

AS CLEAR AS LIGHTNING

Matthew 24:23-28

23 “Then if anyone says to you,

‘Behold, here is the Christ,’

or ‘There He is,’

do not believe him.

24 For false christs and false prophets will arise

and will show great signs and wonders,

so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect.

25 Behold, I have told you in advance.

26 Therefore, if they say to you,

‘Behold, He is in the wilderness,’ do not go out,

or, ‘Behold, He is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe them.

27 For just as the lightning comes from the east

and appears even to the west,

so will the coming of the Son of Man be.

28 Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.”

(Matthew 24:23–28, 2022 LSB)

THE SETTING

At the beginning of Matthew 24, Jesus’ disciples asked Him what signs would indicate His second coming and the end of the age. Matthew 24-25, called the Olivet Discourse, is His answer to them.

Both His second coming and the end of the age will be preceded by the great tribulation. It will be a time so terrible that, if God did not end it, no life would be left.

The suffering of the tribulation will have two sources. The first is the wrath of God. Revelation 6-18 describes a series of judgments poured out by God against the world. The second is what Jesus speaks about here. It is the suffering brought about by the Antichrist against the people of God.

I am convinced from the Word of God that the Lord Jesus will remove the church before the tribulation begins. With His Bride safely out of the way, Jesus will give national Israel His undivided attention. 144,000 Jews will come to faith in Him during the tribulation and will suffer greatly for their faith. And then, at His second coming, the entire nation of Israel – all the Jews alive on earth at

that point – will be restored and redeemed.

Satan will not take the Lord's work passively; he will resist it tooth and nail. As we will see this morning, the devil will attempt to deceive the people of God and prevent their final restoration. Jesus' words to His disciples provide the protection that His people need against those deceptions.

As I said, I believe that the church will be gone when these events take place. But Jesus' words are still important to us today. We are not living in the tribulation period, but the devil has still filled our world with false saviors and false prophets. We also need to know how to protect ourselves from deception.

So let's pray and dive into the Word!

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SATAN'S BATTLE PLAN

Matthew 24:23-24

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(**Matthew 24:23–24, 2022 LSB**)

That final phrase tells us why Satan sends out false christs and false prophets: he is trying, if he can, to deceive God's elect.

THE ELECT

The entire world has almost always been divisible into two groups: the elect and the reprobate. The elect are sinners whom the Father has chosen for salvation and adoption in Christ. The reprobate are sinners whom the Father has chosen to leave to their own nature and the judgment to come.

Satan already dominates the reprobate; he doesn't need to deceive them. Jesus calls the devil "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31). John writes that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (First John 5:19). Paul says that Satan is "the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2).

But the elect have been granted repentance by God and have escaped the snare of the devil (Second Timothy 2:25-26). Colossians 1:13-14 says that the Father "rescued us from the authority of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Satan has no need to deceive the reprobate; they are already deceived. But he has set his sights on deceiving the elect. That's true today, and his efforts will be greatly multiplied in the great tribulation.

The devil will implement three deceptions.

THREE DECEPTIONS

The first deception will be to send out false christs, false saviors. Before Jesus, the devil manifested false religions of every sort. After Jesus, he focused more attention on false saviors. There have been false christs for 2,000 years, but they will be multiplied during the great tribulation.

The second deception will be to send out false prophets. False prophets deliver lying messages to obscure the truth. The devil is not interested in providing a single alternative to Christ, but cluttering the world with so many ideas that the Gospel gets lost in the chaos.

The third deception will be great signs and wonders. There are fakes and frauds all over the

place in our time. You can see them on TBN and other cable networks. They pretend to work miracles, but they are all fakes, every one of them.

During the great tribulation, God will permit Satan to empower actual signs and wonders. They will be real miracles; people will really be healed, for instance. But they will be counterfeit. They will not be by the power of God but by the power of the devil. And they will not lead anyone to repentance and faith in Christ but toward lies and blasphemies.

God will do this for two reasons.

The first reason is to judge those who have rejected the truth. Second Thessalonians 2:8-12 says that the Antichrist will come in Satan's power, with signs and false wonders, deceiving those who perish. Because they rejected the truth, God will send a deluding influence upon them so that they believe what is false and incur His greater judgment.

The second reason is to test those who claim to love Him. In Deuteronomy 13:1-4 Yahweh says that if a false prophet works a miracle and then tries to lead you away from the truth, you aren't to follow him. That false prophet is there because God tests those who say they love Him. If they do, they will never follow false teachers, no matter what miracles those false teachers perform. I know men and women today who, I fear, would believe any teacher who can perform a miracle. They claim to love the Lord, but what they really love is their experiences. The proof of a teacher is not in the power they display but in the words they speak.

Remember, beloved, God does not lie, He does not repent, and He does not regret:

19 "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent...
(Numbers 23:19, 2022 LSB)

29 "Also the Eternal One of Israel will not lie or have regret...
(1 Samuel 15:29, 2022 LSB)

Remember, too, that Satan does not work through power but through deception.

The Lord has provided us with all the protection that we need. Let's listen to Him.

ADVANCE WARNING

Matthew 24:25-26

25 “Behold, I have told you in advance.

26 Therefore, if they say to you, ‘Behold, He is in the wilderness,’ do not go out, or, ‘Behold, He is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe them.”

(Matthew 24:25–26, 2022 LSB)

The devil’s aim is to deceive us. He’ll try to do that by sending out false christs and false prophets. But Jesus has given us advance warning of this so that we will not be caught off guard.

False christs will arise. They will trick the people of the world. Those deluded people will tell believers that the Lord has appeared out in the wilderness or that He is in a room in a city somewhere. He’s just waiting for the right time to announce Himself. Or, only those with the right kind of faith can see Him.

This has been happening for a long time. Ann Lee, the founder of the Shaker movement, believed herself to be the female representation of God. George Baker was known as Father Divine, and he claimed to be God. Sun Myung Moon, known as Reverend Moon, believed that he was the Second Coming of Christ. Claude Vorlihon believed that he was the Messiah and that his father was an extraterrestrial named Yahweh. Inri Christo of Brazil, Ante Pavlovic of Croatia, and Alan David Miller of Australia all believed themselves to be Jesus Christ.

No one should ever have believed any of these deluded blasphemers. They should have believed Jesus. Of course, some people who make these claims are just charlatans looking for money, but many suffer from mental and spiritual delusions. That makes them *pitiable*, but it doesn’t make them *reliable*.

When someone says that Jesus is *here* or *there*, in the *wilderness* or in the *city*, we are to reject them as a liar instantly. It doesn’t matter whether they believe it or not; they are lying. Don’t humor those who are deceived. If rejecting their beliefs offends them, so be it. They have been deceived. Their one hope is someone telling them the truth.

Deceivers often become angry when they are challenged. To be honest, in my experience, they ALWAYS become angry when they are challenged! I think that’s because they have no true faith in their beliefs. Genuine faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. False doctrines are always fragile and delicate and can’t stand up to scrutiny. Those who believe false doctrines are equally fragile and delicate; they hate being questioned. A woman once gave me a unique and highly inaccurate interpretation of the dove that Noah sent out from the ark. I merely asked, “But is that true?” and a look of anger and perhaps even contempt flashed across her face before she could control herself. She had such little confidence in her own beliefs that she needed complete agreement from everyone else.

We must not coddle false beliefs. Instead, we must expose the lie for what it is. We must drain the abscess of that false doctrine. We must pull the splinter of that lie. That person has just one hope, and that is that someone who knows the truth will speak the truth to them. The doctor who looked me in the eye and told me that I had cancer did me a tremendous favor.

UNSHAKEABLE CONFIDENCE

Matthew 24:27-28

Now, how can we be sure of what we believe? That's the challenge that so often comes from false believers. You see, they think that our hopes are like their hopes, that our confidence is like their confidence. I came to Christ when I was seventeen and a senior in high school. I shared what I could with my best friend, but he had no interest in the Lord. After high school, we drifted apart, as people do. I found him about 13 years ago, living in the D.C. area. I learned he was dying of kidney cancer, so I traveled east to share Christ with him face to face. When I started, he interrupted me: "Do you still believe that?" You see, it had been more than thirty years since we graduated. His beliefs, like those of most unbelievers, had shifted from here to there and back again. But the Word of God is a foundation of solid rock; it doesn't change or move.

So, how can we be sure that what we believe about the Lord's return is true? Because we have Jesus' own words describing the nature of His second coming.

27 "For just as the lightning comes from the east and appears even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.

28 Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."

(Matthew 24:27-28, 2022 LSB)

The image of lightning certainly means that His coming will be very quick and unexpected. That's what the picture of the thief in the night emphasizes in Matthew 24:43.

But more than that, lightning is not a subtle, hidden, concealed event. From Norfolk, I've seen lightning flashing in thunderheads over Omaha, 90 miles away, as the crow flies. Imagine a 90-mile circle around Omaha; more than 1.9 million people live there. Potentially, every single one of them could see the same lightning flash at the very same moment. The second coming will be like a flash of lightning around the earth. When Jesus returns to Jerusalem, the whole world will witness the flash of it. Those furthest away from Jerusalem will see it in 0.065 seconds. The whole world will see it all at the same time.

The imagery of vultures and a corpse is the same. The distance is much less, of course, but the idea remains the same. You can see vultures circling in the sky for two or three miles, depending on the clarity of the air and how good your eyes are. As with lightning, those vultures can't be hidden or concealed. There is nothing subtle about them. You know exactly why they are circling that particular spot. In the same way, when Jesus returns, the whole world will know instantly who He is and why He has returned. For the past couple of weeks, I've been quoting Revelation 19:11-16. It continues to apply.

11 Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse,
and He who sits on it is called Faithful and True,
and in righteousness He judges and wages war.

12 His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems;
having a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself,

13 and being clothed with a garment dipped in blood,
His name is also called The Word of God.

14 And the armies which are in heaven,
clothed in fine linen, white and clean,
were following Him on white horses.

15 And from His mouth comes a sharp sword,
so that with it He may STRIKE DOWN THE NATIONS,
and He will RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON;
and HE TREADS THE WINE PRESS
OF THE WRATH OF THE RAGE OF GOD, the Almighty.

16 And He has on His garment and on His thigh a name written,
"KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS."

(Revelation 19:11–16, 2022 LSB)

John says that HE saw heaven opened; did anyone else? John writes in Revelation 19:19,

19 Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies assembled
to make war with Him who sits on the horse and with His army.

(Revelation 19:19, 2022 LSB)

So, there will be nothing secret, hidden, or subtle about Christ's return. It will be as obvious as a bolt of lightning. Its meaning will be as clear as circling vultures. It will be as subtle as an earthquake, as timid as a tidal wave. The world will see Him. The world will recognize Him. The world will try to defeat Him in battle. He will defeat them by His Word.

This is such a central truth that John speaks of it early in Revelation 1:

7 BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS [that's from Daniel 7],
and EVERY EYE WILL SEE HIM, EVEN THOSE WHO PIERCED HIM [that's from Zechariah 12];
and all the tribes of the earth will MOURN OVER HIM. Yes, amen.
(Revelation 1:7, 2022 LSB)

BRINGING IT HOME

The great tribulation will be a time of unprecedented chaos and confusion. We have the very same chaos and confusion in our time, just not at the same intensity.

The answer for tribulation saints is the same as the answer for you and me: lean on the Scriptures, God's breathed-out Word. They are true. They are inerrant. They are infallible. They are authoritative.

Your peace today is completely dependent on how well you know and how much you trust the Scriptures. God is always true; He cannot lie. His Word is like Him. It is true; it cannot lie.

Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room,

**“Do not let your heart be troubled;
 believe in God, believe also in Me.” (John 14:1, 2022 LSB)**

The devil is actively trying to deceive you today. He is trying to confuse you today. His false teachers insist that “love is love.” He sends false christs into the world, men and women who promise peace and comfort and safety and purpose but who always steer you away from the Bible. Satan has successfully obscured the message of the Gospel in the world so that countless people call themselves Christians but follow human traditions and values rather than Scripture.

We must remember that we will never have the opportunity to share the Gospel in a pure environment, one that is untouched by lies and disinformation. We preach Christ in a world full of spiritual debris. And, like it or not, false teachings can cling to us like dryer lint to a sweater. We ourselves can be blind to our own misunderstandings.

So, let's strive to increase our knowledge of God's Word and our faithfulness to Jesus Christ.