Matthew - Commentaries by Paul Wilson

Prophetic Terms, Prophetic Terms: The Great Tribulation

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The time during which the apostasy will develop will be one of trial and trouble for the earth. The moment the Church is taken to heaven to be with Christ, God's plans for the earth will open. At present He is waiting in patience for men to be saved; then He will visit the earth with judgments of increasing intensity.

It is well to be thoroughly clear that no true believer in Christ will be left here during this time of tribulation. The book of Revelation gives many details as to the unfolding of the judgments that will fall on the earth; but in it, the Church is not seen on earth after the end of chapter three. It is seen in heaven in the symbol of the "elders" who display divine intelligence as to that which happens. There, as another has said, "They sing the sweetest songs in heaven; they worship more frequently and characteristically than any others. In them combine exalted position on thrones, active office as priests, as well as prophetic intelligence."

While the Church is still viewed on earth in the third chapter, there is a promise made to the overcomer that he will be kept from the "hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth." It is not that they are to be preserved through temptation (tribulation), but they are to be kept from the "hour" of it. They will be gone first, like Enoch, who went to heaven without dying, before the flood came. The whole world will feel the awfulness of that time, but Palestine and the apos-tate Jews, and the apostate Christian (so-called) nations will reap special vengeance.

When the Lamb in heaven takes the book of judgment to open its seven seals (chapter 5), the "elders" are seen seated on thrones.

Chapter 6 describes the opening of the first six seals, which are in the nature of providential judgments of God. It is God moving behind the scenes bringing forth horses and riders to fulfill His will.

The 7th chapter is a parenthesis in which a special remnant of Israel is sealed—faithful to God, they will be sealed for preservation. A countless number of Gentiles also will come out of "the great tribulation." The latter will be those who not having heard and refused the "gospel of the grace of God," will in that future time believe in God, and await the coming of Christ as King.

Chapter 8 resumes the unloosing of judgments as the seven trumpets begin to sound when the seventh seal is opened. The severity of the trials increases as the time progresses.

Read carefully Matthew 24:3-14. In these verses the Lord Jesus revealed the course of trouble right down to His return to reign. It is needful to see that in this portion it is the revelation of the coming tribulation as it will concern the Jews. Much confusion has been caused by applying this portion of the Lord's discourse on the mount of Olives to Christians or to our time. The disciples in Matthew 24 represent the faithful Jewish remnant who will suffer great persecutions. They will live in days of unparalleled trouble and also suffer from their own brethren who accept the antichrist. Their troubles will be from without and from within.

The disciples ask, "What shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the world?" This word "world" should have been translated "age," and the context shows that the world does not then come to an end, although a period of God's dealing with man will end. In answer to their question, the Lord informs them of general troubles to come, which He calls, "the beginning of sorrows." These earlier troubles correspond to the early judgments mentioned in the book of Revelation. The latter troubles are described in verse 21: "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."

While the whole period is often spoken of as "the great tribulation," this term, strictly speaking, only applies to the last half of it. The first part is only the "beginning of sorrows." The "great tribulation" will be the worst time of trouble the world will ever see. It will be a comparably short time, but will be exceeding fierce and hot. Both parts together will probably not be more than seven years. This is a very small space of time compared with God's other dealings with men; for instance, it is almost 2000 years that the gospel has gone forth.

The 24th chapter of Matthew supposes the Jews to be back in Palestine, and indeed some are already there. They will rebuild the temple and re-establish Jewish ritual. But very suddenly, at the middle of the seven years, their sacrifices and religious services will be stopped, and an idol will be set up in the temple—in the "holy place." At this point their apostasy becomes final, and ushers in that terrible "great tribulation" of short duration. The presence of the idol—image of the great head of western powers—in their temple will be the direct sign for any godly Jews to flee from Jerusalem. When that happens, they are to flee in such haste, that if they are in the field, they are not even to go into the house to get their clothes; desolations are at the very door.

Matthew 24 should not be confused with Luke 21. In the latter the Lord gave instructions for the early Christians to leave Jerusalem before it was destroyed by Titus in the year 70 A.D. At that time the signal to leave, was the presence of the Roman armies around the city. The Christians heeded the Lord's words, and were spared the awful slaughter when Jerusalem fell.

Daniel the prophet also foretold of the days to come. In chapter 12 he described the tribulation as a time of trouble such as never was before. This is the same time of which the Lord spoke, for there cannot be two such times, both of which are the worst. Let us notice the 11th verse: "And from the time that the daily sacrifice shall be taken away, and the abomination that maketh desolate set up, there shall be a thousand two hundred and ninety days."

The word "abomination" in Scripture plainly refers to an idol or to idolatry. Here we learn that it will not only be the signal for godly Jews to flee, it will be the point from which they can count time. The worst days of trouble will start at that point. Terrible as they will be, they are measured, and will only run their allotted time. Twelve hundred and ninety days is just three and one half years, plus an extra thirty days, (Jewish reckoning of time figures thirty days to each month.)

The idol is called the "abomination that maketh desolate" because that for this, God will send a strong one to scourge them. The same days are numbered in Revelation 11 as forty-two months, and 1260 days, either of which is three and one half years. Forty-two months are given in Revelation 13 as the time when the great head of the united western nations will defy and blaspheme God. He will be aided by Satan (called the dragon), and the antichrist described as a beast with two lamb-like horns).

The mass of the Jews who are then back in their land, with the antichrist as their leader, will make a league with the united western powers for their protection. Nevertheless, it will fail, for God will send a power from the north of Palestine as a desolator to scourge them. Listen to what God has said by Isaiah:

"Wherefore hear the word of the LORD, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem. Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves: . . . The hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place. And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it" (Isa. 28:14-19).

The prophet Jeremiah calls it "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7).

And now, dear fellow Christian, be assured that "the coming of the Lord draweth nigh." Soon we shall be off from this wicked world to be with our precious Saviour. We shall not be here during the time which we have been considering. God has spoken to us about it, as He would to friends. He has let us into the secrets of what is coming. It is with us as with Abraham; he did not dwell in Sodom, but God told him what was to happen to Sodom.

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! (Rom. 11:33).

(To be continued)

Simon Peter: May 2010, “Blessed Art Thou, Simon” “Get Thee Behind Me, Satan”

The two parts of this title stand out in sharpest contrast with each other, even though they were spoken to the same man by the same Speaker — the Lord Jesus Christ — and are found only six verses apart in Matthew 16.

Simon Peter was pronounced “blessed” after he had given expression to the wondrous truth concerning the Person of the Lord Jesus. The world at large and even the privileged Jewish people did not understand who He was. “He was in the world . . . and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, and His own received Him not.” But there was a little band attached to Him — attracted to His Person — although even to them it was only by revelation from the Father that they could see who the glorious One was.

The crowd had speculated as to who He was — a Jeremiah, Elijah, John the Baptist or one of the prophets. When the Lord asked His disciples who He was, Peter answered, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,” whereupon the Lord calls him “blessed,” for he was privileged to receive that revelation from the Father.

Happy Peter! happy disciples! to be able, by faith, to see in the lowly Jesus, the Christ — God’s Anointed — the Son of the living God (vs. 16). Oh that our hearts may take in more of His beauty, His glory! He will fill the range of our enlarged vision in heaven; may He become increasingly precious to us here — here where He is still despised and where men restrict His glory to that of a mere man — one of the prophets.

When we come to verse 21, the Lord “began . . . to show unto His disciples . . . that He . . . must . . . suffer many things . . . and be killed.” This was indeed a blow to them; they saw in Him God’s Son and God’s King, but they were slow to take in His sufferings and death. They looked for Him to take the kingdom and reign, but instead He must first suffer. The sufferings must precede the glory; the cross must come before the crown. It was natural for them to shrink from rejection and suffering for their Lord and Master, for if He was to be rejected and suffer in this world, they must receive the same: “The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord.”

Such thoughts provoked Peter to dare to rebuke the Lord and to say, as in one translation, “Be favorable to Thee, Lord, this shall in no wise be unto Thee” (vs. 22). Blessed Lord! He knew the source of such thoughts; Satan had come to Him before, in the wilderness, to turn Him out of the pathway of dependence and obedience as a man; now he was using a chief apostle to urge the Lord to shun the path of reproach and suffering. The Lord instantly recognized in Peter’s words another effort of Satan and promptly said to Peter: “Get thee behind Me, Satan: thou art an offense unto Me: for thou savorest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men” (vs. 23).

Poor Peter — only shortly before he was called “blessed”; now he is rebuked as being the instrument in the hands of Satan. Once the receiver of divine revelation as to the Son, he now is the mouthpiece of the enemy. But such is man; he is not to be trusted. It is natural to the human heart to shrink from reproach and suffering, and also to seek honor in and from this world. How easily Peter’s mind was on the things that are of men.

And we, who have greater light than Peter had at that time, are so easily influenced by the things that are of men that we shrink from a little reproach for Christ and seek some of this world’s honor or favor. Sometimes we sing:

“Farewell, farewell, poor faithless world, With all thy boasted store; We’d not have joy where He had woe — Be rich where He was poor.”

And how easily we drop back from the expressions of our lips! Sometimes we may be like Peter, when he enjoyed divine revelation, and rejoice in Christ Jesus our Lord, and at other times we may be engrossed with the things “that be of men.”

Sadder yet! We may speak of the glories of the Son of God and encourage others at one time, and at another, if not in the current of God’s thoughts, give advice to fellow followers of a rejected Christ that will be the advice of Satan himself. How easily we are influenced by the “things that be of men” and may be, by act or word, the instrument of evil persuading some young Christian (or older one) to seek worldly gain, position, honor or some of the applause of the very world that Christ died to, and died to deliver us from. May we be more careful in our thinking, that it may not be of this world’s philosophy — “the things that be of men” — and may we be on our guard against giving the advice of Satan to a follower of a rejected Christ.

On the other side of this point, may we be careful about receiving such advice. May “the things that be of God” so influence our thinking that when we receive advice to seek the world’s advancement, popularity, wealth, station, or such like, we may discern the voice of the enemy. This should not be construed to mean that an employee may not accept a better position in his work, but even in doing that he should first seek the Lord’s guidance and weigh the consequences. One may well ask himself if he can carry out the duties of the better position heartily as to the Lord — whether there would be certain demands which he could not meet with a good conscience. The higher we get in the world, the closer we get to the prince of it. Many who went on happily with the Lord when in humbler stations have been caught in the world’s vortex when in higher places, to the Lord’s dishonor and their loss. We are responsible for our conduct and must watch against the influence of the world, even though it may come from the lips of one who at another time may have thrilled our hearts as he spoke of heavenly things and the glories of the Son of God.

The Lord follows His word to Peter with a word to all the disciples: “Then said Jesus unto His disciples, If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for My sake shall find it” (vss. 24-25).

P. Wilson

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