

## THE SIGNS OF THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM AND OF THE END OF THE WORLD

Jesus' disciples had asked Him a double question, when the massive stones of the temple would be thrown down, and what will be the sign of His coming and of the end of the age would be. Jesus was answering both questions in Mark 13 (parallels Matthew 24 and Luke 21). We must try to determine which section refers to each. Perhaps the signs of the destruction of Jerusalem are pictures of the greater destruction to come.

Jesus did not encourage interest calculations to fix an exact date. He did not describe a chronological movement from one stage to another. He predicted signs in nature, such as famines and earthquakes, and signs in world history, such as wars between nations. He predicted signs in church history, including the spread of the Gospel over the world, the coming of false prophets, persecution from within, persecution from without, and a great falling away. Many would betray one another and hate one another. One of the signs to which we should pay particular attention is that people will live careless, materialistic lives, and restrict their concerns to this world and what the secular world has to offer. Elsewhere, Jesus compared the times to those before the flood at the time of Noah and before the destruction of Sodom. Then people were fully absorbed in the affairs of their lives in the world, without any inkling of the impending catastrophe that would sweep them away. Paul warned about the coming of Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2, and the coming of the Roman army against Jerusalem is probably an advance picture of that "devastating abomination", which would stand in the sacred place.

The signs that Jesus gave have been fulfilled repeatedly. They are long-range signs, and Jesus indicated that by saying, "The end is still to come." He called them "the beginning of birth pains." It is mistaken, therefore, to regard all of them as events that will occur only immediately before the end. If that were the case, people could relax, and not be concerned until they began to happen. The repeated theme in the whole section is the admonition to be watchful, because people do not know the time of Jesus' coming. The end could have come at any time during the history of the church, and it certainly could come right now.

The Christians in Judea in the time that led up to the destruction of Jerusalem read the signs, and followed Jesus' instructions to the letter. They fled to the mountains in Perea, and most of them escaped that dreadful carnage in AD 70, which the historian Josephus described in lurid detail.

Many Christians today expect a thousand years of peace on earth before the end of the world, either before Jesus returns, or after He returns. This expectation is quite wrong, and contradicts Scripture. Jesus predicted that life would become much more difficult before the end. He said that if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved. The origin of the word "millennium" was the "thousand years" in Revelation chapter 20. It cannot be understood literally. Satan has no physical body, and he cannot be bound with a physical chain. What binds Satan is the proclamation of the Gospel. The book of Revelation uses numbers symbolically. A thousand is ten cubed, for example. This period of followed by severe but short period of great trouble (Rv 20: 1-3). Elsewhere, Revelation contrasts 31f2 years (42 months or 1260 days) with a period of 3 ½ days of trouble. Seven is another symbolical number, and 31f2 are half of seven. It is therefore right to understand the "thousand years" as the major time of the New Testament, in which the Gospel would be preached for a witness to all nations, and bind Satan. During the short time of great trouble before the end, Satan will be loosed. The Gospel will no longer bind him. The view that a "millennium" begins with Christ's return a thousand years before the end of the world contradicts Jesus' statement that no one can predict when the end of the world will occur. So does the view that Christ will return after a thousand years of peace on earth. Both would make Jesus' warning to be watchful unnecessary.

Jesus warned against the coming of false Christs and false prophets. He pictured the wicked world as a carcass around which the vultures would gather. He insisted that the coming of the Son of Man would be sudden and unpredictable.

Some have understood Jesus' references to a darkened sun and moon, stars falling from heaven and the powers of heaven shaken as literal signs shortly before the end. Some have theorised about comets out of control, or a nuclear holocaust. Peter wrote that the earth would indeed be destroyed by fire (2 Pt 3). However, he included the heavens as well, the whole universe. That is much greater destruction than any nuclear holocaust that wiped out life on earth. In Second Peter, the principle of uniformity (a major aspect of the theory of evolution), and the ridicule of the very idea of a coming catastrophe are themselves signs of the end.

It is important to notice that the references to a darkened sun and moon, stars falling from heaven, and the powers of heaven being shaken are prefaced by "Immediately after the tribulation of those days." Jesus then goes on: "Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven." In other words, Jesus seems to mean the

destruction of the earth itself by these expressions. That is the context for the statement, "People's hearts will fail them as they fearfully wait for the things that are coming on the world." These phenomena appear just before the Son of Man comes on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. He sends out His angels with a loud trumpet call, to gather the elect.

Jesus teaches the need to be watchful in a series of parables: the five foolish virgins, and the fig tree's tender shoots and leaves. He described the watchful householder who knows that a thief may strike at night to emphasise the same need for watchfulness. He compared the watchful Christian with a faithful and wise servant whom his master had instructed to keep the door, to open it as soon as he returned. His parable about the talents is a parable of the kingdom, in which Jesus taught us that the Lord expects a return on His investment during this intervening time. In Matthew, the vision of the last judgment concludes the section in the glory of the age to come.

There are many positive elements here for believers. Being hauled before kings and governors because of Jesus' name would be an opportunity to bear witness to the Gospel. No harm would come to God's elect. Jesus said, "But not a strand of hair on your head will be lost. Gain your lives by your patient endurance." Believers should therefore face the coming end with confidence and hope. Jesus said, "When these things begin to happen, stand erect, and lift up your heads, because " your redemption is coming near."

When Jesus used a picture of the birth of a child. The long-range signs of the end are "birth pains." The troubles point to the new life ahead. Christians look forward to the new heaven and earth, the New Jerusalem, and the singing the new song, the song of Moses and of the Lamb. They know that, because Jesus has redeemed them from sin and death, and will raise their bodies to eternal life, they should face everything with a clear conscience, watchfulness, and patience. If God even now declares sinners justified in His sight by reckoning to them Jesus' own obedience, God will give the same verdict also on the Day of Judgment, for Jesus' sake. The judgment holds no uncertainty or reason for fear.