

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

MATTHEW 24 AND 25

AS the King passed out from the Temple, His disciples showed Him its buildings.

Why did they draw His special attention to the buildings of the Temple at this point?

- How often they had been there together,
- How often they had walked with Him the streets of Jerusalem,
- How often they had passed through the courts of the Temple,
- How often they had listened to His teaching,
- But they drew His special attention to the buildings now.

There can be little doubt that we must link this fact with what He had just said, **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered thy children together, . . . and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.”**

There was nothing that indicated desolation in the material aspect of affairs at that moment in Jerusalem. The Jews had never been more strongly attached to their Temple. Of course the ancient glory of Solomon’s Temple had passed and had never been replaced in some respects; but in other ways, the Temple existing was even finer than that existing in Solomon’s time.

As Jesus passed out of that Temple, His disciples came to Him to draw His attention to it, to its beauty, to its strength, to its solidity, in all likelihood to contradict the possibility of what He had said. It was as though they had said, Master, do you mean to say this house is ever to be desolate? Behold its beauty, we want Thee to examine it.

He immediately answered:

“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.”

That was a definite and positive prophecy, fulfilled quite literally, a little more than a generation later.

Nothing seemed so unlikely when our Lord said it.

The Hebrew people were then on excellent terms with their Roman Governors. There had been rebellions, there had been difficulties; but these things had been largely settled to all appearance. The perpetual principle of Roman government was never to interfere with the religion of a people unless the people made that religion the cause of disaffection. Everything seemed at the moment to be hopeful and prosperous.

The King passed on through the Temple to the Mount of Olives, and as He sat on the Mount of Olives the disciples came to Him, and said, **“Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the world?”**

We are very much in danger of taking this question out of its setting, and considering it as a later day question, and not understanding what these men really meant by it. We must put the question into relationship with what they had asked Christ to behold, and what Christ had said concerning the destruction of the Temple. That is where it began. It led to much larger things in His answer, but so far as the men who asked the question were concerned, that is where it began.

In the form in which these men asked their question, it is evident that they considered that the destruction of the Temple would be associated with His presence, and with the consummation of the age.

We often have the phrase before us, **“The end of the world.”**

This is not inaccurate; but our interpretation of it is inaccurate. We have spoken of it as though it meant, the break up of the material universe. We have had graphic pictures of a day of Judgment, when things are all burnt to a cinder, and pass away. Nothing of the kind is intended by this phrase, which also means, “the consummation of the age.”

And just as in the thirteenth chapter when our Lord spoke of the end of the world, He really referred to the ending of one particular age, so also in His reply to His disciples on this occasion.

Evidently in their mind they associated three things:

- The destruction of the Temple,
- The presence of Jesus,
- The ending of the age.

What they meant by the age, who shall say? Possibly they did not mean by the age exactly what Christ meant by it, but they had some conception of a purpose of God, which was working out toward a consummation. They were looking for the setting up of a material Kingdom on the earth.

We shall never understand this prophecy of Jesus, if we do not get back into the spirit of these men. We must know what their question meant. Volume after volume has been written on the subject, and almost invariably we start by tabulating these questions in the light of our interpretation of the answer. That may be quite legitimate, but it is well to begin with the question as it was asked.

Jesus had been strangely puzzling these men for months. Ever since Caesarea Philippi, they had been quite out of harmony with Him; they did not understand what He was doing. They had followed Him with intense eagerness until He came to Caesarea Philippi; and then He began to talk about a Cross, and they had never been able to understand Him since.

- They had watched Him come up to Jerusalem,
- They had seen His conflict with the rulers,
- They had heard His scathing denunciation and His parabolic inquisition,
- Finally, they had heard His actual sentence and doom;
- They had heard Him say, that the beautiful house was to be left desolate, and they said, Master, come and look at these buildings.

“Verily, I say unto you,” was His answer to them, **“There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.”**

Then they were silent. It was a silent walk out of the city, and down the hill, and up the other side of Olivet. Then on Olivet they looked at Him as He was looking toward the city, and they gathered to Him, and they said, Master, **“tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the world?”**

Such was their question.

What did they mean by **“these things,”** by **“Thy coming,”** by **“the end of the world?”**

One cannot believe that these men meant; When shall be Thy second advent? All that they were thinking of could only come by the way of the Second Advent, but they had no conception of it. The Second Advent must be prepared for fundamentally by the Cross and the Resurrection; and they had no apprehension of the Resurrection.

He had told them again and again that He must suffer, and that He would rise again, but they had never grasped the truth of Resurrection, or consented to the necessity for the Cross. They were in revolt against the idea of the Cross, and blind to the fact of the Resurrection.

So that if we take this question not in the way our Lord answered it, but in the way they asked it, we see that they evidently thought that presently, in some way or other He would pass out of sight, perhaps would escape from this pronounced hostility of the rulers. And yet they had heard Him say, that the very scene before them was to be one of devastation and desolation; and they said, **“Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the world?”**

If these things are to be, if this Temple is to be destroyed, if Thou art coming in judgment, how art Thou coming in judgment? when art Thou coming in judgment? Their question simply meant, When art Thou going to do these things? To this question Christ gave the longest answer He ever gave to any question recorded in the New Testament.

His answer occupies all that remains of chapter twenty-four, and all that lies within chapter twenty-five; and constitutes what we speak of as the prophecy on Olivet.

Here Christ became a prophet in the predictive sense of the word.

A prophet is a forth-teller of the Divine Will. He had been that, through all His ministry, but one element of prophecy, not the most important, but a most evident one, is the predictive element. Here Christ became a prophet in that sense. He had done this before, incidentally words had fallen from His lips which pointed to the future; but here, in quietness, speaking to His own disciples on Olivet in answer to their question, He spoke of things that were then wholly to come.

How important a study this is, and how careful we need to be in proceeding with it.

In attempting to see the general outline of the prophecy we at once see that the question of these men was one which indicated their desire to look into the future, and Christ did not altogether rebuke that desire.

He did warn them of the danger that beset investigation, yet He answered that desire so far as it was proper that it should be answered to inquiring and investigating minds.

In our Lord's answer, we find, first, a warning: "**And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you.**"

This is not to be passed over lightly. When Christ adopted the predictive element in prophecy He warned His disciples lest they should be led astray.

Whenever we speak of future things we are dealing with a matter full of importance, yet so full of peril that there have been all kinds of fanciful interpretations, all wandering from the clear declarations of Scripture, in order to fit in with some preconceived notions of future things, until we find in the Church of God to-day, vast numbers of God's own children, saints without a doubt, who have altogether given up any attention to what the Bible has to say concerning things to come.

Christ knew this danger. These men came to Him in the supreme moment when the shadows were upon Him, and when the great strain was before Him, and they asked Him, Tell us something about the future? And His first word was, "**Take heed that no man deceive you.**"

As we read these two chapters, we need that that warning should fall upon our spirits. "**Take heed.**"

We cannot read these things carelessly.

In the next place notice, in the reading of these chapters, the very evident and indeed most careful discrimination on the part of our Lord between the parts of their question, must be observed.

Their question was one, as they asked it, and expressed in His hearing all the puzzling emotion of their minds. When they said to Him, **“Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the world?”** - they thought of these things as closely connected.

One of the first things that we discover in the reading of the prophecy which followed is that Christ corrected the false impression. They said, **“These things . . . the sign of Thy coming . . . and of the end of the age.”**

He spoke of **“these things,”** that is, the destruction of Jerusalem, which He had foretold; and then of the coming of the Son of Man, and of the consummation. He said, **“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;”** the wars and the rumours of wars, leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, must come to pass, they were at hand; but He said, **“The end is not yet.”**

Then notice how He separated His coming from **“these things.”**

He had been warning them against false Christs, those who should come in His name and declare, **“Lo, here is Christ,”** and in reference to that He said, **“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,”** which simply means that the coming of the Son of Man shall be clearly manifest. There shall be no need of prophets to announce the fact that He has come, or invite men to visit Him.

He continued by declaring that the coming of the Son of Man would be followed by the mourning of the tribes of the earth, and the gathering together of His elect, that is, of all Israel. He finally told them, that **“of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but My Father only.”**

Thus He took the truth about the coming of the Son of Man, and removed it from the region of the destruction of the Temple.

It may be said that there are other senses in which He was spiritually present at the destruction of Jerusalem, and there is no doubt that that is so. Nevertheless, He separated His coming at the end of the age from the destruction of Jerusalem with great care, rather than associated it therewith.

He also declared, that these things of judgment and terror and tribulation and destruction, would be completed in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem.

This principle of discrimination on the part of the King ran through all this prophecy. He corrected the false impression of His disciples. He discovered to them the fact that the things of immediate judgment, and the presence of the Son of Man, and the end of the age, were separate.

If this principle of discrimination be discovered we find that for general teaching this great prophecy of our Lord falls into three parts, and the three parts are not chronologically divided.

- He first showed them what the future had in store for Israel after the flesh.
- He then showed them what the future had in store for His Church, that is, Israel after the Spirit.
- He then showed them what the future had in store for the Gentile nations; and the divisions are most clearly marked.

In verses five to thirty-five, the prophetic utterance concerned the excommunicated nation.

Beginning at verse thirty-six, “**But of that day and hour knoweth no man,**” and running right on to the thirtieth verse of the twenty-fifth chapter, He was dealing with the responsibility of His Church as the spiritual Israel of God in the parables that teach the Church’s position between the destruction of Jerusalem, and the ultimate gathering together of the elect at the coming of the Son of Man.

Finally in chapter twenty-five, verses thirty-one to forty-six, the King was looking on to the judgment of the nations.

All this is in harmony with the teaching of the Old Testament and with the teaching of the whole Bible, in which it is evident that God deals with men, never by an election which is to the exclusion of any who will turn to Him, but by an election which is to service, in order that through the elect the light may flash, the message be delivered, and the ultimate purpose of God be realized.

Our last thought must be of the King Himself, and of the position He here occupied, quite alone on Olivet.

Yes, the disciples were with Him; but are we ever quite so much alone as when people are around us who think they understand us, and do not? They did not understand Him; He was alone. The rulers had rejected Him, and while He sat on Olivet with His disciples they were planning and plotting for His life, and He knew it.

His face was resolutely set towards the Cross, for He saw more than the Cross, He saw His victory, and God’s victory. And yet for the moment He was alone. At that moment He knew the attitude of His enemies. They thought they were plotting in secret, but all was naked and open to His eyes.

He knew also the frailty of His friends, and how those men, eagerly inquiring for some glimpses into the future would presently, to the last man of them, turn their back upon Him. His Cross was just ahead, and yet behold Him on Olivet. Whether we understand all this prediction or not, let us come reverently into His presence. Here sat the King, despised and rejected, “**a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.**”

And yet He was looking through all the shadow to the light, looking beyond all the difficulties to the accomplishment. It is the King upon Whom our eyes are resting, Who, quite quietly, looking through all the darkness and difficulties in the future, saw His own crowning and His own vindication.

If He could so talk under the shadow of the Cross, then we can only be convinced again, as we ever must be convinced when we listen to Jesus only, that He is the Son of God as well as the Son of Man; Christ, in all the mystic meaning of that word which the New Testament writers perpetually convey.

A man whose claims were false, a man who had simply been deceived by the clamour of his own disciples, would break down in the presence of approaching death, when his disciples were about to leave him, and he knew it.

But our King is seen intimately acquainted with the fact that all the powers of the world were against Him, that His own friends were so frail that they would forsake Him, and yet He quietly indicated the processes of the coming centuries. And if any one question His accuracy about the more distant things, at least let them remember that they do so while admitting that the things He said about immediate desolation and the actual destruction of the city were carried out to the very letter, within a little more than a generation from the moment in which He spoke.

And so again it is the King we see, in all His dignity, and to that King let us anew yield ourselves, and listen attentively that we may know how to serve the King, for it is certain that we can only serve Him, as we hear Him and understand His teaching.

~ end of chapter 63 ~

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