

The Signs of the End in The Olivet Eschatological Discourse

Matthew 24, Luke 21 & Mark 13

The scripture passages related to the end have been subjected to such extreme interpretations (especially of Matthew 24 by Dispensational theologians) that many sound believers have refrained from studying them carefully of late, wishing to avoid wild conclusions. However, the days in which we live seem clearly to be in the 'season' of the end; hence it behoves Christians to look carefully at what our Lord said about this time so that we are: informed, challenged to be watchful, encouraged to be faithful and determined to not be deceived. In order to do this we have to study each of the passages in harmony with one another and also extricate what applies to the future and that which already has transpired. This is the purpose of this paper.

The key problem, which requires careful exegesis, is: what sections of Jesus' discourse relate solely to Jerusalem and what pertains to the end of the world; the disciples original question refers to both (though they may not have realised this at the time). Does some relate to one and not the other? Does all refer to both equally? Does all apply to one and not the other? This paper intends to examine this conundrum.

1. Introduction: The question of the disciples

NKJ Matthew 24

1 Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up 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, and of the end of the age?"

NKJ Luke 21

5 Then, as some spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and donations, He said,

6 "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 So 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?"

NKJ 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

Technical notes:

Matt 24:2

'Thrown down', the reference by all the synoptic Gospel writers to the destruction of the temple confirms that they were written before 70 AD.

- Matt 24:3 *'Mount of Olives'*, the hill directly opposite the temple across the Kidron valley above Gethsemane.
- Matt 24:3 *'Coming'* = (Gk: *'parousia'*), lit. 'arrival', 'appearance' or 'coming' of Jesus, i.e. his glorious second coming.
- Matthew's account is more precise than Mark's or Luke's and is the only version which contains the destruction of Jerusalem, the parousia and the end of the world linked together. There is no room here for a millennial, messianic age. References in the paper will normally be to Matthew.

Comments

The introductory verses need little explanation other than they furnish the reason for the speech about the coming signs. Jesus' outrageous statement that the temple would be utterly destroyed leads the disciples to ask when these things would take place.¹ Such a shocking event is seen by them as only taking place at the end of the world. So, Jesus explains to them what will lead up to these two events: the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world. These signs needed to be emphasised as the disciples also thought that the consummation of the kingdom would be immediate (Lk 19:11).

¹ The astonishment of the disciples should not surprise us. It was one of the greatest wonders of the ancient world and had been under construction since 20 BC. Some of the stone blocks were 40x12x12 feet, and many were covered with gold to reflect the sun.

2. Signs regarding the end of the world in two phases

Matt 24

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 rumours of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

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, 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 as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come."

Lk 21

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."

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. 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 "Therefore 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 and friends; and they will put some of you to 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 "By your patience possess your souls."

Mk 13

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 "But when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be troubled; for such things must happen, but the end is not yet.

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

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

Technical notes

Matt 24:8 '*Sorrows*' = 'birth pangs'. This had become almost a technical term for the tribulations leading up to the end of the age in Jewish apocalyptic literature.

Matt 24:9 '*Hated*' is intense, meaning detested, pursued with hatred.

Nations' (Gk: '*ethnos*') not just the political actions of nation states but refers to any multitude of similar people. Everyone will hate true Christians.

Matt 24:10 '*Offended*' = 'caused to stumble' (i.e. apostates).

Matt 24:13 '*Endures to the end*' = 'finally', 'without breaking down' (Gk: '*eis telos*').

Analysis

The signs which build up to the end appear to be in two distinct groups. The passages above seem to hinge at a certain point (underlined in the text) to describe two phases: a preparatory series of signs followed by more intense ones. This is especially clear in Matthew and Mark where Jesus closes one section by stating that certain events are only *'the beginning of sorrows'*, the birth pangs of a dying world which give rise to a new one.

Phase One (Matt 24:4-8)

- There will be great deception and the coming of false christs, (Matt 24:5).
- There will be wars and rumours of wars (Matt 24:6).
- There will be national uprisings and tribal wars (Matt 24:7).
- And there will be famines, pandemic diseases, and earthquakes in various places. (Matt 24:7)

Phase Two (Matt 24:9-14)

- All nations will hate God's elect people, true believers; persecution will arise (Matt 24:9).
- There will be many betrayals and much hatred (Matt 24:10,12). This implies a widespread apostasy by superficial believers.
- Many false prophets will arise and deceive many (Matt 24:11).
- There is an increase of lawlessness and a lack of love (Matt 24:12).
- The church must endure through this, there is no secret rapture to spare them (Matt 24:13).
- The Gospel of the Kingdom is preached throughout the world, then the end (of the birth pangs) comes (Matt 24:14).

Problems

Luke 21:11-12 seems to contradict Matthew and Mark by stating that persecution precedes earthquakes etc. However, the *'before all these things'* refers to the immediately preceding clause: *'and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven'*. This is referring to the signs in the sun, moon and stars mentioned in v25. For some reason, Luke wished to give a foretaste of these early in his report.

Comments

Most of these things have occurred since the start of Christianity (not the world wide preaching of the Gospel), indeed the founder was persecuted and warned his followers that they would be treated similarly. There have also been epidemics and natural catastrophes since the flood. But here Jesus implies that the end is a time when all these things become more intense and more frequent. The end is characterised by all these things to such a degree that even unbelievers consider the events significant and full of foreboding. It also appears that each phase of history is accompanied by such events. For instance, widespread persecution of Christians has either prompted or accompanied a fresh move in church history. Jesus mentions the events almost as a series of general principles; certainly the ancients saw earthquakes, eclipses and so on as harbingers of global change.

False messiahs have existed since before the time of Christ (Acts 5:36, 21:38). But here Jesus mentions that the people he has in mind come in his name; they claim to be Christ himself.

The approaching end is a time of great lawlessness. This can be translated as an increase of

wickedness or iniquity. In this short verse a wide range of behaviour is encompassed. What we will see (and are already watching) is the breakdown of society where godly, ethical norms are ridiculed and abandoned. The conscience is overthrown and corruption results. The immediate effect is that selfishness rules and people cease to act in loving ways as Paul warned (2 Tim3:3). If this idea is extrapolated, one can see how society becomes ravaged: no one acts righteously. Children disobey parents and grow uncontrolled with no moral restraints. Parents become selfish and callous and mistreat children. Young people become focused upon hedonism and gradually destroy themselves, and others, in their pursuit of pleasure (e.g. drug abuse, immorality). The criminal justice system becomes corrupted and ceases to act with equity and laws are passed which flout the righteousness standard of God for society (e.g. by condoning: witchcraft, homosexuality and abortion). So, even the legislature can become lawless in God's sight. The approaching end is a boom time for wickedness since iniquity must peak and be ready for harvesting.

The importance of perseverance is emphasised here. Recent church history is unparalleled in the acceptance of superficial, professing Christians into churches; this is part of the reason for its weakness. The very core of the Gospel message has been mutilated and replaced with sentimentality and sacramentalism. As the end approaches, only those who endure to the end will be saved, because only those are truly believers. God will safeguard and strengthen those who are his. There will be a huge falling away and true church membership may well be small.

The Gospel will reach the whole world in this time so that it completes its course and God's work on earth is finished. As wickedness ripens, so God's purposes reach fulness (c.f. the parable of the wheat and the tares Matt 13:24ff).

The reason for this explanation of the end time events is to exhort believers to be faithful in service, to continue fearlessly in our God-given tasks. The events are all under the control of a God who works out his sovereign good pleasure to achieve his will.

3. Signs related to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

Matt 24

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 Judaea flee to the mountains.

17 "Let him who is on the housetop not go 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 who are nursing babies in those days!

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."

Lk 21

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

21 "Then let those who are in Judaea 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.

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."

Mk 13

14 "So 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 Judaea flee to the mountains.

15 "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 clothes.

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

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 since the beginning of the 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."

Technical notes

Matt 24:15 'Abomination...', literally, 'the abomination *that causes desolation*'. In the Old Testament, 'abomination' refers to an idol or idolatrous object. 'Desolation' is the effect caused by such idolatry. 'Holy place', i.e. the temple in Jerusalem. Such desolation in the temple causes such defilement that godly worship ceases.

Matt 24:17-18 Leaving the rooftop by way of the external stairs without going inside the house, and ignoring the cloak were figurative ways for saying, 'Make a rapid departure'.

Matt 24:19-20 Pregnant and nursing women would find a swift flight to the Judaeian mountains a great demand on their stamina, especially in winter. The reference to the Sabbath was that unnecessary journeys were forbidden. Fleeing is not forbidden by Jesus (Matt 12:11-12) but travel on the Sabbath would be highly conspicuous and raise much suspicion; neither would any Jews help such travellers, even if in need.

Analysis

Signs related to Jerusalem (Matt 24:15-22)

After his initial explanation of events, Jesus then qualifies certain matters. The following applies to a time when 'the abomination of desolation' occurs in God's temple (Matt 24:15).

- Those who are in Judaea should flee to the mountains (Matt 24:16).
- One who is on the housetop should not go down to take anything out of his house (Matt 24:17).
- Him who is in the field should not go back to get his clothes (Matt 24:18).
- Those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days will be in jeopardy (Matt 24:19).
- The material Sabbath particularly applies to these people (Matt 24:20).
- A great and unique tribulation occurs (Matt 24:21).
- For the elect's sake those days will be shortened (Matt 24:22).

Why do these matters seem to especially apply to the fall of Jerusalem?

- The passage is introduced by a specifically Jewish event related to the temple: *'the desolation of abomination'* (Dan 9:27, 11:31, 12:11). This referred to the blasphemous action of the Syrian king: Antiochus Epiphanes, in sacrificing a pig on a pagan altar (dedicated to Zeus Olympios) within the temple courtyard in 168 BC (1 Macc 1:54ff). [The antitype of this was the desecration and destruction of the temple by the Roman general: Titus in 70AD and the profanation before the capture of Jerusalem.]
- Jesus specifically mentions a warning to those in Judaea.
- The reference to the *'housetop'* relates to the typical houses in Judaea. Though also in vogue in other near eastern places, many other societies did not have such houses.
- The Sabbath is mentioned as specifically applying to these people.
- The passage in Lk 21 (v20) specifically mentions Jerusalem being surrounded by armies as the time in view.
- The awful tribulation mentioned actually took place in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. The siege was so dreadful that mothers ate their own children; the sack of the city was appalling, even by ancient standards, and the punishment to survivors so terrible that the Judaeen forests were destroyed as a result of the number of crucifixions.
- Matt 24 verses 21-25ff indicate that the end does not immediately follow this great tribulation. Many more events come afterwards. This tribulation does not herald the immediate end of the world.

Then Jesus seems to return to general principles and the theme of the end of the world.

Problems

The warning is *'When you see the abomination ... flee,'* but if this refers to Titus in Jerusalem it is already too late to flee. Luke avoids this by saying: *'when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies'*. What seems clear is that the threat of this abomination, the threat of an army advancing upon Jerusalem (perhaps while being mobilised a great distance away) is the sign that believers should flee. Jews superstitiously thought that Jerusalem was impregnable and could not be devastated containing such a grand temple to God. What they failed to realise was that the kingdom had been taken away from them for rejecting the Messiah (Matt 21:43) and stone blocks now counted for nothing. Furthermore, when an army advances upon a community, it is usual for the suburban population to concentrate within the well defended city. Jesus here warns Judaeen Christians (those most affected by the encamped army) to flee to the hills instead.

Comments

The purpose of this section is to answer the disciples' specific question about the temple, but also (especially as it forms the centre of the discourse), Jesus uses the destruction of Jerusalem as an object lesson for the church. The Jewish Christians were warned in advance what would transpire and, remembering this passage when Titus' armies

advanced on Jerusalem, the believers fled to the hills of Judaea in 68 AD and escaped the wrath of God's vengeance on those who rejected the Messiah (Lk 21:22). The references to nursing mothers and winter etc. identify the need for great haste in escaping.

Similarly, as God's vengeance draws nigh for the whole world as the day of judgment approaches, believers should also recognise the sign of the season of the Lord's return and be encouraged, prepare themselves and be watchful. Like Jerusalem, the world will be burned up but there is ample opportunity for witnessing to the Gospel in the days preceding the end. Christians must be more active in this time, not behaving like escapist refugees with a bunker mentality.

By failing to see that this is specifically Jewish and focused upon 70 AD, many have fallen into radical ideas. The fanciful interpretations of Dispensational teachers mingle incongruous notions from Daniel, Zechariah, 2 Thessalonians, Revelation and this passage to arrive at their end time calendar (which varies from writer to writer). Essentially, they see here a sign that the end time antichrist will blasphemously sit in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, which will later be used by Jesus for a 1000 years and even atoning sacrifices will be offered on its altar. But this, of course, completely ignores the fact that God is no longer focusing on an earthly nation, ethnic people, geographic land or material temple. God's temple is the Christian's body and the church (1 Cor 3:15, 6:19). [We cannot delve here into the myriad of zany ideas put forth in this connection like finding the absurd idea of a pre-tribulation, secret rapture in Matt 24:40-41.]

However, having decided the passage primarily refers to 70 AD, it also forms a picture or parable which should alert the church by example. That a mystery is involved here is certain since Jesus warns the reader to understand what is being hinted at and there is a sense in which the image of a fallen Jerusalem prophetically condenses and coalesces into a single end time vision. [Old Testament prophecies of the end are sometimes compressed in a perspective of time, with what is up front being centuries distant from what is mentioned last, for example when the end of the world is seen as coincident with final judgment on Assyria.] Jesus' words in Matt 24:21-22 clearly have an eschatological character and Jesus sees a certain comparison between the suffering undergone in Jerusalem's siege and destruction with the tribulation occurring at the end of the world. In Jerusalem the suffering was: starvation, cruelty, lack of love and the events of the sack of the city. Jesus does not specify what he has in mind about the '*great distress*' of end time events, but most likely this is the results of the calamities mentioned earlier: famine, epidemics, natural catastrophes and so on. The divine shortening of the days to stop the final outcome may well refer to disease.

If God's temple is the church, and if, as we have already seen, there is going to be a widespread apostasy from the church in the end (Matt 24:10), the warning about abomination could be an allusion to Satan (via the antichrist) attempting to rule from within the superficial church at the end. The end time rebellious ruler may well offer superficial sympathies with Christian things in his rise to power, and may be an authority within what the world outwardly identifies as 'the church'. This would seem to agree with 2 Thess 2 where the man of lawlessness takes his seat in the temple of God. It also agrees with the name of this leader, 'antichrist', which means 'in the place of Christ', not just someone opposed to Christ. The spirit of antichrist has been applied to many who arose out of the church from the beginning (1 John 2:18-19, 4:1-3). The church's greatest danger is false leaders who are wolves in sheep's clothing.

4. General principles and other signs regarding the end of the world and the approaching second coming.

Matt 24

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 rise and show great signs and wonders 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.

27 "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.

28 "For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.

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 the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming 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."

Lk 21

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 on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken.

27 "Then they will see the Son of Man coming 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."

Mk 13

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.

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 the heavens will be shaken.

26 "Then they will see the Son of Man coming 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."

Analysis

General Principles regarding the end (Matt 24:23-31)

- Do not be taken in by false christs (messiahs, Matt 24:23) or false prophets (Matt 24:24).
- These false teachers will manifest great signs and wonders which may even deceive the elect. Jesus emphasises this particular warning (Matt 24:24-6).
- The second coming will be like the days of Noah (Matt 24:37). At this time life carried on as normal (Matt 24:38) until the flood came suddenly (Matt 24:39). One person died and suffered judgment while another was rescued and saved in the ark (Christ, Matt 24:40-2)

Signs related to the actual end

- The second coming of Christ will be like lightning coming from the east and flashing to the west (Matt 24:27).

- There is a tribulation before this event which is like the death of the world (Matt 24:28-9).
- After this tribulation there is an unusual eclipse of the sun as well as the moon. The sky will seem to shake as stars fall (Matt 24:29).
- Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Matt 24:30).
- Then the elect are gathered (Matt 24:31).

Why is this section now applicable to the end of the world?

- Jesus puts it in the context of his glorious second coming.
- Some of the cosmic signs signify the termination of the known universe and have never occurred in history (stars falling etc. Note: these are not meteorites, these people were astute stargazers for whom shooting stars would not be a significant sign).
- All the tribes of the earth are involved.
- Angels gather the elect.

Technical notes

- Matt 24:30 *'Sign'*, (Gk: *'semeion'*) probably means 'ensign' here; c.f. Isa 11:12.
- Matt 24:31 The *'trumpet call'* is only used by Matthew. Cf. Isa 27:13. Ensigns and trumpets are mentioned together in the Dead Sea Scrolls ('War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness').
- Matt 24:30 *'The sign of the Son of Man'* is not a sign like a cross or some image, it refers to the actual appearance of Christ himself in the air (Matt 26:64; 1 Thess 4:16-17; Dan 7:13).

Problems

- Matt 24:28 Why does Matthew use *'eagles'* as a picture of scavengers of carrion when a vulture is clearly the bird which best describes this activity. Eagles kill their own prey. Perhaps Matthew uses *'eagles'* as a generic term for birds of prey. Some translators use the word *'vultures'* here. What is meant by the picture is that the world is dead, rotten and ripe for judgment from on high.
- Matt 24:29 How far is the verse figurative or is it all literal? The Old Testament prophets use similar apocalyptic images in their description of future events and they are usually figurative (Isa 13:9-10, 34:4). But here Jesus is talking about the end of the world and the remaking of the universe (2 Pt 3:10). I take the words literally.

Comments

The main warning here regards the dangers of deception. A key feature of the approaching end is the proliferation of false teachers and leaders. This means that it is critical that church members are astute in matters of doctrine and practice to be able to discern evil very quickly before it takes root. This is the whole point of Christian maturity (Heb 5:11-14). The widespread apostasy of the current Evangelical scene should be of great concern to us.

The tribulation is what has occurred before, i.e. the *'great distress'* of famine, disease and earthquakes plus the persecution of Christians. The coming of the Lord is not long after this widespread oppression of the church. The mention of lightning refers to everyone being able to see the event, not the suddenness of it; suddenness is mentioned elsewhere (Matt 24:36ff).

5. Warnings to be watchful.

Matt 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 doors!

34 "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.

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, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.

37 "But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming 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,

39 "and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming 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.

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

43 "But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not

allowed his house to be broken into.

44 "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

43 "But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into.

44 "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Lk 21

29 Then 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 also, 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 take place.

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.

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

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."

Mk 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 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, not even 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.

35 "Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming -- in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning --

36 "lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping.

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

Technical notes

Matt 24:32 'Fig tree', the budding fig tree is a sure sign of summer in Israel.

Analysis

Warnings to be watchful

- Believers will recognise the approaching event (Matt 24:32-33)
- But no one knows the actual time for certain (Matt 24:26,44).
- Since we do not know the actual time, we must always be watchful (Matt 24:42).
- Satan does not know the time of the end (Matt 24:43).

Problems

Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place, (Matt 24:34).

This has been explained in various ways:

- ‘*these things*’ refer to the ‘appearing’ of the glory of Christ which was seen in the ascension and early church miracles.
- ‘*These things*’ refers to the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem which would occur within a generation (70AD), forty years later.
- Some feel that ‘*all*’ must include all the statements and, therefore, none of them apply to the end (the generation that would see them has died). But this is contradicted by many clear statements about the second coming and the answer to the disciples’ question which specifically mentions the signs of the end.
- ‘*This generation*’ refers to humanity or the Jewish race in particular.
- ‘*This generation*’ refers to the generation which witnesses the signs leading up to the end, the birth pangs of the dying world. This would suggest that a 40 year period (a Biblical generation) is the maximum period for the signs of the end (c.f. Matt 24:33).
- ‘*This generation*’ refers to the corporate elect people of God who will survive, as a distinct entity, till the end of the world and beyond.

The similar verse in Matt 16:28 makes the solution more difficult where ‘*this generation*’ is identified as, those ‘*who are standing here*’. The key to this is to understand the compressing of prophetic perspective where Jesus uses the vision of Jerusalem’s destruction as an image for the end. Within one generation all these things would occur in Jerusalem’s doom and offer a parable for the end of the world. After all, the reason for the discourse was the explanation of the coming downfall of the temple so this is the focus of Jesus’ attention.

Conclusion

Although the world is taken by surprise when the Lord returns, this should not be the case with Christians. These texts provide a clear incentive and exhortation to continue faithfully in our service to God, even in times of international calamity and distress. This is emphasised by the parables which immediately follow (the thief in the night and the faithful servant).

Do we see any correlation between these signs and events in our own time?

Well, there are continual fears in the news about climate and global catastrophes. *The Times* (30.12.98) stated that 1998 was the worst ever year, in recorded history, for natural disasters², yet 1999 has seen an even larger quota. Famines, floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, cyclones, tornadoes etc. are becoming weekly events. Some countries have suffered several major earthquakes in weeks (e.g. Turkey in autumn 1999). Other countries have experienced unusual climatic events: even southern Britain has had several small but devastating tornadoes in 1998-9 sufficient to kill people and rip the roofs off houses. So scientists agree that there is a developing harshness in the weather and geodesic conditions.

Then there is the explosion of warfare in this century and the worsening of it in the last few

² ‘Secular man is becoming puzzled, and anxious as he watches world events. In 1998, the world was hit by three times as many natural disasters as it was in 1960. There were floods, tidal waves, hurricanes, heat waves, famines ... Experts declared it the most disaster-ridden on record.’ *The Times*, 30.12.98

decades. There have been more wars in the last 100 years than any other time. More people have been killed violently in this century than any other. Despite the efforts of international governments and the United Nations, wars proliferate. Tribal and ethnic enmity, long since though dead, has arisen to foster some of the most violent wars ever fought. As I write, the full human cost of the Kosovo debacle is coming home to roost while Russia is bombing civilians in Chechnya. Indonesia has ravaged East Timor and a multitude of minor conflicts rage on around the world. Due to advanced weaponry, civilians in several of the recent minor wars have said that the devastation was worse than that experienced in World War II.

In the realm of disease we are seeing the new threat of sicknesses thought to be eradicated like: Diphtheria and Tuberculosis. Antibiotics are on their last legs and already some illnesses do not respond to them. Aids is now a major killer world-wide and cannot be fought successfully. The threat of pandemics is no longer just the stuff of movies and governments are already preparing for major outbreaks. Even Influenza still has the scope of killing millions again.

The isolation of Christian ethics continues as Bible believing churches are marginalised. In a world where superficial tolerance is the new god, any firm belief is harangued and clear condemnation of sinful behaviour is deprecated. Fathers are arrested for disciplining children, isolated old men convicted for defending themselves and their property against violent criminals and old fashioned values, based upon Christian ethics, are completely downtrodden. Persecution of Christians may not be restricted to third world countries for very long.

Persecution of believers has occurred throughout history and is taking place in at least 60 countries right now (e.g. Nepal, China, Egypt) where, apparently, 160,000 Christians are killed every year for their beliefs. The end will be a time when this becomes even more widespread, but the Gospel is preached throughout the whole world effectively at the same time (similar to the first century), we must continue working faithfully.

The sheer number of false prophets arising in the church is staggering. The widespread promotion of heretical teaching is one thing, but the near universal adoption of it in Evangelical churches is something else entirely. The apostasy which is already taking place in UK churches is truly amazing. Most people no longer have any clear idea as to what sound, historical Christian doctrine is. Aberrant practices, which would have astonished our godly forbears, are conducted in a multitude Evangelical assemblies week by week with no one batting an eyelid.

International leaders of government already feel obliged to play the Evangelical religious card in electioneering, especially in the USA and Britain. Leaders who are supposed to be Christians commit the most gross, public, scandalous behaviour which is then excused by well known Evangelical leaders. The rise of an ruthless, international, political leader from within the church longer requires a stretch of imagination.

Finally the proliferation of false christs is well documented. Whether it is the cosmic christ of New Age, liberal, American Protestantism or the christ consciousness of westernised Hinduism, there are many christs on sale. In addition there are people who are actually proclaimed to be a physical christ alive somewhere on earth (like 'Lord' Maitreya).

These current issues are unusual in their intensity, when viewed from a historical perspective. We are living in very significant times and need to look very carefully at the

warnings of the one who is the glorious Lord of Lords and King of Kings and whose coming is perhaps nearer than we thought.

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