

THAT STRANGE PEOPLE, THE JEWS

Chapter Five. Matthew 24:16-20

by Ray C. Stedman

Perhaps you are now thinking, "If God takes the church out of the world before the great tribulation begins, will no one have a chance to know God during that time?" To answer that perfectly proper question we must return once again to the words of Jesus to his disciples on the Mount of Olives. After he has announced the sign of the close of the age as "the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place," he then adds, in verses 16-20:

"Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle. And alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath."

Who are they who must flee so urgently when the last days begin? Who dare not hesitate long enough even to go back into the house to pick up a wrap, but must immediately head for the hills? There is no need to wonder, for the Lord says plainly, "those who are in Judea." Now Judea is a geographical part of the land of Israel, ancient Palestine. It comprises the hill country surrounding the city of Jerusalem and includes the city as well. It is to the residents of Jerusalem and Judea that this warning is addressed.

Furthermore, the Lord's mention of the Sabbath establishes the fact that these residents of Judea are Jews. He urges them to pray that their flight will not be in the winter, with its distress of cold, or on the Sabbath, with its travel limitations, for Jews are allowed to travel only a short distance on a Sabbath day. Later in this passage these Jews are called "the elect" ("for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened"), and this makes clear they are believing Jews, that is, men and women of faith who know and love Jesus Christ as Lord and are prepared to live or die for him.

They are not Christians in the usual sense of that term, referring to those who are members of the church, for we are told that in the church there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free. Jews are not to be distinguished from Gentiles within the church. These distinctions, we are precisely told by the apostle Paul, have been invalidated in the church. The "middle wall of partition" has been eliminated; there are no distinctions of background, race or religious training that are recognized within the church of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, Christians, we are told, are free from the law and no longer observe special days, special feasts, new moons and Sabbaths. In his letter to the Colossians the apostle Paul clearly speaks of the fact that the Sabbaths were included in those shadows which were done away in Christ. But here the Sabbath distinctly will be a restricting factor in the flight of these people. Here then will be a class of people who cannot be identified with the present day church. They will be Jewish believers in Christ who will be converted after the removal of the church and before the time of the Great Tribulation.

A Shout and A Voice of Triumph

Now a problem arises. How do these Jews become believers in Christ, since there are no Christians left to

preach the gospel to them after the removal of the church? In the great description that Paul gives of the departure of the church there is a suggestive hint that may help us with this difficulty. He tells the Thessalonians that the Lord Jesus himself will descend from heaven, accompanied by three remarkable sounds. There will be, first, a shout, then the voice of the archangel, and third, the sounding of the trumpet of God. Why these three?

The shout comes from the Lord himself. As he appears to the church he will call with a loud voice. When he stood before the tomb of Lazarus he called with a great voice, "Lazarus! Come forth!" It has often been pointed out if he had not said, "Lazarus," he would have emptied the cemetery! The great shout obviously will be to wake the dead. He had himself said, in John 5:28, "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice [the voice of the Son of God], and come forth."

The trumpet of God is used throughout Scripture as an assembly call. A trumpet was used in the Roman army to signal the beginning of a march. In the wilderness Moses used it to summon the people of Israel to begin their journey. It is a sound directed toward the living. After the dead in Christ have been awakened by the shout of the Lord, then, Paul says, "We who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." The trumpet will sound the beginning of that great gathering in the church.

Meet Michael

Then what about the archangel's voice? Scripture refers to only one archangel. His name is Michael. He appears a number of times in the Bible and always in connection with the people of Israel. One of the places where he is mentioned is in the twelfth chapter of Daniel, the same prophet to which Jesus referred concerning the desolating sacrilege. In verse 1 Daniel is told:

"At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people [Daniel's people, the Jews]. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time [unquestionably, the Great Tribulation]; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book."

It is strongly suggested here that Michael, the great archangel, is responsible for opening the eyes of certain Jews living in Judea at the time of the departure of the church, and that they will then recognize the Lord Jesus as their true Messiah and become believers in him.

We may link this passage with one in Revelation chapter 7:2-4, where there is a description of an event that seems to be remarkably similar, if it is not exactly the same. There the apostle John says:

"Then I saw another angel [Here is a great angel who undertakes a special task connected with Israel. He is not called an archangel, though he well might be Michael] ascend from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, 'Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads.' And I heard the number of the sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand sealed, out of every tribe of the sons of Israel."

These 144,000 will clearly be Jews, for the passage goes on to list the twelve tribes of Israel and to declare that 12,000 are chosen from each of the tribes. Further information is given us concerning this special group in Revelation 14:1,3-5:

"Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb,[Jesus] and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had

been redeemed from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are chaste; it is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes; these have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are spotless."

The same chapter goes on to describe the Great Tribulation as "the hour of his [God's] judgment." Before that hour arrives, these 144,000 from the tribes of Israel will be seen with the Lamb on Mount Zion. This is a specific location within the city limits of Jerusalem. This account confirms the fact that Jesus Christ will be on earth during this time, and will reveal himself from time to time these Jewish disciples, just as he appeared from time to time to his followers during those remarkable forty days following his resurrection.

Evidently these 144,000 Jews are to be turned from unbelief to belief much in the same dramatic way as was the apostle Paul. He was converted on the road to Damascus by the sudden appearance of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Paul speaks of himself, in 1 Corinthians 15, as "one untimely born," very likely thinking of himself as properly belonging to this special band of Jewish believers, but who, by the grace of God, was born ahead of time and given the privilege of belonging to the church.

Israel Revisited

Since these 144,000 Jews are in frequent touch with the risen Lord they will be like so many Pauls, proclaiming the eternal gospel in mighty Spirit-given power throughout the whole earth. During this time the Lawless One will be moving to consolidate his power and to present himself to the world as God. This appearance of Christ to the 144,000 is the beginning of the fulfillment of God's renewed activity with the Jews, long predicted by the Old Testament prophets. Paul also specifically says that despite the centuries of wandering following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, God will not cast off his people. He will call them back again and renew a relationship with them.

In Romans 11 Paul warns that we Gentiles must never assume that God has totally and irrevocably set aside the nation of Israel, for all the promises which he has made to them in the past will be fulfilled. Because of unbelief, Paul says, God scattered them around the earth and opened the door of blessing to all the nations of earth, without distinction. But the Gentiles, too, will fail God as did the Jews, and then they will be set aside and God will call Israel back into national blessing. That is the work he will begin with the calling of the 144,000. Will anyone believe the message these 144,000 proclaim? If they do, of course, it will probably be at the risk of their lives, since the Lawless One will soon be in full control. The answer to that question is given by the apostle John in Revelation 7:9,10,13,14:

"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!' Then one of the elders addressed me saying, 'Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?' I said to him, 'Sir, you know.' And he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'"

This great multitude of Gentiles will be converted at the eleventh hour of history, evidently by believing the gospel preached by the 144,000 of Israel sent by the Son of God. Probably the greater part of this multitude will be martyred for their faith. In other parts of Revelation we are told that many will be put to death because they will not worship the Beast (the Antichrist) or his image.

Though they will indeed be "a great multitude" as John said, yet it is immediately evident that they will be different in one most remarkable way from the present day church. Apparently they will not exercise the ministry of salt. They will have no softening or restraining effect upon the people around them nor on the society in which they will live. They will be the light of the world, of that day, exposing and thus condemning

what goes on, but they will not be as salt as Christians are today, preventing corruption, restraining evil, resisting the work of injustice in society. They will live as individuals, facing, at the risk of their lives, a society dedicated completely to powerful delusion.

As a consequence of the fact that there will be no salt at work in society, the dark menace of human arrogance and pride grows darker still. Doubtless a mad science, like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, will go blithely on, mixing evil potions and conjuring up still more fearful forces of uncontrollable, murderous power. It is already evident that man is convinced that he can make anything he likes. He can control the weather (he thinks); he can build machines that can do his thinking; he can produce test-tube babies. He has even devised a science, called biometrics, which proposes to remake man himself. The obsolete apparatus of human organization made by the Creator must be modernized. Man must be biologically rebred.

It is not only the Marxists who think man needs remaking, but also the scientists of the West who propose to turn man from a human being with an unpredictable will and an unmanageable conscience into a robot or a marionette, a compliant human vegetable. The result of these trends is completely predictable. Without realizing it, and certainly without desiring it, man in his incredible blindness has already begun to tip the delicate balance of life. Like a drunk in a canoe, he has thrown his weight around with gay abandon and, perverted by his drunken joy, he cannot see how much water has already been shipped, and that one more violent lurch is sufficient to take him to the bottom.

The apostle Peter tells us that once before in the history of the world this has happened. There was a time when man, in arrogance and pride, boasting of the civilization which he had built, quite unwittingly tripped the lever which held the world of his day in delicate balance. Before he knew what had happened, the clouds began to gather, the sky to darken, the heavens poured down floods of water, the earth heaved, the seas raised and swept across the mountain tops in monstrous waves, and all the world of man perished, except for eight souls who were safely preserved in an ark.

Once again, Jesus suggests, man in his clever insanity will go too far. The sign of it will be a world gone mad with self conceit, permitting and even encouraging its leaders to state publicly what almost everyone secretly believes: that there is no real God, that man is his own god and he does not need any other. Then the deadly lever will be tripped by man's own hand, the dark forces of nature will be released, the seals of nuclear power will be removed, the trumpets of human cruelty will sound out, and the vials of a demented biology will be poured out upon the earth. It is all described in detail in the book of Revelation.

Light in Darkness

About now you may be saying: "This is a terrible outlook; is there any gleam of comfort that shines through these dark clouds?" Yes, there are three things that can encourage us as we face the full implications of this remarkable word from Jesus.

First, the midnight hour has not yet arrived. Perhaps we ought to shout with gladness about that. We may be near, very near, but the hour of God's grace has not yet run its course. This is not an attempt to frighten anyone into faith, but simply a realistic facing of what Jesus Christ has said. He came into the world not to condemn it but to save. He is not interested in beating men over the head with an eschatological whip, but he does want them to see life as it is, and themselves as they are: helpless without him, in the midst of powerful forces that can sweep them to inevitable destruction.

So fantastically accurate is this long range prediction of the Lord's, and so compelling in line with the trend of present events and attitudes, that it becomes a powerful weapon to awaken many from the dream of death in which they are engaged. There are certain questions it forces upon us: Are we spending all our waking hours living for something that is to be swept away in the rush of nuclear destruction. Or, are we living in a relationship of faith in which the Lord Jesus is living his life again in us? It is either one or the other.

The second note of encouragement is that, as always in Scripture, God's dealings with Israel are also a picture

of his work with any believer. As a nation, Israel has long lived in unbelief toward Lord Jesus Christ. They have been wandering in obscurity and persecution for many centuries. Any Christian knows that there are also times of unbelief in his own life. Though he is a believer, yet he can be at times a very unbelieving believer. The result of those times of unbelief is invariably one of scattering and wandering, of darkness and distance from God. But how beautifully this account of the 144,000 shows how God can break through unbelief. He can bring the light of a new glimpse of Jesus streaming through the darkness just when you need it most. Perhaps you may be going through such a crisis experience where God is about to bring new light into your heart, and you will no longer walk in barrenness and darkness but in light, glory and peace. The key to such deliverance is to accept the darkness as from him, as well as the light. When we can thank him for the darkness then the light is not far away. That is what will eventually happen to Israel, and it is what God is waiting to bring about for us now.

The Sovereign God-in control

The final strengthening word is that it is all happening on schedule, according to plan. It has all been anticipated and predicted. Perhaps the most comforting word the Lord Jesus ever spoke to his disciples is found in John 14:1,2: "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house [the universe] are many rooms [places to live, earth is one but there are also others]; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" There is the comforting word. He came to set the record straight, to correct any misapprehensions. He came to outline what will happen and to set the truth before us.

It is tremendously helpful to realize that the present world events and those yet to take place are no surprise to God. Even the time of tribulation is fully known, and will not be the end of the story. Beyond the darkness lies the dawn of a new day for this weary, battered earth. Faith can lift up its eyes and strengthen its heart and rejoice that God has everything in control.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the assurance you give us that you know what you are doing in history. Keep us from the stupid spirit of unbelief which treats prophetic utterances as unworthy of study and consideration. Thank you for calling us to honest realism, and the facing of ourselves as we really are. Help us to lay full hold of your redeeming grace and love. In Christ's name, Amen.

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