

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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WHAT WILL BE THE SIGN OF YOUR COMING

Matthew 24:1-4

In the days of Jeremiah, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem was God's punishment of the Hebrew nation for turning away from Him. In Matthew 24, Jesus declared that the temple will be destroyed again, for the same reason. This prompted the disciples to ask about the signs of His second coming. Let's read this passage. Matthew 24:1-4.

Matthew 24:1. Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple.

2 And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

3 Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

Notice the disciples' question: *What will be the sign of Your coming?* Jesus will come back again. Just as the day of His birth in his first coming was prophesied and fulfilled, so it will be also of His second coming. And it is important for us to know clearly the signs of His coming.

Eschatological considerations

But before we discuss that topic, I would like to go back to v. 39 of the previous chapter. Matthew 23:39.

Matthew 23:39. For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'

I have mentioned before that this verse provides a kind of framework for Jesus' eschatology, i.e., His teaching on the last things. A framework is a structure, a frame, in which you can fit other things in. And here we can fit three things into Jesus' eschatological statement.

The first thing we see is that the Jews will see Him. Look at the sentence carefully. *You shall not see Me until...* The word 'until' implies that they will see Jesus again.

The second thing we see is this: it indicates that at some point, before His coming, the Jews will have a change of heart, causing them to welcome Him.

So they will see Him again, but only at a point in time when a fundamental change in their heart will happen. They will then say, *Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!* These are words of welcome. 'I welcome you in the name of the Lord.'

Let's talk about the third thing. I will present it with this question: what will cause this dramatic change of heart in the Jews? The change cannot happen by itself. There has to be something that will cause this transformation of the heart in the days preceding the coming of the Lord. What is this something?

Actually, there is not just one thing, but two things. The first thing is found in Matthew 24:15 in what is called 'the abomination of desolation.' The setting up of this abomination of desolation will cause such a crisis in Jerusalem that it will spark up a change of heart among the Jews. We will talk in depth about the abomination of desolation in another lesson.

The second element that will cause a change of heart is found in Matthew 24:30: *Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn...* The sign of the Son of Man will cause a deep sense of mourning in the hearts of the people. What is the sign of the Son of Man? This too will be explained in another lesson.

For now, I just want to emphasize the three things I mentioned in relation to Jesus' prediction, *You shall not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'* Firstly, the Jews will see the Lord again. Secondly, when this happens, there will be a change of heart among the Jews who had rejected Christ up to this day and they continue for the most part to do so at this moment. Thirdly, this change of heart will be caused by two remarkable things: (1) the setting up of the abomination of desolation in Jerusalem; (2) the sign of the Son of Man in heaven.

The temple destroyed

Having described this framework, let's return to the beginning of Matthew 24. This was Jesus' last visit to the temple. As He was leaving the area, the disciples pointed out to Him the various temple buildings. They were full of admiration for its beautiful architecture. We may have the same feeling when we enter into a cathedral. The height of the ceiling, the stain glass windows, the marble pillars, all that gives us a sense of wonder and of awe. So the disciples were admiring the temple. They stared at the gold, the marble, the enormous stones, the colonnades, and they were filled with a sense of marvel.

Jesus was not as impressed as His disciples were. He startled them when He said, 'You see these stones? It took many years for workers to put them together and build what you are admiring. Well, let me tell you something. Not one stone of this building will be left upon another. Such will be God's judgment against Jerusalem.'

We explained in a previous lesson that there is a measure of evil beyond which God will not tolerate. When that measure is full, God's judgment intervenes. That was Jerusalem's situation. Because the people of Jerusalem have 'filled up the measure of their sins,' the temple will be destroyed.

And yet, at that moment, when Jesus pronounced those words, it seemed so unlikely. The birds were signing. The sun was shining. The temple stood in its splendor. And there was the Roman Peace, the *Pax Romana*. The mighty army of Rome was there to maintain law, order and stability. Where could there be a war? Who could destroy the temple? Forty years later, the words of the Lord Jesus came to pass.

The disciples now wanted to ask a question. If these things are going to happen, the destruction of the temple and the end of the age, what will be the signs preceding all this? Let's read the question of the disciples.

Matthew 24:3. Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

There will be signs

There are a few points we can deduce from this question. The first point is that very significant things will happen in Jerusalem at the end. I have mentioned previously that Jerusalem is a kind of spiritual barometer for the events of God's plan in this world. By watching Israel, by watching that spiritual barometer going up and down, we can get an idea of what is happening according to the plan of God for our world. It is an indicator of how near to the end we are. The first point then is that important things will happen in Jerusalem towards the end, and by observing them it is possible to have an idea of how close we are to that end.

The second point is that Christ's coming will bring this age to a close. Notice how the question is worded: *what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?* These two things, the coming of the Lord and the close of the age, constitute a joint event. The Lord's coming will bring this age to an end.

Sometimes we read on a poster or a banner those words: 'Repent, for the end of the world is at hand.' This statement is of course inspired by Matthew 3:2 where John the Baptist said, *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!* Well, the end of the world is not at hand. And when the Lord comes, the world will not end either. Heaven and earth will still be here. But the age will close. An age is an epoch. For example, the OT epoch ended when Christ came the first time. He brought that age to a close. But a new era started, the era of the NT, which is the period we are living in now. That period will come to an end with the second coming of Christ. And again, a new age will begin, the era in which Jesus will reign upon the earth with His saints.

The third point is that there will be signs pointing to His coming. *What will be the sign of Your coming*, the disciples asked. Signs give you warning. In this case, they give us warning that Jesus' coming is nearer and nearer. As followers of Christ, it is important to know what those signs are.

From time to time, we hear this erroneous notion that Christ could come at any time. If that were the case, then Jesus' description of the signs of His coming would be irrelevant. He comes when He comes, with no sign to be seen. He would have answered the disciples' question by saying, 'Why do you ask about the signs? Don't you know that I will come at any moment? You don't have to know the signs because there will be no sign.'

The day has not come yet

This was the mistake that some believers of the Thessalonian church made. They were excited over the return of the Lord, so excited that they believed He could come back at any moment. Many of them decided to quit their jobs, and even to sell their possessions. 'The Lord is coming soon. He might be here tomorrow. There is really no point working!' But while they were waiting, they had to sponge off other believers in order to survive. Paul had to tell them to get back to work. 'Don't use the coming of the Lord as an excuse for laziness. Get back to work.' That is why we find this famous sentence in 2Thessalonians 3:10: *If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.* But look at what he told them about the Lord's coming. 2Thessalonians 2:1-3.

*2 Thessalonians 2:1. Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you,
2 not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come.
3 Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition.*

You see, the Lord will not return until these two events happen: (1) a massive apostasy; (2) the revelation of the man of sin. Paul was saying to the Thessalonians, 'Did you see a great rebellion against God? Did you see the antichrist trying to lead people to turn away from God? Nothing of that is happening. So get back to work. The Lord is not coming yet.'

Paul was pointing to the kind of signs which are mentioned in Matthew 24. That day will not come until these things happen. Using the same idea, Jesus said in Matthew 24:6, *The end is not yet.*

Now some people might say, 'OK, the second coming of the Lord will not take place at any moment. But the rapture might take place at any moment.' The rapture refers to this event when the saints are bodily lifted up to meet the Lord in the air. Well, that argument does not work because the rapture is in fact part of the second coming event. The only place in the Scriptures where the rapture is specifically mentioned is in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Let's read this passage, starting with v. 15.

*1 Thessalonians 4:15. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.
16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout (this the second coming of Christ), with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first.
17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up (that is where the word 'rapture' comes from. 'Rapture' is the Latin form of the word (raptus)) together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord.*

You see how Paul presents the rapture as part of the second coming. It is not a separate event. The rapture will occur only when the Lord returns. And the Lord's return will be preceded by signs. This means that the rapture will also be preceded by those signs.

So there are at least three points we can see from the disciples' question: (1) significant things will happen in Jerusalem at the close of the age; (2) the coming of the Lord will bring this age to a close; (3) there will be signs pointing to the Lord's return.

Being prepared

Now notice Jesus' response immediately after the disciples' question.

Matthew 24:4. Take heed that no one deceives you.

What is the purpose of studying the Lord's teaching concerning the last things? What is the purpose of knowing the signs of His coming? It is certainly not to fill our head with more knowledge, with more theology. Jesus was concerned that believers might be deceived. That is why Jesus' first words in answer to the disciples' question was to warn them about deception. *Take heed that no one deceives you.* 'Be always on the lookout because in the end time many false teachers might lead you into error.'

The Lord Jesus is very concerned lest we be deceived. As we will see later in this chapter, deceivers after deceivers will come in the last days. Why do they come? Deceivers are like predators. They prey on people. They gobble up people in their weakness, in their confusion. Because as time

moves towards the end, there will be increasing stress. There will be increasing turbulence. There will be increasing chaos in the world. That creates confusion and uncertainty. And there comes this false teacher. He says, 'Just listen to me. I know the word of God. I spent a lot of time studying it. Follow me. You will be safe.' There he goes into the wilderness and many follow him. They will eventually perish in the wilderness. Because these people profit from an unstable situation in which they can influence people who are weak, gullible and easily fooled.

There is another reason why Jesus teaches us about the signs of the last things. He tells us what to expect so that when these things happen, we are not caught unprepared. And being prepared is a very important part of 'enduring to the end' (Matthew 24:13). Take the example of a fire. Are you prepared in your house for a fire? If you have thought about what you would do in case of a fire, how you would exit from your house, if you have bought yourself a fire extinguisher and you know remember where you put it and know how to use it, then when a fire comes, you are prepared. You have thought the issue out. Many people burn to death in the confusion because they did not know what to do. They were unprepared.

In our next lesson, we will look at the signs of the Lord's coming, and we will concentrate on the one that Jesus calls 'the abomination of desolation.'