

Newsletter January 2017

In last month's newsletter, we discussed Daniel's prophecy of weeks in which we placed particular emphasis upon the final seven years prior to the return of the Messiah (i.e. the Christ) to establish his Kingdom on earth. In this month's newsletter, we shall continue that discussion by turning to the New Testament and the spoken words of Jesus in his Olivet Discourse, which are recorded in Matthew Chapters 24 through 25, Mark 13, and Luke 21. Inasmuch as Matthew provides the more extensive account of this discourse, we shall focus our study on that text, while supplementing it with additional information taken from the synoptic gospels of Mark and Luke. Matthew's extended account can be divided into three parts: (1) events leading up to the end of the current age – recorded in Chapter 24:4-44; (2) activities, moral responsibilities, and living conditions of those existing on earth in the interval of time prior to Jesus' return – recorded in Chapter 24:45-25:30; and (3) the judgment of Gentile nations based upon their treatment of God's people during that interval— recorded in Chapter 25:31-46. In this newsletter, we shall focus our full attention upon the first part of that discourse.

It must be understood that at the time this discourse on the Mount of Olives took place, Jesus' disciples knew nearly nothing of a Church, which would not come into existence until the day of Pentecost following Jesus' resurrection from the dead. There are only two mentions of a "church" by name in the Gospels (cf. Mt.16:18; 18:17). In these two instances, the underlying Greek word, *ekklesia*, is properly defined as any "religious assembly or congregation." Although we clearly understand that Jesus was referring to the New-Testament Church, largely consisting of Gentiles, that would occupy the interim age, his apostles likely interpreted it as a believing Jewish assembly that would go into the coming Kingdom age. Therefore, as we study the questions that the apostles asked and the answers that Jesus gave them in response, we must realize that Jesus' words were specifically intended to inform them as believing Jews inquiring about the end of their current age and the establishment of the long-awaited Kingdom of Heaven on earth by Jesus, their Messiah.

Jesus had previously delivered a full declaration, or manifesto, of his coming Kingdom in an extensive address commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, which is recorded in Matthew Chapters 5 through 7. Although Israel was astonished with the power of Jesus' words and were the benefactors of his many miracles, his claim to deity as the Son of God was consistently denied. Some believed that He was but the son of a common carpenter (cf. Mt.13:55), while still others saw Him as a personification of John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or some other prophet of old (cf. Mt.16:13-14). The Pharisees, who could not deny the authenticity of his many miracles, attributed them to the power of Satan (cf. Mt.12:24). At one point, even Jesus' family, having become concerned for his sanity and safety, sought to intervene in his ministry (cf. Mt.12:46). Confusion regarding Jesus' person abounded as an irrational hatred of Jesus continued to grow among Israel's religious rulers. Finally, Jesus brought all of this built-up animosity to a climax when He leveled seven scathing charges against the Scribes and Pharisees (cf. Mt.23:13-35) concluding with an emphatic statement of their judgment: "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate" (Mt. 23:38). In context, the Scribes and Pharisees' "house" must be interpreted as their religious office and jurisdiction, more specifically the Temple complex, while the word "desolate" is best interpreted as a forlorn uninhabited wasteland. At this point, any hope that Jesus' disciples may have harbored for some sort of peaceful accommodation with Israel's religious leaders was completely dashed. (cf. Mt. 26:3).

"And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to show him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? Verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Mt.24:1,2). This statement must have come as a terrible shock to his disciples considering that many of the massive stones making up the Temple were as much as 24 feet long and weighed many tons. Moreover, they could not ever imagine their Messiah's Kingdom existing without its central Temple. Later, as Jesus sat with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, four of his apostles Peter, James, John, and Andrew (cf. Mk.13:3) asked Him about the statements that He had made to the Scribes and Pharisees, which were so troubling to them: "And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world" (Mt. 24:3)? We must consider the apostles' questions within the context of their limited understanding of things they had been previously taught by Jesus and the events of his ministry that they had observed. Although Jesus had repeatedly told them He must suffer death at the hands of the religious authorities and would rise again on the third day (cf. Mt.16:21; 17:23; 20:16), they were mentally incapable of accepting that statement as fact; at one point Peter actually rebuked Him for saying such an unthinkable thing

(Mt.16:22). They consistently believed that Jesus would set up his Kingdom on earth within their immediate lifetimes.

After having passed judgment on the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus had said to them, “For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Mt. 23:39). Those words would have been processed by his disciples to mean that Jesus was planning to abandon Jerusalem without having established his Kingdom at that time. His words were likely understood to mean that He would return later after Israel’s religious rulers had repented and would then welcome Him as their Messiah. The disciples as yet knew nothing at all concerning the vast expanse of time that would take place between his departure and his future return (cf. Ep.3:1-12; 1Pe.1:10-12).

The four apostles asked Jesus three separate questions, which we shall now consider in turn. We begin with their first question as to when the Scribes and Pharisees were going to be judged and the massive Herodian Temple would be destroyed. Jesus had told the Scribes and Pharisees that this judgment would come upon them within their generation (cf. Mt.23:36), wherein a generation would commonly be understood as approximately 40 years. It is significant to note that Matthew did not choose to record Jesus’ answer to this first question concerning the destruction of the Temple, choosing instead to move on to the second prophetic reference of Jesus’ prophecy, which would take place in the last days. However, Luke records this more immediate reference in his gospel account as follows: “And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh” (Lu. 21:20). This verse speaks of the beginnings of the siege of Jerusalem as it was being surrounded by the armies of Titus in AD 69. Jesus’ next words instruct its inhabitants to flee not only the city of Jerusalem but to vacate all Judaea: “Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled” (Lu. 21:21,22).

“But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people” (Lu.21:23). The historian, Josephus, tells of the terrible famine within the city that had become so devastating that infants were sorely neglected and their bodies sought after for food – even by their own mothers. Jesus then speaks of those who would survive the siege with these words: “And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled” (Lu.21:24). Josephus tells of this massive slaughter and of the many captives that were led away to Rome to serve harsh masters there or to be sold as slaves in distant nations. Gentiles still occupy large portions of Jerusalem within today’s politically restored Israel.

That brings us to consider the apostles second question concerning Jesus’ return, and for this we again turn to the gospel of Matthew. When Jesus had lamented over Jerusalem (cf. Mt. 23:37) and had emotionally stated that He was to depart Jerusalem that had rejected Him (cf. Mt.23:39), his apostles were understandably confused. They wanted to know what sign would signal his return to Jerusalem. Jesus began to answer this question with a very stern warning: “And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many” (Mt.24:4,5). Many have falsely claimed to be the Messiah (the Christ) over the many centuries since Jesus’ ascension, but an ultimate deceiver, the antichrist, will come forth in the last days working many lying signs and wonders (cf. 2Th.□2:9). In context, the future antichrist will be a counterfeit Messiah. Israel will one day accept the antichrist’s false identity as their Messiah in complete disregard of this warning and in fulfillment of Jesus’ statement found in John 5:43.

Inasmuch as Jesus’ return will closely coincide with the end of the age, He began to integrate the apostles’ second and third questions into a single discourse at this point. It is most unfortunate that the *Authorized King James Version* of the Bible translates the Greek word *aion* in the text of Matthew 24:3 as “world,” which suggests an end to all existence, wherein *aion* only specifies a precise period of time or a specific “age.” The apostles understood *aion* as the end of their current age, which was to be immediately followed by a Kingdom age. Jesus began to answer the apostles third question when He spoke of wars and threats of wars that would take place during his absence: “And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet” (Mt.24:6). This answer implies a broad expanse of time that must take place before He returns. While wars and threats of wars can be seen to plague mankind throughout history, many Bible expositors believe that these will increase in intensity and frequency as we approach the end of the current age. In the next verse, Jesus begins to describe events just preceding the end of the age: “For nation shall

rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places” (Mt. 24:7).

It is easily demonstrated that those events characterize the first half of Daniel’s seventieth week during which the rule of the antichrist ultimately fails leading to world war, famine, and pestilences. Jesus said that “All these are the beginning of sorrows” (Mt.24:8). Throughout this 3½-year period, afflictions and persecutions will be very common. Initially these will be carried out against non-conforming Gentiles because of the pact that the antichrist has made with deluded Jews in Jerusalem enabling them to restore the practice of ceremonial law including animal sacrifice. However, there will be many Jews in that day who through the grace of God acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah; for their firm stand they will be heavily persecuted. If as we have put forth, the true Church will still be present on earth hidden away in small distributed enclaves, this persecution will extend to these Christian believers as well, if and when they are discovered. Moral depravity will have fully infiltrated the remaining temporal church of that day resulting in its total collapse into a dark apostasy as it arrogantly joins with the antichrist to persecute believing Jews as well as genuine Christian believers.

Jesus specifically spoke of the persecution of believing Jews in the Olivet Discourse when He said, “Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake” (Mt.24:9). These are Jews who have accepted Jesus as their Messiah, as did Jesus’ first-century disciples. “And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another” (Mt.24:10). This speaks of Jew on Jew persecution as many false prophets abound to deceive their persecutors (cf. Mt.24:11). “And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved” (Mt. 24:12,13). This speaks of the necessary perseverance of the believing Jew in that day who is hated by his brothers. “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come” (Mt.24:14). Here we must realize that the Gospel message has two significant aspects: the hope of a glorious Kingdom age for the Jew, and the hope of personal salvation for the Gentile. Here the emphasis must be placed upon the former aspect inasmuch as this text is exclusively applicable to Jews living in the last days.

In spite of the antichrist’s attempts to quash the Gospel of the Kingdom, the news of the imminence of Christ’s Kingdom Age will find its way into every nation on earth. The antichrist will become desperate to retain his power, inducing him to break his covenant with Israel at the mid-point of the seventieth week and to desecrate the Temple in Jerusalem with a satanic idol. This is the “abomination of desolation” spoken of by our Lord. “When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand)” (Mt.24:15; cf. Da.9:27). At that time, the antichrist will be fully exposed to the world and to Israel as the man of sin that he is, not the deliverer that many had supposed him to be. Satan in the person of the antichrist will set himself up as God in Jerusalem and demand the worship of all the men of earth. The idol of the antichrist, which can move and speak and has various astounding powers, will be set up in the Holy Place of the Temple to be worshiped, thus defiling the Temple with the abomination of desolation. This event will result in a mass exodus of all Jews out of Judea. Jesus describes that desperate exodus in words that echo the earlier mass exodus prior to the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in AD 70 (cf. Mt. 24:16–20). God will prepare many of the dispersed Jews a place of safety for the next 3 ½ years (cf. Re.12:6), but, a large number of orthodox Jews will remain in Jerusalem and Judea during the terrible affliction that is rapidly approaching.

Jesus refers to a period of time following the setting up of the abomination of desolation in Matthew 24:21, as a time of great tribulation. This will be a period of insane hatred and human slaughter the like of which the world has never before experienced. “For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened” (Mt.24:21,22). It should also be noted that the Great Tribulation Period that begins near the middle of Daniel’s seventieth week does not continue to the end of the seven-year period; instead, it will be cut short for the sake of his elect. This reference to the elect is specifically applicable to those believing orthodox Jews who chose to remain in Jerusalem.

At this point in his discourse, Jesus began to speak to the apostles of his future return. The suddenness of his appearance will be as rapid and as astonishing as a bright lightning stroke. “For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (Mt. 24:27). This is also a reference to the universal visibility of Jesus’ return by the inhabitants of the entire earth at one time – just as

lightning that strikes in the east is also visible in the west. The terrible corruption that occurred within the tribulation period demands the imminent judgment of God. Great corruption must always bring forth judgment just as a carcass brings forth vultures to cleanse the land. “For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together” (Mt.24:28).

Jesus then directly answers the apostles’ second question regarding a sign that will herald his return. “Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken...” (Mt.24:27–29; cf. Jl.2:30,31). After this great heavenly upheaval, the entire populace of the earth will see the Lord Jesus coming down out of Heaven in the same clouds of glory in which He had earlier ascended (cf. Ac.1:11): “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Mt. 24:30; cf. Da.7:13). The Gentile nations of the earth will mourn and tremble with great fear when they see this unambiguous sign, knowing that it signals the great judgment and vengeance of God. This judgment will begin as the great and terrible Day of the Lord dawns with seven judgments trumpeted down out of heaven – to be discussed in a future newsletter.

Before God begins to execute this series of judgments, a very important event must take place. “And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Mt.24:31). The elect that Jesus refers to here are 144,000 believing Jews, which will be gathered together to make up a believing Jewish remnant that will receive a seal of God in their foreheads protecting them to survive the wrath that is to come and to provide a powerful witness of the coming messianic Kingdom age on earth of which they will form the core of the nation of Israel (cf. Re. 7:1-8; 9:4).

As we set forth in last month's newsletter, we believe that the book of Revelation also describes a second event that will take place immediately following the sealing of the Jewish remnant – namely, the transport (i.e. Rapture) of the remnant Church into the air to be with Christ. The prophet Daniel had nothing at all to say about this event. In his prophecy, there is only an inference to the possibility of a Church age within an undefined expanse of time between when the Messiah would be cut off, and the beginning of a Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Jesus' disciples were believing Jews who as yet knew nothing of a vast interim age that would be comprised of a largely Gentile Church. Hence, in keeping with the context of his disciples' questions and current knowledge, Jesus does not mention this event. This premise regarding the timing of the Rapture is based solely upon a text contained in the book of Revelation, which we shall discuss fully in a later newsletter as we undertake a comprehensive study through the book of Revelation (cf. Re.7:9-17).

Although Jesus did not answer their second question in definitive terms as to precisely when He will return, He used a fig tree as an illustration of a way in which it would be possible for believers to tell when the end of the age is approaching. “Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.” (Mt.24:32,33). Just as we can know with certainty that summer is soon coming when we see leaves starting to appear on the trees, the living generation that observes the occurrence of prophetic events as predicted in Holy Scripture, particularly those found in the book of Revelation, it will be possible to know that the end of the age is rapidly approaching (cf. Mt.34,35). Many expositors see this fig tree as depicting the nation of Israel, which was politically restored in 1948. However, there is as yet little or no evidence that Israel as a nation is inclined to accept Jesus as their Messiah. Those “mature leaves” and fruit are yet to appear in the future.

Regarding the exact moment of Jesus’ return, He said to his disciples, “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only, but as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (Mt.24:36,37). Men’s wickedness abounded in Noah’s day in contrast to righteous Noah and his family. They went about with their lives as if the judgment of God did not exist (cf. Mt.24:38). When the great flood finally came, Noah’s family was kept safe in the ark to go forward into a future age, while the godless perished in the deluge. In like manner, the godly of the last days, who faithfully work and watch for Jesus’ return, will remain on earth to enter into the coming Kingdom age, while the unbelieving will be taken away in judgment (cf. Mt.24:40,41). “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come” (Mat 24:42) – for He will come in an unguarded moment much as does a thief in the night (cf. Mt.24:43).

In next month's newsletter we shall continue into parts 2 and 3 of the Olivet Discourse in which Jesus speaks of the vast interim age, which exists prior to the coming Kingdom age. © Arthur J. Smith January 2017