

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

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THE SIGN OF THE SON OF MAN WILL APPEAR IN THE SKY

Matthew 24:29-31

In our previous lesson, we saw that Christ's return will trigger astronomical happenings worldwide and universally. We read in Luke 21:25-26 that *there will be signs in sun and moon and stars...* and that *the powers of the heavens will be shaken*.

In the parallel passage, in Matthew 24, we are told that *the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven*.

The nations will mourn

Aside from these signs with the heavenly bodies, there will be a second event that will occur when Christ returns. There will be 'the sign of the Son of man appearing in heaven.' The sign of the Son of man is the second sign. What is this sign? This will be the subject of our lesson today. Let's begin by reading Matthew 24:29-31.

Matthew 24:29. Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken;

30 then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory;

31 and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Matthew 24:29 is the parallel passage to Luke 21:25 which we studied previously. Matthew goes on to say something that Luke did not include in his gospel. Verse 30 of Matthew 24: *Then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.*

Here Jesus talks about the sign of the Son of man, and this sign will bring a reaction of mourning upon the face of the earth. All the people on earth will cry in agony when Christ returns. Why such a reaction? Because people will see without any doubt that Christ is the Son of God. They will realize that they ignored, neglected, rejected, abused and cursed Him. They will suddenly understand that they have missed His salvation and that they are about to be judged. Revelation 1:7 gives a similar picture of this great mourning at the end: *Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, everyone who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.* They will wail and mourn because of the terrible judgment which is about to be inflicted upon the ungodly.

When the sign of the Son of man appears, *all the tribes of the earth will mourn* because people will know exactly what the sign is and what it means. God's Son is coming to judge and rule over all the earth.

The sign of the resurrection

But what exactly is this sign of the coming of the Son of man? It has been interpreted in many different ways. Historically, it has three main interpretations:

- (1) The sign of the Son of man is the cross. There will be a visible appearance of a cross in the sky.
- (2) The sign of the Son of man is the Son of man Himself. It will be Christ who will manifest Himself in person.
- (3) The sign of the Son of man is a mystery that cannot be explained at this point in time.

I tend to agree with the second interpretation, that the sign of the Son of man is Christ Himself who will be seen by all. But I find that this explication is not complete. Let me clarify my thoughts.

Let's go back to the 12th chapter of Matthew. In Matthew 12, Jesus said that only one sign will be given to this generation, and it is the sign of the prophet Jonah. Matthew 12:38-40.

Matthew 12:38. Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You."

39 But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet;

40 for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

If the sign of Jonah is the only sign that will be given, why does Jesus talk about another sign, the sign of the Son of man? When we studied the sign of Jonah in a previous lesson, I mentioned that there is a point of comparison between Jonah and the Son of man. Jonah was the sign to the people of Nineveh in the same way that the Son of man is the sign to us. And the sign of Jonah is the one and only sign of the Son of man. No other sign will be given. What is that sign? The expression 'three days and three nights' is a clear reference to the resurrection. Jesus was buried for three days and three nights, and then He rose again from the dead. Therefore we can conclude that the sign of the Son of man is the sign of the resurrection. I repeat. The sign of the Son of man is the sign of the resurrection. Remember that.

In Matthew 24, the Lord Jesus tells us what will happen. There will be a shaking of the powers of the heavens. Then there will appear the sign of the Son of man. But this time, it is in heaven. Not on earth. That is the big difference. The first time, the Son of man was on earth. This time, the sign of the Son of man is in heaven.

What does that mean? If the resurrection sign is to be visible to all in heaven, I can think of only one thing. It is the rapture. If it is something that is mentioned in the Bible, it can only be the rapture. The rapture is this event where God's people will be caught up into heaven, caught up to meet Christ in the air. This remarkable teaching is explained by Paul in 1Thessalonians 4. If you wonder where Paul got his teaching on the rapture, well, it is here, in the Lord's teaching in Matthew 24, from the passage on the sign of the Son of man in heaven. We also observe that Paul's exposition of the rapture has the same order as Jesus' teaching. We will discuss it in a moment.

A sign in heaven

There is one important observation to highlight about this passage in Matthew 24. From v. 29 to v. 31, every verse has the word 'heaven' in it.

- V. 29: *the stars will fall from **heaven**, and the powers of the **heavens** will be shaken.*
- V. 30: *the sign of the Son of man will appear in **heaven**.*
- V. 31: *from one end of **heaven** to the other.*

Heaven occurs in every single verse in this passage. It is God's work in heaven.

But what is meant here by 'heaven'? This is not the paradise. Heaven, *ouranos* in Greek, should be interpreted in the physical sense. It is the aerial heaven:

- Where we find the birds of the air. *Foxes have holes, and birds of the **air** (*ouranos*) have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20).*
- Where the clouds are suspended. *You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and **sky** (*ouranos*); but why do you not know how to interpret the present time (Luke 12:56)?*
- Where the rain is formed. *Then he prayed again and the **heaven** (*ouranos*) gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit (James 5:18).*

Heaven is where the sun, moon, and stars are seen. So heaven in Matthew is the sky. That is why in some translations, we find the word 'sky,' instead of 'heaven.' Each of the three verses about heaven in Matthew 24 refers to events that will be visible from the earth in the sky. This is important to understand. You look up there into the heaven, the firmament, the sky, and there you will see these things happening. You will see the sign of the Son of man.

Now let's go back to this event called 'rapture.' What is the rapture? The rapture is first and foremost a resurrection event. At the rapture, the dead in Christ will rise first. All the believers who have died in the past will be raised from their grave and they will be caught up to meet the Lord Jesus in the air, in the sky. These resurrected saints will be right there, in the sky, in full view of the earth. People will be able to see them. This is the sign of the Son of man, the sign of the resurrection.

The sign of the Son of man in Paul's words

The word 'rapture' comes from 1Thessalonians 4:16-17 which, as I just mentioned to you, is a direct parallel to our text in Matthew 24. Paul's writing in 1Thessalonians is basically an exposition of the Lord's teaching in Matthew 24. Let's read 1Thessalonians 4:16-17.

1Thessalonians 4:16. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; 17 then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.

I would like to bring out to you five common points to our passage in Matthew 24. You will see how Paul's teaching on the rapture has been influenced by Jesus' teaching. The first one is this. In 1Thessalonians, it says that 'the Lord will come down from heaven.' Notice that He has not come to the earth. He is descending from heaven, but He stops right there in the air where He will meet His saints. In Matthew 24, it says that 'the Lord will be coming in the clouds of heaven,' i.e. in the air, in the sky.

The second point is that in 1Thessalonians, there is a reference to the 'trumpet of God.' Matthew 24 talks about Jesus 'sending forth His angels with a great trumpet.'

The third point is the cry of command. We read in 1Thessalonians that the Lord Jesus will descend from heaven with a 'cry of command,' i.e. with supreme authority. At this present time, divine authority does not have the form of an irrevocable command. God's authority is subject to man's acceptance or man's rejection of it. God has even allowed man to take Jesus, the Lord of lords and King of kings, and put Him on the cross. But when Christ comes again, man will not be able to reject Him like that. There will be a 'cry of command' in which His authority will be recognized by all man. The Lord will come in the full dignity of His being. He will come in all His omnipotence and glory. Matthew 24 says that 'we will see the Son of Man coming with power and great glory.' Power will be reflected in this command at that time.

The fourth point is of course the reference to cloud. In 1Thessalonians, we read that 'those who are alive will be taken in the clouds to meet the Lord.' In Matthew 24, we are told that 'the Son of man will come on the clouds of the sky.' In the Scriptures, clouds are often associated with God.

And the fifth point is the gathering of the elect in both passages. In 1Thessalonians, those who were dead in Christ and those who are still alive will be gathered to meet the Lord in the air. In Matthew 24, the angels *will gather His elect*.

So you see how Paul is following the Lord's teaching, point by point. He expounds it and clarifies it so that the Thessalonians can understand. It is clear in Paul's mind that the sign of the Son of man in the heavens is the sign of the rapture, the resurrection of His saints.

In 1John 3:2, John tells us that we will become like Him when we see Him as He is: *Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.*

When will we see Him as He is? When we meet Him in the air! That is where we will see Him and that is where we will be transformed. Resurrection is fundamentally a transformation. Paul says that we will put on the new incorruptible body. 1Corinthians 15:52: *In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.*

We need to notice that the rapture is an inseparable part of the second coming. It precedes immediately Jesus' coming. He is descending from heaven; we are ascending to the sky. And we meet Him there in the air.

A sign of redemption and condemnation

This is going to be a glorious day, a wonderful day of triumph. But you see, the joy of the Christians will be the distress of the world. In the last days, there will be an immense contrast between the Christians and the non-Christians. The non-Christians will be in a state of nervous breakdown. The believers will be full of praise and adoration. That is why Jesus said in Luke 21:28, *Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*

All these terrible things happening in the world at the end are the sign of the redemption of the believers. But at the same time, they are the sign of the world's judgment. The condemnation of the one is the sign of the salvation of the other. The unbelievers will mourn because Jesus comes as Judge. The elect will rejoice because Jesus comes as Savior.

But notice very carefully Jesus' words. First He talks about the sign of the coming of the Son of man, the sign of the Son of man in heaven. Then the coming of the Lord is mentioned in verses 30 and 31. And then, another event is revealed: the elect are being gathered. But how does the sign of the Son of man relate to the gathering of the elect? This is exactly what Paul explains in 1Thessalonians 4. The first one, the sign of the Son of man has to do with the resurrection. The second one is the

gathering of those who are still alive upon the earth. *Then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.* So they go first. Then, those who are still alive will be gathered together.

And in Matthew 24:31, we read that Jesus sends out His angels. He has not come back to earth. He is still there in the cloud. He is still in the sky. And He gathers His elect from 'the four winds.' This expression, 'the four winds,' means 'all the possible directions.' We find the same words in Zachariah 2:6: *Come! Come! Flee from the land of the north, declares the Lord, for I have scattered you to **the four winds** of heaven, declares the Lord.* There the 'four winds' means 'all quarters.' So when Jesus said, *They will gather his elect from the four winds,* it means, 'the angels will gather the elect from all directions, from wherever the wind blows upon the earth.'

Verse 31 ends with the words, *from one end of heaven to the other.* This is interesting. We would have expected 'one end of the earth to the other.' But instead, we read 'one end of heaven to the other.' This expression comes from an OT imagery. When Jesus says that His angels will gather the elect from one end of heaven to the other, He means that no matter how far away His people may be at that particular time, the angels will gather them together.

Not a single believer will be missed when Jesus returns. No matter where we are or how isolated and lonely and forgotten we may feel, He is coming for us. We will be in that select company in that glorious day. Then our redemption will be complete.