

THE SECOND COMING

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1. THE END WILL COME Based on Matt. 24:1-14

Jesus had just preached a pre-funeral sermon in Matt. 23. Judaism, as a religion representing the will of God in the world, was about to die, and Jesus was giving it the last rights, but it was not a very pleasant experience. Funerals, of course, never are, but pastors unusually try to find some good word to say of the deceased.

When Calamity Jane died at 51, but looking like 70 because of her wild life of prostitution and drunkenness, Dr. C. B. Clark, the Methodist pastor who preached the service, concentrated on the small pox plague of 1878. Jane, though a prostitute, bought drugs with her own money, and she nursed the sick back to health. The man who lowered her coffin into the grave was C. H. Robinson, who was nursed back to health by Jane. She lived an awful life, but there was that one redeeming time of selfless caring, and that was the focus at her funeral.

Jesus was not so kind in His pre-funeral sermon on the Jewish leaders of His day. Matt. 23 is a sermon of 7 woes in which Jesus does not just blast them with both barrels, but with a gattling gun of condemnation. We don't want to immerse ourselves in this river of verbal blood-letting, but we need to wade into it a little to get a feel for the context. Jesus left temple is the way chapter 24 begins, but you have to look back to chapter 23 to see that it was the last time he would set foot in the temple. He was not just leaving the temple, but he was forsaking it. He was leaving it behind as a place no longer to be the house of God. In fact, He says in 23:38, "Look, your house is left to you desolate." It's your house now, said Jesus, and no longer is it what Jesus called it in 23:13, "My house will be called a house of prayer."

What was God's house was now their house, for the rightful owner was walking away, and leaving it empty of the presence of God. It was their house now, and they could do as they please, for God was gone. His efforts to reform the Jewish leaders had failed. They refused to repent, and so Jesus lays on them the heaviest prophecy in all the Bible. It was a weight so heavy that there is none to compare. To compare the burden that was going to come on them with any other would be like comparing the Rock of Gibraltar to a pebble.

Listen to these words of Jesus in Matt. 23:35-36. "And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berakiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation." Why was Jesus picking on that generation to suffer the wrath of God for all the murder of just men from the first to the latest? That sounds unfair to hold them accountable for the whole history of unjust murder.

What we see here is the principle that the more light people have, the greater the accountability. They were the only generation in history who had the light of the world in their very midst, and yet they refused to see. Others had some excuse, for they did not see clearly the light of God's will. They had some basis for their folly and rationalizing their actions. But not this generation. They had the light shining full force in their eyes, and still they refused to see. Such flagrant rejection of the truth led them to top off the sins of all history by the ultimate sin of killing their own Messiah-the Son of God. That was the last straw, and so upon that generation God was going to pour out His wrath.

Having prophesied such doom on Israel, Jesus walks out of the temple never to return. It was their house now and not His, and it would become their tomb as well in 70 A.D. The Jewish leaders just dismissed all this as the ravings of a mad man. It was preposterous to think such a judgment would fall on them. They looked on Jesus as if He were a chicken little yelling that sky was falling. It was hard to believe, and so we see that even His disciples tried to get Him to cool off and modify His radical words of judgment.

This, after all, was the temple. It was the place of God's dwelling, and the pride of all Israel. They tried to get Jesus to reexamine His strong language in the light of the beauty of the temple. In Mark 13:1, the parallel passage to Matthew, one of the disciples said, "Master, behold what manner of stones and what manner of buildings." Luke 21:5 is Dr. Luke's parallel passage, and he has some of them speaking of how it was adorned with goodly stones and offerings. Some of the disciples may have never been to the big city, and they could be seeing the temple for the first time. They were deeply impressed by it. The Jewish Talmud said, "He that never saw the temple of Herod, never saw a fine building." It was started in 20 B. C., and was not completed until 64 A. D., only 6 years before it was destroyed.

It was a marvelous piece of architecture made of white marble and much gold. It was surrounded by great porches with solid marble pillars 37 and one half feet high, and so thick that it took three men with arms linked to reach around them. Some of the cornerstones have been found, and they weigh more than 100 tons. It was like the Rock of Gibraltar, and so awesome that the disciples, by their admiration, questioned the wisdom of Jesus in abandoning the temple. They were so impressed, but Jesus was not impressed with anything that did not promote the will of God, and so He pours water on

their enthusiasm.

He says in verse 2 that this whole impressive structure will be so totally demolished that there will not be one stone upon another that will not be thrown down. This stone masterpiece will be a stone dump, and its destruction will be as awesome as its construction. They were trying to get Jesus to be a more positive thinker. Maybe something can be worked out, and the temple can be saved for the glory of God. These guys would have joined a save the temple campaign in a moment. It was the essence of their heritage as Jews. It was to them what Washington D. C. is to us. To talk about the total destruction of the temple was like telling us Washington D. C. will be wiped off the map. But that is the center of our heritage, and the American way of life. You can't destroy that! And that is how the disciples felt about the temple.

Jesus is not pleased with this disastrous elimination Himself, but He had done all He could to prevent it. That was His lament in 23:37, "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." You could only be a positive thinker so long in a setting of persistent rejection. There comes a point where the only alternative left is judgment, and that is where Jesus is. Jesus is saying that, yes it is a great building, but great will be the fall of it as well.

The disciples were impressed at the massive physical stones, but even these do not provide security from judgment. There is only one Stone that can give that security, and that is the very Stone Israel was rejecting-namely Jesus. Jesus told the chief priests and the Pharisees a parable about the tenants who would not pay the landowner his rent. He sent servants and they beat them. He sent his son and they killed him, and so he had to come in judgment on them. Then in the context Jesus says in Matt. 21:42, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

Peter before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:11 says of Jesus, "He is the stone you builders rejected which has become the cornerstone." Peter in his first Epistle makes a major point of Jesus being the Stone-the solid rock on which we stand. In 1:4 he writes, "As you come to Him the living stone-rejected by

men but chosen by God and precious to Him." Then Peter goes on to make clear that Jesus is the cornerstone of a new temple, and that Christians are now the new priesthood in this temple. In 2:5-6 he writes, "You also like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame."

The point of all this is, the physical temple was to be destroyed, but God would still have His temple. It would be a living temple, not of stones, but of people. Jesus is more impressed with people than with stones. These dead stones would be replaced by living stones, and he would be the cornerstone of this greater structure yet, and He will be a stone that will never fall and never perish. You can build on Him for eternity.

This prophecy of not one stone being left upon another was literally fulfilled in 70 A. D., but Jesus did not wait until then to build His new temple. On Easter morning, when Jesus rose from the dead, the new temple rose as well. It took decades to build this temple of stone, but it only took three days to build the temple that would be forever. It was one of the most offensive things Jesus ever said when He said, "I can destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days." This was the major charge against Him before the Sanhedrin. It got Stephen, the first Christian martyr, killed as well, for the charge against him before the Sanhedrin, we see in Acts 6:14, was that he taught that Jesus would destroy the temple. This sort of thing really angered the Jewish leaders, and we hear people just passing by when Jesus was on the cross and they were hurling insults at Him, and Matt. 27:40 says they were saying, "You who were going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross!"

It was the biggest joke in Israel that a man would claim He could destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. But each of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John record this, and John gives it in greatest detail in John 2:18-21." Then the Jews demanded of Him, what miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this? Jesus answered them, destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days. The Jews replied, it has taken 46 years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days? But the temple He had spoken of was His body."

The point is, when Jesus raised His body it was the new temple of God, and the old one was obsolete. Jesus only literally destroyed it in 70 A. D., but it was no longer God's temple on Easter morning. The Shikinah glory of God left that place of stone, and dwelt forever after in the Living Stone-the Risen Christ, in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead.

Now the disciples come to grasp all of this later, and it all made sense after the resurrection, but at this stage of their education it was a mystery, and they came to Jesus loaded with questions. They wanted to know what sign to look for to tell them when all of this would happen. Their question takes us into a study of the signs. Richard Jefferies, the naturalist, explains how a robin can pounce upon a caterpillar when it is concealed among the grass and impossible to see. It is all a matter of reading the signs. Slugs, caterpillars, and such creatures in moving among the grass cause a slight agitation of the grass blades as they crawl under them. The bird has a trained eye, and knows when grass is moved by the wind, for broad patches swing simultaneously. But when a single blade of grass moves ever so slightly, that is a sign of-dinner is served.

All of nature operates on signs and signals, and we have learned to read many of them. There are signs of the seasons, and signs of bad weather we can all read. We also learn to read signs of our mates moods, or those of our friends, or boss, and these signs can guide our behavior. We live in a universe where messages are coming at us from all directions, and we are constantly decoding the signs. Words themselves are signs, and actions and gestures often speak louder than words.

God, by sign language, shouted to the world the meaning of the cross when He rent the veil of the temple from top to bottom. What a sign of His new open door policy to sinners to come into His presence by the blood of Christ. Nature, man, and God all speak to us by means of signs. And old Jewish legend says that when Joseph was Prime Minister to Pharaoh during the great 7 year famine, he emptied the chaff of his graineries into the Nile. And as it floated far down the river people along the banks of the Nile saw it and knew there was hope, for the chaff was a sign that somewhere up the river there was food, and that sign kept them going.

Constantine, the first Christian Emperor of the Roman Empire, saw a cross in the sky, and the words, "By this sign conquer," and he was motivated

on to victory. Columbus with a ship load of near mutinous sailors finally saw some leaves in the water, and that was a sign of land ahead, and they were cheered to press on. We could go on and on, for signs are a vital part of life and history. Anybody who has traveled knows that life on the road would be a nightmare without signs. So it is not surprising that the Bible would have almost 200 references to signs. Nor is it surprising that people have a strong interest in signs of the times, and especially in signs of the end.

The disciples were no different than most of us. They were curious about the future, and about when Jesus would come again, and so they ask Him what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? If it was not for the disciples curiosity, and their asking this question, we would not have one of the most fascinating chapters in all the Bible. Matt. 24 is next to the longest sermon Jesus ever preached, and since both Mark and Luke recorded also, it takes up more the New Testament revelation than any other subject Jesus ever dealt with. It is called the Olivet Discourse.

It is loaded with signs and teaching about signs, and they are not all easy to decipher, but it is exciting to try, for decoding the signs lets us get a peak into the prophetic future from the perspective of the Lord of all history. But before we start a serious search to make sense of these signs of our Savior, we need to see just how Jesus felt about our being sign searchers. Matthew's Gospel has 11 uses of the Greek word for sign, which is semeion. That is more than any of the other Gospels, but what is surprising is that 6 of these 11 are negatives. By that I mean they are denounced by Jesus, and they are tools of the forces of evil. Matthew wakes us up to the fact that there are two sides to this sign searching business, and one of them is a bad side.

You do not get a sainthood medal just because you have a craving and a curiosity about the signs of the times. It could be a vice, and could develop in you a spirit that makes Jesus angry at you, just like He was angry at the sign seeking Pharisees. In Matt. 12:38 we read that they came to Him and said, "Teacher we want to see a miraculous sign." They were saying that He should do something spectacular and force them to believe that He really was the Messiah. Jesus was not pleased with their request, but responded in verse 39, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah."

This whole scene is repeated in Matt. 16 where they again come to test

Jesus and ask for a sign, and He again calls them a wicked and adulterous generation looking for a sign. Jesus is saying that it was a sexual and sensual generation, and such people are often so obsessed with the spectacular that they crave a thrill to get into anything, and they cannot just accept the truth even when it is not star studded, and with rockets going off all around it. Jesus was disgusted with people who needed sensationalism for any kind of commitment. He refused to feed this addiction in His day, and you can count on it that He is just as disgusted with it in people today.

Why is Jesus so angry about being seekers of spectacular signs? Is because such seekers are suckers that bring con men out of the woodwork, and the devil himself is the greatest con of all. You will note that the very first response of Jesus to the disciple's request for a sign is in verse 4, where He says, "Watch out that no one deceives you." More people have been deceived by being sign seekers than by any other way. They are sitting ducks for the master deceiver. The result is, this chapter is full of warning about the dangers of being sign seekers. In verse 24 Jesus says, "For false christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect, if that were possible."

This is the same Greek word the Pharisees used for signs. Jesus refused to grant their request, but Satan will not refuse. He will feed their lust for the sensational, and even believers will be impressed with these signs, almost to the point of deception. The thing we need to grasp right from the start is that Jesus is the greatest skeptic there is on end time signs. A major portion of His message to His disciples is this: Be as skeptical as you can be when it comes to signs of the end, and claims about the end and His second coming. You will find no such unbelief anywhere in the Bible as you find here in Matt. 24. Jesus borders on the fanatical as a skeptic. Look at the evidence.

V. 4-Watch out for deceivers.

V. 5-They will deceive many, these false christs.

V. 6-Don't let emotional things like war and rumors of war get you worked up.

V.11- Many false prophets will appear and deceive many.

V.23-Don't believe anyone who says Christ has come.

V.24-False christs will succeed in deceiving many.

V.26-Don't believe those with spectacular claims that they know where Christ is.

V.36-No one knows just when the second coming will be, so don't believe those who claim they do.

Anybody who studies end time theology, which is called eschatology, knows that every cult in the book specializes in it, for it is the most powerful too they have for deceiving people with their claim to know what nobody else has discovered in the Bible. The cults have brought millions of people into their fold by being sign seekers, and by using sensational literature about the Second Coming and the end of the world. Jesus knew it would be so, and that is why He warns, and warns, and warns. Do not be a sucker, but be a skeptic, and do not believe everything you hear about signs and the end of the world just because somebody sounds biblical. Every cult there is bases their end time schemes on their use of Scripture. If falsehood was easy to spot Jesus would not have had to warn so frequently. The fact is, false teaching on the end times is very plausible and seemingly biblical, and that is why it is so deceiving.

It is okay to ask with the disciples, what is the sign of your coming and the end of the age? It is right and valid to be curious about what we can know of God's plan for the future. But beware of the danger. Don't be a gullible person who gets all emotional about every claim and rumor, and follow after someone who professes to have a crystal ball into which he can see the future. Jesus is not anti-emotion at all, but on this issue He is. This is an area of theology that is so full of abuses and deception that it has to be an area where we become very rational and skeptical. We must weigh things very carefully before we give them any place in our understanding.

Jesus is saying to His disciples that if you are going to travel this road of sign seeking, keep your eyes on these signs that I will give you first of all, and they are: Caution, Slow Down, Danger Ahead. The sign seeker who does not give heed to these signs is almost certainly going to be deceived and led astray. So let's face reality. We are about to embark on a journey that takes us through a mine field where the enemy has laid one trap after another. If I seem to be overly cautious as I lead the way, it is because I take the warnings of Jesus seriously, and because I have studied the history of how God's people have been lead astray time and time again by following false prophets.

Christian people have been so gullible and so open to swallow anything that so-called prophecy experts come up with that many pastors and

evangelists have rejected sign seeking altogether. John R. Rice, the great evangelist who won tens of thousands to Christ, and who has had a great influence on over 20 thousand pastors, of which I am one, got so fed up with the sensationalism of preaching the signs of the times that he began a crusade to whip out sign seekers themselves as being dupes of the devil. His message spread widely by books, pamphlets, and papers was this: There are absolutely no signs of Christ's Second Coming in the Bible. Those who say there are pervert the Bible and reject the clear teachings of Christ. This is the other extreme that many are forced to take because of the folly of those on the other end who see signs in every event that takes place. We will pursue this subject in our next message.

2. SIGNS OF THE TIMES Based on Matt. 24:1-14

Gene Autry paid 27 thousand dollars for one letter of an old sign. Back in 1923 a real estate developer put up a huge sign on the hill over looking Hollywood, California. It became a symbol for the many who came seeking jobs in the movies. Over the years it became weather worn, and was damaged by vandals. Several entertainers decided it was time to start a save the sign movement. They sold the letters of the old sign to raise money for the new one. Gene Autry bought one of the old signs. The new sign is 4 stories high, and is steel reinforced, and it has a fence to protect it from vandals. It is a state of the art sign, and has to be considered one of the signs of our time. People all over the world recognize this sign from Hollywood. It is a sign of the stars that people idolize in our movies and culture.

Signs have power to move and motivate people. Dorothy Parker, a short story writer and theater critic, had a small office in the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. No one ever came in to see her, and she felt isolated and alone. She solved her problem by hanging a one word sign on her door. She got people coming in to see her all the time. The one word sign simply said Gentlemen. Signs determine the direction people go all the time, and we have to be constantly reading signs when we travel, or we could easily get lost. In a strange city the number one task of a driver is to find the right signs. We are all sign seekers as we travel, for they are essential for arriving at our destination.

Sign seeking can even become a full time job if you are in the situation Steven Callahan found himself in. His small plane went down in the Atlantic, and he was adrift for 76 days. This was the longest any man had ever survived in an inflatable raft. He drifted 1800 miles, and when he was rescued he wrote a book called ADRIFT. He said he spent his days looking for a sign. He was looking for any sign of life. It could be a plane, a fish, a bird, or any sign that would give him hope.

It is a world where people always need a basis for hope, and that is why they seek a sign. This is a world of sign seekers, and the result is that it is a gold mine for sign makers. There is a lot of money in signs, and not just the advertising and neon signs of the business world, but also the signs of the time makers, who make a fortune off people's hunger for signs. Jesus knew Christians would be sign seekers like everybody else, and so to save them a lot of emotional turmoil, and a fortune, he warns them to be on guard against the most common tricks of the sign promoters.

The first one is war and rumors of war. I call your attention to verse 6 where Jesus says, "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come." Jesus makes it clear that no war or rumor of war is a sign of anything but the depravity of man. It is not to alarm the Christian at all as if it had an significance as to the time of His coming and the end. There have been hundreds of wars since he said this, and even two horrible world wars, but they were in no way signs of the end.

Commentators by the dozens point out that Jesus is teaching that war will be a part of history, and every age will see wars. They cannot be a sign of anything because they are so common. To make war the sign of the end would be like making bank robbery the sign of the end. Commonplace matters of every generation are not of much value as signs of a once in a history event. You need something unique and unusual, and not just everyday human folly. So Jesus says, first of all, don't let talk of war get you alarmed. Now what have Christians often done with this admonition to not get alarmed? They have sounded an alarm with almost every war of significance in history. Not just the cults and sensationalists, but some of the most godly men of history, whom God has used in a mighty way, have fallen into the trap of making some war the sign of the end.

They are not damned for paying no heed to Jesus, and doing what He says they are not to do, but by their disobedience they displease Him, and add confusion where He tried to calm the waters. Dr. Oswald J. Smith of the Peoples Church in Toronto, one of the giants of the 20th century said, "I'm reminded of the fact that the Lord Jesus stated in unmistakable terms that one of the many signs of the approaching end of the age would be talk about war." He was a great man of God, but he jumped to a false conclusion and twisted the words of Jesus to say just the opposite of what He really said. Book after book quotes that war and rumor of war is a sign of the end, and that we should be alarmed, even though Jesus said just the opposite is the case.

This is precisely why Protestants do not believe in a pope or any higher authority having the final say on what the Word of God is saying. The common people can often read the Bible and better hear what God is saying than the so-called experts. The Bible has to be in the hands of the people to balance out the mistakes of leaders. The Apostles themselves misunderstood Jesus and needed to be corrected, and so none of us are beyond misunderstanding the Word. We need each other to bring balance, and to overcome impressions that are not consistent with God's revelation. This is a good example, for many see war as a sign of the end, even though Jesus made it clear that it is not. I don't care what authority you quote, or how many of them you can quote. Jesus said war is not to alarm Christians as a sign of the end. That is my highest authority, so I refuse to get alarmed by any war as being a sign of the end.

Christians have let many wars become occasions to signal to the world that the end is near. Many of the cartoons depicting the doom of the world are aimed at religious fanatics. They have refused to listen to the Lord of history. None of us could escape the impact of the news coverage of the Persian Gulf War. The rumors were wild and I expected a war far beyond the level it came to. Rumors exaggerate war, and there is no way to escape some degree of alarm. Jesus is not saying that we should not care about war and its awful consequences. He is saying that we should not be alarmed that it is a signal that history is about to end. It is not a sign of the end.

If the United States and Russia go to war and blow each other off the map, and destroy a major part of the world, that is something to be alarmed about, but it is not a sign of the end. The work of the church will go on after that

until the Great Commission is fulfilled, and the whole world has the Gospel. Jesus said in 24:14 that only then will the end come. Man will never set the agenda for Jesus by all of his wars. They can kill people by the millions, and bloody this planet from one end to the other, but war will never bring history to the end. Only Christ can do that, and He tells us war will not be His means of doing it. It will be the onward Christian soldiers who take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. That is the sign that Jesus says we should give heed to.

Durant in *The Lessons Of History* tells us that in the last 3,421 years of recorded history there have been only 268 years that have been free of war. There are always wars going on someplace in the world. If you are going to use war as a sign, you just as well use plane crashes for one as well, for one is as likely as the other to signify the end of history. The problem with using war, or any disastrous event as a sign of the end, is that you have to delude yourself into believing you live in the worst of times, and that your war, or disaster, is worst than anybody else's. This is almost impossible for those who know history.

Listen, for example, to the Roman historian Tacitus who wrote about life in the Roman Empire in 69 A. D. "I am entering on the history of a period rich in disasters, frightful in its wars, torn by civil strife, and even in peace full of horrors. Four emperors perished with the sword. There were three civil wars; there were more with foreign enemies; there were often wars that had both characters at once." After describing some of these he goes on, "Now too Italy was prostrated by disasters either entirely novel, or that recurred only after a long succession of ages; cities in Campania's richest plains were swallowed up and overwhelmed; Rome was wasted by conflagration, its oldest temples consumed, and the Capital itself fired by the hands of the citizens."

He goes on to describe the masses of exiles, and all of the many crimes. The corruption in government was a nightmare, and everyone was out to get what they could at everyone else's expense. He concludes his description with these words: "Slaves were bribed to turn against their masters, and freed men to betray their patrons; and those who had not an enemy were destroyed by friends." These were not exacting the good old days. If they ever develop a real time machine, don't be too quick to sign up for a trip back to the New Testament period in Rome. On the other hand, the trip might do you good, for you would realize it still a fallen world today, but you would lose your

illusion that it is the worst of times. Those who latch on the wars and rumor of wars as the sign of the end are in direct opposition to Jesus, and they have filled history with many blunders.

Sign seekers create sign skeptics because they maximize the very thing that Jesus minimized-the wars, rumors of wars, famine, and earthquakes. All of this is just a part of history is what Jesus is saying, and they are no particular sign of the end. They come in all ages, and our age is no exception. If we are to look at current events as the focus of our hope, then we had better be ready for disappointment, for it can't get much better than World War I got for fulfilling all of these signs.

One of the great Bible prophecy experts of his day was Louis Bauman. He published the book Light From Bible Prophecy in 1940. It was well received by the evangelical world, and it was about as good as such a book can get in reading the signs of the times from current events. He shows by extensive evidence that World War I was the greatest war in history. It was the worst war in numbers involved, in cost, and in deaths. It made all previous wars seem pigmy by comparison. Then he gives evidence that the worst famines in history took place at the same time in both China and Russia. Many millions of people starved to death after eating all the animals, tree bark, and grass. The Archbishop of Canterbury said in 1921, "Never in the history of the world has a condition of things existed comparable to the ghastly death by famine of whole millions of men, women, and children."

It was also the greatest period of pestilence. In 1918 at least 12 million people died of the flu epidemic. It was more widespread than the black death of a former age, and this was considered to be without parallel in the history of disease. It was 5 times more deadly than war. The greatest earthquakes ever came after World War I. There is a long list of terrible quakes all over the world that killed many hundreds of thousands of people, and probably well over a million. In the light of these facts in his day, Bauman has this eloquent conclusion.

"Greatest war, greatest famine, greatest pestilence, greatest earthquake-anyone of which should cause men to meditate upon the way of God with men. And when all these can be synchronized within the space of 10 years-1914 to 1923-and a space of 20 years would include the last great Chinese

famine, then men who think, and especially those who think in the light of divine revelation, will not dismiss it all with a flippant sneer. I said-men who think! Most men don't think. It is so much easier to sneer!

Weigh it well! Nearly 6,000 years have passed since God placed Adam in Eden. And yet the 4 greatest plagues that can afflict the human race were all packed recently in a single decade! If that does not fulfill the sign that the Lord Jesus gave an answer to the question "What shall be the sign of Thy coming?" -Then, pray tell, just what is it going to take to fulfill the words that "cannot be broken"?

This is a good question. If that decade did not fulfill the sign of the times, then what in this world can? The signs of our day are petty in comparison. Even if there are more earthquakes and more wars, they are not nearly as destructive. It is this reality that makes many question if Jesus intended us to even look at these things as signs of the end. We don't have the time to look at them, but I have the records of dozens of dates that have been set by godly men for the second coming of Christ. They are all based on what they felt were clear signs of the times. Some of them are sheer nonsense, and others seem quite convincing, but all of them are embarrassed by history, which made them false prophets.

Jesus says in verse 36, "No one knows about that day, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Jesus emphasized that it is a mystery when He will return, and there is no way to know. In Mark 13:23 Jesus says to His disciples, "You do not know when that time will come." He goes on to say that it's like a master of the house going on a trip and leaving his servants in charge. They have no idea when he will return, and so they need to stay alert. He says in verse 36, "If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you I say to everyone: Watch!"

The point of signs smashers, and the thousands of Christian teachers who reject sign watching, is that it detracts from the focus of Jesus to watch for Him by getting people to watch for signs. Sign watchers are almost always pessimistic, and they draw their strength from crisis events like wars and earthquakes. This means that people get all excited when such signs are prevalent, but when they are over and life goes back to normal they settle down again into indifference to the second coming of Christ. Sign watchers

rise and fall like the tide with daily events. This means it has to be dooms day before people will give heed to the second coming. The focus is not on Christ at all, but on signs, and this is futile, since Christ said nobody can know by signs when He will come.

This sort of thing lets God's people be manipulated by the so-called readers of the signs. Jesus said watch at all times, and not just in the bad times, and crisis times, but in the good times as well, for He said He could come at anytime. No one can read the signs and tell when He will come, for He can come anytime. In fact, Jesus said that when He does come it will be a surprise, like a thief in the night, and only those who are always watching will be ready. Those who go by signs will not be ready, for He may come when there are no such signs.

This is what is called the doctrine of the imminent coming. It simply means that Jesus can come at any time. He does not have to wait until some signs are first given before He comes. If we can know there are signs to precede His coming, then He cannot come until He first gives us these signs, and if that is the case, we can know He is not coming before we see the signs. Those who hold this view of the imminent coming say they do not look for signs, but for the Savior Himself, for He is not bound by any signs before He comes. If He is, then we have to focus on the signs that are to precede Him. Sign seekers make Christ secondary to the signs. They reject His right to come again like a thief in the night. He cannot do that and surprise us, for He has to wait until the signs are evident first. So they cannot honestly sing that Jesus may come today, for the signs are not yet fulfilled. For sign seekers His coming cannot be at any time. He must wait until after the signs.

John R. Rice is dogmatic in his view that Jesus can come at any time. He writes, "Now the intent of the Lord Jesus was that they should expect Him to come at any moment in their lifetime. He could have come before World War I, or World War II, or before the rise of communism, or before the Catholic papacy. Yes, Jesus could have come at any time since Pentecost is a clear teaching of the Bible. Jesus said, "Watch, for you know not the time."

If we take at face value the Bible doctrine about the second coming, that it is imminent, then we know He could have come at any time in the centuries past. We cannot go by signs. No signs are prophesied. There is no prophesied event. He may come at any moment, and when He does come, it will be unexpected because it cannot be foretold."

Because of the history of sign seekers and the discredit and disgrace they have brought on the church, I can sympathize with this position, but it goes to far. The disciples asked for a sign, and Jesus did not reject them. He warns them over and over to be cautious, but He does go on to deal with signs, and in verse 14 He gives a very specific sign of the end of the world. This leaves me in the middle. The sign seekers on one side, seen signs in every disaster and unusual event, and the sign smashers calling it all nonsense, and rejecting all sign as of value.

There are many of God's most brilliant and committed children on both sides of this issue, but each side goes to extremes. The third way is the wisest way, and as I see it that is to be a sign skeptic. Be very cautious, as Jesus warns, but don't throw out the baby with the bath water. Work at focusing on the signs that really are valid because Jesus says so, and forget the rest. This third way says both the sign seekers and sign smashers are right if they join forces to smash the nonsense of sign sensationalism, and hold to the signs to which Jesus clearly points.

There are very few authentic signs, and possibly only the one in 24:14 is a truly valid sign that can be measured with any degree of accuracy. But I agree that over enthusiasm even for this authentic sign is folly if it takes our eyes off Christ. We are to be looking for our Lord, and not for signs. Annie Johnson Flint put it in poetry:

**It is not for a sign we are watching-
For wonders above and below,
The pouring of vials of judgment,
The sounding of trumpets of woe;
It is not for a Day we are looking,
Not even the time yet to be
When the earth shall be filled with God's glory
As the waters covers the sea;
It is not for a King we are longing
To make the world-kingsdoms His own;
It is not for a Judge who shall summon
The nations of earth to His throne.**

**Not for these, though we know they are coming;
For they are but adjuncts of Him,**

**Before whom all glory is clouded,
Besides whom all splendor grows dim.
We wait for the Lord, our Beloved,
Our Comforter, Master, and Friend,
The substance of all we hoped for,
Beginning of faith, and its end;
We watch for our Savior and Bridegroom,
Who loved us and made us His own;
For Him we are looking and longing:
For Jesus, and Jesus alone.**

This is not just poetry, it is Bible exposition, for the only use of the word sign that Jesus makes is in verse 30, which if you look at it you will see is Himself. The only thing we know for sure is that when we see Him that is the sign He has arrived. Be skeptical of all other signs, but be every ready for this one.

3. THE KEY SIGN OF THE END Based on Matt. 24:1-14

It was reported in the mid 80's that shoes coming to America from Italy had a Common Market stamp on them. It was a circle with a line drawn through the middle, and in the top half was a lamb's head with two horns, and on the bottom half was the number 666. Joe Esses said he saw it himself in his book, The Next Visitor To Planet Earth. When Edgar C. Carlisle, an evangelist, read that he got all excited and incorporated it into his message, and he showed it on a screen as he traveled from church to church.

No doubt many pastors and evangelists used this startling information. But Carlisle was more fanatical than most. He started looking in shoe stores to find that circle, and he excited others to do the same. He even had people traveling to Rome to find a pair of those shoes, but none could be found. He wrote to the U. S. Emigration authorities, and the British Embassy, and they knew of no such stamp. He wrote and called Mrs. Esses, but he could make no contact. Finally in embarrassment he stopped telling the story, he hated to do it, for it was his best thriller, and Christians ate it up, but he had to stop because he realized he had been deceived by another prophetic hoax.

There is no way he could go back to the many people he told this story to, and so he became a tool of the great deceiver, and no doubt, many Christians are still spreading this false story along with dozens of others that come from the master deceiver. At least pastor Carlisle learned his lesson, and now he checks out his stories before he proclaims them. He saw in this travels across the country a tract that declared the vultures in Israel are increasing as a fulfillment of prophecy. He wrote to the authorities in Israel and soon heard back that 30 others had made the same inquiry. The answer was no, they are decreasing, and there were only 60 mating pair in all of Israel.

Christians all across the land were being deceived by false information. We could go on for hours looking at this sort of thing. Maybe, just maybe there is a reason why Jesus in this sermon on prophecy warns His disciples about deception 4 times. Jesus knew that in the area of prophecy and its fulfillment Christians would be susceptible to deception. Pastors and evangelists are very eager to have startling illustrations, and the result is they are the first to be suckered by a good story. Seldom does a pastor ever check out a story, and so if one tells it, it spreads like wildfire, each one quoting the other with none of them having any basis in fact.

Dr. Paul Reese, one of the greatest preachers in America. Wrote these words of criticism: "I shall go to my grave believing that, side by side with my ardent expectation of the Second Advent, most of our 'signs of the times' sermons and books are based on opportunism and a mistaken understanding of what the apocalyptic portions of Scripture are meant to teach us. These hot sermonic and literary outpourings tend, in the cases of many Christians, to distract from the 'occupy until I come' mandate for missions and social responsibility."

Spiros Zodehiates, the Greek scholar and author, writes, "I believe that the insistence on signs, or the craving for any form of the religion of signs or the religion of superstitious wonder, is an element of disease in the Church. It is analogous to the spirit that helped to bring Christ Jesus to His death." I agree with these men completely. If you are a sign seeker, there is a high likelihood that you will be a tool of one prophecy hoax after another. A wise Christian will doubt and question every sign he hears about, for the vast majority are fiction, and the more that Christians get excited about fiction, the more the world concludes that all that Christians believe is fiction.

In spite of all this negative warning about sign watching I want to focus on the key sign of the end of history. Remember, the abuse of a thing is never an argument against its proper use. In Washington D. C. the police dropped the charges against a man named Stanley for driving through 8 stop signs. How could anyone miss 8 stop signs and not be guilty? He proved that he was going the wrong way on a one way street, and so he could not see the signs. Here was a case where ignorance was an excuse, but we have no excuse for missing the key sign of this sermon on the signs.

The disciples wanted to know about the end of the age, and Jesus says there is to be a history of terrible things, but they are not the end. There will be wars and terrible persecution. There will be apostasy and wickedness, but hang in there to the end he urges. Then in verse 14 Jesus finally answers their question. All the rest is background, but here is the answer to their question: "And this Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

The only clear sign that Jesus gave of the end of the world is the sign of world wide spread of the Gospel. Jesus says that when the Great Commission is fulfilled, then the end will come. It makes sense that if the purpose of Christ for the church is to take the Gospel into all the world, that when that purpose is fulfilled, the end should come. When the goal is reached, you move on to another goal, and this is God's goal for history, that the whole world have a chance to hear the Gospel. It makes sense also that Jesus would not come again and end history before His church finishes His purpose for coming in the first place. This goal must be reached before the plan is over.

This is the only clear sign that Jesus states, and yet the human mind is so stubborn in its lust for the sensational that this is the least of the signs you will read about in books on prophecy. It is not even mentioned by Hal Lindsey in The Late Great Planet Earth, and many other popular end time books. Why? Because it doesn't sell. The sign of Jesus is boresville. How can you get excited about the Gospel reaching the remote regions of the world? Sure it means people in heaven who otherwise would never be there, but there is no impact on our lives like a super earthquake or terrible war. We want news, and news is basically bad, and so give us the terrors of famine, the horrors of major disasters, and then you have our attention. Christians buy this stuff like crazy, and they support the sensationalists. That is why there is so many of them. You would think that Jesus taught us to keep

records on the wars and earthquakes, and when they are high, then we will know it is near the end.

We don't pay any attention to Jesus because He is a kill-joy. He says that all of this sort of thing that we like in the way of signs are, in fact, not signs at all, but just part of the history of a fallen world. The sensational things will be in every generation, and false prophets will take advantage of them in every generation. But those who listen to Jesus will not be deceived by spectacular news of this or that disaster. If we listen to Jesus, we will be looking instead at the statistics of how many more peoples we have to reach before the Gospel is in every language on earth. This ignored sign, on the back burner of most prophetic stoves, is the really hot one for those who are interested in being right rather than popular.

There is no other sign that Jesus connects with the end but this one. All the others He states clearly are not the end, or at best, they are the beginning of the end, but this one is the sign of the end. Our business as Christians is not to study wars and rumors of wars, and famines, earthquakes, and all sorts of spectacular events, but to be about the business of getting the testimony of the Gospel to all the world. Let's face up to the implications of this verse. If the end will not come until the Gospel is taken to all nations, then Jesus did not expect to come anytime soon. He knew, and so did the disciples, that reaching the whole world would take some time. The known world was fairly well united under Roman rule, and so it was conceivable that it could be done in their life time, but still, it was going to be a long hard job to accomplish.

Pentecost helped a great deal, for there were people from all over the world there to hear the Gospel, and take it back to their land. A good many received Christ at that time, but Jesus would not be content until people of every language tribe and nation in the world were part of His family. It was a life time job, and not a task that could be finished quickly.

According to the World Christian Encyclopedia (1982). By A. D. 100 there were about 1 million Christians in the world out of a population of 181 million in the Roman Empire. That was just over one half per cent. By the year 1000 Christians were 18 per cent of the world's population. By 1900 it was 34.4 per cent of the world. But by 1980 it had slipped to 32.8 per cent. Christianity lost ground in that century largely because of the massive defection due to communism in Eastern Europe, and secularism in Western

Europe. That would lead to pessimism except for the fact of what has happened in the third world.

Christianity has grown in the third world from 83 million in 1900 to 643 million by 1980. That is a growth of nearly 800 per cent. In Africa in the same period Christianity grew from 9.9 million to 203 million, which is a 2000 per cent growth. In South Asia and Latin America the church is growing like wildfire. The point is, Christianity does not have to grow in the Western countries. The Gospel is there, and the task is achieved, even if Christianity does not grow. The issue is not the West, but the rest of the world where the Gospel is not being preached. That is what matters to fulfill the Great Commission, and that can be achieved in any one generation. It is not global conversion, but global proclamation that fulfills this sign.

The task is enormous, and so it could take many years to achieve, but the fact that it is even possible makes us to be living at a very unique time in history. No one has ever lived so close to the end as we are now living. Our century has seen some radical changes. In 1900, 85 per cent of the Christians were in the Western World. By 1980 only 32.8 per cent were in the Western World. 44.1 per cent were in third world, and 17.7 per cent in the communism world. In 1900, 81 per cent of Christians were white. In 1980 only 48 per cent, and non whites were the majority with 52 per cent. In the 20th century Christianity has become a universal religion with people in almost every country in the world. 96 per cent of the world's population has part of the Bible in their language.

The major sign of the church's task is being completed, and now more than ever the sign seekers are looking at this sign seriously. Anthony Hoekema in his book *The Bible And The Future* says, "The missionary preaching of the Gospel to all nations is, in fact, the outstanding and most characteristic sign of the times. It gives to the present age its primary meaning and purpose." G. C. Berkouwer in *The Return Of Christ* says, "In the last days the preaching of the Gospel is the focal point of all the signs. In it all the signs can and must be understood."

The focus of Jesus is just the opposite of what most end time messages stress. They stress the bad news of war, earthquake and lawlessness in man and nature. Jesus says that in the midst of all this world chaos, false prophets, increase of wickedness, and the love of many growing cold, the

Gospel will be preached in the whole world. Don't look at the negative for a sign. That stuff is always present, but look for the positive, for that will be a once in a history sign that the end is near.

No matter how rotten the world, and no matter how corrupt the church, the mission goes forward until every nation has a chance to hear the Gospel. The great sign is the Great Commission being fulfilled. This means we should be concerned about reaching the unreached peoples of the world, for that is the only route Jesus left us to go in to make a difference in history. Bernard Ramm said, "Motivation for foreign missions is not exhausted by the love of God in the cross of Christ, nor the darkness of pagan hearts, but it is also eschatologically motivated. Our world-wide missionary work brings ever closer the parousia of our blessed Lord, and so we spread the Gospel far and wide to hasten His appearing."

The focus is on the unreached peoples now, for when they are reached, and people of every nation and language have a chance to be saved, and to be a part of God's family, the end will come. And not before this, for Revelation gives us a glimpse of heaven, and there will be people in heaven from every nation, tribe and tongue. Jesus could not come and end history before His goal was achieved, and cut out of the scene of heaven people not reached. Peter said that the second coming is delayed because Jesus is not willing that any should perish. He refuses to come until at least someone from every nation and tongue is saved. When the whole world can say that the word is out, and we know of Jesus, then the end will come. Nothing can hold Jesus back then, but nothing can bring Him until then.

This optimism about the whole world being reached is what motivates the Christians who call themselves Post-millennialists. They say this verse guarantees that the church will be successful, and will achieve her goal of reaching this world. They realize the world is a mess, and there is a lot of negative reality, but it is in the midst of all this negative that Jesus comes forth with the positive verse of success. There will be bad times, and there will be persecution, apostasy, and false prophets, and all the rest with the wars, famines, and earthquakes, but none of it will stop the church from reaching the whole world with the Gospel. Many focus on all the bad things that are a reality, but Jesus says the church will still fulfill His purpose, and this should be our focus.

I am not a post-mill, but I do accept their optimism as biblical, and recognize that they are only listening to Jesus when they believe He will become Lord of some lives in every nation on earth, and thereby have the only universal kingdom in history before He comes again. Jesus will not scrap His plan and cut short His agenda just because the going gets tough. Christians who are pessimistic about the future are listening to somebody besides their Lord. Christians who listen to Jesus won't give up, let up, or shut up until the job is done.

Jesus ended His Great Commission by saying, "Surely I will be with you to the very end of the age." In other words, there is no quitting. We will work together to the end, and never give up until we reach the whole world. Jesus is committed to this plan. It is the only plan there is, and the only truly obedient attitude is to support the fulfilling of this Great Commission.

There was a minor fulfillment of this prophecy in New Testament times, so that it was possible for Jesus to come in 70 A. D., or anytime after, but Jesus did not go for the short plan. He could have, for at Pentecost it says in Acts 2:5, "There were God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven." The first sermon of Peter bore witness to people from every nation. Later on after Paul traveled all over the Roman Empire he wrote in Col. 1:23 that the Gospel had been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. Jesus could have come in the lifetime of the Apostles, for they had already touched the known world for Christ. They, of course, had a limited view of the world. There were whole continents of people they did not know even existed, and so they had achieved the goal as far as they knew, but Jesus did not return for He knew of a vast world yet to be reached. The minor fulfillment was not enough for Jesus, for He is going for the maxi-fulfillment which will cover the whole world.

The year 1000 was thought to be a good time for history to end. It was a great round number, and the world was reached as far as they could tell. They had no idea about the Americas or Australia, or other parts of the world. As we approach 2000 we are the first Christians to ever live who know there is no part of the world yet unknown, and who also have the technology to reach the whole world. We have the best choice of any Christians to play a major role in bringing history to a conclusion.

This does not contradict the statement in verse 44 that Jesus will come at a

time when we don't expect Him. We have an authentic sign to watch, but the fact is, we have no idea when it will be fulfilled. It could be some time this afternoon, or a hundred years from now. Only God can know when all peoples are reached. There could be people from the unreached nations coming to a Western nation and hearing the Gospel that could represent the last people needing to be reached. We just have no idea when God will be satisfied that all people have been reached. That is why we can both have a great sign to watch, and yet still not know when Christ will come, for only He can know when the goal is achieved.

He is the Alpha and Omega. He started things, and only He can end it, and He will do so when He has accomplished His goal of making sure there are saved people to sing forever in heaven out of every tribe, tongue, and nation. The only sign we can even guess at is this one, and even that is a guess, for only Christ can know when it is fulfilled. More important than guessing, however, is getting in on the plan, and millions of Christians are doing so in their support of the effort to reach all of the yet unreached peoples of the world. Evangelism is the key theme, for in the next decade we could fulfill the purpose of Jesus for His church. We should all be excited about reaching the unreached people groups, for this is a key sign that the end is near.

4. THE GREAT TRIBULATION Based on Matt. 24:15-25

A man who tried never to miss a boxing match had an important business meeting the night of the championship bout. He hated to miss the fight, but he did what he thought was the next best thing. He asked his wife to watch it and tell him about it when he got home. When his meeting was over he rushed home and said, "Well honey, how did the match go-who won?" "Nobody won," she said, "One of the guys got hurt in the first round and fell down unconscious, so they had to quit."

Any sport is hard to interpret when you don't understand the rules. It gets even harder when people have different ideas of what the rules are. Have you ever played a game where the people you are playing with go by different rules than you are use to? You have to work out compromise somewhere, for no game or sport can make any sense unless everybody is playing by the same

rules. Christians have their little games too which sometimes lead to major conflicts because they play by different rules. A great illustration of this is the subject called The Great Tribulation. There is a great deal of tribulation over this issue of the Great Tribulation, for Christians have radical different rules by which they interpret the Bible when it comes to this subject.

Believe it or not, the paradox is that there is almost universal agreement among the opponents in this conflict over one key issue. All Christians agree that God's people will escape the wrath of God. Jesus took the wrath of God on Himself at the cross, and now those in Him will not have to suffer that judgment. It would be totally inconsistent for God to let His wrath fall on His own children. That would be like chasing a car in which your child has just been kidnapped, and forcing it off the road over a cliff. You judge the culprit severely, but at the same time you destroy the innocent. It is not a very wise plan, and not the sort of strategy that an all wise God would use.

When He judged the world with the flood, He saved Noah and his family out of the flood. When He destroyed Sodom He took Lot out of the city. It is just logical, even if the Bible did not say so, that God would spare His own in a day of wrath. So all Christians see this logic, and they are fully agreed. But then we come to the wrath of man and Satan, which is what the Great Tribulation is all about, and the unity of Christians is shattered. Some say the church will be raptured out of the world, and escape this tribulation. They are called the pre-tribulationists. This means the rapture comes before the tribulation.

Other Christians, and keep in mind there are millions on both sides of this issue, say that the church will not be raptured until after the tribulation. They are called the post-tribulationists. So you have your two sides; each writing a ton of books defending their position, and in many cases calling each other lame brain numskulls for not being able to see the obvious truth. There is the mid-tribulationists too, but that is just another form of the pre-trib. Over the last 30 years I have read hundreds of authors on this subject, and there are brilliant and marvelous men of God on both sides. Anyone who thinks all the good guys are on one side are terribly ignorant. To cast doubt on any man's love for Christ, or his love for the Word of God, based on his conviction about the tribulation is a great sign of ignorance. No matter what your conviction is, some of your favorite heroes of the faith are on the other side. When wise and godly people see an issue differently, I like

to try and figure out what is true and valid on both sides.

My first conviction is that both sides in this controversy can be shown to be correct in their emphasis as we focus on the tribulation that came in 70 A. D. when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. The pre-trib side is concerned to spare the church from the tribulation, and this appears to be the whole point of Jesus here in Matt. 24. He is giving them these warnings so they can watch and be prepared to escape. When they see the abomination that causes desolation they are to flee to the mountains. By heeding this warning they will be spared from the Great Tribulation. We know from history that the Christians did listen to Jesus, and when Jerusalem was surrounded by the Roman legions they fled to a town called Pella 50 miles away. They were spared the great slaughter that killed a million and a half people in Jerusalem, as the city and temple were utterly demolished. So the pre-trib idea of the church being spared is supported here.

On the other hand, the post-trib side who stress that the church has to go through the tribulation are equally supported in this passage. They are spared from death, but they are not spared from the distress of the tribulation. Jesus says that in their fleeing the city they have to forsake their possessions. They are to flee so fast they are not to go into their homes to grab anything, and not even their cloak. In this emergency evacuation they get out with just the clothes on their back, and they lose all else. It will be dreadful for pregnant women and nursing mothers. It will be hard on anyone, but for them even worse. Then in v. 20 Jesus says to pray it does not take place in the winter or on the Sabbath. That will just add to the misery of an already terrible situation.

The point is, though they are spared from the death of this tribulation, they are not spared from the loss and suffering of it. They survive it by God's grace, but they have to go through it. Now we don't have to guess about this, for we have the history of the fulfillment of all this prophecy, and it was just as Jesus said it would be in 70 A. D. The Christians escaped to the city of Pella.

The problem is, though both the pre-trib and the post-trib are right in their basic ideas, with one saying Christians escape, and the other saying they endure tribulation, neither of them is right about the rapture. The pre-trib says the church will be raptured out of the world before the Great

Tribulation, but we do not see that here at all. They are warned to flee, and God cuts it short for their survival, but they are not raptured out. The post-trib says the church is raptured after they endure it, but the record of history is clear-they went through it and survived, but they were not raptured out. The Great Tribulation of 70 A. D. did not see Christians raptured before or after. They escaped and had to endure, but there was no rapture.

Now the key fact that has to be established is that 70 A. D. was, in fact, the Great Tribulation that Jesus spoke of, and not some other tribulation at the end of history. Both the pre-trib and post-trib scholars in their desperation to be right twist this passage all out of shape to make it fit their systems. They ignore the context and force this passage to refer to some far off event that has no relevance to the disciples and that generation at all. This chapter is one of the most abused in all of the Bible. Common sense would never dream of the things men do to rip this chapter out of context. Let's put it in context as Jesus does, and see than any attempt to tear this away from the 70 A. D. fall of Jerusalem is abusive. Jesus clearly puts brackets around this Great Tribulation to make clear just what it is.

First he says in chapter 23:35-36, "And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berakiah whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation." The generation that rejected and killed the Son of God, as the last straw of unjust killing, was to be the generation of God's worst judgment. All other generations that were judged were judged for the sins and folly of their own generation, but this generation was to be judged for the sins and folly for all of history. That is why Jesus says in v. 21, "For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now, and never to be equalled again." The Great Tribulation was to come upon that unique generation which crucified the Son of God.

There are many attempts to get around this obvious truth of what Jesus is saying, and not make that generation the most unique in all of history in terms of the judgment that is to come upon them. Many want to push this into the future and some unknown generation. They come up with elaborate theories that take you into the book of Daniel or Revelation, and they make this chapter refer to something totally irrelevant to the disciples and the Christians living in that day. They are clever theories, but they do not hold

water. They are buckets without bottoms, in fact, for not only does Jesus tell us before this chapter that that generation was to suffer for all the unjust killing of history, but after telling of the Great Tribulation He says in v. 34, "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened."

The first three Gospels all record this, but not John's Gospel, for when he wrote it was already history and no longer prophecy. This Great Tribulation was over, and that is why John does not record this longest teaching passage of Jesus on prophecy. I take Jesus at His word, and see that he clearly teaches here that the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. was the greatest tribulation ever in history, and there will never be another like it. The only way to escape from this conclusion is to try and make generation mean something else, like the Jewish race, or Christian race, and many try, but all attempts are futile, for generation is a word Jesus used frequently, and always to refer to the people of His day.

In Matt. 12:41 Jesus says , "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here." In 12:45 He calls them "This wicked generation." In 16:4 He calls them, "A wicked and adulterous generation." In 17:17 he says, "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you." Jesus is always referring to his contemporaries when He used the word, and that is what He means in Matt. 24. All of the details of the tribulation that Jesus gives here fit that generation, and it is far fetched and meaningless in any other context. If this referred to some future tribulation, as many try to teach, it is really obsolete. How many people in Israel live on their roofs any more? How many work in the field, and what is the relevance of the winter and the Sabbath for travel? The whole picture fits perfectly the events of 70 A. D. To take it out of context of that day and make it refer to some unknown event of the future is purely man made fantasy in order to force this passage to fit some man made scheme. Jesus said it would happen to that generation, and I believe Him.

There is a reason why men work at a theory that makes this refer to some future generation, however, for Jesus says that after this tribulation He will come again in the clouds with power and great glory, and the elect will be gathered from on end of heaven to the other. Obviously, this did not happen after 70 A. D. they say, and so that is what makes this one of the hardest

chapters in the Bible to understand. Jesus seems to be teaching that His second coming and the rapture were to happen right after the fall of Jerusalem. This leads to all kinds of theories to try and explain what seems to make Jesus teaching an error. He said He did not know when He was coming, but here He seems to be saying it will be right after this Great Tribulation. Most of the theories to explain this are not very convincing.

My conviction is, let the so-called prophecy experts create their mazes, and have their fun trying to guide people through them. I prefer to stick with Jesus, and just see if we can make sense of what He is saying without abandoning His clear words that this was all to take place in that generation. I can agree with the many, even the majority of scholars, who see Jesus using the 70 A. D. tribulation as an illustration and type of the final tribulation of history, and the literal rapture and coming again. That is what makes this chapter relevant to every age, and not just that generation. This fits the pattern all through the Bible. But you cannot escape the fact that Jesus linked end time events with that generation and 70 A. D.

Before we can see how this applies to every generation we need to see how it applied to the generation Jesus is speaking of and to. First of all, let's look at the startling signs in the heavens in v. 29. "The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken." From our point of view this is an astronomical catastrophe and the end of the universe, and not just Jerusalem. But that is because we do not understand apocalyptic language. The people of that day were used to hearing this kind of language. It was not only a part of their popular reading material, it was a part of their Old Testament.

When Isaiah described the fall of Babylon, this is how he wrote in Isa. 13:10, "The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light." In v. 13 he adds, "Therefore I will make the heavens tremble and the earth will shake from its place." The judgment of God is pictorially displayed in the heavens. If this was an isolated thing we could not make much of it, but when we see it is a common pattern of Hebrew thought, then we begin to see the picture. Later on Isaiah describes God's judgment on Edam, and other evil nations, and he writes in Isa. 34:4, "All the stars of heaven will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine." We know, of course, if God ever did such a thing literally it would

be the end of the entire universe, but God did not literally do it. This is just the Hebrew way of describing the anger and judgment of God.

When Ezekiel describes God's judgment on Pharaoh king of Egypt, this is what he writes in Ezek. 32:7-8, "When I snuff you out, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; 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." Whenever God comes in judgment the prophets describe nature going bezerk. In Joel 2 we read, "For the day of the Lord is coming-a day of darkness and gloom....the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened and the stars no longer shine."

When God breaks into history in any way the heavens register it. Thus, the star of Bethlehem at the Incarnation. Even when the Holy Spirit came on the church at Pentecost Peter makes a point of quoting Joel's prophecy with its heavenly signs. In Acts 2:17 we read, "In the last days, God says I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams." But then he goes on in v. 19, "I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below. Blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood..." Peter says this was fulfilled at Pentecost in the coming of the Holy Spirit. There are other examples but these make the point clear. Whenever a Hebrew wants to tell you that God is radically involved with events in time, the heavens and heavenly bodies participate.

Here in Matt. 24 Jesus is saying that Israel is going out as the light of God in the world. He was going to close shop and abandon the temple for good, and destroy it not leaving one stone upon another. This was radical judgment, and the heavens speak their peace. This is apocalyptic language so common to the Jews, but so foreign to us. In verse 30 He says, "The sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of the sky with power and great glory." This sounds like it has to refer to the second coming. How could this possibly apply to the fall of Jerusalem? It is our limited understanding of biblical language that leads to all the problems and complex theories. If we just take Jesus at His word, and take Him literally, this all fits into a very simple message that is fulfilled in 70 A. D.

If you say Jesus could not have come in the clouds in power and glory in 70

A. D., then you are really going to have a tough time with Matt. 16:27 where Jesus says, "For the Son of Man is going to come in His Father's glory with His angels, and then He will reward each person according to what He has done." That has to be the second coming at the end of history, does it not? Not so, for Jesus says in verse 28, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." This coming He speaks of is not a far off event, but one in the lifetime of those who heard Him.

Let's try to see history from the point of view of Jesus. He has rejected those who have rejected Him. The temple is to be abandoned and destroyed, and the light of God's glory will be shifted to Him as the new temple of God. The nation of Israel will be severely judged for all the unjust blood of history, and will no longer represent God's people in the world. He and His followers will be the new people of God, and the light of the world. So when God comes in judgment and the temple is wiped out in 70 A. D., what is to follow? Naturally, it is the kingdom of Christ. Jesus pictures the destruction of the old and the beginning of the new world order where He is king, and His kingdom is to spread into all the world. So in verse 31 we see the going into all the world to gather His elect that will make up His kingdom that will be forever. Christ's angels and His messengers on earth are linked everywhere in the Bible. Here they bring in the great harvest from the seed of the Gospel.

I use to struggle with these words of Jesus, as do most Christians. How can He say He will come again in power and great glory, and then not do it? But then I discovered the apocalyptic literature of Israel and realized that Jesus really could have come in 70 A. D. as He said, and all of this could be literally fulfilled in that generation. This whole scene in verses 29-31 is the judgment of God's wrath and the Gospel of His love in apocalyptic language. He judged Israel severely and all heaven went black. But then God comes in mercy, and with love, and then the sinful world mourns in repentance at the sight of the crucified Christ coming as King, and they are received into the kingdom. Judgment and grace is what you have here, just as you have it all through the Bible.

Jesus says in verse 30 that the nations of the earth will mourn when they see the sign of the Son of Man. This mourning I always pushed off to the final coming of Christ, and I never dreamed it could have been fulfilled in 70 A. D. but if you look at Scripture and logic, all the evidence points to that time.

First of all, when people saw that what He said was coming to pass they would realize their folly and rejecting Him, and mourn in grief or repentance. In Rev. 1:7 John writes, "Look He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of Him." How can John tell us to look if it is a coming in the far future, and not one that can be seen by the readers in the first century and every century since.

We don't have time to look at the many comings of Christ. There is only one final and glorious coming of Christ to end history, but there are many comings in judgment, conversion, and death, to name the major ones. The Bible calls these comings by the same term as the Second Coming. So what I am saying is that we should not write off the reality of His coming in 70 A. D., for it fits perfectly what He said would happen.

In Zech. 12:10 we read, "They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him as one mourns for an only child." Commentators says this points to the first coming of Christ where even at the cross some beat their breast in grief recognizing they had made a big mistake. How much more would this be so after the judgment on Jerusalem? You do not have to push this to the end of history. In 70 A. D. all of this could take place literally with some of the actual people who pierced Jesus seeing Him come to power, and His kingdom ascending as theirs lay in the ashes.

Our problem with seeing all this take place in that generation is because we do not think in apocalyptic images like the Jews. When Isaiah says in Isa. 19:1, "See, the Lord rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt," the Jews did not look up expecting to see God riding on a fast moving cloud. It was a word picture, and the Bible is full of them. But for us it is like saying, "See, the 747 up in the clouds," and we expect to be able to look up and see it, and that is how we also see this phrase, "See the Lord in the clouds." We have a hard time thinking in pictures that appeal to the imagination. We think in concepts which appeal to the intellect. When we are told that He is coming in the clouds, we expect to look up and see Him. The Jews would be able to say that they see that He has come in glory, and that He reigns.

Jesus prophesied there would be men alive who heard Him, and who would see Him come in His kingdom. Either Jesus blew it, or we blow it by not seeing that He did so come. He put Judaism out of business officially in

destroying the temple, and His new temple, the church, began to be built up rapidly. They saw Jesus come in power and glory. Edersheim in his famous *Life And Times Of Jesus The Messiah* tells us the Jewish conviction about the Roman Empire being the last world Empire that was to be followed by the reign of Messiah. That is precisely what happened, even though the Jews never dreamed it would be with a new people of God composed of both Jews and Gentiles. He says the language of Matt. 24 shows that the fall of Jerusalem and the coming of Christ are linked. Jesus obviously did this on purpose, for as Edersheim says, the whole motivation of the church to watch and be in a state of hopeful expectancy would have been lost had He said His coming would not be for centuries after the fall of the temple.

The point is, Jesus really did come in some way then, and He really does come in judgment, in conversion, and at death, all through history. All the nearness passages are relevant to every generation of Christians just as they were to the first generation. Everything Jesus taught He meant for His disciples to take seriously, and He meant it to be taken seriously by every Christian all through time. One generation will see the final fulfillment of this message when the Gospel has gone into all the world. Edersheim says this is really the only sign of the end of the present age.

This interpretation that I have shared with you is the simplest of all the interpretations. It makes the teaching of Jesus fit the people He is talking to, and it opens the door to some exciting biblical teaching on the many comings of Christ that we seldom to never see because we assume there is only the one final coming.

5. THE SECOND COMINGS Based on Matt. 24:29-35

Life is full of serendipity, which is the finding of things you are not looking for, when you are searching for something else. Columbus was looking for Asia, and instead he found America. Edison was looking for the electric light, and he found the phonograph. Pasteur was looking for a way to keep wine from turning sour, and he found the process of pasteurization. The world is full of discovers which are made by people looking for something else. It happens to all of us. We go to the attic or garage looking for

something and we discover something else we forgot we had, and we are delighted that we found it.

This is what is called serendipity. The word was coined in 1754 by Sir Horace Walpole who read the Persian tale of Three Princes of Serendip who were always finding things they were not looking for. He called this experience serendipity. It was my experience of serendipity that changed my whole perspective on Matt. 24. I was reading for my Sunday School class on Revelation, and I was seeking to grasp the views of Dr. Henry Morris, who got his degree from the University of Minnesota, and who worked for years at the Institute For Creation Research in California. He is famous for his work in this field, and is also a Professor of Apologetics at Christian Heritage College in San Diego.

In his book *The Revelation Record*, he begins with a look at the Apostle John and the strange rumor that ends his Gospel. Jesus had just told Peter about the way He would die. Peter responded by saying, "What about John?" Jesus says in John 21:22, "If I want him to remain until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." Now Jesus did not say John would live until the second coming, but only that it was his business and not Peter's. The rumor, however, spread that John would not die but live to see the return of Christ.

Now why in the world would John end his Gospel with a false rumor about his living to the second coming? Could it be because it turns out not to have been a false rumor after all, and that he did, in fact, live to see Christ come again? Dr. Morris opened my eyes to a whole new world dealing with the coming of Christ. He made this comment on John's visions in the book of Revelation: "In one sense, John did indeed tarry until Christ came. On the wonderful Lord's Day when John received the book of Revelation Christ did "Come" back to John's presence...So that John saw his beloved Lord once more. Furthermore John was allow to see all the events that would be associated with Christ's eventual second coming to the earth, so that he could record them for the instruction and inspiration of all believers between his day and the last day."

Before John died he saw the second coming of Christ in all its glory and power. The entire future of God's plan for man was unveiled and unfolded, and John saw it with his own eyes, and he put it in a book where all of us can

see it. Did John really see the second coming? Yes he did! He could not have recorded it if he had not seen it. This is a serendipity experience for me, for I was looking for ideas about Revelation, and suddenly I discover the very piece of knowledge I needed to understand the mysteries of Matt. 24. Jesus clearly says he is coming in power and great glory immediately after the tribulation, that is the worst tribulation that was ever to happen to the generation He was speaking to-the generation that killed the Son of God.

We know this happened in 70 A. D., but did Jesus come after 70 A. D. as He said? It appears not from our perspective, and so this whole passage is stood on its head and made to mean everything but what it clearly says. To protect Jesus from being a false prophet Christians have ignored His clear statements and made Him say something entirely different from what He actually said. I followed these teachers myself, and made this the hardest and most complex chapter of the Bible to interpret, until I learned that it is possible to believe Jesus, and take Him at His word, and see that He really did come in power and great glory just as He said.

He came to John in power and glory, and by way of John to the whole church by means of the book of Revelation. But my question was, are there other comings of Christ after His death and before His literal coming in the flesh, which will end history. I began to study the words of the New Testament that described the coming of Christ, and I discovered that the answer was yes.

One of the key words for His coming is the Greek word parousia. At least 15 of the 17 times it is used of Jesus it refers to His second coming. But look at the very interesting exception where it is used of His first coming, or, rather, a second coming during His first coming, which happened on the Mt. of Transfiguration. Listen to II Peter 1:16-18, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye witnesses of His majesty, for He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, saying, this is my Son whom I love, with Him I am well pleased. We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with Him on the sacred mountain." Peter, James and John were permitted to see Jesus come in power and glory and majesty even before He died. The future of their Lord broke into time, and they experienced the parousia even before the first coming had ended. Jesus had already appeared in power and

glory to the three of His inner circle.

The point I am making is that God can reveal the parousia at any time. The coming of Jesus in power and great glory is not limited to the coming that ends history. It is not out of line with the New Testament at all to believe Jesus when He says He will appear in power and great glory to the world after 70 A. D. This becomes all the more easily to see when we study the word coming in Matt. 24:30. "They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory." The Greek word for coming is erchomai, it is the same word used in 24:39 where we read, "That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man." The same word is used in 24:42, "Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." Also in 24:44, "So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him." It is used 8 times in this chapter. It is the number one word used to describe the second coming of Christ.

Jesus then used this word to describe a coming of Himself to the people of His generation, and a coming that was different than His just being there. When He sent His 12 out to preach the Gospel of the kingdom to the lost sheep of Israel He concluded His instructions with these words in Matt. 10:23, "I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes." This is a shocking prophecy, for Jesus is saying that before the church goes into all the world, and even before Israel is fully reached there will be an erchomai-a coming of the Son of Man.

Now you have a choice. You can follow the liberals that just say Jesus was plain wrong. He had a misconception and just did not know what He was saying, or you can follow those who twist plain language to mean something else than what it obvious means. Or you have the third option which is believing Jesus knew what He was saying, and believing it was prophecy that was fulfilled. The coming of Christ can be literal, or it can be in an historical event, or it can be in a spiritual experience. We need to see this to understand the coming of Christ. In John 14:18, Jesus in the context of telling His disciples He was about to leave them says, "I will not leave you as orphans: I will come (erchomai) to you."

He goes on, "Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am

in my Father and you are in me and I am in you." On what day is this that Jesus will come again after leaving them? It is obvious the Jesus is speaking of the day of His resurrection. Jesus left this world in death, but He came back again, and the word used for that coming is the same word used for His second coming all through the New Testament. Easter was, in fact, a second coming for Jesus, for He had ascended to the Father and then came back into time, and to the earth in His new body. He left, and then came back again. That is what a second coming is.

The hope of God's people all through time is for God to dwell with them, and make His home in their midst. This dream is finally fulfilled in Rev. 22:3, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people and God himself will be with them and be their God." Now this will not be until after the final second coming and the end of history, but the fact is, the future has already come in Christ's coming after His resurrection. Jesus using this same word *erchomai* says in John 14:23, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." This is the ultimate goal of life-to live with God in the same house, and Jesus says this can happen in a coming that is long before the final coming. It is a coming that can and does happen every time a person anywhere on this planet opens their heart to Jesus in conversion, or in renewed surrender. Christ is coming again to people all over the world every day of history.

Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, and so He not only comes to bring eternal life to us, He comes again to bring us to eternal life. He says in John 14:3, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may be where I am." In our careless reading of this promise we think this is the second coming, but if that was the case, the thief on the cross was taken to heaven that very day of Christ's death, and yet the 12 Apostles are still waiting to be taken there at the second coming. Paul, however, says that to be absent from the body is to be with the Lord. He went to be with Christ the day he died. If this coming back to take the 12 is not until the second coming, then they will be just about the last people in paradise.

This promise to the disciples only makes sense when we see it as a promise to come and take each of them to heaven when they die. What a comfort that

is to all believers. You are not left to wander through strange tunnels and be alone. Jesus says He will come(erchomai) and take you to the Father's mansion. He is our Shepherd and Guide, and just when we need it most He will be there. Every death is a mini-rapture where Jesus comes to each child of God and takes them up to meet the Father, and be with Him forever. This means there is a second coming of Christ every day in history as He comes to take His own home. He is ever near and we never know when He will be coming to receive us to Himself.

We see this clearly in the experience of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. In Acts 7:55-56 we read, "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Look, he said, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." The crowd rushed on him and stoned him to death. Stephen had his own private rapture as he prayed before he died, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit." He was taken directly into the Father's mansion by Christ as he died.

This became a traditional way of describing death for the believer. Eusebius, the early church historian, in the account of the death of James has him saying to his killers, "Why do you ask me about the Son of Man? He is seated in heaven at the right hand of the great power, and is about to come on the clouds of heaven." Jesus comes again in power to take his own to heaven. This was the early tradition, and it is based on the promise of Jesus to come again to receive His own to Himself.

We need to also face the reality of Jesus coming in judgment. In Revelation the word erchomai is used 7 times for the second coming, but it is used also for a coming that is before that final coming. It is used in Rev. 2:5 where we read, "If you do not repent I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place" This is a promise to come again to discipline the church of Ephesus. Jesus does not wait for the second coming to do all his judgment. He comes into history along the way and disciplines His people. There is no way to know how many times Jesus has come back into this world. All we can conclude is that it has been many times, and often in probably every period of history. In a very real sense, there are second comings that are going on continuously, and will continue until history ends in His final coming in the flesh.

In Rev. 2:16 Jesus says it again to the church of Pergamum, "Repent therefore! Otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." This is a warning, and a case where Christians are being told to prevent this second coming of Jesus, for it is a coming in judgment. If they repent they will prevent His coming, and this is a good thing. What a paradox! Here are Christians who are urged to do all they can to prevent Christ coming to them. Not all comings of Jesus are good, for He will also come in judgment. This is a "Just wait until your father gets home," type of coming, and Jesus does not want to come in that way.

Jesus wants to come into history and our lives, but always as a friend and guide. That is why He says in Rev. 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him and he with me." That is the way Jesus wants to come into each of our lives-at conversion, at renewal, and on every occasion that we are willing to invite Him to join us.

Now what is the value of seeing all of these pre-second coming second comings? The value is that we see Jesus is not way off in another universe, but is actively involved in this world that He died to save. He is active in history, lives, and churches, and was from the start. Right after the cross Jesus began His coming back into time and history, and He has never ceased. One day He will come for the last time, and the curtain will fall on the play of life in time once and for all. But meanwhile we need to be aware of His comings. If you are locked into just His final coming, and you fail to see the many others, then many of the things Jesus said will not make sense. Especially this whole scene He describes as following immediately after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A. D.

Verses 29-31 sound so much like the final coming that few ever dream it could be on of the many pre-second comings that run all through the New Testament. But Jesus says it is a pre-second coming because He says in v. 24 that it will happen before that generation passes away. Now if this was an isolated statement, it could be considered a mystery we just cannot understand, but when you find every one of the Gospels have similar statements by Jesus, and that He clearly planned to return from heaven to that generation of people, then you cannot escape its clear meaning.

Listen to these texts that say clearly that Jesus will be seen by the people of His day.

- 1. In John 1:51 Jesus says to Nathaniel, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."**
- 2. Jesus responded to the question of the high priest at His trial, "Are you the Son of the Blessed One?" by saying in John 14:62, "I am and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." That, of course, was the last straw, and for that kind of language they judged Jesus worthy of death. It was blasphemy for Jesus to say they would see Him as their Lord and King. Of course, it was not blasphemy if He really was, but they did not believe it.**
- 3. Jesus said to the crowd in Mark 9:1, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come with power."**
- 4. Matthew makes it even stronger in Matt. 16:28, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."**
- 5. Stronger yet is the text of Matt. 10:23 where Jesus says, "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes."**
- 6. Mark 13:30 has Jesus saying, "Amen, I tell you, that this generation will not pass away before all these things happen."**
- 7. Luke 21:32 has Jesus saying, "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened."**

Our major problem is that we do not have an adequate concept of just how important that generation was in God's plan. We have no idea of the significance of 70 A. D. because, even though it was the end of an age, and in a very real sense the end of the world for the Jewish system of worship, and the generation that rejected Jesus, we seldom hear about it. Yet Jesus said it was going to be the worst experience of tribulation the world has ever known, or will ever know. This is confirmed by the radical language used to describe His coming on that generation. Jesus made it so clear that He was coming again to judge that generation that it was one of the reasons they sought to kill Him.

In Matt. 21 He told the parable of the tenants who refused to pay the land owner his share of the crop. He sent servants to collect, but they drove them away and killed them. He sent His Son, and they threw Him out and killed Him too. Then Jesus uses violent language. The owner comes in anger, and

in verse 41 Jesus says, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end." Mark states it, "He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others."

In His parable in Matt. 22 Jesus tells the same story in a new context. The king is giving a wedding banquet for his son, but those invited reject the invitation, and they kill the servants who bring the invitation. Jesus says in Matt. 22:7, "The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city." This is what happened in 70 A. D. Look at the last verse of Matt. 24: "He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." The most violent language in the New Testament revolves around the coming of Christ in judgment on that generation. Did the leaders of Israel get the point? Yes they did, for Matt. 21:45-46 says, "When the chief priests and Pharisees heard Jesus' parables they knew He was talking about them. They look for a way to arrest Him."

Jesus kept His word, and He did return in judgment on that generation in 70 A. D., and the reason the language sounds so radical like the final coming and end of the world is because it was a preview of that final end. It was a type of the day of judgment, and the rapture of the church out of that judgment. But its primary focus is on the fulfillment of all Jesus said was coming on that generation. Jesus ended the history of God's people, and began a whole new history with a new people of God.

What I have done in this message is to make it clear that Jesus comes in many ways in history before He comes to end history. He comes to judge; He comes to take us at death; He comes to indwell us at conversion, and He comes to renew and empower us when we submit anew to His Lordship.

6. THE SIGN-LESS COMING Based on Matt. 24:36-51

Don't feel bad if you feel confused by Matt. 24. The greatest Bible scholars in the world are confused by this chapter, and the preachers of the world are so confused they contradict their own system of theology in preaching on it. Dr. Earl Rudmacker, the President of Western Conservative Baptist

Seminary in Portland, is a leading promoter of the Pre-trib rapture school of thought. He is so angry at the preachers in his system because they do the very thing their system rejects. They teach that none of the signs are relevant to the Christian. They are all meant for the Jews after the Christians are raptured out of the world. There will be no signs of Christ coming for His church.

That is a fairly simple principle to grasp, no signs for the Christian. But if you go to your Christian Book Store you will see books on the signs everywhere, and who writes the vast majority of them? Those from the Pre-trib school of thought. Dr. Rudmacker is embarrassed about this, and he responds to his critics with these words: "I would admit that there is a glaring inconsistency in those who preach about the signs of a signless event. There are no signs of the times because we are not in the time of the signs."

Here is a leading scholar of our day admitting that most of the authors who write about Matt. 24 and the signs of the times are confused. So you have every right to be confused if these who are the so-called experts are confused. The only way to avoid endless mysteries and confusion is to believe every word Jesus speaks in this passage just as He states it. It is hard to believe Him when He says in verse 34 that all of the signs up to that point would happen in that generation. But if you don't believe it, you are forced to join the ranks of the perpetually confused.

Now as we come to the last part of this chapter we are compelled to again state what ought to be obvious: Believe Jesus and take His words literally, or you will again go astray into endless nonsense of interpretation. I can't believe all the sermons I read that take this text and use it to prove the very opposite of what Jesus is teaching here. In fact, most everything that gets into the hands of people distort this passage beyond recognition, and to the shame of Christians they listen to the popular authors and ignore the words of their Lord.

For example, I just read a sermon that was spread across this country in a major periodical. The title was "The Days Of Noah Repeated." The point of the message was that when we see the conditions of our world become like those in the days of Noah, then we know the end is near. In other words he is saying that Jesus is giving us signs to look for so we can know when His coming is at hand. He then goes on to show how our day parallels that of

Noah, and so we see the signs of the end everywhere. There is only one mistake in the sermon, and that is that he totally ignores the point of Jesus in this paragraph.

The essence of what Jesus is saying here is that there are no signs of His coming. It is, in fact, so secret that no one knows just when it will be, not even the angels in heaven who are in on all God does, and not even the Son. This is one bit of information so highly classified that only God the Father knows. Then Jesus illustrates the point of it being totally unknown by referring to the days of Noah. In those days before the flood he says they were eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage, and just living life as usual with no sign of judgment about to fall, when all of the sudden the flood came and swept them all away.

That is the way it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. People will be just carrying on life as normal. Two men will be in the field, and one will be a Christian and the other an unbeliever, and the Christian will have no more idea than the unbeliever. Two women will be grinding at the mill, and neither will have any idea that the day of the Lord is near. The whole point of this passage is that the coming of Christ will be totally unknown, and be a surprise to Christians and non-Christians alike. Those who greet it with joy, and those face it as judgment, are all in the same boat. They have no idea when it will happen.

The people of Noah's day were wicked, but Jesus does not refer to that here, for that is not the point. The point is, they were totally unaware to the judgment coming on them. It took them completely by surprise, and so they coming of Christ will be completely unexpected. People will be eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage, and suddenly in the midst of life as usual the end will come. Many twist this passage to say that Jesus is giving signs of His coming, and they ramble on for pages about how Jesus is saying how awful they were in their eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage. They take what Jesus is saying to be just normal life of any generation of people, and they go on and on about drunkenness and adultery, and point out how we live in just such an age like that of Noah. It is all true, but it has nothing to do with what Jesus is teaching here.

If you think eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage is describing awful wickedness, then you need some therapy. This is the

description of life as usual for Christians as well as non-Christians. To twist this into some kind of description of depravity is to ignore the meaning of language. Jesus does not refer to a single sin of that generation, because that is not His point. His point is that they just went about life as usual unknowing of the fact that the end was right at the door. In contrast to the thousands of sermons preached on this passage as a sign passage, Jesus is teaching that there are no signs. That is the point. You have to be ready at all times, for He will come when life is just going along as usual, and nobody is expecting the end.

This is in total contrast to the teaching He has just given on the signs of the coming of judgment on Jerusalem in 70 A. D. Jesus knew every detail of that event, and of His coming in judgment. In verse 15 He says when they see the abomination of desolation that is the time to flee to the mountains. Luke clarifies this for us and tells us exactly when this is in Luke 21:20. "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains." Jesus makes the sign of the end of Jerusalem so clear that the blind could see it. Then in verse 29 He says the other signs in the heavens will be immediately after the tribulation of those days, and He goes on to say that when you see the leaves on the fig tree you know summer is near, and so when you see all these things you know the end is near right at the door.

Now notice that everything about the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. is sign oriented, and there is evidence galore when it is to take place. All of it will happen in that generation Jesus said. The whole point of all the signs is because Jesus wanted His people to escape this awful judgment. Then in verse 35 there is a transition where Jesus says that "heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." Just when will this final end take place-this passing of the heaven and earth, and the beginning of the new heaven and earth? This is not just the end of Jerusalem and the temple, but of the whole world. Jesus now deals with His final second coming, and it is in total contrast to that of 70 A. D. with all of its signs. There is no sign whatever, for He was without a clue, and so is everyone else.

There is no sign to watch so that you can flee anywhere. There is no where to go for this coming anyway, for it is the end of the world. Getting to the mountains can save you from the Roman army, but it won't do you any good at the end of the world. The whole point of Jesus in dealing with His final

coming is, nobody knows, and there are no signs to be given, and so you have to be ready for the end at all times. Those who are careless in not watching for the Lord's return will risk getting side tracked and out of His will, and they will face judgment when He comes.

Jesus will come like a thief in the night, and no thief gives signs of his coming. He does not put a marker out front saying, "Hit this home at 11P.M. on Saturday night." So also Jesus does not give us signs of when He will come, for if He would have said it will be in the year 2002, then every generation of Christians up to that year could be careless and unprepared for it. In order to keep every Christian in every generation on alert, Jesus had to keep the time of His coming secret and unknown, and that is the whole point of the closing part of this chapter. There is a sign filled coming of Jesus in judgment in 70 A D., but His final coming is a signless coming.

Jesus expected all Christians to see through a glass darkly on the issue of His coming. Nobody who listens to Jesus will be persuaded by any sign fanatic that they have figured out the schedule. God did not let Jesus use that schedule, and it is presumptuous for any man to think he has been able to calculate it. But in spite of this clear teaching of Jesus many godly men and women have spent a major portion of their lives trying to figure out the exact time of the second coming. They are often ingenious, and when you read them you are almost persuaded they must have some validity. The only problem is that they are trying to go over the head of Jesus. He said you can't know, but they are saying that you can. Many have chosen to follow them, but I choose to follow Jesus and recognize that all schemes for prediction His coming are not only always wrong, but they are a form of rebellion against His Lordship.

Life will be going along as usual, and there will no particular reason in the world why this should be the end, and then like a lightening flash it will be over, and the day of judgment will be upon the world like the flood in the day of Noah. You don't need to be a Sherlock Holmes to find the clues Jesus is dropping all over the place in reference to His coming in 70 A. D. in judgment. But the best in the business will not find a clue to His final coming, because Jesus says there is no clue. It will be a surprise for everyone, and so be ready.

What does that mean? Do we stand gazing into the sky? Of course not.

By watching He means be doing what He expects you to be doing. Don't be like a servant who thinks his Lord is gone for a long time, and so he can goof off and abuse his privileges and power, and let his duties go undone. The watching servant is one who goes on faithfully doing the master will, and taking care of his household no matter how long he is away. Watching is simply being faithful so that whenever he comes it doesn't make any difference, for you are ready to meet him as one who is living in obedience.

It you are not living for Jesus and seeking to fulfill His will as a servant of the body, He will not be impressed that you have calculated that there are more people eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage than ever before, or any other such nonsense. He did not leave the church in the world to calculate and collect signs of His coming. He left the church to fulfill His purpose for coming, which is to gather His bride from all the nations of the world to live with Him in a new world forever. It was the Christians job to figure out the signs of His coming in 70 A. D. so they could escape the tribulation. It is not their job to figure out when the final coming will be, for there is no escape from that coming for anyone. You need to be ready for it at all times, for there will no sign to warn you ahead of time.

So what do Christians do in their lust for signs of the times? They get around Jesus on a technicality. Jesus says in verse 36 that no one knows about that day or hour, but He does not say they do not know the month or week. So you can't nail it down to the day or hour, but they go off seeking all the signs that will tell you when it will be approximately. I'm sure Jesus is just telling us we can't know the exact day or hour, but that we can get real close. This sort of thing is seen in every book on the signs of the times, and Christians eat them up like they were inspired by the Lord Himself, when, in fact, they are calling Jesus a liar. I agree with the judgment of Charles Spurgeon, that king of preachers. He wrote, "Some would-be-prophets have rested this verse from its evident meaning by saying, though we can't know the day and hour of Christ's coming, we may know the year, the month, and even the week. If this method of treating the words of Jesus is not blasphemous, it is certainly foolish, and betrays disloyalty to the King."

The whole attitude of sign seekers is contrary to that of Jesus. He is teaching that since it can't be known when the end is coming, you have to be ready always and live life constantly in consistency with His Lordship. The sign seekers are saying its time to shape up, for we see the evidence that He is

near. Dr. Robert Mounce said this in an article in Eternity Magazine: "This approach seems to say that what is really important is to be in good shape at that particular point in time when Christ returns. (Its the old I-don't-want-to-be-caught-in-there-when-Jesus-returns syndrome). It suggests in a veiled way that the mark we get on ethical report card is the mark we happen to receive on the pop quiz given at the Parousia rather the cumulative grade for the entire course."

If the threat of war, economic turmoil, unprecedented earthquakes, and other natural disasters motivate you to a deeper Christian life, you are marching to the wrong drum. If you listen to Jesus, you will live that life regardless of any signs, for it is those Christians who always seek a deeper walk in good or bad times who will be ready when He comes. Those who only get deeper when things get terrible will not be ready when He comes at a time unexpected, and when all is normal and routine.

If the words of Jesus are not enough for you, and you need a sign to motivate you, there is a danger that the sign is your idol. Sign seeking is a form of idolatry, and Christians dance around it like the people of God in the Old Testament danced around the golden calf. Because Christians will not believe Jesus, and be ready for His coming regardless of any signs, they are living in disobedience. Spurgeon says of verse 36, "There is a manifest change in our Lord's words here, which clearly indicates that they refer to His last great coming in judgment." There is no escape from this event. All you can do is be ready for it, and be prepared to face it at any time.

The greatest danger of the Christian is to think there is no sense of urgency. It has been a long time now and no second coming, and so it is not something to be very concerned about. There is a story about three demons who came to Satan with a plot against man. One said, "I will tell them there is no God." Satan said, "That will not be very effective, for the evidence is too great." The second said, "I will tell them there is no hell." "That is better," Satan responded, "but still man knows there has to be a judgment." The third said, "I will tell them there is no hurry." "Excellent," said Satan, "go, for your plan will be most successful."

Christians fall for it too, and think there is always time in the future to be more committed to Christ, and more time to do His service. Even Christians can get so caught up in the routine of life and forget they have a mission.

When were Christians to be ready to flee from Jerusalem? When they saw the signs that Jesus gave them. When are Christians to be ready for His final coming? They are to be always ready, for His coming will be unexpected and sudden. It could be that you haven't heard of an earthquake for months, and wars are not in the news, and disasters are rare, and then like a thief in the night, or like a flash of lightning, Christ will come and all will be over, and there will be no more time to do His will. Wise is that servant who is always doing what pleases his master, for he will never be taken by surprise by His return.

The Israelites did not know when Moses would return from the mountain, and so they fell into idolatry. The not knowing is a test of loyalty, and they failed the test. Not knowing when Jesus will return is a test of our loyalty. The one who needs signs to get ready is like the unfaithful wife who only stops seeing other men when she gets a letter saying her husband is arriving back from his trip the next day. The faithful wife is ready at all times for she is faithful regardless of when he will return, and she lives in constant anticipation of his return. The unfaithful wife needs signs to get ready, but the faithful wife needs no signs for she is always ready. The unfaithful Christian may be dabbling in false cults, and new age thinking, or questionable practices, and needs some sign to know when to shape up and put his full trust in Jesus. The faithful Christian does not need any sign, for he walks in obedience to Jesus all the time.

Being ready for the coming of Christ is not a seasonal thing, or a matter of some sensational news event in the world. It is a matter of just solid commitment to Christ, and a living of the life that pleases Him. It is a seeking first the kingdom of God. The unfaithful servant in v. 48 just forgets his master's will and does his own thing. He becomes a pain in the household of the master. We need to have the spirit of Luther who said, "I live as though Jesus Christ died yesterday, rose today, and were coming again tomorrow."

Someday Jesus is going to say, "Here I come, ready or not." The wise Christian does not need to fear that day, for he, or she, lives with a spirit that is ready any day. Signs just get people alarmed, and that is just what Jesus did not want to happen. He did not want all of the wars and other bad news to get Christians all upset and emotional so they do not keep a balanced Christian witness. John R. Rice was one of the most anti-sign preachers I have ever known about. You cannot escape his logic if you believe what Jesus

is saying. He writes,

"I do not mean to state emphatically that "Jesus is coming soon," as so many people say. He may; He may not come for five hundred years. No one knows. But His coming is possible at any moment and something we should expect.

I do not mean that certain signs have appeared which indicate His coming is soon. We do not need signs; we need only to believe and heed His plain statements in the Bible. He commanded us to watch, and we should watch, knowing that He may come at any time.

I do not mean that there is any evidence that we are "in the end of the age" or that these are "the closing days," as so many people say. That is wrong and unscriptural. Nobody knows how close to the end we are. When we say that the coming of Jesus Christ is imminent, we do not mean that there is any special evidence that this age is drawing to an end. We simply mean that He may come at any moment, as He said, and we should watch.

We should not expect Christ's coming because of world events but because He said for us to expect Him. We should expect His coming Not by sight but by faith; not by the newspapers, but by the Word of God. An any moment-day or night-He may come to call all the redeemed-Those who sleep in Christ, and us who are alive and remain-up with them to meet Him in the air.

The time of Christ's return is deliberately and intentionally left in the Realm of the unrevealed. It is presumptuous for people to set out to know what God has plainly declared is not to be known. Nearly all fortunetellers play on this carnal longing to know the future. Nearly all the false cults some way appeal to me on this basis."

The debate over when Jesus will come has been going on for centuries, but way back in the 4th century St. Augustine settled the issue according to the words of Christ. He said, "He who loves our Lord's coming is not he who asserts that it is near or he who asserts that it is far off; but rather he who, whether it be near or distant, waits for Him with sincerity of faith, steadfastness of hope and fervor of love."

There are many books written on the signs of Christ's coming. The one thing they all have in common is that they have always been wrong in predicting the coming. Some sign expert will eventually be right, for he will live in the day that Jesus actually does come, but meanwhile all sign literature will go the way of the history of such literature, and end up in oblivion. Wise are those who cease to play the sign seeking game, and get busy doing something constructive for the kingdom of God. Jesus will be pleased with such a servant when He does arrive and fulfill His signless coming.

7. THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST Based on II Thess. 1:1f

The doctrine of the second coming of Christ is one on which all true Christians agree as to its reality, but one on which they disagree on many other points. One of the causes for much confusion is the fact that we are seldom content with reading the Bible from the historical point of view. That is, we so seldom make a conscious effort to see the letters of Paul as written to specific people under specific circumstances, and for the purpose of conveying specific information. It is my conviction that we can never rightly understand the Bible until we study it historically, and that means that we determine just what the author was conveying to the original readers.

Any conclusions drawn apart from this consideration are usually pre-conceived ideas read into the text. I have read dozens of books on the second coming which prove all kinds of things by simply ignoring the text and bringing in all kinds of passages from the prophets to the book of Revelation to support their views. The result is that each position links together a series of unrelated texts arranged just to prove their point. Because there are so many varied passages all through Scripture each view can compile a list that, when woven together cleverly, will prove there's to be the most biblical. The cults, of course, do the same thing. The end result is that a person is convinced of any position he happens to read because each of them is very convincing, and each has biblical basis when the text are arranged to fit a system.

We all have preconceived ideas about certain systems of interpretation, but none of these will be of much hindrance if we study just the Bible text in

front of us as of independent value. That is we must first of all determine just what an author is saying in his letter, and only then refer to other Scripture to support it. If we treat Paul's letter just as a letter should be treated, and take it without commentary and cross references, and seek to understand it as he meant it for the persons to whom he wrote it, then we can go to other texts for commentary. It must be considered as a distinct message in itself, and not as a jumping off place to go roaming all over Scripture for proof texts. By this method of roaming all over the Bible can be made to teach anything, but when you stick strictly to the text at hand, you are compelled to face its message, and any false interpretation can be easily spotted.

We want to begin a study of II Thessalonians in a verse by verse method, for not only will this help us to stay on the subject of the text, but it will enable us to keep a closer check on our reasoning and conclusions. Since I also have a bias, it is your obligation to follow closely and correct that which you can see does not fit the text. The first two verses are introduction, and they are the same as in the first Epistle, and so we will skip them and go right to verse 3.

In verse 3 Paul expresses how grateful he is to God for their spiritual growth. Their faith is growing, and that indicates they are becoming stronger as individuals, and their love for one another is growing and so they are becoming stronger as a body. In verse 4 he says that because of this he boasts of them in other churches. They are used by Paul as examples of how believers ought to grow, even in the midst of trial. This was good psychology on the part of Paul, because if they know he is boasting of them, they will be more determined to go on enduring and not give up, which they might do if they thought no one cared anyway.

Paul makes it clear that these Christians were going through persecution and tribulation, but he also makes it clear that they were standing fast, and were not wavering in faith. This is important background to know about these Christians. He is not writing to those at ease in Zion, or to those who live as we do with little to fear by standing for Christ. They were suffering for Christ. There was no promise to them of escape from trials, for they were already in them, and they were to go through the persecution of Nero. If Paul knew anything about the supposed rapture of the church out of the world before tribulation, he kept it to himself, and for good reason, for it would be of small comfort to the early Christians who had to go through 10 waves of

horrible persecution by the Romans. If it is true that the church will escape some great tribulation at the end of history, it would have been of no value to the early church, or to the suffering church through the centuries. It is not even of much comfort to us today since we can never be sure we are the last generation of Christians.

This text does not say anything to prove or disprove the idea of a rapture of the church to escape a tribulation. It does indicate that if such a teaching is true it has been of little value in the history of the church, and specifically in the lives of the Thessalonians. Paul does not mention it, but speaks to meet their need rather than deal with speculation about some future escape. In verse 5 he says that the fact that they are standing fast in the persecution is a manifest token, or is clear evidence, that God has judged them worthy of His kingdom. He will right all the wrongs against them, but meanwhile He will use the wrongs they suffer to make them worthy. Paul is assuring them that they are God's own, and that they suffer because they are, and are not of the world. Jesus said that just as the world hated Him it will hate His followers. He promised that in the world you shall have tribulation, but if we suffer with Him, we shall also reign with Him. Paul wants them to see that their suffering is evidence that they are on the right track to the eternal kingdom.

The Scripture places a high value on suffering for Christ, and those who suffer for His sake are promised great reward in heaven. "The path of suffering and that path alone leads to the land where sorrow is unknown." The poet has probably overstated the case, for certainly there will be some non-sufferers who will be saved, but the Bible does lay great stress on suffering and being worthy of the kingdom. We can pursue this, but it is enough to see that these Christians are encouraged and comforted by being assured that God will use what they suffer for their eternal good. They suffered by giving their allegiance to a rejected king, but what is that when they are assured that He will yet reign, and they will be His loyal subjects forever. Paul goes on then to describe the judgment ahead. He first assures them of their reward, and then of the judgment of their enemies.

In verse 6 he tells them that God, being a righteous and just God, will write all wrongs, and those who are now making tribulation for them will suffer His tribulation. This is important psychologically for the suffering believers. Injustice arouses the emotions more than most anything, and even a Christian cannot easily submit to it. Our very nature cries out for revenge

when evil men hurt and kill the righteous. Paul says not to let it get you down. Justice will prevail, and evil men will not get by with it. They may triumph for the day, but they will certainly lose the war, and all their evil will be repaid with interest.

Here is the great tribulation that I see the Scripture teaching. It is God's tribulation upon evil men. It is the greatest possible tribulation, for it is God's wrath, and it leads to eternal damnation. That Christians will escape this, no one has ever doubted. This tribulation, however, comes after the second coming and not before. The so called 7 year tribulation before the second coming is nowhere to be found in this passage. He does not deal with how long it lasts, but he does make it clear that it is after the second coming. He makes it clear in the next two verses that the second coming is both a day of joy and a day of judgment. There is joy for believers and judgment for unbelievers. Believers will suffer tribulation before the rapture, but unbelievers will suffer God's tribulation after the rapture.

In verse 7 Paul says that on that day they will, with him and his companions who have also suffered tribulation, experience rest. He does not write of escape from tribulation, but of rest when it is all over. That is the promise, and the second coming will end the battle of good and evil forever. The believers will enter their eternal rest, but until this they will suffer at the hands of evil forces. Not until the second coming will all be changed and the final victory be won. It is at the revelation of Christ, and this word means at His uncovering or unveiling. The hidden Christ will be made manifest in all His glory and power.

Some divide the second coming into two parts with the rapture first and then 7 years later this revelation, with a great tribulation in between. If Paul knew of this, he was again silent about it, for he says here that it is at this revelation of Christ that their rest will begin. This would be a strange thing to say if the church is to be raptured 7 years earlier than this revelation he speaks of. It is my conviction that the rapture and the revelation are the same event, and that the New Testament clearly indicates this. To separate them demands that you ignore the Greek, which makes it clear that this revelation of Christ was the blessed hope. It is the day of reward, and Peter says it is the day we receive the crown. This day of the reveling of Christ is the day the believer is to wait for. The rapture is going to happen on that day that Jesus is revealed.

We are going beyond the text, however, for Paul is silent about the rapture here, and only indicates that the day of Christ's reveling will be a day of rest for believers. It does not prove there could not be rapture 7 years earlier, but it does show that those who separate the rapture and revelation have a problem to explain, and that is, what have the Christians been doing during that 7 years that makes it needful that their rest does not begin until the 7 years have passed? However this be answered, the fact is that the revelation of Christ is the day of joy for believers.

Paul goes on in verse 8 to show that it is a day of judgment for the unbeliever. The second coming will be dooms day for those who know not God, and who have not obeyed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Some feel since both Jews and Gentiles were persecuting the early Christians, it could be those who know not God, which would be the Gentiles, and those who knew Him but did not obey the Gospel, which would be the Jews. This may be, but it is not certain. What is certain is that it is the end of hope for all unbelievers. This being the case has always puzzled me as to how there can be any evil people left after this, for they are all judged and condemned. Verse 9 says they will be punished with everlasting destruction, and verse 10 says this will be on the day He comes to be glorified in His holy people, and that this included the Thessalonians. It is difficult to see where so many unbelievers come from at the end of the thousand year reign, if all have been judged at the second coming.

There are many questions about end times that are not easily answered, and I am not convinced that any system of theology has been developed that answers them all clearly. The problems arise because we do not stick to expounding the text at hand, but bring in information from many other sources. If we just stick to the verses that Paul is writing to this church we will see that the second coming is the beginning of heaven for believers and hell for unbelievers.

8. UNFULFILLED PROPHECIES Based on II THESS. 1:9 TO 2:2

The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus came into the world the first time, not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be

saved. It is equally clear that when He comes the second time, He will come to end the day of grace and judge all men who have not taken advantage of the good news. This day of judgment is necessary because God is just, and He cannot allow those who have rejected and cruelly treated His Son to go unpunished. The exception, of course, is if they too receive Him before He comes again. Paul was a persecutor of believers, but he received Christ, and so he will not experience God's tribulation. This final judgment when Christ returns is not only necessary from God's point of view, but from the point of view of Christians who suffer for Christ. They can only endure to the end if they know it will be worth it, and if they know that the opposition will be dwelt with justly.

If the universalists idea of all being saved in the end were true, the suffering Christian would soon be asking himself what am I doing suffering for Christ, and paying such a cost, when it does not make any difference in the long run anyway? If all are going to eventually redeemed, one just as well be on the most favorable side meanwhile, and for Christians like the Thessalonians that would mean siding with the opposition. In other words, if you can't beat them, join them. This would be the logical conclusion for them to reach. If they are going to persecute us, we just as well give in, for all will be the same in the end.

Paul makes sure no such thoughts go through the minds of these people. He praises them for enduring persecution. He assures them that it makes an eternity of difference. Those who are putting them through tribulation will experience the tribulation of God and eternal destruction. In verse 9 Paul just states the fact that punishment will be dealt out to the unbeliever when Christ returns. The fact that it is called punishment reveals that eternal damnation is not for innocent people. There will be no one punished by God who does not deserve it. Paul does not elaborate, or paint any pictures of horror. This is the only place in all of Paul's writings where he mentions everlasting destruction, and here he just states the fact of it. He was not a hell-fire and brimstone preacher if we can judge him by his letters. He believed in eternal punishment, however, and he makes it clear.

Neil writes, "The most notable feature is the reticence of the description. What in normal apocalyptic literature would have included a lurid picture of the torture of the damned and the bliss of the righteous, in Paul's hands becomes a restrained background of judgment with a light focused on the

Person of Christ as Judge.” It is horrible enough without detail for Paul says it is eternal destruction. A piece of paper could not be destroyed forever, but persons are made in the image of God, which is eternal. The context only tells us one thing about this punishment, and that is that it is to be an exclusion from the presence of God. It will be eternal life without that which gives life meaning, and so could be better called eternal death. The first death separates us from physical life, but the second death separates us from spiritual life.

As history began with the exclusion of Adam and Eve from God’s presence, so it will end with the exclusion of all from His presence who have not taken advantage of God’s plan of reconciliation. Just as the believer will be caught up to be ever with the Lord, the unbeliever will be cast out to be never with the Lord. When Christ comes again the line is drawn once and for all. As in the days of Noah you are either in the ark or out of it, and where you are determines your eternal destiny.

In verse 10 Paul says that this awful day of judgment and exclusion from the glory of Christ is the very same day of great joy for the believer. Not only is the battle done and the victory won, but he has rest, for the glory of Christ will be manifested in all its fullness in them. Once we get it into our heads that the Day of the Lord is both a day of judgment and joy we will be able to fit all Scripture into a simple pattern. Sometimes an author will write of the Day from the point of view of judgment, and then another will write from the view of it being a day of joy. Here we see them both together. Some who do not take heed to such passages as this, where both are together, divide the two and complicate the simplicity of Scripture. It is my conviction that all we need to do is accept Paul’s understanding of the second coming, and then the rest of Scripture falls into place. It is a great day of many amazing events, but it is still a once for all program. The day is stretched by some to include over a thousand years, and it could well be, but all I read is that however long the Day is, when it comes it is the last Day, and all of the passages dealing with final judgment and salvation will be fulfilled.

If you enjoy speculating about the order of events of that day, it is your privilege, but please do not label such speculations as the Word of God, for it is such practices that has made the glorious doctrine of the second coming a stumbling block to many. Each one who speculates is more concerned about proving his own guesses than proclaiming what is clearly revealed. Paul said

it will be a day of final judgment for the unsaved, and a day of ultimate joy for the saved, when they shall see Jesus and be like Him. Paul says all this will be yours simply because you received the good news when it was preached. In the last two verses of this chapter Paul prays for them. We are going to skip to the second chapter.

Chapter 2 gets us into one of the most difficult passages in the Bible. Many feel it is impossible for us to ever know the right interpretation for sure. If we were to try and go over all the different ways men have interpreted this chapter, we would do little else for the rest of the year. Most of them are not even reasonable, and so we can narrow it down considerably. We need to remember that difficult passages on which Christians have a variety of views are not essential for salvation. They are not a part of the good news to the lost world. They are passages of value only to the believer, and in some cases, only to those who originally received the message.

The background here is simple enough. Paul wants to get some things straight about the parousia and rapture that he wrote so much about in his first letter. All agree that the gathering together is the rapture. Paul received the word that they were apparently confused and shook up about this matter. The second coming can be a very emotional doctrine, and when it is not properly understood people can be led into some very unbalanced thinking, which does more harm than good.

The words Paul uses in verse 2 describe a state of jumpiness and worry. They were on edge and perplexed about it, and this was not good. The second coming is to be a doctrine of stabilizing influence, and is to be anticipated with joy and not anxiety. Some false teachers had apparently gotten some ideas into their heads to the effect that the Day of the Lord was already at hand, and that it had actually arrived. Paul urges them not to accept any such idea, and not to believe it even if it is in a letter reported to be from him. Paul rejects any part of the idea no matter what its source. They are to stick to what he told them, and not take any other ideas as authorities.

This is advice that has been ignored time and time again, and it has led to all kinds of fanaticism. We are not immune from it today. Harold Ockenga tells of the son of the president of an evangelical college who was so persuaded of the soon coming of the Lord that he wanted to quit his studies and make money so as to enjoy life before the end came. Some of the

Thessalonians had the same idea, and they quit working thinking that it was senseless to plant a crop when they would not be here to harvest it. This has been the response of many in different ages. This makes the glorious doctrine of the second coming a stumbling block. Paul wants these Christians to ignore the idea that the Day of the Lord is here, and he wants them to get back to work into a normal pattern of life.

We need to stick to what we know from Scripture, and not take seriously all the fantastic ideas of men that are always floating around. Leon Morris wrote, “Men taken up with advent speculations may easily take an unbalanced interest in the latest idea.” If we wish, we can find all kinds of information from self-appointed experts in the field of prophetic speculation. Some can give you a day by day account of how world events are fulfilling Scripture passages. They can name names and countries that the Bible has revealed will be doing such and such things. If I seem skeptical of this kind of thing, it is because of the history of it. Paul was skeptical in his day, and every generation has needed the warning that Paul gives here.

The Bible makes it clear that every age until the end will have anti-Christ, and evil movements and wars of all kinds that fit the prophecies of Scripture. Someone can be found in every period of history to fit, but they are all only apart of the process, and they are not the fulfillment of the prophecies. So we need to be cautious lest we think that we are facing the ultimate anti-Christ. One of the main tasks we have in our study is not just to try and figure out who the anti-Christ is, but to seek to eliminate some ideas by showing how he cannot be who many think he is. Paul gives us more detail here than anywhere in Scripture, and if we apply them we can be quite sure of who cannot be the anti-Christ.

If Paul could urge them not to get shaken, and not to believe the Day of the Lord had come because anti-Christ had not yet been revealed, how can we believe Christ could come any minute? I think that the falling away and the man of sin must come first before Christ comes in judgment. If that was true then, it is still true today, and so I look for these signs to be fulfilled before Christ returns. If it couldn't be when Paul wrote because these signs were not yet fulfilled, then it still holds true that it is error to say that the Day of the Lord has arrived, for these prophecies are not yet fulfilled.

9. THE MAN OF SIN AND THE SECOND COMING. II THESS 2:3f

Christians have not been the least among the gullible who have fallen for all kinds of gimmicks. One could write a lengthy history on the nonsense of the way Christians have been duped. A man in Fort Worth, Texas is giving away flat gold plated two inch nails. All you have to do is pound it in the wall of your home and leave it there, and your prayers will be answered. For five dollars more he will send you one of his “miracle billfolds” which he claims has been a financial blessing to thousands. Sincere believers are constantly being exploited, and deceivers actually make a fortune. Getting a believers money by deception is bad enough, but when the deceiver begins to peddle false doctrine, then it is very serious, for then he is in danger of perverting God’s revelation.

The fact that Christians fall for so much makes it clear why all the warnings are in the Bible to be cautious in following any other authority than the Word of God. There is no other foundation which is safe, for even the most godly and intelligent have demonstrated their ability to be deceived. The Christian must recognize this, or he will be a victim who ends up believing many things that are only the conjectures of men. Conjectures about the unknown may or may not be true, and there is way to prove or disprove them, and so in the realm of speculation one is free to think as he pleases as long as it is consistent with what is known. It is wisest, however, to be silent where God is silent. If God has not spoken, it borders on presumption for men to speculate. What God has revealed is enough, and so let us be content with clear revelation and listen to Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians, who were all too ready to listen to men.

In verse 3 Paul warns them not to be deceived by the self-appointed prophecy experts of his day. It is well to note that Jesus gave His disciples the same warning in Matt. 24:23, “Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there, believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; in so much that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.” Paul is only following the advice of Christ, for Jesus made it clear that there would be a long period of history before He came again. They were to go into all the world and preach the Gospel. Meanwhile there will be false prophets who will seek to deceive you and proclaim that His coming has already taken place. Paul is now dealing

with Christians who have been shaken up by just such false prophets as Jesus said would come. Paul says do not believe them. There are definite signs to guide the believer so that he is not at the mercy of every prophetic fanatic that appears on the stage of history. Paul says not to be deceived by any who say the Day of the Lord has come or can come before these signs are evident.

Unfortunately, Christians have not listened to Jesus and Paul, but they have followed fanatics that have brought disgrace on the church of Christ. Many Christians are eager to swallow anything that tickles their ears or pleases their prejudices. They are almost superstitious in their craving for information on what has not been revealed. The wise test everything by the Word of God, and if it is not in harmony with God's Word they reject it. It is important then that we listen to Paul and avoid being deceived. He is making it clear that the Day of the Lord will not and cannot come until there is a falling away and the man of sin is revealed.

Unless it can be shown that these two things have already been fulfilled, and that the man of sin is already here, then I must reject all ideas that indicate Christ could come at any moment. If He could not come to the Thessalonians without these clear signs in that day, it is inconceivable to me that these things could be fulfilled in the modern world without us knowing it. The result is, I do not believe Jesus will come again until I see these two things fulfilled. If an any moment coming was rejected by Paul, and if he could urge these Christians not to believe it, then it can hardly be a sign of superior piety to believe it today. In fact, it is the Christian's obligation to recognize Paul's point here, and not be deceived. Until these two things he mentions are fulfilled, that day will just not come. They could, of course, be fulfilled in a matter of weeks, and so every believer is always potentially less than a year away from eternity. This is sufficient to account for the constant admonition to be ready for the second coming. We don't know when it will come, but we do know what must precede it as signs for the believers.

The first sign is a falling away. The Greek is apostasia from which we get the word apostasy, which means abandonment or desertion of what one has professed to have believe. It is used in Greek to refer to revolts and rebellion in a religious sense. This has happened many times in history. In the Roman persecutions many professing Christians escape death and torture by apostasy. They left the church and renounced Christ. One of the big problems of the early church was deciding if a person who had apostatized

during persecution should be allowed back into membership when the pressure was off. There have been many other periods where apostasy was common. This means that the apostasy that Paul refers to must be one so universal that it could not be missed. Keith L. Brooks wrote, "The great period of wrath is not due until we witness the universal revolts from the true faith on the part of those professing to represent Jesus Christ in the world. The unbelief of infidels is not apostasy." Like Calvin and many others he looks for a great world wide rebellion from within the church.

If this sign was all alone it would be inadequate. It would mean that Christians in times of great revival could be sure that the Day of the Lord was not near, but Christians in times of apostasy would always be thinking that it was near. How could one ever be sure which apostasy was the last? Paul solves this by giving another sign that cannot be missed. The man of sin will be revealed. We will know when the last rebellion against the church is taking place because on the wave of that rebellion the man of sin will ride to power. This is the idea the early Christians had about this matter. In the Didache (teaching of the 12 Apostles) from the second century we read this: "...as lawlessness increases they shall hate each other and shall persecute and betray, and then shall appear the deceiver of the world as a Son of God, and shall do signs and wonders...And then shall appear the sign..first, the sign spread out in heaven, then the sign of the sound of the trumpet, and thirdly the resurrection of the dead."

They felt then that lawlessness would become so great that the deceiver could rise to power, and then after that there would be signs for the believer to indicate the coming of Christ. Justin Martyr, back in that early period, in his dialogue with Trypho wrote, "What brainless men! For they have failed to understand what has been proved by all these passages, namely, that two advents of Christ have been announced, the first in which he is shown as suffering, without glory, without honor, subject to crucifixion, and second, in which he shall come from the heavens in glory, when the man of apostasy who utters arrogant things against the Most High, will boldly attempt to perpetrate unlawful deeds against us Christians." The early believers understood this man of sin to be one who would enter history at a time of great lawlessness, and he would and he would seek to oppose the church, but would be unsuccessful because Christ would come in power to destroy him.

This appears to be the clear and obvious point which Paul is making, and

it means that believers will know the man of sin, and possibly face his pressure before the second coming. We do not know any such person fitting this description, and so it seems clear that the second coming is at least weeks or months away. However, since it would not take long in an international crisis for all law and order to vanish, and the man of sin to rise to power, we must all recognize that we are always potentially near the end of history. We can say on the basis of verse 4 that no man alive today is fulfilling this, for he opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God, or is worshiped. He will be a person that opposes all religions, and all objects of worship. He is lawless, and so he wants no rules from any religion to be binding. He wants to be absolute in his power.

It would seem likely that such a person of power would arise from the secular world. The Roman Emperors came the closest to fulfilling this picture, and they were certainly types of the anti-Christ, for some of them actually proclaimed themselves to be God, and they persecuted those who worshiped other gods. Many feel that the Roman Emperor is what Paul had in mind, and it can be argued with much support. The problem is that the Day of the Lord did not come then, and so we must see them as types of what will finally be. Some great leader will gain world power and proclaim himself God. When this happens it will be no secret. He takes his seat in the temple of God, and some feel this will be the temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem. If that be the case, it will take some time to accomplish. When the man of sin that Paul describes does come there will be no debate, for all will know. Meanwhile, we are not to get shook up, but be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding the work of the Lord, and not be any anxiety concerning the second coming.

10. THE MAN OF SIN Based on II THESS. 2:5f

A six year old boy and his father once traveled down the Danube River, and at the close of one day they stopped at a cloister. The father took the boy into the chapel to see the organ. It was the first large organ he had ever seen. His face lit up with delight. He asked his father if he could play it. The father complied and went to fill the great bellows. The boy was too small to use the stool, and so he pushed it back and stood on the pedals. Suddenly the silent chapel was filled with deep tones, and the monks who were just then eating

their supper dropped their knives and forks in astonishment. Their organist was right there with them, and so they ran to the chapel, but when they looked up into the organ loft they saw no one at the organ, and yet its harmonious tones continued to flow forth in thrilling power.

“It is the evil one!” cried one monk. “No, it is a miracle,” said another. A third monk boldly climbed the stairs and found the small boy treading from pedal to pedal while playing on the keys above with his little hands. The boy was John Wolfgang Mozart, one of the greatest musicians that would ever live. This story is of interest because it illustrates the difficulty that men have in interpreting the unusual and mysterious. Seeing no evidence of a person at the organ, the monks came to the conclusion it was either the devil or God. Only the man who could see the situation up close could come to a conclusion that was certain and not just a matter of conjecture.

So it is with the passage we are studying in II Thessalonias. Only those who were addressed by Paul could see the situation from the vantage point that would give them perfect understanding, for, after all, it was written to clarify their minds. They were like the monk who climbed the stairs. They had heard Paul explain these matters in detail in person. We are like the two monks below trying to guess which is the most likely explanation for what we hear and see. The result is, just as the monks came to opposite conclusions, so men have come to opposite conclusions in interpreting what Paul has written here. This means humility must characterize any interpretation of this passage. We must be ever open to new light, but meanwhile, with what we have, we must seek to understand Paul’s message.

In verse 5 Paul reminds them that he told them these things when he was with them. They were Gentiles with no knowledge about God’s plan for the world. Paul had apparently gone over these matters of the end times in detail with them. They had the key to what he writes here in their memories, and so in verse 6 he simply says, “And now you know what restrains.” Unfortunately, Paul’s confidence was only in them, and not the rest of the Christians in history. For we were not there to hear him, and so we are not certain at all. What we do know for sure is that they knew what it was that was restraining the lawless one in their day. This tells us a great deal. It tells us that the man of sin is no mere historical person or power, but is definitely supernatural, for he existed in the first century. He is Satan incarnate in man like Jesus was God incarnate in man. Satan’s last attempt to conquer will be

by counterfeiting God's method.

He is under God's control all along. He cannot even come unto the stage of history until God says the time is ready. God has a power in the world that is restraining Him from coming. The big question is, what is that restrainer? There are those who say it is the church and the Holy Spirit. Both are needed to account for the restrainer being called by a neuter in verse 6, and a masculine in verse 7. The church is the instrument, and the Holy Spirit is the person in control holding back the man of sin. It makes sense, for Paul says that we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers. The church is restraining the power of Satan by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why the church is the light and salt of the world. As long as the church does its task, the man of sin cannot take over. This is the battle of the ages, and Jesus said that the gates of hell would not prevail against His church. The Gospel would be preached to every nation, and then would come the end.

The Amillennial idea is that this restraint of the man of sin is the same as the binding of Satan for the 1000 years, or the total period of the age of grace. The church and Christ reign in history until God's plan is completed. Then comes the final test with the great falling away, and then Satan is let loose to deceive the nations. He does so with his man of sin and lawlessness who gains world power and deceives all who love not the truth. Christ then comes and this great imposter is destroyed. This interpretation appeals to me because it accounts for so many things in the Bible, and it is so simple. I cannot assure you it is a certainty, but as I compare it with other views it seems far superior. But let's look at some other views.

B. B. Warfield, the great Presbyterian scholar, feels that the restrainer is the Jewish state, and it was restraining the power of Rome against the Christians. This view does have some support, but Rome's power was restrained by the existence of Judaism. Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman Empire, and the Romans thought of Christians as a movement within Judaism, and so they were not persecuted as they would have been had they not had this shelter. When Judaism fell in 70 A.D. The Christians were then on their own, and they met real trouble. The Emperors called themselves God, and they demanded worship just as the lawless one is to do. There was also a falling away. This would be a sound interpretation except for the fact that Jesus never came to destroy the Emperor. There is no room for a

spiritual interpretation of the second coming here, for the whole context clearly reveals the literal coming and judgment.

What about the opposite view that Rome is the restrainer, and that Judaism is the one restrained. This view also has support, for Paul was saved several times by the power of Rome from being killed by the Jews. Christians had protection from the Jews just because the Romans would not tolerate lawlessness. The Roman power of law and justice kept the hatred of the Jews from destroying the church as it did her Lord. The day will come, however, when the reign of law in the world will be taken away, and lawlessness will reign. A Jewish ruler will be revived by Satan and gain world power. The temple will be rebuilt, and he will proclaim himself God and deceive the world. This view reads a Jew into the place of being anti-Christ, but there is no basis for this.

A third view which is the most widely held from the earliest days of the church is like the second, but does not make the Jews the source of the anti-Christ. They say that the restrainer is the Roman Empire. The early Christian writers almost all agree on this. The early Christians prayed for the Empire to last, for they feared that when it collapsed the man of sin would come. The New Testament abounds with exhortations to pray for leaders and to live a life of peace. The breakdown of the law and order of the Empire would be the beginning of the end was the Christian conviction. It was Roman power that seized and executed the false Christs that appeared on the scene.

If it was Rome, it would explain why Paul does not mention it in a letter to be read in public. These believers were already in tribulation. If they started reading in public ideas about the fall of Rome they could easily be charged with treason or rebellion. Paul does say that the restrainer would be taken out of the way, and the Romans would not have cared to hear this idea being expressed. The Reformers say it was the Roman Empire, and when it was taken away the Papacy began, which they say represents the man of sin. The Pope is the anti-Christ in this view, and it has been a popular view of Protestants. This was part of the warfare between Protestants and Catholics, but no where in history has a Pope proclaimed himself God, as did the Roman Emperors.

I accept the Roman Empire as the restrainer, but in the sense that it was

the maintainer of law and order. When it fell the principles of law lived on, and even today much of the law of our land goes back to Rome. The spirit of law has gone hand in hand with the church in building Western civilization. The church has preserved the law and justice of the Empire, and where the church goes, there goes law and order. This is then the restraining power that keeps Satan's hands tied so that he cannot get his man of lawlessness on the stage of history. When the church has done its task and God's time comes, law and order will collapse, and in the anarchy that follows Satan will be allowed to guide his man of sin into power. It is not important that we know for sure all the details, but it is important that we be busy fulfilling the Great Commission.

11. THE LAST DAYS Based on II Thess. 2:7-10

In the magazine called the New Yorker there was a cartoon of two ministers conversing in a luxurious library. The older man says to the younger: "Drawing upon my not inconsiderable experience, Andrews, my advice to a young man ambitious of preferment in our calling is to steer clear of two subjects-politics and religion." There is no doubt about it that these are the two most controversial subjects. They are so just because they are important and vital to both time and eternity. There is much needless controversy, however, that can be eliminated if men will limit their debate to what is known, and not argue over the unknown.

There are at least 3 or 4 probable ways to interpret Paul's remarks about the man of sin and the restraining power that was holding him back. One is free to believe any of them if he can maintain a consistency with the rest of Scripture. It would be easier to shut out eyes to the matter and just stir clear of controversial subjects, but this is foolish since we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by struggling with the hardest passages of the Bible. However difficult it might be to know the exact interpretation of every detail, it is easy to get the basic ideas, and these are the values that we really need anyway. We do not need to know who and when, but it is important that we know what. If we admit we do not know who the anti-Christ and the restrainer are for sure, and that we do not know for sure when he will be revealed, we can still know and declare what he will do when he does come,

and what the consequences will be. We want to study Paul's difficult words so as to know what history will be like the last days.

In verse 7 Paul says the mystery of iniquity is already at work in the world. Being that the man of sin is a product of Satan's power, it is obvious why he is already at work, for Satan does not cease to do all he can to promote evil. But notice that Paul says he is limited and works in mystery, which means he works in the dark and in secret. Lawlessness has no right or power to operate openly in the light, for the restrainer is holding him back. When the restrainer is out of the way, then Satan will be permitted by God to again operate in full power out in the open. The man of sin will come to the light. No longer will he be limited to underground operations.

Paul is simply telling them that if they think evil is powerful now, just wait. It will be a great deal worse before history is ended. The last days have already begun, and the lawless one does have some power, but in the latter days of the last days he shall be revealed in great power. The Apostle John said the same thing-anti-Christ is coming, but already there are many anti-Christ's in the world. Anti-Christianity is as old as Christianity, for both began at the same time. Herod sought to slay the Christ-child, and from that day to this there has been a division-the followers of Christ and opponents of Christ.

Only the presence of the restrainer prevents the final revelation of the man of lawlessness. The restrainer I believe is the principle of law and order that is embodied in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit and manifested in a just government. If you believe the restrainer to be something else or someone else, as some believe it to be Michael the archangel, or if you say with Augustine and many others, "I frankly confess I do not know what he means," still we can all agree that the restraining is still going on, and as of now Satan does not yet have the power to freely establish his man of lawlessness.

If we agree at this point, the rest does not really matter, for then we are in the same position as the Thessalonians. We are waiting and looking for the signs to be fulfilled, for the day is yet ahead when as Paul says in verse 8, the wicked one shall be revealed. Paul implies by his following words that his rise to power is almost immediately followed by his being destroyed in the coming of Christ. Sometime, of course, is needed for him to deceive the people, but

centuries can hardly be read into this place between the coming of anti-Christ and the coming of Christ. Whoever he is, Paul says Jesus will consume him, or slay him, with the spirit of His mouth. This is Old Testament imagery. In Isa. 11 we read of the Messiah coming in judgment: "...he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked."

When Jesus comes again it will not be in patient long suffering, nor with a message of love to woo the wicked from their sin. He comes in glory and power to judge and destroy. He comes to wrap up history by bringing justice upon all believers. All he has to do is speak and it is done. When he says, "Depart from me ye accursed," it will be accomplished. What the Jews looked for in Messiah in the first century is what He will be when He comes again. He will be absolute sovereign, and He will triumph over all His enemies.

Paul indicates that He will come with such brightness that the light itself will destroy the power of darkness. Notice that it is the brightness of His coming, that is His parousia, which will destroy the lawless one. Parousia is the word used by Paul in his teaching concerning the rapture of the church. Those who put 7 years between the parousia, which includes the rapture, and this parousia which ends the rule of the man of sin, do so on the arbitrary ground that their system demands it. There is no support for such a view in the Greek. If such an arbitrary use of Scripture can be allowed for one system, then it can be allowed for all, and the cults have as much right to twist the Bible to fit their schemes as anyone else. Just because a person is an evangelical Christian does not mean he has a license to do what he condemns in others.

If you cannot prove what you believe by Scripture alone, then you are as accountable as those who do the same to prove what you do not believe. The point is, the New Testament uses parousia as a term to describe all of the events of the second coming. It is without foundation to say it has two meanings. When Jesus comes with His saints and for His saints it will be to destroy the man of sin, which also makes the theory of the secret rapture improbable if not impossible.

After Paul has given a brief order of events: the falling away, the man of sin revealed, and the second coming of Christ, he goes on to give the reasons

for this in God's plan, and he describes briefly what the plan of the man of sin will be. In verse 9 he gives us the source of our power, and the signs of that power. All of the terms here to describe the signs are terms used of the miracles of Christ. In other words, they are going to be real supernatural acts to gain the allegiance of the people. Anti-Christ will be a real counterfeit of Christ. The motive and goal, however, are all based on evil and falsehood. They are designed to deceive rather than enlighten like the miracles of Christ.

Notice that the word coming is used again, but here it is the parousia of the anti-Christ. In verse 6 the word for his being revealed is also the same word used of the revelation of Christ, which is apokalypsis. The appearance of the anti-Christ on the stage of history is described in the same terms as the appearance of the true Christ. Since it is obvious that the parousia and the apokalypsis of the man of sin are the same event, why should it not be equally as obvious that the parousia and apokalypsis of Christ are the same event? They are not two different events separated by 7 years, as some believe. There is no more basis for that than there is in putting 7 years between the revealing and the coming of the anti-Christ.

The fact that the anti-Christ has a revelation and a coming confirms my conviction that he is a supernatural being, and that he is now in existence, as he was in the first century, he will appear just as soon as Satan is unbound and allowed to pursue his plan of deception through signs and wonders. At this point I would caution against what I feel is another misuse of Scripture. Every time someone appears who can do great wonders, someone is quick to point out that even Satan will do miracles to deceive the people. Paul did not go into detail and tell us what the signs would be, but it is certainly unjust to impose this passage on all those with whom we disagree. Much healing may be evil in its source and result, but I would hesitate to link any of it with the miracles of the anti-Christ, for they just do not fit the picture. None of those who can be criticized are anywhere near fulfilling Paul's description of the anti-Christ. Be careful how you apply this passage to wonder workers. Unless you are prepared to deny that God is doing anymore wonders in the world, you are in danger of using the Word of God to impose the work of God.

In verse 10 Paul says it will be the lost who are going to perish, and who will fall for him when he comes. They will fall for his deceiving lies just

because they loved not the truth. In other words, God is going to use Satan's evil scheme as a means of accomplishing his own judgment upon the foolish and hardhearted who reject the Gospel. Only the lost will be deceived, for the saved are in no danger. The implication is that the whole world will have been evangelized, for they have all had a chance to receive the truth, but many have not received it. In other words, after the world has had a chance the day of grace will end, and the day of judgment will begin. God let Satan back on the battlefield and laughs at his futile efforts, for when he is at his best he fails utterly, and Christ destroys his whole plan by His coming. However we interpret details, the message is clear that Satan is going to have one more chance to deceive the world, and then he will be destroyed, or judged forever. History as we know it will close, and this is what we call the last days.

12. THE DAY OF JUDGMENT Based on II Thess. 2:18

The optimist says the world is everyday in every way getting better and better. The pessimist says the world isn't what it used to be, but is going to the dogs. The Christian realist says they are both right, because there are two kingdoms of reality. There is the world order, or that realm in which sin and rebellion reign. There is the kingdom of God, or the realm in which Christ reigns. Both will exist side by side in conflict until the end. The Christian, as a realist, must be both an optimist and a pessimist if he accepts the whole picture of reality painted for us by Scripture. If the Christian refers to the world as it is outside of Christ, then he has no choice but to be pessimistic. The Bible clearly says that it will pass away and end in destruction. There is no basis for optimism about the world. But we must not have our vision so limited by the world order that we cannot see the hand of God working in history.

We must open our spiritual eyes and recognize that there are thousands of victories being won everyday around the world. We are referring to the victories of light over darkness. The Christian must balance his pessimism concerning the world with his optimism concerning the kingdom of God. If he does not, he will not be an effective servant of Christ. Paul shows us the balance between the two in this passage. He paints a picture of the end time,

and the final revelation of the man of sin. The whole thing will end in every rejecter of truth being condemned. Paul was certainly no universalist. He knew that many would be finally lost. On the other hand, as soon as he finished this awful picture he begins to sing a song of thanksgiving in verse 13, because he is aware of another whole realm of reality. He is aware that God has a plan of salvation, and that there will be many elect, and this includes the Thessalonians, who will not be a part of that awful picture he has just painted.

We need to keep this dual vision before us-a lost and damned world, and yet a glorious saved kingdom of God. Optimism is essential to motivate us to win as many out of the world into the kingdom before the day of judgment comes. Pessimism alone is a pagan characteristic, for even they can see the signs of doom. The following inscription was found on a Chaldean tablet in the Mosque of St. Sophia in Constantinople. It was written 200 years before Abraham, but it sounds like a modern prophet on the signs of the times. It reads, "The times in which we live are decadent. It is evident we are approaching the end of the age. Everyone has disregarded the law. Children no longer obey their parents. Everyone is eager to write a book." Such statements can be found in almost every age because every age is peopled by the sinful. The world has also always had its men of sin, which means men of power and leadership who are opposed to the will of God. They make life on earth more miserable than it would naturally be. None has fulfilled the picture that Paul paints for us in this passage, and so we still await the coming of the anti-Christ.

In verse 11 Paul says the strong delusion that God sends upon the world in that day will be for a very definite purpose with a definite cause. The cause is in verse 10. It is because they received not the love of the truth that they might be saved. The day of judgment is a day to be feared by all who have not responded to the truth, for before that day they will be led into a delusion that will seal their doom. God permits Satan freedom to work in order to accomplish His own purpose in causing evil men to condemn themselves. Put a piece of cheese in a dangerous spot such as a trap, and let the mouse's nature do the rest. So God sends His bait into the world, which is the deluding power of Satan, and lets the rebel sinners follow their hero into judgment. They refused God's truth, and would not bow to Him, and so He makes sure they bow to the one they adore that they might join him in his destruction.

History will end with a final demonstration of the folly of sin and rebellion against God. It is of interest to note that God fully cooperates with Satan in his plan, or, rather, God makes Satan cooperate with Him. God permits Satan to do his best, but then He also helps out by sending a spirit of delusion into the world. This may be the same thing as permitting Satan free reign, but it could indicate also that even Satan could not dupe all sinners without help from God. Some of them would not swallow his line, or be dazzled by his show of miracles, and so God makes sure all will be involved by sending strong delusion. The sovereignty of God runs through this passage, for without God even Satan could not be total success in deceiving the whole world of the unregenerate.

In verse 12 the reason for God's making sure of Satan's success is stated: That all might be damned who believe not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. We speak much of God's plan of salvation, but here we see God's plan of damnation. This is conclusive evidence to support my conviction that Paul is describing the final days before the day of judgment. If it was any other period of history, it would contradict all that Scripture says about God not willing that any should perish. But if we see it as the very end of history when the day of grace is over, then it is no problem at all to think of God as directly involved in a plan a damnation. It would be inconsistent to conceive of God planning and working out the damnation of sinners at the same time as he has the church trying to fulfill the Great Commission of taking the Gospel to all the world. It is only when this is accomplished that it can be reasonable to conceive of God working on a plan of destruction. Just before the end it makes sense to let Satan loose to deceive the world of rebels, and lead them into the ultimate of folly and damnation, but at any other time it makes no sense at all.

To me it is necessary to see ourselves standing in the same relationship to this passage as the Thessalonians. It applies to all Christians throughout history. For it is ahead for all of them, which includes the last Christians on earth. Paul says that they all might be damned who believe not the truth. The all must be taken literally or it is meaningless. All does not always mean all in the Bible, but here it is obvious that it must mean all. All unbelievers will be deceived by the man of sin. Such a universal deception has never taken place. There have been many anti-Christ persons, but never have they succeeded in deceiving all believers. No infidel ruler has ever had the loyalty of all non-Christians. That is why I say that Christians will know when the

man of lawlessness is revealed, for the whole non-Christian world will be deceived by him. Such an universal deception can hardly take place unnoticed.

Paul thought of the world as one. Rome was an universal power, and Paul thought of all people's of the world of his day. We must think of the whole world as we know it in applying Paul's words. When anti-Christ comes he will not deceive just the people in the area of the Roman Empire, but of the whole world as we know it. God's judgment will not be local, but universal. Therefore, it is inconceivable to me that any Christian could live at this period of history and not recognize the man of sin. He will deceive every person who is not of the elect. That means that the elect alone will not give allegiance to the man of sin. All who believe will not be deceived. The implication of these verses leaves no doubt in my mind that every believer alive in the last days will know who the man of sin is. It is easier to believe that they will be gone at this time than to believe that they could be here and not know. Since all the evidence is opposed to their being gone, it follows that Christians will be here and will know.

In verse 13 Paul, having finished his picture of the judgment ahead for the lost, goes on to express his optimism concerning the Thessalonians. They were not going to be a part of that tragic deception, for they had received the love of the truth, and Paul is grateful. Paul is so thankful for them because they are beloved of the Lord and will escape the judgment. The Father planned their salvation, the Son purchased it and the Holy Spirit will bring it to perfection. Our hope is always in the sovereign God and His plan, and not in any man-made plan of escape. If the Lord wills that we escape we will, but Paul does not mention any plan. His focus is on the election of God and the present work of the Holy Spirit in them to bring them to sanctification. Those who are sanctified and believed the truth have all that is necessary to be free from the strong delusion of the days of the man of sin.

For me this means that all I have to do is be assured of my salvation in Christ, and that the Spirit is working in me to sanctify me. I then need not fear Satan's worst, for I can be secure no matter what he does. In verse 14 Paul states God's work of calling, and then in verse 15 challenges them to stand fast to the truth they were taught. This is typical of Paul's attitude. There is nothing to fear, for God is in control, and He will keep you, but hold on and never let go as if everything depended on your own faithfulness. Paul

ends the chapter with prayer that they be comforted and established in word and work. All of this chapter was for the purpose of calming and comforting them in order to make them stable, and ready for whatever comes in the day of judgment.

13. WHEN WITHDRAWAL IS WISE Based on II Thess. 3:1f

The Thessalonian Christian had been foolish enough to give heed to false teaching concerning the second coming. As a result some of them were acting in a way contrary to the will of God. Their basic problem was a lack of certain authority. They had been pagans all their lives, and they had probably believed all kinds of superstition, and so now as Christians they had to learn to accept the authority of the Apostles, and this was not easy. Paul's first letter apparently failed to solve the problem, and some of them had refused to get back to work, even after they had heard his advice and commands. In this second letter he has to use stronger language, and speak with as great an authority as anywhere in the New Testament.

Paul knows that if Christians are not submissive to the Word of God they will be at the mercy of every source of advice. These people were basing their attitudes and actions on mere rumor that was baseless, and not on the wisdom of God as revealed through the Apostle Paul. Their concepts of the end were about as well founded as those of the poet who confessed: "Absolute knowledge I have none, but my aunt's washer woman's sister's son heard a policeman on his beat, say to a laborer on the street, that he had a letter just last week, written in the finest Greek, from a Chinese coolie in Timbuctoo, who got it straight from a circus clown, that a man in the Klondyke heard the news, from a gang of South American Jews, about somebody in Borneo, who heard a man who claimed to know of a swell society female fake, whose mother-in-law will undertake to prove that her 7th husband's sister's niece, had stated in a printed piece, that she has a son who has a friend, who knows when the world will end."

It was on the basis of authority as remote as this that some of them began to be idle and to wait for the Lord without working. This disturbed Paul greatly, and he was determined that Satan would not bring shame upon the

name of Christ and His church by this subtle means. His first strategy we have already considered. He has destroyed the false theological foundation of those who are idle. He has made it clear that the Day of the Lord is yet future, and that Christians will know when it is near, and so until then they are to work and carry on a normal and honorable pattern of life. They are to live just as if they were sure the Lord would not come in their lifetime. In other words, Paul has said they were not to use the second coming as any excuse for laziness or idleness, for until we see the signs we have no idea when the end will be. Now he goes on to some specific and practical methods to be used by the faithful in bringing those who are out of step back into harmony with what is good Christian living.

It is a sensitive situation, and Paul approaches it diplomatically and with all the kindness of his Christ-like heart. In the first verses of this third chapter he strengthens their relationship and makes it clear that they are one in Christ. They are seeking the same end, which is the glory of Christ and the extension of His kingdom. In verse 1 he calls them brethren, and he asks for their prayers. Paul reveals his confidence in them and covets their prayers. He acknowledges that they are God's children, and so their prayers will be a benefit to his ministry. Paul's greatness was in his dependence upon God, and in his recognition that the prayers of the common Christian were of value and power in getting the Gospel to speed on its way to success. R. A. Torrey sent out 5 thousand letters in 1901 asking for prayer as he took his world tour of evangelism. When he reached Australia there were ten thousand praying, and 40 thousand were praying in England everyday. He said, "Who could not preach under such conditions, and is it any wonder that the marvelous results followed that did follow." I cannot doubt that the success of Billy Graham is also due to the thousands who pray for him constantly.

Paul knew this was the source of much of his success, and he wanted these Christians to share in it. Paul was wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove. He was going to lay down some rigid commands, but he made it clear that it was in love. So often Christians do the right thing in the wrong way. They let evil increase and stir up friction and hard feelings. The difference is that of being Spirit-led or self-motivated. The Spirit-led man has a person centered approach to problems. His concern is for persons and what is best for them. The law centered approach says to get the problem solved, and let the devil take those who will not cooperate. Paul's method wins the sinner back into fellowship.

In verse 2 Paul points out that he and his companions are also suffering persecution, and they are seeking for deliverance. We are all in the same boat going up stream against the current, and so let's stick together. In verse 3 he goes from his problems to theirs, and he assures them that the Lord is faithful in spite of the opposition of faithless men, and he will strengthen and guard them. Here again we see the pessimism-optimism combination: Look at the world and you see faithless men and opposition, but look to God and see a faithful guide who will bring us through.

In verse 4 Paul stresses his confidence that they will not listen to every voice, but will accept his authority and abide by his commands, as being from the Lord. He is going to give them a command that may not be easy to follow, and so he prepares them to say yes to it by expressing his confidence in their loyalty to his authority. No where do we see more clearly how apostolic authority was in the early church. If Paul could not get the loyalty to his commands, there would be no way for the truth to triumph over the heresies of that day. Apostolic authority was the foundation of the early church. We can see why it was necessary for Christ to appoint men as authoritative voices through which he could speak.

In verse 5, just before he gets to the basic problem, he prays that the Lord will direct their hearts into the love of God and the patience of Christ. Paul is praying that these two virtues would characterize them, for these are essential to facing and conquering their problems. Verse 6 brings us to the place where we see Paul taking the role of standing in Christ's stead and commanding the body of Christ with absolute authority. Paul was not even a member of this church, and so we wonder how he can command and not just suggest. He could do so because an Apostle stands in the same relationship to the church as does the Word of God. Paul is still commanding every local church, for obedience to him is obedience to the Word of God. No church is independent of the authority of the Apostles. Though dead they still speak through the Word, and that is why we have the Bible, so that they might continue to speak, for their voice is the voice of Christ to His body.

Paul's command is in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no question as to the source of Paul's authority. Paul commands them to withdraw from fellowship those believers who live disorderly, and not in harmony with the Christian values that he taught when he was with them.

Here is a biblical form of segregation based on conduct. A Christian who is living disorderly, or in idleness, is not to be encouraged by being allowed to remain in good standing in the church fellowship. If a Christian will not conform to the authority of the apostolic teaching, he must lose the benefits that go with obedience to it, which is Christian fellowship. Paul does not just suggest this as one possible way of dealing with a lazy Christian. He commands it in the name of Christ. He says to withdraw and not associate with such a person, or show any approval.

Such discipline is not as effective today because a person can now go to another church and not even suffer for his folly. In Paul's day if you were out of the church, you were out, for there was only one church. Nevertheless, the local church still must heed the command of Paul and withdraw fellowship from the disorderly and idle Christian.

In verse 7 Paul calls their attention to the fact that Christians are to be as he and his companions were when they were with them. You are to imitate us, said Paul, for we were exemplifying the Christ-like life. We were not disorderly or idle in trying to shirk our duty. Paul learned to work hard, for laziness was a Gentile vice. The Jews glorified work, and Paul, even as a man of high position in Judaism, had his own trade. The Jews said, "He who does not teach his son a trade, teaches him to steal." Paul sensed that this view was lacking in these Christians when he was with them, and so he went out of his way to be an example.

In verse 8 he says they didn't even eat anywhere without paying for it, but they worked night and day to earn their own living so as not to burden the people, and to be a good example. In verse 9 he says it was not because they did not have the power and right to expect to be supported, but because they wanted to set this good example. Paul did not hesitate to wave his rights if he could be more useful for the advancement of Christian learning. In verse 10 he reminds them that even when he was with them he had laid down the command that if any would not work, they should not eat.

It is good to remember this passage when you hear Billy Graham, or some other creature, preaching on safe driving, housing or labor. Some are critical and say the church is to stick to the Gospel, but here we have the very highest authority for preaching and teaching on any area of life. Paul had plenty to say about a Christian's responsibility to work. No Christian can say

it is my own business how I make a living, and so it is no concern of the church. If it is not in harmony with Christian teaching, it is the concern of the church. If a Christian takes advantage of the state poverty program and refuses to work when he could, just because he can get something for nothing, he is out of God's will, and he should be out of fellowship with the rest of the body.

Work is part of the Christian life, and to shirk it is a sin. When people are incapable of working, no one was more for charity than Paul. He traveled all over the known world to get a collection for the needy saints of Judea. But when a person does not work because they will not, then Paul says they are to be disciplined. It is as serious as any other sin, and Christians are not to be charitable to the idle and lazy. Today, of course, the church does not have the control as it did then. A lazy Christian can get food from the government, and so the church cannot prevent them from eating. The ideal would be for the government also to require some work for their free handouts. If a person is not willing, but chooses to be idle, he is undeserving of support. If he is willing, then even if there is no work, he is worthy of support. Hesiod the Greek wrote, "Both gods and men are angry with a man who lives in idleness, for in nature he is like the stingless drones who waste the labor of the bees, eating without working."

In verse 11 Paul says that he has heard of Christians who are doing nothing but are mere busybodies. Their only business being to pry into what is none of their business. They were probably trying to persuade others to stop working too, and just wait for the second coming. They were becoming a stumbling block to others. In verse 12 Paul commands the guilty ones to cease this folly and get back to work. The Lord will not come until you see the signs fulfilled, and so meanwhile you must live and honorable life by making it count as a witness for Christ. In verse 13 he encourages the faithful not to give up, but to persist in doing right and living well regardless of the foolishness of some. In verse 14 he says that if any still persist in folly after reading his letter, then they are to have nothing to do with them that they might be ashamed and repent. In verse 15 he makes it clear that the bottom line is love, for we are to always treat a fellow Christian as a brother and not as a enemy.

14. OPTIMISTIC PESSIMISM Based on Mark 13:1-2

A man stood before the judge and told him this story. One day when my rheumatism was bad, and my daughter had just eloped with a good for nothing scalawag, and fire had destroyed my barn, and my best hog had up and died of the cholera, and they had foreclosed the mortgage on me, and the sheriff was looking for me with a warrant, I told my troubles to one these here optimists and he said, "Cheer up, old man, the worst is yet to come." So I shot him.

Nobody, let alone a troubled person, likes to hear that the worst is yet to come, but sometimes it happens to be the truth and it needs to be faced. Jesus had to do this in Mark 13. He makes it unmistakably clear to His disciples that the clouds of doom hang over the future, and darkness rather than sunshine covers the horizon.

Jesus is not being a pessimist here, however, in spite of the gloomy nature of His prophecy. He is being a realist with an optimistic foundation. You can afford to face the worst when you know the best will finally triumph, and that is why Jesus taught His disciples about the trials ahead. Jesus was optimistic about the ability of His followers to stand in the storm of testing and bear a fruitful witness. Therefore, He opens up the scroll of the future and reveals the dreadful consequences that will befall them as well as unbelieving Israel. He had some pessimistic facts to share, but in an optimistic attitude, and so Jesus was revealing an attitude of optimistic pessimism.

The greatest tragedy ever to befall the Jewish nation was not the threshold of history. The hand of mercy had been knocking at the door of Judaism, but they would not open the door. Instead, they nailed that hand of mercy to a cross. Jesus knew this was going to be their response, and that the next response would be God's hand of wrath which would not knock at the door, but demolish the door. The Jews had been captives in Egypt for 400 years. They had been captives in Babylon for 70 years, and they had had their share of troubles ever since, and were now under the domination of Rome. In this chapter Jesus says in effect, "Cheer up, the worst is yet to come."

In 70 A.D. the Jews would suffer the most shattering defeat in their history. The temple would be destroyed and all the records and genealogies would be destroyed, and the whole ceremonial and sacrificial system of Judaism would be demolished. Since then Judaism has not been the same for

1900 years. Nothing of such catastrophic proportions had ever happened before, and unless we believe history will go on for several thousand more years, nothing like it can ever happen again. The killing of millions of Jews by Hitler did not change the essence of Judaism at all, nor has any other tragedy, as did the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

This being the greatest calamity ever to hit Judaism made it the ideal type for the greatest calamity to ever hit the world-namely, the end of the world-the second coming, and the judgment. God's judgment on Israel has many parallels with God's judgment on the world at the end of history. Jesus is the actually speaking of both of these events in this passage, and this has lead to confusion. The chapter is impossible to unscramble unless you see he has both the immediate and the far off judgment in mind. He talks of wars and earthquakes, and says don't be alarmed, the end is not yet. He says in verse 10 that the Gospel has to go into all the world before the end, so there is a long period of history ahead. Yet in verse 30 He says all this will happen before this generation passes away. It is common sense to recognize that the same event cannot be around the corner and far in the distance at the same time. But it is clear that around the corner was judgment on Israel, and far off was the judgment on the world. The fact that Jesus put the two together indicates that the first is a type of the second, or at least that they are similar.

Men disagree a great deal in trying to determine what parts of this chapter apply to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and what verses apply to the second coming. The variations of scholars are so numerous that it is a waste of time to try to set up a system before hand. We have to take a verse at a time, and from within that verse look in both directions, and see how far, or how near the perspective is. The expert will breeze through this chapter with a clear cut outline, and make it seem as simple as a nursery rhyme as he fits it neatly into his pre-conceived system. This is the easy way and eliminates the need for thinking, and asking questions. However, for the person who is really more interested in what Jesus is saying then in what men say He is saying, there is the need to move slow and think seriously about the implications of each verse.

G. Campbell Morgan after of years of study in God's Word said of this chapter, "None of these things, which I confess I am less able to explain today than yesterday, for the puzzle and the wonder grow-were unknown to my Lord." The deeper he went the less of an expert he became, and so he had to

be content with mystery, but assured that Christ knowing was sufficient. Strange as it may seem, it is a great growth in knowledge just to learn that you do not know, for none are so ignorant as those who have eliminated all the mystery of God's revelation, and especially the prophetic portions as we have here. It is, therefore, with an attitude of optimistic pessimism that we begin the study of this chapter, for in spite of all the conflict and confusion, there is still much truth to be gained by this study. You don't have to exhaust a mine to enjoy its riches when there are gems right on the surface.

Let's begin by reading the first verse from the New English Bible. "As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples exclaimed, look Master, what huge stones! What fine buildings!" This verse gives us the setting and the reason why Jesus began teaching about the destruction of the temple. Jesus was coming out of the temple for the last time, and it was symbolic of the departure of the divine presence from the temple. The Jewish hierarchy had rejected him. God had literally descended and come to His temple in His Son, but they who kept the temple would not accept Him. With the departure of Christ the true glory of the temple also departed, and Jesus knew it.

That is why Jesus did not share the same awe and appreciation with the disciple who said what a marvelous place this is. Many think the disciple was Peter, and that he was being his impetuous self and was just expressing his sense of amazement at the beauty of the temple. The Rabbi said of it that whoever had not seen it had not seen the perfection of architectural beauty. It had huge stones 20 feet long and 7 feet high and 10 feet thick, and there were great Corinthian pillars 37 and a half feet high cut out of solid marble. Josephus, an eye witness, wrote, "The temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow, for as to those parts of it which were not gilt, they were exceeding white." No one can doubt the magnificence of the temple, and certainly Jesus had an aesthetic nature, and love beauty, but this time he did not respond positively to the beauty being pointed out.

Instead, in verse 2, he as much as says, it may look like something now, but before long it will be just a pile of rubble. Not a stone will be left upon another he said. Jesus was not much impressed with an external beauty when the heart and soul were gone. The inner glory of the temple was gone, and so when God came to the temple again it would be in judgment. What good is a beautiful shell if the egg is rotten inside? What good is a beautifully wrapped

package if the precious gift that is to be inside has been removed? The disciple was still impressed with the huge stones and the external inspiring appearance of the temple, but Jesus who looked beyond the externals was no longer inspired by the temple.

There is a worth while lesson conveyed in these first two verses, and it is this: Where there is true worship and obedience to God, and where the Spirit of God is not quenched but yielded to, no amount of external beauty and magnificence is great enough to symbolize the values that are there. On the other hand, where the word and will of God are despised, and where the Spirit is denied, all external beauty is sham and blasphemy. The point is, the inner life of a person or church must be beautiful before externals are legitimate. External symbols that imply internal character are disgraceful when the internal character they imply is missing. When a very foolish or wicked person wears a cross, it gives you an idea of how Jesus must have felt as He looked at the beauty of the temple.

Externals are only beautiful to Christ when they are true expressions of what is within. The beauty of the temple was a sham, and only deceived people by its beauty into thinking it represented a living and dynamic faith. It was dead and would soon be buried. As huge as its stones were it was no match for the Rock of Ages, and when his blow came it was to be thorough. Josephus confirms the prophecy of Christ and writes about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. "It was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those who dug it up to the foundation that there was nothing left to make those who came hither believe it had ever been inhabited."

Jesus was not being a pessimist, He was being a prophet. You are not being negative when you tell what you know, even if the facts are negative. The facts were that Judaism was but an empty shell after it rejected and crucified Christ. The sacrifices and atonement and the holy of holies were all meaningless after Jesus made atonement for all sin, and opened up the holy of holies to all men. The destruction of the temple, and the whole sacrificial system was necessary as a concrete demonstration that in God's eyes it was obsolete and no longer acceptable. 70 A. D. was an historical witness to the effectiveness of Christ's atonement. From that point on Christianity represented the true God and the true message of salvation. God was no longer centralized, but could be worshipped everywhere in spirit and in truth. This is old news to us, but to the disciples it was the most fantastic and

revolutionary prophecy imaginable.

15. A WARNING ABOUT WARNINGS Based on Mark 13:3f

Jesus loved Israel, for the Jews were God's people. He was their King, and He was as patriotic as any of Israel's leaders or kings. We cannot doubt that Jesus loved the Jews more than either Moses or Paul, both of whom were ready to perish for the sake of Israel. Nevertheless, Jesus did not try and deceive Himself or His disciples. Love, devotion, and patriotism could not alter the truth that judgment was ahead because Judaism was dead. The prophets highest loyalty is to truth, and to God who is the author of truth. The prophets loved their people and nation, yet they denounced the evils of Israel, and warned of judgment. The false prophets were silent, or spoke soft words of false comfort. It is good for us to keep this Biblical role of the prophets in mind as we evaluate men and attitudes in our own day. The critic of the evil's of our nation is the true lover of America, if his motive is to bring us to a change for the better. The man who cries out against the evils and corruption is more likely to be the spokesman for God than the man who seeks to whitewash over the evils.

Just as it is the parent who most opposes the folly of their children who love them most, so it is the critics of national evil who are the nations best friends. In this context Jesus was sure of the judgment ahead, and, therefore, was not warning in the hope of diverting the judgment. He had already failed and knew that He was to be crucified. This kind of certainty is not known about the future of any other nation. We do not know if we will proceed into inevitable judgment, or repent as a nation and be restored to a place of even greater leadership in world evangelization. All we know for sure from Christ's attitude in this passage is that the church must escape from the rut that is leading us to the same dead institutionalism that characterized Judaism. We as Christians must escape from the influence of materialism that makes us think of the church in terms of buildings and rituals.

By His teaching and action Jesus made it clear that the essence of man's relationship to God is personal and spiritual, and not material. Jesus made no plans for a super structure in which to worship, for each believer was to be

a temple of the Holy Spirit. Jesus gave the power of the Holy Spirit to the common people, and it was that people-empowered body that replaced the huge stones of the temple of Judaism. People with God's power: That is the church, and no matter how much marble, wood, steel, and stained glass you have put together, without people with God's power you don't have a church. Man is constantly trying to rebuild the temple that God destroyed thinking that is the secret of spiritual success. It's the age old spirit of those who built the tower of Babel. William Barclay wrote,

**Pride of man and earthly glory
Sword and crown betray his trust;
With what care and toil he buildeth,
Tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power,
Hour by hour,
Is my temple and my tower.**

A return to a personal encounter and dependence upon God rather than the impersonal, mechanical, and materialistic forms of worship is essential if the church is to escape the fate of the temple of Judaism. The power to witness, and the power to live a Christlike life, will not come through ceremony, but through surrender; not through ritual, but through revival of a dynamic personal response of believers to a living God. This is a clear conclusion that can be drawn from the very attitude that Christ reveals in this chapter. Men must learn from the destruction of the temple that aesthetics, and the beauty of art and architecture can never be a substitute for the beauty of holiness. The disciples came to this conclusion as time went on, but now they were interested when this event of the destruction of the temple would be.

Jesus had just wetted their appetite. He made this boldly shocking statement about the ruin of the temple, and then walked off to the Mt. of Olives. He, no doubt, expected them to follow Him with curiosity churning in their minds, and He was right, for when He sat down verse 3 tells us He was approached by the inner circle for a private conference on this matter. Andrew is for the first time included, and so we have two sets of brothers, and the first four that Jesus called to be His disciples. They, like most everyone, were interested in the future, and prophecy fascinated them. They were eager for more details, and verse 4 shows us that their first interest was in knowing

when. We all love to nail things down and have an accurate time-table of events. Date setting is almost a compulsive urge for those interested in prophecy. What a thrill to be able to determine the date of future events.

All scholars want to be the first to discover truth so they can inform those who are still in the dark. To know is power, and so the disciples were no different than the non-believing Jews when it came to an interest in signs. They wanted a warning system so they could know when judgment was at hand. Who would not appreciate the security of such knowledge. The Jews of that day were fanatical in their speculation about the end, and many had to suffer the consequences of listening to some of these self-appointed prophets. Josephus in Wars Of The Jews tells of a tragic instance of false calculation of the end. Six thousand men, women, and children were burned alive by the Roman soldiers in the outer court of the temple. He writes, "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 up upon the temple, and that there they should receive miraculous signs of their deliverance." This prophecy rested on an interpretation of the 70 weeks of Daniel whereby the end was to fall in 70 A. D., a common calculation.

Before Jesus gives them the information they seek, He first gives them a warning about something that will be relevant to them long before the signs, and He also gives them a list of things that are not signs so they will not get alarmed before hand. In other words, He gives them a warning about warnings that are not authentic warnings. In verse 5 He warns them that their first concern is to avoid being deceived and led astray. Now keep in mind, He is not talking here to children, or to some recent disciples who just began to follow Him. He is speaking to the inner circle, the very foundation of His church; the most mature followers that He has at this point. If He needed to warn them about being led astray, we have better face it: Christians can be led astray by false prophets.

In the next verse Jesus states it as a fact that many will be led astray. There is no area in the Christian life where it is easier to get off the track than in the area of prophecy. Whenever a man wants to rob the saints He knows the quickest way to do it is to become a prophetic preacher, for people who won't pay a dime, or cross the street, for sound training in practical Christian living, will go for miles and sacrifice to be deceived by a false prophet. Jesus said it would be so, and those who are fulfilling His prophecy

by being so foolish do so as a direct result of ignoring His warning to be cautious. Anyone who is careless and indifferent about accuracy and sound evidence in the area of Biblical prophecy has covered their ears to the voice of Christ. Their punishment will be that they will be led astray.

The warning of Christ gives us a warrant to be skeptical about all prophetic schemes of men. It gives us the authority to question and probe into the foundations and premises of all men's teachings, including our own. It gives us basis for withholding judgment until we are satisfied that a message is in harmony with the whole revelation of God. If these disciples had to be cautious, or be led astray, then there is no authority on earth that can ask us for unquestioning submission. We are duty bound to Christ to carefully evaluate the claims of every man who assumes the authority of teacher.

I may seem overly cautious, but I know from experience that what Jesus warned of is a fact which disrupts and weakens the witness of the entire church. I take this warning seriously because it is obvious that Jesus recognized it to be a serious matter. History has demonstrated that those who did not heed His warning, but instead rushed headlong into following one prophet or another, ended up making fools of themselves, and brought a bad name upon the cause of Christ. Men do not lose their salvation by going astray on matters dealing with the Second Coming, and the end of the world, but they can cause enough confusion through fanaticism to block others from approaching the Savior. No error is too minor to be a stumbling block to some, so let us not take it lightly as if it really didn't matter what we believe.

Our attitude ought to be, let us learn all we can for sure, and be willing to remain silent and uncommitted where we are ignorant. If this is our attitude, no one can lead us astray. In verse 6 Jesus says the false prophets will come in His name. This immediately throws many Christians off the track, for as soon as they hear that a man speaks in the name of Christ they let down their guard, and assume he is inspired if not infallible. We need to learn that a man can speak as a Christian and still be a false prophet. We often assume that anyone who can say praise the Lord must be a genuine prophet.

Barclay said, "The human mind has an infinite capacity for wishful thinking." We easily fall for anything we like to hear because we want it to be true. The false prophet just has to discover what appeals to people and then

give it to them. In this verse Jesus gets very specific about their claims. He says that many will say they are Him. There will be many false messiahs. This seems irrelevant to us, for we do not know of anyone claiming to be Christ, nor does it seem to us we could be fooled if anyone made the claim. It was very relevant to the early church, however, and as Jesus said, many were led astray. Alexander says there has been 50 false messiahs from the fall of Jerusalem to the 17th century. No doubt, the invention of printing and wide distribution of Scripture eliminated the likelihood of such deception in the modern world.

We are not likely to be deceived by such a claim today, but we can be deceived by other forms of alarmism. Someone is always giving warning that the end is near, and they quote statistics about the increase of wars, famine, earthquakes, and all kinds of natural calamities. Jesus says to beware of such warnings. They can get you excited and unstable, and make you unprepared to do the will of God. Jesus says that all of these things are not signs of the end. Whenever anyone uses these things as signs of the end, he is contradicting Jesus who clearly tells His disciples that they are not. Jesus warns us about heeding false warnings. He says in verse 8 that all these things are but the beginning of sufferings. Let us, therefore, be calm and not alarmed by a world in turmoil. This is when the Christian has to be at his best in applying Christian principles. We cannot afford to throw up our hands and wait for the rapture, for as Jesus said, these are not signs of the end. Let us keep busy in meeting the needs of a suffering world, and not be led astray by those who give false warnings.

16. ADVANCE THROUGH ARREST Based on Mark 13:9-13

There is a difference between sin and error. If I say $2+2=5$ I am in error, but I am not sinning. That is, if my motive is to come to a right answer I am not sinning. If my human fallibility leads me to a wrong answer it is not sin. If I say $2+2=5$ in order to confuse a young person so that they will make a mistake and get a problem wrong then it becomes a sin, for it is a deliberate attempt to deceive. It is no longer an error but a lie, and, therefore, a sin. The motive determines the difference between a sin and an error.

When it comes to matters of Biblical doctrine we find the same distinction. If I had believed that Jesus was to come in 1988, I have been proven wrong. I was in error to believe that, but I was not sinning in believing that. That was an error in calculation and interpretation. Christians have been wrong about a good many things because they did not properly understand God's Word. This is not sin, but the natural result of the inadequacy of human knowledge. However, if my error is the direct result of disobeying, or of paying no heed to the clear words of Christ, then it becomes sin, for it is error due to willful negligence. Whenever we can avoid error easily and do not do so because of laziness and indifference, it becomes a sin to be wrong. To be in error about the obscure or unrevealed is perfectly normal, but to be in error about the clearly revealed is to be guilty of sinful negligence.

Jesus predicted that error would be successful, and false prophets would lead many astray just because people will refuse to give heed to His warning. They will allow themselves to be frightened, and led into unstable emotionalism over the very things He clearly stated were no cause for alarm. G. Campbell Morgan wrote, "Observe...that in this prophecy we have the definite declaration that wars and rumors of wars are not the sign of the end of the age." Yet every crisis and international conflict will bring many false prophets out of the darkness to confuse and frighten.

Whenever you find Christians being alarmists and acting like chicken little scampering around the barnyard screaming that the sky is falling, you know they have missed the purpose of Christ's teaching on last things. His key word is watch. Do not be alarmed He urges. Don't go off half cocked. Don't lose control of your emotional stability. Be steady, be alert, be watchful. A few minutes of calm reflection upon the evidence would have saved chicken little from his emotional blunder and premature warning that caused so much chaos. So also a few moments of calm reflection on the clear teaching of Jesus will help us avoid confusing the end with the beginning. Jesus said that all these things are the beginning of sufferings. Let us not be guilty of willful error by saying these things are signs of the end.

In verse 9 Jesus goes on to tell the disciples some of the very specific forms of suffering they will have to endure. Let us keep in mind that Jesus answered their question primarily to give them understanding. The first application of His teaching is to the immediate future of the disciples, and not to the 20th century, or any other century. For example, Jesus says they will

be beaten in synagogues, and taken before governors and kings. This is obviously a picture of law enforcement and persecution which fits what the Apostles faced, but would not apply after 70 A. D. After that the Jews no longer had the power or authority. It was not long before the picture was reversed completely and Christians were persecuting Jews and beating them.

The point is, Jesus is not describing what is going to happen all through history, though similar things have always happened. He is telling them what they must endure as the first proclaimers of the Gospel. Both Jews and the Romans would arrest them because of all the trouble Christianity would stir up. The Romans would have to intervene because of the dangerous tension between the old Israel and new Israel. It was a civil war within Judaism that the Gospel caused, and as verse 12 shows, it was a conflict unto death. The Romans had to step in to maintain order. You will notice that the beatings are to take place in the synagogue at the hands of the Jews, but the being brought before the governors and kings was for the purpose of bearing testimony. Of course, no beatings have been allowed in synagogues for many centuries, and so this passage obviously refers to the immediate future of the disciples.

Jesus indicates that one of the key ways of getting the Gospel spread would be through the courts. The persecution would lead to opportunities to defend the Gospel before high officials and leaders in high places. This would give the Gospel a world wide sounding board. Just as today an obscure matter known only to a few people can become the talk of the nation if it comes before the Supreme Court. Some people break a law on purpose just to get the matter before the courts, and to get their voice heard. This is what was going to happen in the early church. Old Israel was dying, but it was going to take down the new Israel with it, but their very efforts to destroy it were the cause for its becoming a world wide movement. God makes even the wrath of man to praise Him.

So crucial was this in the plan of God that Jesus tells them in verse 11 not to be anxious about what to say, for the Holy Spirit was promised to make sure this opportunity would be used to the fullest extent. Under this unique situation the direct work of the Holy Spirit was essential for the success of the spread of the Gospel. If we go to the book of Acts, we discover that almost all of the great preaching, and all of the great defenses of the Gospel were delivered before official bodies, or men in high places. We find Peter and

John before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:8-21 and 5:29f. The seventh chapter is Stephen's great defense before his martyrdom. Paul is before the Sanhedrin in Acts 23; before Felix in Acts 24; before Festus in Acts 25; before Agrippa in Acts 26, and in a Roman prison in Acts 28. It is no less than fantastic when we see the role of the legal system of Rome in the spread of the Gospel. Had God not prepared the world through the development of the Roman legal system, the church would not have gotten off the ground to such a rapid start.

Freedom of speech and liberty to be heard, and to present your side of the case, was essential for the growth of Christianity. At other times and under other systems Christianity would have been denied this privilege. We see another explanation of the statement, "In the fullness of time God sent forth His Son." God knew all of these factors before time began. He is never too early or too late in His actions. It would be interesting to digress here, and consider the whole history of how the Gospel has spread through its conflicts within the courts of this world, but this would take us too far afield. Many of the great men of God and movements of God became that due to conflict with the law or official bodies. The Baptist General Conference began with the trial of F.O. Nielson in Sweden where his defense of the Baptist position was published all over the nation by reporters at his trial. This led to many believing and becoming followers. Never underestimate the value of the truth being brought before the courts.

Jesus wants to encourage His disciples with this knowledge that what they suffer will be worth while, for it is part of the necessary price to pay for the success of the church. In verse 10 He makes it clear that the persecution will not destroy the church. The Gospel will be preached in all nations before the end. This has both an immediate and ultimate application. The Gospel did reach all nations before 70 A. D., in the sense that through the synagogues Jews all over the world had a chance to choose Christ as their Messiah before Judaism was judged in the fall of Jerusalem. This is the primary application for the benefit of the disciples, and to comfort them as to the immediate success of the Gospel before the fall of old Israel.

If our assumption is valid that the judgment on Judaism is a type of the coming final judgment on the world, then we can see the application of this promise to our own day also. The end will not come until the great commission is fulfilled, and people of every nation have the chance to respond to the Gospel. Not knowing the precise definition of this means that this goal

is certainly within sight in our day.

Mark's record of the statement clearly makes it a reference to the world of the disciples. It is put between verses 9 and 11 which are references to their own personal trials. In verse 11 Jesus tells them not to be anxious about what to say when they are brought to trial. This has nothing to do with their responsibility to expound the Word and their study habits. Paul said, "Bring me the books and the parchments." He was a student of the Word, but he did not have time to prepare speeches when he was brought before the courts. Jesus is saying, do not worry at such a time, for all you need to do is defend your right to believe, and the basis for your belief. All that is necessary is your love for and faith in Jesus. The Holy Spirit will do the rest. Anyone who gets a wide open opportunity to express their faith in Christ is able to do a good job of it, for the Holy Spirit continues to operate this way under such circumstances. When there is perfect liberty the Christian needs no preparation, but simply a living faith in Christ.

Verse 12 is the saddest part of this prophecy, for the tension will be so terrific in homes where some believe and others do not that there will be hatred unto death developed between loved ones. Here is clear civil war; not between Jews and Gentiles, but between believers and unbelievers. This is why Jesus said that if you love father or mother, or son or daughter, or brother or sister, more than me you are not worthy of me. He knew the day would come when men would have to choose between Him and family loyalty. This was true for both Jews and Gentiles. Emperor Domitian slew Flavius Clemens and his niece because they were Christians. Emperor Maximin killed Artemia his own sister. Diocletian killed his own wife and other relatives for being Christians. Only eternity will reveal how many Christians were killed by their own family.

In verse 13 Jesus indicates that men of all places will be hateful toward believers. There will be no sanctuary, for Christians will suffer universal persecution. Jesus promises no escape, but encourages them to endure to the end and be saved. He promises no cheap grace, but He says it is worth going through all the suffering, for all who do shall be saved. Be faithful unto death and you will receive the crown of life. This was true in the first century, and is true for Christians today who suffer all over the world.

