

# THE AGE OF CONFUSION

Chapter Two. Matthew 24:1-14

by Ray C. Stedman

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"What will be the sign of your coming and [the sign] of the close of the age?" This is the question the disciples ask Jesus as he sits on the Mount of Olives with the faithless city spread out below him. We have noted already that the question is not very well put. Their concept of his coming is not at all clear, and they think that the close of the age is perhaps only a few years away. Therefore, the answer Jesus gives is at first seemingly evasive or at least indirect. Matthew says,

And Jesus answered them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray."

## **The Big Point-Don't Be Fooled!**

In our understandable haste to come to the great events he predicts for the future, let us not miss the heavy emphasis he makes in this opening word. It is the dominant note of this whole discourse. The age will be a time of great uncertainty as to the meaning of events. It will be frightfully easy to misinterpret and therefore be misled. The phrase "lead astray" forms the structure around which the whole message is built. He used it again in verse 5,

"For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray."

again in verse 11,

And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.

Once again in verse 24,

"For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect."

Because of this continuing possibility, the Lord's exhortation throughout the message is, "Watch!", i.e., keep your eyes open. Evaluate! Test! Try the spirits! Bring everything to test that you might understand the true character of movements and pressures, for the predominant note of the age will be one of deceit and confusion. Then he proceeds to show to these men that they are already confused in their thinking that the end of the age lies immediately ahead. From verse 5 through verse 14 he clearly indicates that there would be a rather long, indeterminate period before the end of the age would begin. These men knew from the prophet Daniel that the end of the age would not be a single spectacular event but a series of events, covering several years. The Lord begins carefully to trace the age which they could not see, the parenthesis of time in which we now live. If we note carefully the time phrases he employs to lead up to the answer to the disciples' question we shall have no difficulty with this section. He is most emphatically not giving so-called "signs of the times" here. To the contrary, he repeatedly indicates that he is tracing the age. For instance, he says in verse 6, "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet." Therefore, despite the commentators who insist that "wars and rumors of wars" are a sign of the near approach

of the end, our Lord says quite otherwise. In verse 8 he adds,

"all this is but the beginning of the birthpangs."

He is saying, in effect, "These events are but leading up to the end of the age about which are asking." Then, finally, in verse 14, after listing a long series of events, he says, "...and then the end will come." It is at this point that he at last begins to answer directly the disciples' question, "What will be the sign...of the close of the age?" From verse 15 through verse 31, he gives in detail the events that will occur during the end-of-the-age.

## **Danger Ahead**

How then shall we characterize these events he outlines which are to occur in the intervening time before the end of the age is reached? They are of enormous importance to us for we live in this time before the end. If, as we have seen, the dominant note of this discourse is to warn against the allure of the false, the glamour of the phony, and to indicate the ease by which the uninformed may be led astray, then it is immediately evident that in these intervening events he is listing the perils of the age. These are the threats to faith, the powerful forces by which men and women, observing the events of their day, may be misled into confusion and error. These perils to faith are forces, deceptive in their character, which will mislead men throughout the whole course of this intervening time. They make it difficult to believe, they act powerfully upon men's minds to turn them from the unseen spiritual kingdom to depend only upon the things of sense and time. Each peril, when once introduced, runs on to the end of the age.

## **Phony christs**

Let us now examine these perils one by one. The first, in verse 5, is the peril of the counterfeit,

"For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray."

The apostle John wrote at the close of the first century, "For many [antichrists] have gone out into the world." The term, "antichrist", does not indicate someone who is openly against Christ, like an atheist or a pagan. Rather it is one who appears instead of Christ, and in this sense opposes true Christianity. It is a counterfeit Christ.

Of course it includes the originators or propagators of all the false cults which have arisen throughout the course of the age, beginning with the first century. We have witnessed the rise of many in the last few decades, especially those with the label, "Made in America," like Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, Christian Science, and others. These are outwardly Christian in language and activity but their basic message is anti-christian, rejecting the true Christ. Any person or organization which purports to be Christian in its outward aspects, but whose message is actually opposed to Christian faith is an antichrist. It is the rise of these groups our Lord predicts. What a peril to faith they have proved to be.

But by no means are these the most deceptive of the anti-christian voices. Perhaps our Lord is thinking of even subtler expressions. We will miss the full meaning of his words if we look only for those who actually say, "I am the Messiah," or "We have the true Christian message." Are they not more dangerous who claim to do what only Jesus Christ alone can really do? "I am the Way," says that lonely Man who died forsaken upon the Cross. "We are the way," say all the many voices that attract today: politics, patriotism, social work, literacy crusades. These are often really fine works, but they claim to meet the basic problem of human life, they become antichristian. Their claim is false, and many are deceived throughout the course of the age. They offer to lead men into peace without forgiveness, and thus are really evil masquerading as angels of light. How many are being misled by these siren voices which neglect the narrow way by which an individual is confronted with the person of Jesus Christ-the one way to redemption and cleansing and forgiveness of sin?

## **Conflict**

The second peril Jesus foresees is that of conflict.

"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom..."

Clearly he is not predicting any one specific war, or revolution. He is characterizing the general course of the age. It will be marked by continual turmoil among nations, and the fears, the alarms, the degradation, the horror, the misery, of war. His words telescope together all the effect that wars produce on the human heart.

What a threat to faith war is! Many a young man has been deceived by the glory of war and has left home to proudly march away. But in the carnage and slaughter of battle his eyes have been opened. He has come home, disillusioned, sickened by it all, and must continually fight bitterness and despair. That is the deceitfulness of war. Many can still remember the horror of the mushroom cloud hanging over Hiroshima, the scream of air-raid sirens, and the terrible challenge to faith these events had produced. How many lost all flickerings of faith in bitter resentment against the wars in Viet Nam or Korea?

## **Natural Calamity**

Another peril Jesus foresees is natural calamity.

"...and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birthpangs."

For almost two thousand years these natural calamities have been occurring. They are not, therefore, "signs of the times." Jesus simply states that during the intervening age there will be famines, pestilences, earthquakes, and other natural disasters, and each one will be a threat to belief in God. Sometimes Christians mistakenly try to convince skeptics that God is love by parading the evidence of nature. They describe the beauty of the sunset, the glory of the mountains, the abundant provision in the natural world for the needs of man. But what becomes of that argument when the tornados and earthquakes bury one's children in their ruins, and famine takes the bread from their lips, and parents must watch their children's swollen, distended bodies with no food to give them? Where, then, is the argument for the love of God as revealed in nature?

How do you preach God's love to those who are stumbling along in dumb terror, fleeing the horror of a volcano which is belching out smoking ashes and burying their homes and cities? Who has not felt the shivers of doubt that come when we read of terrible disasters caused by natural calamities and must square them somehow with our concept of a God who rules and reigns in the midst of all human events? Granted, such doubt can be answered by a clearer understanding of the purposes and workings of God, but how many are pressured by grief to believe the apparently obvious and will not wait for an explanation? Surely we need our Lord's warning, "Take heed that no one leads you astray."

## **Persecution**

Another terrible threat to faith appears in verse 9,

"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake."

Here the peril is a religious persecution. This began shortly after the day of Pentecost when Stephen and James were slain and disciples were scattered. Who is not familiar with the terrible stories of Christians who were thrown to lions, burned as human torches, mangled by wild beasts, killed by gladiators, tortured, torn apart by wild horses, or martyred in other dreadful ways? Another great period of martyrdom broke out at the time of the Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries. We can read the accounts in all their gruesome details in *Fox's Book of Martyrs*.

But do you know what is the most tortuous century of all? The century in which more Christians have died for their faith than in any other is the 20th century! It is estimated that more Christians were tortured and slain in twelve months during World War II than died under Rome in all the early centuries. In the city of Seoul, Korea, ten thousand Christians have already suffered martyrdom for their faith. Some authorities claim that over fifteen million Christians have been slaughtered in Russia, Soviet-controlled Europe and other Communist countries. Since Christianity began, no generation has seen such world-wide persecution as is now in progress.

We can scarcely realize the cost of discipleship in certain places of the world. Recently a Christian magazine contained the account of a young Arab who had turned from Islam to Christ. The magazine told his story only because it could add in a footnote, "His body now lies buried on a hillside in his own native land. (He was slain by his own relatives.) We can now print his testimony because he can no longer suffer recrimination for it." Ask yourself, how many have wanted to be Christians, have heard the message, have been drawn to Christ by the preaching of the good news, but have taken a long look at the price they must pay in terms of misunderstanding, exclusion and ridicule, and have quietly melted back into the crowd? Jesus spoke of seed that would fall on shallow ground and spring up, but when the sun came out in burning heat, it would wither and die. How many in America would disappear from our churches if persecution began to break out? What an enemy to faith it is. How the heart trembles and quavers before the thought of torture, or sometimes even of misunderstanding!

## **Apostasy**

Then the Lord put his finger squarely upon another peril to faith,

"And then many will fall away, and betray one another, and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because wickedness is multiplied, most men's love will grow cold."

Undoubtedly we are approaching, in these words, the end of the age. A gradually increasing manifestation of evil is indicated as the age nears its end. And what does all this mean? Is this not a description of that sneering contempt for standards that once were held just but now are widely forsaken?

"And many will fall away, and betray one another, and hate one another." This is the terrible pressure of apostasy. When combined with persecution it represents a powerful double attack upon a quiet trust in Christ. It is highly disturbing to be left standing alone; to see, one by one, those who previously were on your side, depart, give in, succumb to the pressure and leave you unsupported and alone. If they also betray you in the process, it is almost unbearable. "Demas...has [forsaken] me, [having loved] this present world," writes the apostle Paul from his cold prison in Rome. Even to such a doughty spirit as his, that must have been a severe blow. What young person today does not feel the pressure of the world's sneering contempt for sexual and social standards that were once held by almost all? How many have thus "fallen way," driven by the spread of a philosophy of moral relativism that teaches that only the situation can determine whether a thing is bad or good? And when such folly is openly advocated by leaders of the church, who can help but feel his faith tremble a bit?

## **Cynicism**

In close connection with this Jesus adds, "And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because wickedness is multiplied, most men's love will grow cold." Here the peril is cynicism. It is cold and brutal indifference which arises out of the teaching of "false prophets." Do not read this as though these are religious men, necessarily. The false Christs the Lord mentioned earlier were unquestionably religious, but here he uses the term "prophet." It refers to any who speak authoritatively-philosophers, professors, scientists, statesmen-those leaders of thought who shape and mold the thinking of common man. What they will teach is the sanctity of self-interest, the insistence on having "my rights" no matter what happens to the other fellow. The true prophet insists on the rights of God, but the false prophet upholds only the rights of man. Jesus predicts that a tragic and inevitable sequence will follow. First, many will be led astray by the false teaching of the leaders of thought; "because [of this], wickedness [will be] multiplied" (the Greek word used here for wickedness is "anomia," lawlessness); and the result of lawlessness is, "most men's love will grow cold."

One needs only to read the daily papers to see how true this is. The overthrow of moral limits always destroys the fire and glow of love. The psychologists and philosophers who seek to measure the pulse of our times tell us that the major problem of our age is meaninglessness-the loss of fire in life, the coldness of the human heart. Since men cannot live without fire they replace true love with the false fire of lust, and its inevitable consequence, hate. Watch those who feel they can, with impunity, step over the moral bounds of the past. See how they grow hard and callous and cynical. Life becomes for them an increasing tangle of emptiness.

There seems little reason to doubt that here is the explanation for the rocketing divorce rates of our day and for the rapidly increasing frequency of sex crimes and crimes of violence. Often these are accompanied by moral apathy and callous indifference to cruelty. Only recently the papers reported the cases of two mothers who lost all natural affection. One threw her baby in the path of a truck, and the other left hers on a dump heap. How true these words are: "because wickedness is multiplied...love...grow[s] cold."

## **Anti-Christian Currents**

Here are the clanging gongs that Jesus says will be sound throughout the age, to drown out if they can the still small voice of faith. He warns against the peril of counterfeit faith, of human conflict, of natural calamity, and callous cynicism. These are the sweeping, powerful currents that flow throughout the age, gathering as a vast and resistless flood of deceit; distorting, twisting, deluding, so that men are deceived and misled and the whole race is at last swept along over the brink of destruction into the black and raging waters of the world's last day.

How can anyone resist this? Who is equal to those pressures? Who has the wisdom to distinguish the truth from error in these powerful voices? Who can point out the way of faith when these things are happening?

## **The Power To Stand**

Fortunately for us, Jesus does not stop with this black picture. He goes on to a further unveiling. It is of enormous importance, for it contains the secret power-the power to stand against deceit and delusion and to avoid the fate of being "led astray." It is introduced by that corner word "but."

"But he who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come."

Despite the pressures, despite the impossibility of the natural mind's remaining undeceived, despite the subtle siren voices that sound-nevertheless, some will see through the distortions, the perversions of truth, the silken deceptions, and will stand true. Some will endure to the end. These will not and cannot be overthrown. They will be saved. The end referred to here is not the end of the age, for obviously, no one could live through the

entire twenty centuries of this intervening age. What Jesus means here is the end of life. These words of Jesus are often distorted to mean that if someone does his best to hang on and live a good clean life, then, if he endures to the end he will be saved. But it is quite the other way around. If he is truly saved, then he will endure to the end and the fact that he endures makes obvious to all that he is saved.

No doubt it is true that there is no use having a good beginning if there is not a strong finish; but it is equally true that there is no possibility of a strong finish unless there has been a good beginning. Only those who have genuinely found Christ will endure to the end. What our Lord is bringing out here is that the strength of character which permits them to stand fast demands an unceasing flow of power, for they are exposed to an unceasing flow of pressure. They can stand only if there is power available that can keep them every single moment of the way. That power is revealed in what these people say. They will not stand, but they will speak as well. "This gospel of the kingdom," Jesus said, "will be preached throughout the world, as a testimony to all nations." The good news they preach reveals the secret of their ability to stand. They tell everywhere the story of One who "has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). Amid the pressures of the age they reveal that they have heard and obeyed the good news, and there stands with them One whose very life is imparted to them and who can keep them against all the deceit of the world in which they live.

It was the Lord himself who said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." No matter how the wolves howl, fangs drip, and opposition mounts on every side, still they will follow him. Why? Because, as he goes on to say, "I give them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." This is what keeps them and makes them able to stand in the midst of a flood of deceit. They will move against the stream, sometimes in blood and tears and terrible loneliness, but they will not succumb.

## **The Hour No One Knows**

When this good news of "the kingdom of his beloved Son" has been preached as a testimony to all nations, then shall the end of the age begin, said Jesus. That is one unmistakable mark of the approaching end. It is supremely significant that this present generation is the first generation in twenty long centuries of which it may be unreservedly said that the gospel is being preached throughout the whole world to all nations. This is properly a "sign of the times" which marks the near approach of the end. When the sirens of the Last Day begin to moan, and the panicky, jostling crowd tries to get in the door at the last moment, then will be unveiled the deceitfulness of the age. But only those who have learned to walk day by day will be able to endure to the end.

In the light of this clear revelation of the character of the age, the exhortation of Jesus takes on new impact. "Watch," he said, "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." The question he leaves with us is: What is there in your life that is different than another's? Do not prate about outward religious differences. They do not count. They can all too easily be a part of the "broad way that leads to destruction." Have you stood at the narrow way and done business with the One who says truly, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Is his life in you? Has he come to indwell you, to strengthen and keep you every day by a continual impartation of his life through you, in terms of your personality? This alone will make the difference. The test of reality is endurance, and only those who thus stand have every really known him.

## **Prayer**

Father, how confusing are the voices we hear, how accurate is our Lord's prediction that these voices will be sounding out in ever increasing clamor to deceive us, mislead us, pervert, and destroy us. How thankful we are for that other voice, the clear voice of the Holy Spirit who interprets to us the truth of Scripture. Help us to ask him to begin his wonderful work of

sustaining and keeping, empowering and strengthening, till we can stand in the midst of the flood of deceit around us. In Jesus's name, Amen.

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