

THE LONG LOOK AHEAD

Chapter One. Matthew 24:1-3

by Ray C. Stedman

How would you like to know the future? Who does not want to lift, if possible, the curtain that hides the things to come, and read the future as well as he can the past? Many are trying it today with varying degrees of success, but the only book with a batting average of 1.000 is the Bible. That's one of the things that makes it such a fascinating book. It is always up-to-date and filled with the most pertinent, often exciting information. In fact, it is more than up-to-date-it is ahead of the times.

There are many predictive passages in both Old and New Testaments, but none is clearer or more detailed than the message delivered by Jesus himself as he sat on the Mount of Olives overlooking the city of Jerusalem during the turbulent events of his last week before the cross. These words have immense significance for us for they are a revelation of the ultimate fate of earth. From his point in time (about A.D. 32*) he looks ahead to foretell the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the disturbances connected with that singular event. He looks on across the centuries and outlines the perils that lie between his first and second coming, thus describing the very age in which we live. He looks past the present day to that time which he calls "the end of the age" and sets its events before us in searing and vivid detail, culminating in his own return to earth and the ushering in of a new day.

Unfolding Events

As we read his perceptive words we shall discover that what is coming is but the unfolding of events which will grow out of movements and processes already at work in human society. The future has already begun, and our Lord's outlining of its course will greatly help us to understand what is taking place in our own day. In this first chapter we shall look only at three verses which introduce Christ's amazing message to us and provide for us the key to its structure and the events out of which it came. They are the first three verses of Matthew 24:

"Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.'"

"As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?'"

It sounds strange to us that the disciples should come to Jesus at this time and point out to him the beauty of the Temple buildings. He had often seen the Temple and the disciples had frequently been with him as he taught in its courts. Why then this sudden interest in the buildings? It all grew out of the astonishment of these disciples at the recent actions of the Lord. The chapter opens with the pregnant phrase, "Jesus left the temple." When he left the Temple on this occasion he never entered it again. He left it after having pronounced upon it a sentence of judgment, recorded in the closing words of chapter 23:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How

often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house [the Temple] is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

All of this comes at the close of the most blistering sermon he ever delivered. It was addressed to the scribes and the Pharisees, and consisted of a series of "woes" pronounced upon the hypocrisy of these religious leaders. They were supposed to be the teachers of the people but were actually hindering them from knowing the truth of God. Jesus began his ministry with a series of eight blessings (the Beatitudes, Matthew 5), and he ended it with a series of eight woes.

Nothing arouses more vehement anger in the heart of God than religious hypocrisy. Throughout the Scriptures, God's most scorching terms are reserved for those who profess to know him but who behave quite contrary to their profession- especially for the self-righteous.

Cleansing the Temple

Having completed this sermon, Jesus for the second time, cleansed the Temple of the money-changers. John records the first occasion (2:13-21) which occurred at the beginning of the Lord's ministry. Many do not realize that he did this twice, but Mark records that when he came to Jerusalem for the last week, he went into the Temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold. Further, Mark records a most significant action of our Lord's. Mark says, "he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple" (Mark 11:16).

This strongly suggests that he stopped the priests who bore vessels through the Temple in order to bring the blood of the sacrifices offered in the outer court into the holy place where it was to be sprinkled before the altar. Jesus arrested this procession. He brought to a close, for the first time since the days of the Maccabees, the offerings of Israel! They were later resumed by the Jews but without meaning or divine sanction. When Jesus himself became upon the cross "the Lamb of God which takes away the sins of the world," he thereby declared all other sacrifices as no longer of any meaning or value.

Then, having stopped the sacrifices, the next day the Lord stood in quiet dignity and pronounced the official sentence of rejection,

"Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Having said this he left the Temple, and the disciples went with him. Silently, they walked down through the valley of Kidron and up the other side to the Mount of Olives. There Jesus took his seat, upon one of the rocks that overlooked the city and the Temple area. The disciples were troubled and confused. They could not understand his actions or his words concerning the Temple. The Temple was the center of the nation's life and they regarded it with holy awe as the very dwelling place of God among his people. Its beauty was famous throughout the earth and they could not believe that God would allow any harm to come to it. So they began to point out to Jesus the strength and beauty of the Temple.

To this he responds with words which distress them even further:

Truly I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.

They cannot believe that this will happen. They knew, of course, that the nation was under the bondage of Rome. They had no final authority in their own city or land. But it was well known that the Romans were lovers of temples. It was their boast that they preserved, if at all possible, the temples and monuments of any country they conquered. They had been in power in Palestine for many years and they had not destroyed the Temple. There seemed no good reason, therefore, why this Temple should ever be destroyed. But Jesus

solemnly assures them that there would not be one stone left standing upon the other.

Test of a Prophet

We shall surely miss the full meaning of this sentence if we fail to see that Jesus is giving here his credentials as a prophet. The law of Moses required that whenever a prophet essayed to foretell the future it was necessary that he give a sign by which his prophecy could be tested. That requirement is found in Deuteronomy 18. In the midst of a prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah, Moses said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren-him you shall heed." Then, a little later, he quoted God as saying: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him." (Deuteronomy 18:18, 19)

Many Bible scholars agree that this prophecy was a foreview of the coming of Jesus Christ. He was that prophet, raised up of God among the people of Israel, who would be like Moses and would speak words that the nation should hear. Moses went on to say:

"...but the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.' And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?'-when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you need not be afraid of him." (vv. 20-22)

In the practical carrying out of that admonition it became customary for the prophets to give the people a prediction of something that would occur in the near future. When it came to pass as foretold, the people would know that this was indeed an authenticated prophet. But if the sign did not occur as predicted, the prophecy in its entirety was to be rejected as not from God, and the prophet was exposed as false. So Jesus predicts the downfall of the Temple in the near future as a sign that all else he includes in this discourse is true. This is what lay behind the request of the disciples for a sign associated with his coming.

In Luke 21:20, we have other details of this predicted overthrow of the city and the Temple. There Jesus adds, "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near." Forty years later, the Roman armies under Titus came in and fulfilled the prediction to the very letter. With Titus was a Jewish historian named Josephus who recorded the terrible story in minute detail. It was one of the most ghastly sieges in all history. When the Romans came the city was divided among three warring factions of Jews, who were so at each others' throats that they paid no heed to the approach of the Romans. Thus, Titus came up and surrounded the city while it was distracted by its own internecine warfare. The Romans assaulted the walls again and again, and gave every opportunity to the Jews to surrender and save their capital destruction.

During the long siege a terrible famine raged in the city and the bodies of the inhabitants of the city were literally stacked like cordwood in the streets. Mothers ate their own children to preserve their own strength. The toll of Jewish suffering was horrible but they would not surrender the city. Again and again they attempted to trick the Romans through guile and perfidy. When at last the walls were breached Titus tried to preserve the Temple by giving orders to his soldiers not to destroy or burn it. But the anger of the soldiers against the Jews was so intense that, maddened by the resistance they encountered, they disobeyed the order of their general and set fire to the temple. There were great quantities of gold and silver which had been placed in the Temple for safekeeping. This melted and ran down between the rocks and into the cracks of the stones that formed the Temple and the wall around it. When the Roman soldiers finally took the city, in their greed to obtain this gold and silver they took long bars and pried apart these massive stones. Thus, quite literally, not one stone was left standing upon another. The Temple itself was totally destroyed though the wall supporting the area upon which the Temple was built was left partially intact and a portion of it remains to this day, called the Western Wall.

In this remarkable fulfillment, confirmed so strongly by secular history, is convincing proof that God will fulfill every other part of this amazing message fully and literally. As Jesus himself said in the discourse, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." With the certainty of its fulfillment underscored so strongly, let us now note the clue to the structure of the discourse, as given in these opening verses.

Three Tough Questions

There are actually three questions which the disciples ask the Lord. The first is,

"Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?"

They mean of course, the destruction of the Temple. As we have already seen, the answer is recorded by Luke. It would be when they saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies. A number of them were still living when Titus fulfilled the prediction.

The second question is, "What will be the sign of your coming? The third is "[What will be the sign] of the close of the age?" These questions are perfectly natural in view of the instruction of Moses to ask for a sign when prediction is attempted. Without a doubt there is a great deal of difference between what the disciples had in mind when they asked these questions and what we are thinking of when we read them. They asked out of confusion. There were many things they could not see, or would not believe, and so their questions were difficult to answer. They were much like the little boy who asked his father: "Daddy, why does the sun shine in the daytime when we don't need it, and not at night when we do?" That kind of question is difficult to answer, not because the answer is so hard, but because the question is so wrong. To some degree, that was the problem here.

In many ways we can understand much better than they what their questions meant, for we have the history of twenty centuries to look back upon. Also we accept the importance of Christ's death and resurrection, against which they were in revolt. Therefore, they could not understand all that he said to them. He had been puzzling them for months and they were now quite out of harmony with him. He had told them plainly of his coming death and resurrection, but they refused to give heed. Since they would not allow themselves to face the terrible specter of his death, they could not have any clear idea of what he meant when he said he was coming again.

Thus, when they asked him here about his coming they did not have in mind a second advent. They did not picture a descent from heaven to earth, nor anything at all of what we mean when we speak of Christ's second coming. They had in mind a political revolution and the crowning of Jesus as King and his subsequent presence among the nation as its acknowledged King and Messiah. They used a very interesting word for coming. It is the Greek word, "parousia." This word appears four times in this passage, in verses 3, 27, 37, and 39. It is not the usual word for coming. It means more than the mere arrival of some person; it also implies his continuing presence after he arrives. This is important, for much of the understanding of this discourse will turn upon the meaning of this word. The English word "coming" appears other times in the message, but it is not the same Greek word and has a different meaning.

Even after the resurrection these disciples were still asking Jesus questions that reflected a political concept of his coming. In Acts 1:6 they asked, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" They were obviously still thinking of a political rule over the nations of the earth. He did not deny that this will eventually occur, but simply reminded them that the times and seasons are the Father's prerogative to determine. Thus, when they asked him on the Mount of Olives, "What will be the sign of your coming?" it is not a question about his coming again, but of his presence in the nation as its king. But, as we shall see in our Lord's answer, he treats it as a legitimate inquiry concerning his second advent.

The Close of the Age

They also ask for a second sign, concerning the close of the age. It is not, as in the King James Version, "the end of the world." It has nothing to do with the end of the world. The world will go on for a long time after the events of the Olivet Discourse are fulfilled, but the age will end with those events. In this matter they were much more clearly informed, though they unquestionably felt that it was a time that lay immediately ahead. They were sure that they were living in days approaching the end of the age and that they were about to enter the events that would mark the close of the age.

We must remember that these men were well acquainted with the Old Testament. They also had heard Jesus teaching the parables of the kingdom (Matthew 13) and had heard him speak of a close of the age when he would send his angels throughout the earth to gather men to judgment. They knew the Old Testament predictions of Messiah's rule and reign over the earth. Doubtless they knew, too, of Daniel's remarkable prophecy (Daniel 9) that there would be a period of 490 years, (seventy weeks of years, or 490 years), from the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity until the time of Messiah the Prince. From the prophecy they may well have known that the 490 years were almost completely expired, and it was little wonder that they expected the close of the age to be very near.

What they could not see and could not be expected to see was that there would occur a wide valley of time between the hour in which they asked their question and the close of the age in the far distant future. We cannot blame them for this, for it is difficult to distinguish the two comings of Jesus in the Old Testament prophecies. Peter wrote that the prophets foresaw "the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory." But to them it seemed as if they were one great event. What looked to them to be one great mountain range of fulfillment was actually two widely separated ranges with a great valley of time in between.

For instance, in Isaiah 9 there is a well known prediction of a coming child. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given." That is a prophecy of our Lord's first advent as a baby in Bethlehem. But the rest of the verse says, "...and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called 'Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'" That is clearly referring to his reign in the days of the kingdom which would cover the earth. It will not be fulfilled until the Lord returns to earth again, but these two events are brought together into one verse with no hint of any intervening time.

The Sign of the End of the Age

The Lord now takes their questions and in answering their questions and in answering them reverses the order. They asked about the sign of his presence and the sign of the end of the age. He answers the last one first. The sign of the close of the age is found in verse 15, "the desolating sacrilege...standing in the holy place." We shall examine that much more fully later on. The sign of his coming is given in verse 30, "then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven." This, too, we shall examine in detail in due course, but throughout this whole passage the Lord takes pains to make clear to his disciples that the end of the age lay far in the distant future.

Here in this great prediction are illustrated two great principles of prophetic fulfillment. First, there is often an unspecified interval of time which may operate to delay final fulfillment far beyond what may otherwise be expected. Jesus warned in Acts 1 that "the times and the seasons [are] not for you to know," but remain always in the Father's sovereign choice. The second principle is that of double fulfillment. When Jesus predicted encirclement of Jerusalem by hostile armies and its conquest and overthrow, it was fulfilled to the letter less than forty years later. But that historic fulfillment became in turn a preview of another day in the far distant future when again Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies and would face its hour of destruction on a greater scale than ever before. Then it will be the close of the age. The age which is thus to be closed is the age in which we now live.

Notice that Jesus speaks to these men as though they would live to see all the events he predicts. Obviously, therefore, he is speaking to them as representative men. Some of them saw the destruction of Jerusalem as he had foretold it, but none would live to see the close of the age, and none would pass through the Great Tribulation. They were uniquely representative men. They were representatives both of Israel and the church. At the time he spoke to them they were Jewish believers, men of Israel, all of them. As such they represented the nation and God's dealings with that remarkable people. But after the cross and Pentecost they were Christians, part of the Church, neither Jew nor Greek. They would then belong to a unique body which has a task to fulfill throughout the intervening centuries before the end times. Thus the message includes truth for the church in its relationship to the present age, and also truth for Israel in its time of trouble to come at the end of the age. These disciples are representatives of both groups and our Lord speaks to them as such.

As Jesus sits looking out over the city he is facing the darkest hour of his life. He knows the scheming of his enemies and the opposition that even then is sharpening against him from almost every quarter. He knows what Judas is planning. His enemies think they are doing their nefarious deeds in secret, but he knows it all. He knows the frailty of his friends and that he can never depend upon them. These very disciples who cluster around him on the mountain will in but a few hours forsake him and flee. One of them will even deny him with curses. He knows all that. He sees the darkness of the coming centuries but he looks through them to the light beyond. When all around him seems utterly hopeless he quietly declares what the end will be, without the slightest uncertainty or doubt.

All things, he says, all events, will find their significance and meaning in relationship to him. Any event which is not related to his purpose in the age is worthless and useless, without real meaning or significance. As we listen to his declaration of what the course of human history will be, we must each face the inevitable question: In what way is my life related to the great events that Jesus says will take place? Am I contributing to what will ultimately eventuate in anarchy and distress among men and in the failing of hearts for fear of what is coming to pass? Or am I contributing to the program of God which is moving through history to bring the age to its appointed climax and to bring again from heaven the Son of God to establish his kingdom over the earth? It is one or the other.

We do not live our life in an isolated segment of time. What is happening today in the affairs and councils of men is bringing to pass what our Lord says will occur. We can often trace the connection if we see the events of our day in the light of what he says in this discourse. The great and supreme question is not, what shall I do with my life, or what can I make of it, but, how does it relate to what God is doing? When God is through with history, this is the way it will be. What part will I have played in the process? These are the questions this Olivet Discourse forces upon us.

Prayer

Father, as we come to this great prophecy we ask for understanding hearts and ears that are ready to hear. Lord, teach us to see that all this is woven into the very warp and woof of our lives and that we cannot escape being part of your program. Keep us from being frightened or resentful or bitter or indifferent, but grant that we be ready to walk in fellowship with you, our Living Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen.

* According to the calculations of Sir Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1909.

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