

SIGHTING THE “END”

(A MATTHEW 24 SERIES)

PART 1

God’s Ideal Thwarted

“It was God’s design that the **whole earth** be prepared for the first advent of Christ, **even as today** the way is preparing for His second coming.”¹ The colorful, intricate rites and ceremonies of ancient Israel’s worship experience pointed to a spiritual kingdom that the Messiah would inaugurate at His coming. But His arrival was virtually unknown and He was unhonored. Tragically, the Hebrew people, assigned to represent God’s holy ideals, failed to recognize their Savior. The **fullness of time**, however, demanded He not delay. Jesus came and visibly manifested throughout His life the nature of that kingdom. His life and death became an illustration of that elevated spiritual kingdom of which every person might become a citizen. The Holy Spirit was then sent to establish in each willing human heart the moral beauty of holiness. *“Even the Spirit of truth; ... for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you”* (John 14:17). God had to then identify a new people described as those *“whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit”* (Ephesians 2:21-22).

The failure of the Jewish nation is a lesson book filled with fearful warnings. God had assigned to them a rescue mission for planet earth. Their elevated calling was marred, then shattered by open rebellion against their Leader. *“He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not”* (John 1:10). Why?

“God designed that the temple at Jerusalem should be a continual witness to the high destiny open to every soul. But the Jews had not understood the significance of the building they regarded with so much pride. They did not yield themselves as holy temples for the Divine Spirit. The courts of the temple at Jerusalem, filled with the tumult of unholy traffic, represented all too truly the temple of the heart, defiled by the presence of sensual passion and unholy thoughts. In cleansing the temple from the world’s buyers and sellers, Jesus announced His mission to cleanse the heart from the defilement of sin,—from the earthly desires, the selfish lusts, the evil habits, that corrupt the soul. ‘The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of hosts. But who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth? for He is like a refiner’s fire, and like fullers’ soap: and He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and He shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver.’ Malachi 3:1-3.”²

In spite of the massive failure of that ancient people, their worship types and incidents recorded in the Bible provide word pictures for us by which God still teaches us spiritual truths. In them we are to see things in a worldwide scope with corresponding likeness in God’s spiritual kingdom, which is ‘spiritually discerned’ (I Corinthians 2:14).³ They can help rescue us from their failures.

¹ White, Ellen G.; *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 703-704.

² White, Ellen G.; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 161

³ Were, Louis F.; *Three Angels* (LMN Publishing International, Inc.; St. Maries, ID), p. 31.

Ancient Israel – End-Time Metaphor

The Christian world is so riveted on the Jewish people continuing as God's specially chosen, that many scholars misapply prophecy.^{4,5} This limits greatly their understanding of what "present truth" is for the last generation.

Jesus, however, used the failure of the Jewish nation to develop remarkable metaphors for apocalyptic prophecy related to another people called the 144,000 and a "remnant." The failure of "Jerusalem" and its leaders parallels the story of "Babylon" and its fall at the end. Each serves as a stunning warning of what "might have been" and what "will be" if rebellion is cherished.

God's rejection of the Jewish nation as His special corporate body is a stark notice to all end-time believers that rejection of the covenant conditions of grace will lead to eternal loss.

"Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God warned them not to forget that the blessings they were to enjoy there if they cooperated with Him would come as divine gifts (see Deut. 8:7-14), not primarily as the result of their own wisdom and skill (vs. 17-19). Solomon made his great mistake when he failed to realize the secret of Israel's prosperity, and with a few noteworthy exceptions, leaders and people sank lower and lower from generation to generation until apostasy was complete (Isa. 3:12; 9:16; Jer. 5:1-5; 8:10; Eze. 22:23-31; Micah 3).

"The kingdom was divided following Solomon's death (see 1 Kings 11:33-38). This division, though tragic, served to insulate, for a time, the southern kingdom, Judah, from the tide of idolatry that soon engulfed the northern kingdom, Israel (see Hosea 4:17). In spite of the bold and zealous efforts of such prophets as Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea, the northern kingdom rapidly deteriorated and was eventually carried into Assyrian captivity. Its people were given 'no promise of complete restoration to their former power in Palestine' (PK 298).

"Had Judah remained loyal to God its captivity would not have been necessary (PK 564). Again and again He had warned His people that captivity would be the result of disobedience (see Deut. 4:9; 8:19; 28:1, 2, 14, 18; Jer. 18:7-10; 26:2-6; Zech. 6:15; etc.). He had told them that He would progressively diminish their strength and honor as a nation until they should all be carried away into captivity (Deut. 28:15-68; 2 Chron. 36:16, 17). God designed that Israel's experience should prove to be a warning to Judah (see Hosea 1:7; 4:15-17; 11:12; Jer. 3:3-12; etc.). But Judah failed to learn the lesson, and a little more than a century later her apostasy, also, was complete (see Jer. 22:6, 8, 9; Eze. 16:37; 7:2-15, 12:3-28; 36:18-23). The kingdom was overturned (Eze. 21:25-32) and the people removed from the land, which had been theirs only by virtue of the covenant relationship (Hosea 9:3, 15; Micah 2:10; cf. Hosea 2:6-13). Deported to Babylon, they were to learn in adversity the lessons they had failed to learn during times of prosperity (Jer. 25:5-7; 29:18, 19; 30:11-14; 46:28; Eze. 20:25-38; Micah 4:10-12; DA 28), and to impart to the heathen Babylonians a knowledge of the true God (PK 292, 371, 372).

"God did not forsake His people, even during the Captivity. He would renew His covenant with them (Jer. 31:10-38; Eze. 36:21-38; Zech. 1:12, 17; 2:12), including its accompanying blessings (Jer. 33:3, 6-26; Eze. 36:8-15). All that had been promised might yet come to pass if they would only love and serve Him (Zech. 6:15; cf. Isa. 54:7; Eze. 36:11; 43:10, 11; Micah 6:8;

⁴ Nolland, John; *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Grand Rapids, MI), p. 879.

⁵ Turner, David L.; *Matthew* (Baker Publishing Group; Grand Rapids, MI), p. 561.

Zech. 10:6). According to His beneficent purpose, the covenant promises were to have 'met fulfillment in large measure during the centuries following the return of the Israelites from the lands of their captivity. It was God's design that the whole earth be prepared for the first advent of Christ, even as to-day the way is preparing for His second coming' (PK 703, 704).

"It is important to note that all the Old Testament promises looking forward to a time of restoration for the Jews were given in anticipation of their return from captivity (see Isa. 10:24-34; 14:1-7; 27:12, 13; 40:2; 61:4-10; Jer. 16;14-16; 23:3-8; 25:11; 29:10-13; 30:3-12; 32:7-27, 37-44; Eze. 34:11-15; 37; Amos 9:10-15; Micah 2:12, 13; etc.). Daniel himself so understood these promises (Dan. 9:1-8). Captivity, he said, had 'confirmed' the 'curse' that came because of disobedience (vs. 11, 12), and Jerusalem lay desolate (vs. 16-19). Then Gabriel came to reassure him of the restoration of his people and the eventual coming of the Messiah (vs. 24, 25). But, said the angel, Messiah would be rejected and 'cut off,' because of the abominations of Israel, and Jerusalem and the Temple would once more lie waste (vs. 26, 27). Between the return from Babylon and the rejection of the Messiah, Israel was to have its second and final opportunity as a nation to cooperate with the divine plan (see Jer. 12:14-17). 'Seventy weeks' – 490 years of literal time – were 'determined' upon the Jews, 'to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness' (Dan. 9:24).

"Eventually, however, it became apparent that the Jews would never measure up to the standard God required of them, as Malachi makes evident (chs. 1:6, 12; 2:2, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17; 3:7, 13, 14; PK 705). Formal worship took the place of sincere religion (D 29; cf. John 4:23, 24; 2 Tim. 3:5). Human traditions came to be honored in place of the revealed will of God (see on Mark 7:6-9). Far from becoming the light of the world, the Jews 'shut themselves away from the world as a safeguard against being seduced into idolatry' (PK 708; see Deut. 11:26, 27; cf. Mark 7:9). In their meticulous attention to the letter of the law they lost sight of its spirit. They forgot that God abhors a multiplication of the forms of religion (Isa. 1:11-18; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:7; Mal. 2:13), and asks of man nothing 'but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly' with his God (Micah 6:8; cf. Matt. 19:16, 17; 22:36-40). Yet, in mercy, God still bore with His people, and in due time Messiah came (Mal. 3:1-3; DA 37). To the very last, 'Christ would have averted the doom of the Jewish nation if the people had received Him' (PK 712)."⁶

But their rejection was complete. This is occurring once again in the Christian world. The issues behind "Babylon's" failure are similar to those of the Hebrew people. Knowing the details is important. A call to come out of Babylon must be accompanied by a reason "why!" This is one reason for these studies. God's reaction to this repeated apostasy? *"And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird"* (Revelation 18:2).

Developing Lessons from that Rejection

Drawing upon the familiar agrarian life of the Jewish people, Jesus gave a convicting parable regarding "His vineyard" (Matthew 21:33-44). A landowner planted a vineyard, encircled it with a protective hedge and made a winepress and tower. It was complete, awaiting only the vintage. He put its care and management to caretakers, called husbandmen.

⁶ *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, pp. 31-32.

This story was drawn from Isaiah 5:1-2. God chose a people out of this world to be trained and educated by Christ. But they turned against Him! His plaintive cry is heard: *“What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briers and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it”* (Isaiah 5:4-6).

“Through the Jewish nation it was God’s purpose to impart rich blessings to all peoples. Through Israel the way was to be prepared for the diffusion of His light to the whole world. The nations of the world, through following corrupt practices, had lost the knowledge of God. Yet in His mercy God did not blot them out of existence. He purposed to give them opportunity for becoming acquainted with Him through His church. He designed that the principles revealed through His people should be the means of restoring the moral image of God in man.”⁷

“The priests and teachers were not faithful instructors of the people.”⁸ God sent His prophets and messengers to those caretakers – but they were treated as enemies. Then the owner sent His Son. Surely they will reverence Him! He, too, was killed.

“Christ, the Beloved of God, came to assert the claims of the Owner of the vineyard; but the husbandmen treated Him with marked contempt, saying, We will not have this man to rule over us. They envied Christ’s beauty of character. His manner of teaching was far superior to theirs, and they dreaded His success. He remonstrated with them, unveiling their hypocrisy, and showing them the sure results of their course of action. This stirred them to madness. They smarted under the rebukes they could not silence. They hated the high standard of righteousness which Christ continually presented. They saw that His teaching was placing them where their selfishness would be uncloaked, and they determined to kill Him. They hated His example of truthfulness and piety and the elevated spirituality revealed in all He did. His whole life was a reproof to their selfishness, and when the final test came, the test which meant obedience unto eternal life or disobedience unto eternal death, they rejected the Holy One of Israel. When they were asked to choose between Christ and Barabbas, they cried out, ‘Release unto us Barabbas!’ Luke 23:18. And when Pilate asked, ‘What shall I do then with Jesus?’ they cried fiercely, ‘Let Him be crucified.’ Matthew 27:22. ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ Pilate asked, and from the priests and rulers came the answer, ‘We have no king but Caesar.’ John 19:15. When Pilate washed his hands, saying, ‘I am innocent of the blood of this just person,’ the priests joined with the ignorant mob in declaring passionately, ‘His blood be on us, and on our children.’ Matthew 27:24, 25.”⁹

The Jewish leaders pronounced their own sentence of doom and eternal loss. As the meaning of this parable suddenly became apparent to these men (that ***they were the evil caretakers***), Jesus concluded: *“Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof”* (Matthew 21:43).

Jesus is about to describe a template for end-time prophecy (Matthew 24). There, He will objectively show what the final outcome is for those in rebellion – and for those who remain loyal.

⁷ White, Ellen G.; *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 286.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 293-294.

He anticipates another apostasy and has already warned: *“Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 7:21). The Jewish nation would soon become a metaphor for another group claiming to belong to God – “Babylon.” It, too, will become cursed and come to an end (Revelation 16:19). Apostasy ends in desolation – eternal loss. Prophecy matures how the whole world must face a final moral choice between God and Satan. Then there will be no turning back – all decisions will be irrevocable. The risk of being in a similar state as the Jews is high, and their example serves us as a warning.

With a heart aching in a struggle of separation, Jesus pronounced a series of curses on the nation (Matthew 23). These **woes** were related to a progressive failure over a 1500-year span of the Jewish nation. They were also Christ’s preamble to the apocalyptic messages that would shortly follow in the next chapter. They remain a warning today.

In that last temple discourse He denounced the Jewish leaders – especially the Pharisees. He concluded with these scathing words:

“Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?” (Matthew 23:33).

“Verily I say unto you, All these things [curses] shall come upon this generation” (Matthew 23:36).

In verity a generation had just ended when the temple was burned, the city of Jerusalem destroyed and over a million people were killed by the Roman armies. The ultimate divine **end** that He had predicted of “desolation” occurred. Then another *desolation* was foretold by Christ, related to earth’s apocalyptic end (Matthew 24:15). The woes He just portrayed would be replicated for a people called “Babylon.”

It was difficult emotionally for Jesus to “depart” that day from the “central precincts” of His people – the temple. Earlier in the week He wept over Jerusalem. Now, with pathos in His voice, the rending of His heart with a “last goodbye” and knowing this “closure” would be permanent, He cried out: *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you **desolate**”* (Matthew 23:37-38).

Christ’s curses were not a vague message of generalities. He outlined the core issues that mock and defy the heavenly kingdom. Looking at Luke’s record, we see even greater details presented:

- *“For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation”* (Luke 19:43-44).
- In the past, similar devastating judgments came to this nation because of apostasy. This narrative is written in future tense. Jesus conveys the **final** devastation of the Jews. They are facing their last chance to repent. A final **end** is in sight.

The Jewish people did not respond to the Messiah's eschatological warning.¹⁰ With the deepest of emotion, Jesus outlined the fearful consequences of their willful ignorance. Their curse would be twofold:

1. Against the physical city: "they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another."
2. Against the inhabitants – illustrated in its most tender portrayal: "and shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee."

"Christ's words to the priests and rulers, 'Behold, your house is left unto you desolate' (Matt. 23:38), had struck terror to their hearts. They affected indifference, but the question kept rising in their minds as to the import of these words. An unseen danger seemed to threaten them."¹¹ And – it eventually came.

The Temple Exit – a Paradox

"Could it be that the magnificent temple, which was the nation's glory, was soon to be a heap of ruins? The foreboding of evil was shared by the disciples, and they anxiously waited for some more definite statement from Jesus. As they passed with Him out of the temple, they called His attention to its strength and beauty. The stones of the temple were of the purest marble, of perfect whiteness, and some of them of almost fabulous size. A portion of the wall had withstood the siege by Nebuchadnezzar's army. In its perfect masonry it appeared like one solid stone dug entire from the quarry. How those mighty walls could be overthrown the disciples could not comprehend."¹²

"And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to show him the buildings of the temple" (Matthew 24:1).

This structure was a Solomon's temple "replacement," begun under a decree of Cyrus' and finished by Darius I (515 B.C. – Ezra 6:15). Herod later embellished its architecture, making it "gleaming with beauty."¹³

Though its physical marvels are now drawing the disciples' attention, the glory of God's presence ***never*** returned after its difficult departure (Ezekiel 11:22-23) in 586 B.C., just before the destruction of that first temple (predicted in Jeremiah 9:14, 9:11; Micah 3:12). ***The disciples must have wondered if this second temple demise might signal the end of the world.***

Christ's departure from this worship center did signal the last divine appeal – in the person of the Messiah – that the Jewish nation would ever have. "Slowly and regretfully Christ left forever the precincts of the temple."¹⁴

The Jewish nation was to cease being God's chosen people. Its leaders had been cursed. It is as if the disciples are saying: "Is it really that bad? Look how beautiful the temple really is!"

¹⁰ Bock, Darrell L.; *Matthew* (Baker Academic; Grand Rapids, MI), p. 1563.

¹¹ White, Ellen G.; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 627.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Hagner, Donald A. (quoting Josephus, 6.4.8, p. 267), *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nelson Reference & Electronic, Division of Thomas Nelson Publishers), vol. 33b, p. 687.

¹⁴ White, Ellen G.; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 626.

This structure had symbolized the **moral character** of the nation. It was where God had been worshiped and honored.

This structure was renowned for its beauty and known throughout the Roman world.¹⁵ The disciples undoubtedly regarded it as a most holy site, in the world's most holy city. Cursing its leaders seemed like a curse on the temple **and** the people. Jesus does respond shortly.

“And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple” (Matthew 24:1a).

Associating this phrase with Mark 13:1-3 suggests that His departure was an **abandonment** (cf. I Samuel 4:21-22; Jeremiah 12:7; Ezekiel 8:12, 9:9, 11:23) of all that the temple represented.¹⁶ This was shortly highlighted.

“Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent” (Matthew 27:50-51). It ceased to have any divine value.

They made their way across the Kidron Valley, then ascended the slopes of the Mount of Olives. From the temple mount to the Olivet heights was direct and didn't require going through Jerusalem. They were likely above the elevation of the temple and looking back when the disciples drew Jesus' attention to that edifice. But He had a different reaction!

“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” (Matthew 24:2).

If the disciples had any desire to diffuse “tension” that Jesus exhibited towards the Jewish leaders and the temple, it failed.

“And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things?” (Matthew 24:2a).

This question seems rhetorical on His part. It is as though He is saying: “I want **you** to look carefully at these magnificent structures. “Are you seeing all of them?” They *had been* the ultimate symbol of God's glory (cf. Jeremiah 7:4). “There is another emotion I want you to have!”

What now follows is symbolic of the ultimate end of all apostasy – **desolation**. Repeatedly in apocalyptic messages there is a sin/transgression (abomination) that God says will provoke His wrath and terminate in **desolation** (nothing is “structurally” left).

“Verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down” (Matthew 24:2b).

This stunning revelation, associated with the curse he gave the Pharisees with the question, *“How can ye escape the damnation of hell?”* (23:33), led the disciples again to conclude that He was referring to the very end of the world.

¹⁵ Keener, Craig S.; *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Grand Rapids, MI), p. 559.

¹⁶ Nolland, *op. cit.*, p. 958.

This would be the destruction of the second temple! It **must** signal the “end of the age.” Having not one stone upon another refers to total destruction and symbolizes a reversal of the building process – a “decreation” process (Haggia 2:15).¹⁷

In Luke’s narrative (19:42, 44), he notes that judgment will come because they knew not the **time** of the Messiah’s eschatological coming.¹⁸

A framework has been constructed for Jesus to now explain in greater detail earth’s **final** apocalyptic end and the special meaning that surrounding the Second Advent. In viewing the terrifying end of the Jewish nation, we discover a greater horror for the end of the world. However, in sighting that end, the consummation of redemptive hope shines with brilliance.

(to be continued)

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¹⁷ Hagner, *op. cit.*, p. 688.

¹⁸ Bock, *op. cit.*, p. 1563.