

WHY FOUR GOSPELS? THE FOUR-FOLD PORTRAIT OF CHRIST

in
Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

by

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CHAPTER TWELVE

THE LAST GREAT PROPHETIC UTTERANCE OF THE KING

Matthew 24:1-25:46

Between His official rejection by the nation of Israel and His cross, the Lord Jesus gave His disciples a comprehensive prophetic outline of events to take place as this age draws to a close and at His return in glory to take His rightful throne.

We call it the Olivet discourse, the last great prophetic utterance of Israel's rejected Messiah and King. It is recorded in the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth chapters. While Mark and Luke give part of this message, yet they do not go into as much detail as Matthew does; and all of the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew is found nowhere else in the Scriptures. The presentation of this Olivet discourse according to Matthew is particularly Jewish; and is, therefore, in keeping with the Holy Spirit's purpose for the book.

The Lord had just foretold the destruction of the temple; and as He sat upon the Mount of Olives, where His feet shall stand in that day when He returns in glory, His disciples asked Him, saying,

“Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?” (24:3).

The **“coming”** that the disciples had in mind was the manifestation of Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. They did not have in mind the translation of the church; for, as we have already seen, that was a **“mystery”** revealed later through the Apostle Paul.

These disciples were Jews well versed in the Old Testament, the pages of which are filled with the prophecy of **“the day of the Lord”** and the coming of the King to take the reins of government.

That is the **“coming”** which the disciples had in mind.

The Olivet discourse, therefore, is largely a description of “**the seventieth week**” of Daniel, that short period which will run its course between the rapture, or translation, of the church and the manifestation of Christ as King.

The disciples, to whom these words were spoken, represent the faithful remnant in Israel at the time of the end of this age. They occupied the same relationship to Christ as will the Jewish remnant in that coming day. Because the church was at that time still in the future, they were not members of the church when the Lord gave them this great prophecy, but they were individual Jewish believers. It was not until the Day of Pentecost that they became members of the church, which is the body of Christ.

Therefore, in the Olivet discourse they aptly represent the faithful Jewish remnant during the tribulation period, that company who will occupy the same relationship to the Lord as did the disciples before Pentecost.

In answer to their question, the Lord cast His all-seeing eye down the age, and gave them a detailed description of its closing hours. His words, as recorded in Matthew 24:6-14, are descriptive of the first three and one-half years of “**the seventieth week**” of Daniel, and are called by the Lord “**the beginning of sorrows.**”

The last three and one-half years, described from verse fifteen to the end of the chapter, form the period of the tribulation, the greatest of all sorrows, called in Jeremiah “the time of Jacob’s trouble.”

1. “The Beginning of Sorrows.”

Let us look first at the words descriptive of the first three and one-half years. The Lord emphasizes seven conditions which will prevail in that day

- (1) False Christs;
- (2) “**wars and rumours of wars**”;
- (3) famine;
- (4) pestilence;
- (5) many hated and killed as martyrs;
- (6) earthquakes;
- (7) the preaching of “**the gospel of the kingdom.**”

These seven conditions harmonize minutely with the seven seals of Revelation, which are also descriptive of the first three and one-half years of Daniel’s prophecy. When the first seal is broken, a white horse appears. The rider is the Antichrist who will go forth “**conquering, and to conquer**” (Revelation 6:2). The breaking of the second seal brings into view a red horse, symbolic of war.

“**And power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword**” (Revelation 6:4).

The breaking of the third seal brings into view the black horse of famine. (See Revelation 6:5, 6). The breaking of the fourth seal reveals the pale horse of pestilence and death. **“And his name that sat on him was Death”** (Revelation 6:8). With the breaking of the fifth seal there is a martyred company; with the sixth, a great earthquake; and with the seventh, a silence in heaven, during which the 144,000 Jews — 12,000 from each tribe — are called out to preach **“the gospel of the kingdom.”**

Of course, all of the conditions, with the exception of the last, have been characteristic of the age ever since the Lord went away. There have been false Christs and false prophets. There have been wars, famines, pestilences, earthquakes, martyrs. But these things are only shadows of the same disorders which will be greatly intensified during **“the seventieth week”** of Daniel. As we have seen, the preaching of **“the gospel of the kingdom”** will be the revival of the message preached by John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus and His disciples at the beginning of His public ministry. We have already pointed out the difference between **“the gospel of the kingdom”** and **“the gospel of the grace of God.”** **“The gospel of the grace of God”** is the message being preached today; and through it the church, which is the bride of Christ, is being formed. **“The gospel of the kingdom,”** however, has to do with the earthly kingdom of Jesus, **“the Son of David”** and Heir to David’s throne. It will be preached again after the translation of the church and at the beginning of **“the seventieth week”** of Daniel.

This preaching is to be done by the 144,000 sealed ones of the seventh chapter of Revelation, 12,000 Jews from each tribe of Israel. The veil of blindness will be lifted from their eyes, and they will begin their preaching immediately after the church has been translated. **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”** will be their message as they herald the coming King, and set His claims over against the claims of the Antichrist. A great multitude will hear and receive this truth. They will be the nations whom the Lord compares to **“sheep”** in Matthew 25:31-46. And they will enter the earthly kingdom when it is established by the returning King.

2. *“The Time of Jacob’s Trouble.” The prophecy of the second half of Daniel’s “seventieth week” begins with Matthew 24:15:*

“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:) then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains . . . For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be” (verses 15-22).

From the ninth chapter of Daniel we learn that in the midst of **“the seventieth week”** the Antichrist will break his covenant with Israel, and the **“abomination of desolation”** will be set up. An **“abomination”** to a godly Israelite was an idol of some sort; and the setting up of the **“abomination of desolation”** refers to the erection of an image of the Antichrist, who will require that divine honors be paid him.

A mark on the forehead and on the right hand will be a token of allegiance to this “beast,” without which no man shall be able to buy or sell. In other words, the ultimatum will be, **“Worship me, or starve.”** This will be the signal for the beginning of **“the great tribulation.”**

And in verses 16-26 of this chapter the Lord Jesus has given instruction to the faithful Israelite of that day, who refuses to worship a false Christ, telling him how to escape from the terrible persecution that will follow his refusal to worship the Antichrist:

“Then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains: let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house: neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes. And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days! But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day: 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.”

Doubtless the place to which this faithful remnant in Israel will flee is the land of Moab, on the east of Jordan, where there are cities that have been preserved for thousands of years. Why is it that other cities have passed away, while the cities of Petra remain? They stand just as they did thousands of years ago, marvelously preserved, almost inaccessible; and yet during these thousands of years no one has lived in them. We have reason to believe that the persecuted Jewish remnant will take refuge in these cities; for Daniel 11:41 tells us that Moab is one of the countries that will escape out of the hands of the Antichrist.

Following the description of the persecution of those coming days, the Lord again warns against false Christs, because the delusions in that time of trouble will be powerful. The satanic cults of today, such as Christian Science, Mormonism, Theosophy, Spiritism, and Russellism, are only a shadow of what will be prevalent in that day. Many of the delusions of that hour will distort the truth of the Lord’s return, even as many do today; for in connection with this warning, Christ makes clear the manner of His appearance, saying,

“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” (Matthew 24:27). What a marvelous sight that will present!

The whole universe, radiant with His glory, will see the King coming with power and great glory!

3. The Parable of the Fig Tree.

The reference to the fig tree and the putting forth of its leaves, in connection with these events, is very significant.

The fig tree is a type of the Jewish nation, and the putting forth of its leaves is understood when connected with the cursing of the fig tree that had taken place previously in our Lord’s ministry, even as we have already stated. The fig tree covered with leaves but destitute of fruit was a picture of the state of Israel at the time the Lord came to present Himself as Israel’s King. The leaves of profession were there, but there was no fruit of holiness in reality. The cursing and the withering of the fig tree foreshadowed what was to follow Calvary — the scattering of Israel through the nations.

This dispersion has already lasted nearly two thousand years, and Israel is still the barren fig tree. But the putting forth of her leaves once more speaks of the resurrection of the national idea of the return of the Jews to Palestine. Surely the Zionist Movement of our own generation is a shadow of the fig tree's beginning to bud! How solemn are these days! And how serious people should be, in the light of this and other events that seem to indicate that "the seventieth week" of Daniel may soon begin to run its course!

4. The Characteristics of the End of This Age.

The reference to the days of Noah is also significant (Matthew 24:36-42). And what were the characteristics of Noah's day? It was a time of great apostasy. It was a time of violence. The thoughts of men were "**only evil continually.**" And so shall the closing hours of this age be — eating, drinking, thoughts for everything but God. The storm will break suddenly, just as it did in Noah's day, sweeping away the ungodly.

"Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left" (Matthew 24:40, 41).

These verses do not refer to the rapture of the church, but to the tribulation period.

The two that are to be "**taken**" means that they will be taken away in judgment; whereas the two that are "**left**" shall remain upon earth to enter into the millennial reign of Christ. The reference to the flood in this connection makes this interpretation clear; for concerning the "**ungodly**" in Noah's day, our Lord says, "**The flood came, and took them all away**" (verse 39).

5. The Exhortation to Watchfulness.

The verses with which the chapter closes are an exhortation to watchfulness and godly living:

"Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come . . . Therefore be ye also ready; for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh . . . If that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming, and shall begin to smite his fellow-servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; the lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, and shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 24:42-51).

6. The Parable of the Virgins 25:1-13.

Chapter twenty-five, recorded only by Matthew, falls logically into three divisions:

- The parable of the virgins,
- The parable of the talents,
- The judgment of the living nations at the return of Christ.

While chapter twenty-four of the Olivet discourse has to do with “**the seventieth week**” of Daniel, the opening verses of the parable of the virgins make clear that it is descriptive of the sphere of profession during the Lord’s absence in this age. The language of the opening lines is the same as that of the thirteenth chapter,

“Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto . . .”

The parable emphasizes again the warning that, during the absence of the King, there will be a great body of mere professors in Christendom who will be doomed to a sad disappointment when the Lord comes because they will not have been born again by faith in His atoning work accomplished on the cross.

The foolish virgins are like the wise in their profession, but not in their possession.

The difference is the oil which the wise have and the foolish lack. Oil in the Word of God is a type of the Holy Spirit. The foolish virgins, lacking oil in their vessels, represent that great mass of nominal (*in name only*) Christians who are strict observers of forms and ceremonies, but who have never been born again. The Lord’s answer to their cry, “**I know you not,**” should be a warning to all those who have only a dead profession.

The foolish virgins do not represent immature believers, as some hold, thus teaching a divided rapture; for what the Lord says to the unwise virgins could never be said to any child of God, however immature he might be. These had “**no oil.**” And since oil symbolizes the Holy Spirit, there is only one conclusion to draw.

“If any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his” (Romans 8:9).

7. The Parable of the Talents 25:14-30

The parable of the talents emphasizes the same thing. The man with the one talent, who charges the Lord with being harsh and unjust, and whose portion is outer darkness, represents the unconverted man who is occupied with service, but who does not know the Lord Himself. No one but an unconverted man could address the Lord as this man does, and only the unconverted will experience the destiny of this man.

8. The Judgment of the Living Nations at the Return of the King 25:31-46

The judgment of the living nations at the return of Christ in glory will close “**the seventieth week**” of Daniel. Christ will come in power, and sit upon the throne of His glory. Before Him shall be gathered all nations. This is not a description of individuals to be judged. Christ is called “**the King**” in this passage; and His “**kingdom**” is in view — particularly appropriate to this Gospel record.

Three classes are mentioned here:

- The nations compared to “**sheep**”;
- Those likened unto “**goats**”;
- Those people whom the Lord calls “**my brethren.**”

The “**sheep**” nations are those who will heed the preaching of “**the gospel of the kingdom**” by the faithful remnant in Israel; the “**goat**” nations are those who will line up with the Antichrist; and the “**brethren**” are the Jewish remnant who will preach the kingdom message, Christ’s “**brethren . . . according to the flesh.**”

They will go forth as did the disciples of old, carrying no purse, no gold, no scrip of any kind (See Matthew 10:9, 10).

The giving of food and drink to these will be the outward expression on the part of the nations who will heed their message, even as it was when “**the gospel of the kingdom**” was preached at Christ’s first coming. The “**sheep**” nations will inherit “**the kingdom.**” This is not heaven, but the earthly kingdom which Christ will establish, and over which He will reign. The portion of the “**goat**” nations will be everlasting punishment.

“And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal”
(verse 46).

The words of the text clearly indicate that this passage does not refer to individual salvation or condemnation, but to “**nations**” which will be living on the earth when “**the King**” returns to establish His “**kingdom.**”

Moreover it but completes the Lord’s description of the events which will transpire as this age comes to a close. Any other interpretation takes the passage entirely out of its context; and the Holy Spirit put it here for a purpose!

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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