - The Ten Horns of the Beast — These ‘ten kings’ have the following characteristics:

1. They are satellites/tributaries of the beast = subject to Rome.
 2. They are confederate with the beast against Jerusalem.
 3. They are hostile to Christianity.
 4. They also become hostile to the harlot and active in her destruction.
 5. When John was writing these kings were not yet in power.
 6. Their power was to be contemporaneous with that of the beast.
- We conclude that this symbol signifies the princes and chiefs who were allies of Rome and received commands from the Roman army during the Jewish war.
 - We know from Tacitus and Josephus that several neighboring nations followed Vespasian and Titus to the war.
 - Tacitus speaks of ‘the bitter animosity’ with which the Arab auxiliaries of Titus were filled against the Jews.
 - Notice another feature in the vision. The woman is represented as sitting upon ‘many waters,’ and in verse 15 these waters are said to signify peoples, multitudes, nations and tongues.

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- We see this as a reference to the widespread dispersion of the Jews in the Roman Empire in the 1st Century. Jerusalem (representing the Jewish nation) might truly be said, in that sense, to sit upon many waters (See Acts 2:5).

Finally, we note the striking parallels between 2 Thessalonians 2 and Revelation 13 and

The Man of Sin of 2 Thess. 2

“The man of sin...” v. 3

“Full of names of blasphemy” 17:3

“The son of perdition...” v. 3

“The lawless one...” v. 8

“Who opposes & exalts himself above all that is called God, or worshipped” v. 4

“So that he as God sits in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” v. 4

“Whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and destroy with the brightness of his coming” v. 8

“Whose coming is after the working of Satan, v. 9

“With all power and signs and lying wonders” v. 9

“And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish” v. 10

“for this cause God will send them a strong delusion to believe the lie” v. 11

The Wild Beast of Rev. 13,17

“on his heads names of blasphemy” 13:1

“He shall go to perdition...” 17:11

“Power was given to him to do what he will” 13:5

“There was given him a mouth speaking great things...and he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God” 13:5,6

“And they worshipped the beast, saying, who is like the beast?...and all the land shall worship him” 13:4,8

“These shall make war with the Lamb, & the Lamb shall overcome them” 17:14 (and compare 19:20)

“And the dragon gave him his power” 13:12

“And he does great wonders so that he makes fire come down from heaven in the sight of men” 13:13

“deceives them that dwell in the land by means of those miracles...he had power to do in the sight of the beast” 13:14

“If any man worship the beast and his image...the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God” 14:9,10

We see it as self-evident that the momentous calamity predicted by our Lord — which included “*the great tribulation*” that was to be greater than anything before it, and greater than anything that was to occur after

it, in history²⁴⁰ — was the focus of John's vivid retelling of his Lord's eschatological discourse? It is our conviction that the parallels are too numerous and striking to warrant any other conclusion. It is also a fact that the pathway to a right understanding of the symbolism that God used in these visions can only be obtained by comparing scripture with scripture — and in this instance especially the O.T. usage of these very images and symbols.

Revelation Chapters 18 & 19

The fall of Babylon (*"that great city"*) is portrayed in glowing colors in 18:1-19:10, and the language and imagery are appropriated almost wholly from the Old Testament prophetic pictures of the fall of ancient Babylon and Tyre.

- How strange that learned exegetes who find fulfillment of this prophecy in comparatively unimportant events of the modern world — and of the Papacy — are forgetful of such events as those described by the Jewish historian Josephus.
- Describing the destruction of the temple Josephus says: *"While the holy house was on fire everything was plundered that came to hand, and ten thousand of those that were caught were slain; nor was there a commiseration of any age, or any reverence of gravity; but children and old men, and profane persons and priests, were all slain in the same manner; so that this war went round [to] all sorts of men, and brought them to destruction, and as well those that made supplication for their lives as those that defended themselves by fighting. The flame was also carried a long way, and made an echo together with the groans of those that were slain; and because this hill was high, and the works at the temple were very great, one would have thought the whole city had been on fire. Nor can one imagine anything either greater or more terrible than this noise; for there was at once a shout of the Roman legions, who were marching all together, and a sad clamor of the seditious, who were now surrounded with fire and sword. The people also that were left above were beaten back upon the enemy, and under a great consternation, and made sad moans at the calamity they were under; the multitude also that was in the city joined*

²⁴⁰ Matthew 24:21 - *"For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be."*

in this outcry with those that were upon the hill; and, besides, many of those that were worn away by the famine and their mouths almost closed, when they saw the fire of the holy house they exerted their utmost strength, and brake out into groans and outcries again: Perea did also return the echo, as well as the mountains round about [the city], and augmented the force of the entire noise. Yet was the misery itself more terrible than this disorder; for one would have thought that the hill itself, on which the temple stood, was seething hot, as full of fire on every part of it, that the blood was larger in quantity than the fire, and those that were slain more in number than those that slew them; for the ground did nowhere appear visible for the dead bodies that lay on it; but the soldiers went over heaps of these bodies as they ran upon such as fled from them.” (Wars of the Jews, Book 6, Chapter 5:1.)

The vision is fourfold:

- (1) An angel proclaims the awful ruin in 18:1-3. He repeats words already used in 14:8, words used of old by Isaiah 21:9 and Jeremiah 2:8 in foretelling the ruin of the Chaldean capital.
- (2) Then another heavenly voice is heard, much like the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:16, and the prophetic word which long before called people to “*flee out of the midst of Babylon, and deliver every man his soul*” (Jeremiah 51:6; cf. 1:8; Isaiah 48:20; Zechariah 2:6,7).
- (3) This call is followed by a woeful dirge over the sudden ruin of the great city in 18:4-20. This oracle of doom should be closely compared with that of Isaiah and Jeremiah over ancient Babylon (Isaiah 13:19-22; Jeremiah 50,51), and Ezekiel over the fall of Tyre (Ezekiel 26-28).
- (4) The violence of this great catastrophe is next illustrated by the symbolism of a mighty angel hurling a millstone into the sea, and the consequent cessation of all her former activity and noise (Cf. 18:21-24).
- (5) After these things there is heard a cry of victory in heavens — a notable contrast to the voice of the harpers and minstrels of the fallen Babylon, as all the servants of God are admonished to prepare for the marriage supper of the Lamb.

- (6) After the fall of *“the Great Babylon”* (Old Jerusalem and National Israel) there follows a sevenfold vision of the coming [ἐρχομενον] and kingdom of the Christ in 19:11-21:8. Just as Jesus said *“immediately after the tribulation of **those** days”* in Matthew 24:29 the sign of the Son of man in heaven was to appear, so — immediately after the horrors of the woe-smitten city — the seer of Patmos sees the heavens opened, and the King of kings and Lord of lords coming forth to conquer the nations.

This great apocalyptic picture is about:

- (1) The present activity [ἐρχομενον] of Christ in history 19:11-16.
- (2) The destruction of the beast and the false prophet with all their impious forces in verses 17-21. This overthrow is portrayed in noticeable harmony with what is said about the lawless one in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, *“whom the Lord Jesus shall consume [ἀναλώσει] with the breath of his mouth, and destroy [καταργήσαι] with the manifestation [ἐπιφανεία] of his coming [παρουσίας]!”* The first item here refers to the progressive conquest of the nations by means of faithful gospel preaching; the second item, of course, refers to the final judgment.
- (3) The destruction of the beasts to whom the dragon gave his power and authority (Chapter 13:2,11,12) is appropriately accompanied by the binding and imprisonment of the old dragon himself (20:1-3). The symbols employed to set forth all these triumphs are surely not to be understood literally of a warfare carried on with carnal weapons (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:4; Ephesians 6:11-17), but they do vividly express momentous facts associated with the crisis of that age, when Judaism fell, and Christianity opened on the world.
- (4) From that time on no well-authenticated instance of demon *possession* can be shown. *“We conclude,”* says the author of *The Parousia*, *“that at the end of the [O.T.] age a marked and decisive check was given to the power of Satan; which check is symbolically represented here by the chaining and imprisoning of the dragon in the abyss. It does not follow that all error and evil were banished from the earth. It is enough to show that this was... ‘the decisive crisis between ancient and modern times,’ and that the introduction of Christianity ‘changed and regenerated, not only government and science, but the whole system of human life.’”* (*Parousia*, p. 618.)

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- (5) With the shutting up of Satan the millennium begins: a long indefinite period, as the symbolical number most naturally suggests, but a period of ample fullness for the universal diffusion and triumph of the Gospel (vv. 4-6). "*The first resurrection*" we take to be the same as that spoken of by Jesus in John 5:25. For it is written, "*Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection, on such the second death has no authority,*" for of such Jesus said, "*neither can they die any more*" (Luke 20:96).
- (6) This conflict of the final era of history is rapidly passed over by the seer, and its details are not made known (vv. 7-10). This is no doubt because God has not given any revelation as to times and the seasons leading up to the parousia.
- (7) The last judgment is what is next portrayed in verses 11-15. It is one and the same with what is depicted in Matthew 25:31-46 and which will take place when the Son of man delivers over the kingdom to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24). The appointed time and sequence of these events are unknown (Matthew. 24:36; Acts 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:1 etc.)
- (8) The last picture in this series is that of the new heavens and new land, and the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem (21:1-8). It corresponds with Matthew 25:34, where the king says to those on his right hand: "*Come, you blessed of my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*"

Here the glory of the righteous is put in striking contrast with the curse and doom of the wicked, when it is finally said that "*These shall go away into eternal punishment*" (Matthew 25:46). So here — after the glory of the redeemed is outlined — it is added, as the issue of God's final judgment: "*But as for the fearful, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and fornicators, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part is in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone* (Cf. 'the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels,' which is the second death" (Matthew 25:41).

- It should be noted that this last sevenfold apocalyptic vision in 19:11-21:8 covers the entire field of biblical eschatology. The whole is rapidly sketched, for details would have transcended the purpose of "*the prophecy of this book*" which was to make known things which were *shortly* to come to pass (Revelation 1:1-3). But like the last section of

our Lord's discourse in Matthew 25:31-46 which introduces the unknown time "*when the Son of man should come in his glory*;" so this sevenfold vision begins with the parousia (19:11), and sketches in brief outline the mighty triumphs and eternal issues of the Messiah's reign.

Revelation Chapter 20

We understand the millennium (Revelation 20:1-10) to be in progress now. It began with the end of the Jewish theocracy in 70 A.D. and is the period of Christ's Messianic reign as prophesied by Daniel, and described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:24-26. The kingdom of heaven — like the mustard seed or the leaven — is *now* in a process of gradual development that could require many thousands of years.

- It is here that some might think that we have been wrong in saying there will be no signs to indicate the time of the parousia. Because it is right here (in verse 30 that we read that "*after that he must be released for a little while*" and in verse 7 that "*when the thousand years have expired*" Satan will be loosed so that he will (again) "*deceive the nations*" (v. 8). But is this commonly accepted translation really true to the original text? Or is the 'received text' (called the Textus Receptus or TR) used by the Reformers really the correct text²⁴¹ in this instance? We believe it is. And when we follow the reading of *this* text we again find complete harmony with the teaching of Jesus and his apostles. Because *this* text says: "*And in the midst of* (Greek: μετα) *these things it is necessary to release him a little time*" (v. 3) "*And in the midst of* (Greek: μετα) *the thousand years Satan will be released*

²⁴¹ It is a well known principle of textual criticism that a reading which at first sight seems more difficult may well be the correct reading. Its easy to see how the TR of this passage could have been 'corrected' by textual scribes who thought it made little sense as it stood. The TR of v. 3b reads: μετὰ ταῦτα δεῖ αὐτὸν λυθῆναι μικροῦν χρόνον and v. 7 reads: καὶ μετὰ τα χίλια ἔτη λυθῆσεται ὁ Σατανᾶς ἐκ τῆς φυλακῆς αὐτοῦ. Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* defines μετα as: "a preposition, akin to μέσος (as German *mit* to *mitten*) and hence prop. *in the midst of, amid*, denoting association, union, accompaniment." But even if the more commonly accepted text is preferred we see no reason to view a final loosening of the restraints on Satan to be taken as a second fulfillment of the "great tribulation" predicted by Jesus (Mt. 24:20). It is clear from 1 Th. 5:1-3 that it would more likely be a time of seeming tranquility. So, with either reading, it is quite unnecessary to see in this a contradiction to our Lord's clear and repeated statement that there are no predicted 'signs' by which people can know — even approximately — the time of his second coming (parousia).

from his prison” (v. 7). In other words, according to the TR, Satan will not be loosed just once to do his evil work — shortly before the second coming of Christ — but will be loosed from time to time, and place to place, to some extent, to do evil. Exactly what we would expect from the teaching of Paul, who said “*in the last days perilous seasons will come*” (2 Timothy 3:1). But also, just as Jesus promised, none of these seasons will equal, let alone surpass, “*the great tribulation*” (Matthew 24:21). No, the very gates of hell will not be able to withstand the advancing church of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:18).

- This understanding remains true to the non-literal principle we have followed in the interpretation of this book. We are not to look for a specific historical period of 1,000 years, nor of Satan’s work as done in a last gasp. No, its “*with*” — “*along with*” — or “*in the midst of*” — the non-literal millenium that God has ordained seasons of heightened Satanic activity. “*In the last days perilous times will come.*” The last days began when Jesus ascended into heaven. And they will end when he returns to the world. Satan will keep on trying to destroy the church until the very last day, when — quite suddenly — his terrible end will come with Christ’s parousia.

Revelation Chapters 21 & 22

There remains for our notice but one more vision, the vision of the New Jerusalem. As in Revelation 16:19, under the seventh and last plague, the fall of the “Babylon” (*old Jerusalem*) was briefly outlined, and then, in chap. 17-19:10, another and more detailed ‘portrait’ of that same “*mother of the harlots and of the abominations of the land*” was added, going over many of the same events again, so here — having given under the last series of visions a short but vivid picture of the heavenly Jerusalem in 21:1-8 — the apostle, following his artistic style and habit of repetition, tells how one of those same seven angels (of 17:1-4. and 21:9-11) took him to a lofty mountain, and gave him a fuller vision of the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.

- This wife of the Lamb is the woman of 7:1, but she is here revealed at a later stage of her history, after the dragon has been shut up in the abyss. After the land has been cleared of the dragon, the beast and

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false prophet, “*the seed of the woman*” — the *seed* here meaning the whole body of believers — who fled into the wilderness, and then were caught up to the throne of God, are viewed as “*coming down out of heaven from God,*”²⁴² and all things are made new.

- The language and symbols used are appropriated mainly from Isaiah 55:17-56:24, and the closing chapters of Ezekiel. The great thought is: old (Jerusalem) Babylon, the bloody harlot, has been removed, and a New Jerusalem, the glorious Bride, appears.

As the closing chapters of Ezekiel have been variously understood so this vision of the New Jerusalem has been explained in different ways.

- (1) According to many premillennialists it indicates a future restoration of the Jews to Palestine, and rebuilding of a literal temple on a magnificent scale, in the earthly Jerusalem.
 - (2) According to others, the new heaven, new land, and new Jerusalem are a symbolic recapitulation of the visions of chapter 20, for the purpose of fuller detail, and are to be understood as synchronizing with the period of the thousand years.
 - (3) But most interpreters regard the prophecy as descriptive of the final heavenly state of the glorified saints of God.
 - (4) Rejecting the first of the above named views (which represents the sensuous Ebionite conception of the Kingdom of Heaven, we may blend the two other interpretations (in an already/not-yet concept of the Kingdom of God).
- The words of Haggai 2:6,7, are acknowledged by some interpreters to be a Messianic prophecy: “*Yet once — it is a little while — and I will shake the heavens, and the land, and the sea, and the desert; and I will shake all the nations, and they shall come to the delight of all the nations, and I will fill this house with glory.*”
 - This prophecy is quoted and explained in Hebrews 12:26-28, as the removal of the earth and heaven as it was before, to be replaced by

²⁴² Compare 1 Thessalonians 4:14

an “immovable kingdom.” Is there any reason for believing this immovable kingdom to be other than that of which the Lord spoke in Matthew 16:28 — *“There are some standing here who shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom”*? — The *“glory of that latter house”* of which Haggai 2:7,9 spoke, was attained when Christ entered and taught within its courts; but the destruction of the second temple, and the shaking of *“the heaven and the land”* which it represented, prepared the way for the better temple of *“his body, the fulness of him who fills all things in all”* (Ephesians 1:23). Of this body Christ is the head, the husband, and Savior (Ephesians 5:23), having loved her and having given himself for her, *“that he might sanctify her, having purified her by the laver of water in the word, that he himself might present to himself in glorious beauty the Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing”* (Ephesians 5:26,27). This glorious Church is manifestly the same as the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, and it is also called the holy city, New Jerusalem. It was necessary that the Old Testament form of the Church should be shaken and pass away, for its glory had departed; but out of it emerges *“the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven...and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect”* (Hebrews 12:23).

- If we allow the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews to guide us to a right understanding of the New Jerusalem, we will observe that the communion and fellowship of true believers are viewed as heaven already begun on earth. It is probable that Hebrews was written after the Book of Revelation, because direct allusions to it seem apparent in the following passage: *“You are come* (the sense of the Greek word προσελήλυθατε is that you have already come) *unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem”* (12:22). The Christian believer — his life being ‘hidden with Christ in God,’ — has already entered a fellowship and communion in the new Jerusalem which will never end. He is already enrolled, by name, in heaven. He already dwells in God and God in him. All subsequent glorification in time and in eternity is simply a continuous and growing experience of blessings belonging already to members of Christ’s Church and Kingdom.
- In this vision of the New Jerusalem we have the final New Testament revelation of the spiritual and heavenly blessedness and glory of which the Mosaic tabernacle was prophetic and material symbol. The *“dwelling of the testimony”* Exodus 38:21 and its various vessels and services were *“copies of the things in the heavens”* (He-

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brews 9:23). Now Christ has entered into the holy places *“through the greater and more perfect tabernacle”* (Hebrews 9:11), thereby making it possible for all true believers to enter *“with boldness into the entrance way of the holiest”* (Hebrews 10:19).

- This entrance into the holy place, and fellowship, is realized only as *“we draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water”* (Hebrews 10:22), and this spiritual access is now available to those who believe in Jesus. The Alpha and the Omega, accordingly, says: *“Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and that they may enter into the city by the gates”* (Revelation 22:14).
- This city is represented as having the form of a perfect cube (Revelation 21:16), and may therefore be regarded as the heavenly *“Holy of Holies,”* which we may now approach.
- This all accords with the voice from the throne, which said. *“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God”* (Revelation 21:3). Herein we discern the true antitype of the ancient tabernacle and temple, and it is for this reason that this holy city needs no separate temple, and no light of a sun and moon, because the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb are its light and the city itself is the temple (Revelation 21:22,23).
- Note also that there is no mention of Cherubim in this Holy of Holies! Why? Because these former symbols of redeemed humanity, in unity with the rest of the creation, are now supplanted by the innumerable company of Adam’s race, from whom the curse (κατάθεμα Revelation 22:3) has been removed, and who take their places around the throne of God and the Lamb, act as his servants there, behold his face, and have his name upon their foreheads (Revelation 22:3,4).
- The New Jerusalem, then, is a prophetic portrait of the New Testament Church and Kingdom of God in its heavenly character. Its symbolism exhibits the heavenly nature of the communion and fellowship of God and his people, which is entered here by faith, but which opens into unspeakable fulness of glory through all eternity.

- There is room for differences of opinion in the interpretation of the particular symbols in all of the apocalyptic Scriptures. But attention to their general harmony — and a careful study of the scope and outline of each prophecy in its historical context — will go far to save us from the hopeless confusion and contradiction into which many have fallen by neglecting this method.

Conclusion

We are now assured of the unity and harmony of the various New Testament prophetic passages.

1. There is no contradiction between the teaching of Jesus, the Epistles of Paul, and the book of Revelation written by John, concerning (1) “*all these things*” that were to take place in that generation, and (2) the second coming [παρουσία] of our Lord which to follow. They all agree in teaching (i) that the end of the ages²⁴³ of preparation was near at hand when the apostles wrote their appointed portions of the New Testament, (ii) that Christ was to come (ἐρχομαι) progressively on the clouds of heaven, and that this progressive conquest of the world of lost sinners would commence before that generation had passed away, and (iii) and that there would be no signs to indicate the time of his second coming [παρουσία].
2. It is self-evident that the coming [ἐρχομαι] of Christ on the clouds of heaven *was* premillennial, for it marked the formal assumption of the dominion, power and judgment which he now exercises — and will continue to exercise — until he’s put all of his enemies under his feet (1 Corinthians 15:25).
3. The final visible return [παρουσία] of Jesus will mark the end of the process of his present coming [ἐρχόμενον] on the clouds of heaven, when he will give over the kingdom to the Father, and God will be all in all.²⁴⁴ Between these two events — his ascension *to* heaven and his return *from* heaven — the Messianic age intervenes. Its beginning was

²⁴³ The Apostle Paul uses this very expression in First Corinthians 10:11: “*Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.*”

²⁴⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:24-25

like the tiny mustard-seed,²⁴⁵ or like the stone cut out without hands, which grows, and will increase until it becomes like a great mountain (the church) filling the entire world.²⁴⁶ It is possible that much of the Church's history and triumph is still future, and that more centuries may yet elapse before it reaches its fullness of development. After all, God promised Abraham that in his seed²⁴⁷ *all* nations of the earth would be blessed!

4. When our Lord shall have put down all of his other enemies he will finally abolish death for his people.²⁴⁸ At that hour "*all who are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; those who did good unto a resurrection of life, and those who wrought evil unto a resurrection of damnation*" (John 5:28). The resurrection of those who do not belong to Christ is in order that they might experience the second — and final — death. But for those who believe in, and belong to, him "*over such the second death has no power*" (Revelation 20:6).
5. Concerning the second coming [παρουσία] of Christ — when the redemption that he purchased for his elect has been applied to all of them, and he delivers the kingdom to the Father — no warning signs will be given to indicate when it is about to take place.²⁴⁹ Jesus clearly stated that even *he* did not know *when* it would take place in his estate of humiliation.²⁵⁰ He also clearly said that it was not even given to his inspired apostles to know.²⁵¹ It follows, therefore, that we are in serious trouble if we try in any way to calculate "*the times or the seasons*" [Acts 1:7] which will usher in the final consummation.
6. We conclude, then, with wise words from the final chapter (33:5) of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

"As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin; and for the greater

²⁴⁵ Matthew 13:31

²⁴⁶ Daniel 2:35b, 44

²⁴⁷ Genesis 22:18

²⁴⁸ "*For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*" 1 Corinthians 15:25,26.

²⁴⁹ As it was in the days before the flood when there was only the preaching of Noah to warn of the flood that was coming, so it will be until the very day of Christ's glorious second coming (cf. Mt. 24:37ff and 1 Thess. 5:1-10).

²⁵⁰ Mark 13:32

²⁵¹ Acts 1:7

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consolation of the godly in their adversity: so will he have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come; and may be ever prepared to say, Come Lord Jesus, come quickly, Amen.”

Questions for Further Study and Discussion:

1. How does the outline of this book indicate that it is like Daniel (using parallelism)?
2. What is the basic idea in using the symbolism of seals?
3. What is the basic idea in using the symbolism of trumpets?
4. What is the basic idea in using the symbolism of bowls?
5. What does the parallel material on p. 90 indicate?
6. What reasons are there for thinking this book is a retelling of Mt. 24?
7. What do the parallels shown on p. 127 show us?
8. What is the difference between the two Greek words *ercomai* and *parousia*?
9. What does the Greek text (as received by the Reformers) say about the meaning of Satan’s being released? (Footnote on p. 133)
10. Does this study agree with what our Reformation Fathers said in their Belgic Confession XXXVII paragraph 1, and Westminster Confession XXXIII sections 1 and 3?
11. List some of the benefits that come from understanding Revelation as a repetition of our Lord’s eschatological discourse in Mt. 24?
 - a. It protects us from...
 - b. It assures us of...
 - c. It motivates us to...
12. What has helped you the most in this study?
 - a. This text (or these texts):
 - b. This principle:

Chapter 6

Confirmation in Other Scriptures

If our understanding of Matthew 24, 2 Thessalonians 2, the material in the Epistles of John, and his book of Revelation is correct, then it ought to be confirmed by other evidence in Scripture. It is to the evidence that this is the case that we now direct our attention. And we find it several places.

1. The parables of Jesus.

Luke's gospel (Lk. 12:42-26) has the parable about the slave who, because he saw no signs that his master is about to return, began to beat the other male and female servants, but was suddenly surprised by his return. We see this as showing that Jesus did not want his disciples to think that they would be able to tell from signs when *he* would return.

In Matthew 24:43-45 describes that master of a household who, had he known when a thief might come would have been prepared when he did come. Jesus then went on to apply this truth, saying "therefore you must also **be** ready." In other words it is a great mistake to think that you will be just fine if you look for a sign to **get** ready.

In Matthew 25:1-13 we read about the ten virgins — five wise and five foolish. The wise virgins represents those who do not look for signs to tell them when Jesus will return because there will not be any. The foolish virgins represents those who wait until they think they see such signs only to learn that it is already too late.

2. **Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (5:1-3)** where he says this: *"Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you."* And then immediately gives the reason that statement: *"For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them...and they will not escape."* So the second coming of Christ will not come right after a second, and even more severe, edition of *"the great tribulation"* (Mt. 24:21). No, it will come when un-

believing complacent men are convinced that there's no reason to expect it. Was this not exactly what happened at the time of the worldwide flood of Noah's generation?

3. The second Epistle of Peter. If we want to know the one thing that is certain about 'the last days' then we need to listen to Peter. And the one certain thing we ought to know is "*that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, 'Where is the promise of his coming [παρουσία]? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation'*" (2 Pet. 3:3-4). There is a lot to be learned, and much could be said, about this one momentous statement by Peter. But our interest here is to simply point out that what Peter described is what we see in our own generation. People seem to fear God less and less because they see no signs that seem to them to point to Christ's second coming. But then Peter says — in that very context of scoffing unbelief — "*the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done in it will be exposed*" (3:10). So what should be *our* outlook or posture? "*Since all these things are thus to be dissolved*" we are called to "*holiness and godliness*" — just another way of saying there will be no signs so we need **right now** to be ready!

4. The same thing is reiterated again by Jude the brother of James. He says "*you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ because they said... 'In the last time there will be scoffers'*" (Jude 17-18) going on to exhort us to get ready *now*, and to persevere in *always being ready*.

Big books have been written to convince us that this or that author, at last, has deciphered the book of Revelation. Much of it reminds us of what they have also written about the first chapters of the Bible. But it is our conviction that the creation account is simply the truth: that is exactly what happened, and that is how long it took for it to happen (six days)!. And it is much the same with the doctrine of eschatology — it is really basically simple. What has God said, again and again, that is constantly disregarded? It is that it is not given to us to know "the times or the seasons." There is no revelation given to us by God to enable us to foretell in any chronological detail what will happen in the future. No one knows how long the history of the human race will take, or when Jesus will return in power and glory. The very thing that

we can know for sure is that there will be no signs of his second coming. He is going to return like a thief in the night; it will be like the world-wide flood that came in the time of Noah. And it is interesting to note that the great Reformation Creeds clearly declare this very conclusion.

- 5. We must learn to distinguish between the things that differ.** What happened in 70 A.D. is very different from what will happen at the time of the second coming of Jesus. As we saw in the beginning of this study *this was the very thing that Jesus had to correct in the thinking of his disciples*. They thought that many of “these things” had to be things that would only happen at the time of his parousia. They couldn’t seem to think of them as different kinds of events, which would take place at different times and with different precursors. But that was what was needed: a change in their way of thinking. They needed to pay closer attention to what Jesus was saying. He said — concerning “these things” that he described (Mt. 24:4-33) — not only that they would all happen in that generation, but also that they would be able get out of the doomed city of Jerusalem in time by seeing “these things” happening as signs intended to alert and warn them. But *then* Jesus said “*But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, **nor the son,** but only the Father*” (Mk. 13:32). And since that is the case it follows as night follows day that there will be no such series of things by which people can know it is about to happen. This *was* possible with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. It *is not* possible with the second coming [παρουσία] of Jesus.

We all live, as Christian believers, under the weight of two certainties. We are *either* going to physically die at a moment unknown to us in advance, *or* we are going to live until the moment of the second coming of Jesus. And it really doesn’t matter which it is because in either case the one thing that matters is to be ready to meet our creator.

- 6. What our Reformation Fathers said about eschatology concurs with the view set forth in this study.**

Belgic Confession Article XXXVII (first paragraph)

“Finally, we believe, according to the Word of God, when the time appointed by the Lord (which is unknown to all creatures) is come and the number of the elect complete, that our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, corporally and visibly, as He ascended, with great

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glory and majesty to declare Himself Judge of the living and the dead, burning this old world with fire and flame to cleanse it.”

Westminster Confession Chapter 33:3

“God hath appointed a day, wherein He will judge the world, in righteousness, by Jesus Christ, to whom all power and judgment is given by the Father...[and]

“As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment...so will He have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come; and may be ever prepared to say, Come Lord Jesus, come quickly, Amen.”

Questions for Further Study and Discussion:

1. Look up the text of Luke 12:42-6 and underline the words that you see as showing Jesus view of ‘signs’ of his coming.

Do the same with the text of Matthew 24:43-45

Do the same with Matthew 25:1-13

4. What do you find in the text of 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3 that helps you in this study of eschatology
5. Can you relate what Peter says (in 2 Peter 3:3-4) to what most people today
6. Considering items 3 and 4 (above) together, what are some of the things that people scoff at today!
7. What should our attitude be concerning books that claim to have a chronological scheme worked out for the future?

Appendix 1

Three synoptic gospel accounts of the Eschatological Sermon of Jesus

MARK - 13

- 1 Then as He went out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!"
- 2 And Jesus answered and said to him, "Do **you** see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down."
- 3 Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Him privately,
- 4 "Tell us, **when** will *these things* be? And **what** will be the *sign* when **all these things** will be fulfilled?"
- 5 And Jesus, answering them, began to say: "Take heed that no one deceives **you**."
- 6 For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and will deceive many."
- 7 "And when **you** hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled; for such things must happen, but *the end is not yet*."

MATTHEW - 24

- 1 Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came to Him to show Him the buildings of the temple.
- 2 And Jesus said to them, "Do **you** not see **all these things**? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down."
- 3 Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, **when** will *these things* be? And **what** will be the *sign* of your coming [παρουσία], and of the end of the age?"
- 4 And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives **you**."
- 5 For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many."
- 6 And **you** will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that **you** are not troubled; for **all these things** must come to pass, but *the end is not yet*."

LUKE - 21

- 5 Then, as some spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and donations, He said,
- 6 "As for *these things* which **you** see, the days will come in which not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down."
- 7 And they asked Him, saying, "Teacher, but **when** will *these things* be? And **what** *sign* will there be when *these things* are about to take place?"
- 8 And He said: "Take heed that **you** not be deceived. For many, will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and, 'The time has drawn near.' Therefore do not go after them."
- 9 But when **you** hear of wars and commotions, do not be terrified; for *these things* must come to pass first, but *the end* will *not* come *immediately*."

MARK - 13

- 8 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be earthquakes in various places, and there will be famines and troubles. These are the beginnings of sorrows.
- 9 But watch out for **yourselves**, for they will deliver **you** up to councils, and **you** will be beaten in the synagogues. And **you** will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, *for a testimony to them.*
- 10 And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations.
- 11 But when they arrest **you** and deliver **you** up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what **you** will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not **you** who speak, but the Holy Spirit.
- 12 Now brother will betray brother to death, and a father his

MATTHEW - 24

- 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places.
- 8 All these are the beginning of sorrows.
- 9 Then they will deliver **you** up to tribulation and kill **you**, and **you** will be hated by all nations for My name's sake.
- 10 And then many will be offended, will betray one another,

LUKE - 21

- 10 Then He said to **them**, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.
- 11 And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great *signs* from heaven.
- 12 But before **all these things**, they will lay their hands on **you** and persecute **you**, delivering **you** up to the synagogues and prisons, and **you** will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake.
- 13 But it will turn out for **you** as an occasion *for testimony.*
- 14 herefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what **you** will answer;
- 15 for I will give **you** a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist.
- 16 **You** will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives

MARK - 13

child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.

- 13 And **you** will be hated by all men for My name's sake. But he who endures to *the end* shall be saved.

- 14 But when **you** see the '*abomination of desolation*,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not (let the reader understand), then *let those who are in Judea flee* to the mountains.

- 15 And let him who is on the housetop not go down into the house, nor enter to take anything out of his house.

- 16 And let him who is in the field not go back to get his garment.

- 17 But woe to those who are pregnant and to those with nursing babies in those days!

MATTHEW - 24

and will hate one another.

- 11 Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many.

- 12 And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.

- 13 But he who endures to *the end* shall be saved.

- 14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world [οικουμενη] as a witness to all the nations, and then *the end* will come.

- 15 Therefore when **you** see the '*abomination of desolation*,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand),

- 16 then *let those who are in Judea flee* to the mountains.

- 17 Let him who is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house.

- 18 And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes.

- 19 But woe to those who are pregnant and to those with nursing babies in those days!

LUKE - 21

and friends; and they will send some of **you** to your death.

- 17 And **you** will be hated by all for My name's sake.

- 18 But not a hair of **your** head shall be lost.

- 19 In your patience possess **your** souls.

- 20 But when you see *Jerusalem surrounded by armies*, then know that its desolation is near.

- 21 Then *let those in Judea flee to the mountains*, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her.

MARK - 13

- 18 And pray that your flight may not be in winter.
- 19 For *in those days* there will be **tribulation**, such as has not been from the beginning of creation which God created until this time, **nor ever shall be**.
- 20 And unless the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake, whom He chose, He shortened the days.
- 21 Then if anyone says to **you**, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'Look, He is there!' do not believe it.
- 22 For false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.
- 23 But take heed; see, I have told you **all things** beforehand.

MATTHEW - 24

- 20 And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath.
- 21 For *then* there will be **great tribulation**, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, **no, nor ever shall be**.
- 22 And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.
- 23 Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it.
- 24 For false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect.
- 25 See, I have told **you** beforehand.
- 26 Therefore if they say to **you**, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it.

LUKE - 21

- 22 For *these are the days of vengeance*, that **all things** which are written *may be fulfilled*.
- 23 But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress *in the land* and **wrath upon this people**.
- 24 And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

MARK - 13

MATTHEW - 24

LUKE - 21

- 27 For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming [παρουσία] of the Son of Man be.
- 28 For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.

- 24 But *in those days, after that tribulation*, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light;
- 25 the stars of heaven will fall, and *the powers in heaven* will be shaken.

- 26 Then they will see the Son of Man *coming* [ερχομαι] *in the clouds* with great power and glory.

- 27 And then He will send His angels, and gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest part of earth to the farthest part of heaven.

- 29 *Immediately after the tribulation of those days* the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and *the powers of the heavens* will be shaken.

- 30 Then will appear *the sign* of the Son of Man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the land [γῆ] will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man *coming* [ερχομαι] *on the clouds* of heaven with power and great glory.

- 31 And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

- 25 And there will be *signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars*; and **on the earth distress** of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring;
- 26 men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are *coming* [επερχομενων] *on the earth*, for *the powers of heaven* will be shaken. -

- 27 Then they will see the Son of Man *coming* [ερχομαι] *in a cloud* with power and great glory.

- 28 Now when *these things begin* to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near."

MARK - 13

- 28 Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender, and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near.
- 29 So you also, when **you** see *these things* happening, know that it is near, at the very doors.
- 30 Assuredly, I say to **you**, *this generation will by no means pass away till **all** these things take place.*
- 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.
- 32 But of **that day** and hour *no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*
- 33 Take heed, watch and pray; for *you do not know when the time is.*
- 34 It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch.

MATTHEW - 24

- 32 Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near.
- 33 So you also, when **you** see ***all** these things*, know that it is near, at the very doors.
- 34 Assuredly, I say to **you**, *this generation will by no means pass away till **all** these things are fulfilled.*
- 35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.
- 36 But of **that day** and hour *no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.*
- 37 But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming [παρουσία] of the Son of Man be.
- 38 For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark,

LUKE - 21

- 29 And He spoke to them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees.
- 30 When they are already budding, **you** **see** and know for yourselves that summer is now near.
- 31 So you, likewise, when **you** see *these things* happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.
- 32 Assuredly, I say to **you**, *this generation will by no means pass away till **all** things are fulfilled.*
- 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.
- 34 But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and **that Day** come on **you** unexpectedly.

MARK - 13

MATTHEW - 24

LUKE - 21

39 and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming [παρουσία] of the Son of Man be.

40 Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left.

41 Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left.

35 For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole land.

35 Watch therefore, for **you** do not know when the master of the house is coming (ερχομαι) —in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning—

36 lest, coming (ερχομαι) suddenly, he find you sleeping.

37 And what I say to **you**, I say to **all**: Watch!"

42 Watch therefore, for **you** do not know what hour your Lord is coming [ερχομαι]."

36 Watch therefore, and pray always that **you** may be counted worthy to escape *all these things* that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Old Testament Kingdom

Christ's First Advent

**Ascension - Pentecost - Final Jewish Apostasy
Destruction of Temple and Jerusalem in 70 AD
(Matthew 24:3-35)**

**Perilous Times (καιροι) will come
(2 Timothy 3:1)**

**Seasons (καιροι) of Refreshing
(Acts 3:19)**

**The parousia (second coming of Jesus)
General Resurrection and Final Judgment
The Eternal Kingdom - New Heaven and Earth**

Appendix 3

A. Classical Premillennialism

O. T. Kingdom	Christ's 1 st Coming	Pentecost	Evil matures	Apostasy—Antichrist	2 nd Coming of Christ	Saints' resurrection	Millennium (1,000-year reign of Christ on earth)	Resurrection of lost	Judgment of wicked	The Eternal Kingdom
			Good matures							

B. Modern Dispensational Premillennialism

Five Old Testament "Dispensations"	Christ's 1 st Coming	Pentecost	Evil	Resurrection of saints	Living nations judged Tribulation saints raised Antichrist destroyed Satan bound	Satan loosed	Gog and Magog battle	Fire—then Judgment	The Eternal Kingdom
			Good	Judgment of saints					
			Christ returns for						
1 2 3 4 5			6	Rapture (7 years) Revelation	7				
Rise of Antichrist Great Tribulation									

C. Postmillennialism

O. T. Kingdom	Christ's 1 st Coming	Pentecost	Tribulation		2 nd Coming of Christ	General Resurrection	General Judgment	The Eternal Kingdom
			(Great Jewish Apostasy)	Evil (gradually decreases) Good (gradually increases)				
				(Christian Apostasy)				

D. Amillennialism

O. T. Kingdom	Christ's 1 st Coming	Pentecost	(John 16:33) Tribulation	(Apostasy)	2 nd Coming of Christ	General Resurrection	General Judgment	The Eternal Kingdom (1Cor. 15:24–28)
			Evil Good (Matt. 13:24–30, 37–43, etc.)					