

# The Power And The Glory

Chapter Eight. Matthew 24:29-31

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The most dramatic event in all history will be the visible appearing of Jesus Christ. No one can possibly miss it when it occurs. He himself describes it for us in Matthew 24:29-31:

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

This is the most prophesied event in the Bible. The Old Testament contains many references to it, and it has been estimated that in the New Testament one verse out of ten refers to this coming of Jesus Christ. If all the references to this event were taken out of the New Testament, you find it unintelligible in many parts.

## From "Presence" to Unveiling

But we must be careful to understand it in relation to the parousia, the presence of Jesus, which has been going on since the Church was taken out of the restrictions of time before the end of the age began. This flaming advent is part of the parousia, actually the event that marks the end of the secret presence. It is the outshining of his presence before the eyes of the whole world. What he has been in secret to his own during the dark days of the tribulation, he now will be openly before the whole world. He will especially manifest himself to the Lawless One. Paul says, "The Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming" (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

That last phrase, "his appearing and his coming," is literally, "the epiphany of his parousia." Epiphany is a word that means unveiling, or outshining. Taken in that sense, Paul is calling this dramatic appearance of Jesus Christ, "the unveiling of his presence." It is the startling climax of the whole period which Jesus calls "the close of the age."

The final crashing crescendo of civilization's last hour will be accomplished in three sweeping movements. Each of these is traced in broad strokes by Jesus. The first is a violent activity in nature:

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

Notice that the Lord Jesus distinctly separates this event from the Great Tribulation. The tribulation will be essentially the manifestation of the naked brutality of man, the exhibition of the cruelty and unbelievable violence of the human heart unrestrained by grace. It is described for us in detail in the book of the Revelation, especially in the judgments of the seals and the trumpets. It will be a time when the horrors of Nazi

persecution, reflected in the gas chambers of Buchenwald and Dachau, will be repeated all over the earth; a time when violence stalks the streets, and the nuclear witches of terror scream through the skies. As Jesus said, it will be a day of unprecedented human evil, of terrible slaughter and human suffering.

But immediately following this tribulation terrifying signs appear in the heavens. The phrase, "the powers of the heavens will be shaken," suggests severe gravitational disturbance of the solar system. This in turn would produce phenomenal effects on the earth. Showers of meteors will flash through the darkening skies. Earthquakes cause the land to heave and shake, and great tidal waves sweep the coasts. Luke reports that, "men [will be] fainting with fear," and there will be great "distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves." Volcanoes erupt, spouting out streams of lava and vast clouds of cinder and ash which obscure the sun and the moon. The sun is darkened and the moon reddens and is finally unable to shine at all.

Unbelievable as all this may sound to our ears, nevertheless, it very likely does not include anything which has not happened before within the memory of mankind! The Russian scientist, Immanuel Velikovsky\*, has amassed a tremendous amount of evidence from many sources indicating, quite apart from any religious connotation, that in the past there have occurred similar times of volcanic eruption, seismic activity, and disturbances in the solar system. It is the conviction of this scientist that the plagues of Egypt during the time of the Exodus under Moses were part of a world wide upheaval in nature caused by a comet closely approaching this earth. Its gravity drew the waters of the sea into huge tidal waves and caused volcanoes to disgorge great flows of lava which came pouring from the mountain ranges of earth. The comet then went on to become the planet Venus, which often appears in our sky as the morning star.

These theories are disparaged in some scientific circles, but all agree that Velikovsky has gathered together an enormous amount of evidence for strange happenings in the past. The discoveries of the rocket "Voyager" on its trip to Venus helped to confirm certain claims of Velikovsky concerning the nature of this planet and its origin, and there is now much scientific interest in Venus.

Even in relatively modern times there are many unexplained celestial phenomena. By no means should we assume that science is able to explain all that has taken place in even the immediate past. In one of his public speeches while president, John F. Kennedy mentioned the unexplained Dark Day which occurred in the month of May, 1780, when all of New England was for many hours plunged into total darkness. No one has ever been able to explain it, but it remains a fact of history. From time to time the papers report the falling to earth in various places of great chunks of ice weighing sometimes four to five hundred pounds. No one yet knows their origin.

## **Voices from the Past**

To face honestly the unresolved mysteries of the past is realize how readily these words of Jesus can be fulfilled. It is not only Jesus who tells us of these earth traumas, but other prophets from the Old Testament have foretold them. For instance, Joel 2:30,31 says:

"And I will give portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes."

Isaiah also describes the same event, using very similar language in 13:9, 10:

"Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising and the moon will not shed its light."

And in Revelation 6:12-14, the apostle John describes it in very vivid terms.

"When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place."

All these passages confirm the words of Jesus that some celestial force will create these tremendous events upon earth, and will thus introduce the final act in the drama of civilization as we know it.

## **The Unveiling of Christ**

This violent upheaval in nature is followed immediately by the sign of the Son of man in heaven and the visible appearing of Jesus Christ to all the earth:

"Then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."

As we have already noted, this is the outshining of his glory; the sudden unveiling of his presence. It is often called the "second coming," though in truth that term covers the whole period of Christ's secret presence. But it will be the second time the world sees Jesus Christ. The last time it saw him was on a bloody cross, writhing in the agonies of death, apparently a shameful failure with no glory, no power and no success. But when it sees him again it will see him coming triumphant in power and glory.

The event will be preceded by the appearance of "the sign of the Son of man" in the heavens. The disciples had asked him at the beginning of this discourse: "What will be the sign of your coming?" This question he now answers, though not as completely or clearly as they or we might have liked.

When the disciples asked the question they did not mean, as we frequently take it, "What is the sign that will mark the time of your coming?" Inevitably we associate signs with schedules. But the disciples knew better than that. They meant, "What is the event which will reveal the meaning of your coming?" This is always the purpose of signs in Scripture. That sign, Jesus now says, will appear in the sky just before he is made visible.

Let us not miss the fact that he links this sign with the statement, "then all the tribes of the earth will mourn." We shall examine that more fully a bit later, but from other Scripture it appears that he means the tribes of Israel. Since this sign is thus linked with Israel it strongly suggests that the sign will consist of the reappearance of the cloud of glory which accompanied the nation Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness for forty years. It was called the Shekinah, and was the sign of God's presence with his people. Much later, when the Temple was built and Solomon dedicated it to God, the Shekinah glory came down and took rest in the holy of holies upon the Ark of the Covenant as the sign that God was dwelling with His people.

This shining cloud may well be what Jesus himself is referring to when he says, "They will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven." There is an obvious reference to this same event in Revelation 1:7. There John says: "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him." Of course it can simply refer to the atmospheric clouds, but the repeated emphasis seems suggestive of more. When Jesus thus appears it will mark the close of the age, but it will also be the opening event of a new age, and the supreme characteristic of that new age will be that God dwells with His people. In Revelation 21:3, John describes it, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them." Since the Shekinah is the sign of God's presence with man, it is fitting that it should reappear as the sign that explains, clarifies, and reveals the meaning of Christ's coming. He comes that he may be, as the Old Testament prophets whispered, "Immanuel-God with us."

## **God With Us---In Power**

The shining cloud will be followed by the dramatic appearance of Jesus Christ himself. It is not a silent appearing, not something that takes place in a corner, but a bold, triumphant revelation. As we have seen, John declares that every eye shall see him. In 2 Thessalonians 1:7,8, Paul speaks of a time: When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." The present age, when God allows man to have his head, is brought to an end and God now reasserts his right to rule over all the earth. It is described in striking language in Revelation 11:15: "Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.'"

The reference of Jesus to his coming "with power and great glory" reminds us immediately of the closing words of the Lord's Prayer. How many times have you prayed, "For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory?" That prayer reflects the anticipation of God's people, through all the dark centuries, of the eventual coming of that flaming hope when the power and the glory of the universe will be in the hands of the One to whom it rightfully belongs.

It was to try to prevent this that the Tempter met Jesus in the wilderness in the beginning of his ministry and tempted him three times. The final temptation was to take him to a high mountain and show him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. There the devil said, "All these will I give you, if you will fall down and worship me." In effect he was saying, "Mine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory." And he was right!-for the moment. Jesus did not rebuke him for some preposterous claim that had no justification. Rather he answered him, using the only weapon that is available to a believer in any hour of darkness or temptation, the unchangeable word of God. He said to him: "It is written, 'You shalt worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"

With those words Jesus set aside the temptation to take a seeming short-cut to the goal for which he came. Instead he went on to the darkness of the cross, the agony and the blood of death, in order that he might make possible the hour he is describing here, when he will come to take the kingdoms of the world, in power and great glory.

## **When Israel Mourns**

The unveiling of Jesus as Lord of lords and King of kings will also accomplish certain immediate events. The first will be the mourning of the nation Israel. As we have already noted, the Lord's reference to "all the tribes of the earth will mourn" does not mean tribes of Indians, but tribes of Jews. In the verse from Revelation already quoted, John says, "All tribes of the earth will wail on account of him." It will be the mourning of Israel in her hour of national sorrow.

Their mourning will be in direct fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah 12: 10,11: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born. On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadadrimmon in the plain of Megiddo."

Why will they mourn? Because they will be looking on him whom they have pierced. To their utter astonishment they will discover that the One who appears in power and great glory bears in his hands the marks of nails and in his side the wound of a spear. Of course, all the world is guilty of piercing the Son of God, but the Jews were particular instruments in that respect.

Perhaps the very words of their mourning are recorded for us in a well-known passage from the prophet Isaiah. In the day that Israel shall look on him whom they have pierced, they will say to each other:

"Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"

For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed."

They will recognize in that day that the one whom their fathers, in ignorance and blindness, had crucified was the one who had loved them and given himself for their sins. They will cry out in sadness and heartache over the long years of rejection that have followed his crucifixion.

### **Righteousness Triumphs---At Last!**

But that is not all that will happen to Israel when Jesus appears in power and glory. He also adds, concerning himself, "He will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

Once again we do not need to be in doubt as to who these elect are. Isaiah 11:11, 12 helps us here:

"In that day [the context makes clear it is the end of the age] the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. He will raise an ensign for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth."

Jeremiah also confirms the same promise. The whole thirty-first chapter of Jeremiah should be read to note the beauty of its language and the lilting gladness of its promise. But in verses 7,8 he says:

"...the LORD has saved his people, the remnant of Israel.' Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her who is in travail, together; a great company, they shall return here."

Certainly this gathering will include the 144,000. Perhaps also it will include as many as are left alive of the "great multitude" of Gentiles who believe in Jesus because of the testimony of the remnant of Israel. Jesus himself, in his description of this same gathering given in the parables of Matthew 13, suggests that others are included. He says, in verses 40-43:

"Just as the weeds [tares] are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

Many have confused this gathering by the angels with the removal of the church, described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4. Nothing is said here of gathering the elect into heaven, but rather, as ordinary living persons, they are gathered into an earthly kingdom. There is no resurrection of the dead mentioned at all, while in the case of the removal of the church, this is a primary emphasis.

Furthermore, when the church is removed there is no suggestion that evil men are judged, but in the passage quoted above from Matthew 13, Jesus makes clear that "all causes of sin and all evildoers" will be removed from his kingdom at the same time that the elect are gathered. This he emphasizes further in another of the Matthew 13 parables, verses 47-50:

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad. So will it be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth."

Doubtless it will be at this time that the Lawless One will come to his end as it is described by John in Revelation 19:19-21:

"And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who sits upon the horse [the LORD Jesus] and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had worked the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with brimstone. And the rest were slain by the sword of him who sits upon the horse, the sword that issues from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh."

## **The Jew and You**

In this review of his dramatic return to earth, the Lord Jesus has laid great stress upon its effect on Israel. Probably you, like the vast majority today, are not Jewish but Gentile. You may well ask, "What significance has all this for me?" As we have already noted, whenever God wants us to understand how he will handle us as believers today, he holds before us the history of the nation Israel.

Briefly retrace the history of this race and you will see what is meant. In that desperate hour when they were slaves and serfs, in bondage in Egypt, the angel of death passed over and spared them, and in that first Passover they were born as a nation by the grace of God. They were redeemed, brought out of bondage, and set free. Then, in the marvelous phrasing of Moses, God carried them on eagles' wings and bore them along, upholding them, and sustaining them by miraculous interventions on their behalf. (see Exodus 19:4.)

But his goodness and grace were repaid, for the most part, by pride, arrogance, and a self-righteous effort to please him without any genuine conviction of heart. They fell to murmuring, complaining, and grumbling, in constant frustration of God's efforts with them. At last there follows the story of gradually increasing moral failure and of final dispersion in moral bankruptcy and despair.

For centuries they wandered throughout the length and breadth of the earth, preserved as a nation, but still in unbelief. Even when they were allowed to go back to Israel and establish themselves as a nation, again they did so in unbelief. But, says Jesus, the hour is coming when by an act of sovereign grace, without any merit on their part, God will bring them back again to the land. This time it will be an hour of mourning and repentance when they will understand at last what God has been wanting to do with them. They will then enter into a time of national health and wholeness and will become the instrument of blessing to all the earth.

If you read carefully the book of Romans you will see that the same story is told in chapters 5-8. These detail for us the way God has designed to bring men into genuine liberty, genuine joy and the true excitement of life. In chapters 9-11 of Romans' Israel is brought in as the illustration of all this. These trace for us the way God will work with us. When we come to the place of utter spiritual bankruptcy, when we stop thinking we can contribute something of value to God, and begin at last to rest, to rely wholly upon his ability to do everything through us-then we begin to enter into the fullness of life that God has planned for man. This is the meaning of God's dealings with Israel.

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, we thank you that at this very moment we may experience your living presence in our hearts. We do not need to wait until some future day in order to know the glory of your presence. We long for the day when earth shall know your presence in power and glory, but in the meantime we are glad we can say with deep personal meaning: "Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory." In your name, Amen.

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