

Review

In our last study, we saw Jesus and His disciples exiting the temple. As they were leaving, the disciples pointed out the amazing structures which Herod's building project of remodeling the temple had created. One of them said to Him,

Mark 13:1 ...“Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!”

Jesus wasn't impressed. He told them as they were leaving that there would come a day when not one of those stones would be left upon another. When the disciples had taken the short walk with Him over to the Mount of Olives, a few of them asked for specifics about what He had said back at the temple. Jesus' answer is known as "The Olivete Discourse."

24:3 Tell Us

Peter, James, John, and Andrew were the four disciples (Mark 13:3) who asked Jesus about the timing and scenario surrounding the destruction of the temple. With hindsight, it would seem to us that they also asked, "And while we're at it Lord, what will be the signs of your coming and the end of the age?" But from their limited understanding and perspective, it's also possible that they were assuming the destruction of the temple would happen at the end of the age. Either way, their question prompts an amazing monologue from Jesus.

24:4-8 See To It That No One Misleads You

The first thing Jesus tells them is that looking for the end of the age will be fraught with deception: Being misled will be easy. And He began the Olivete Discourse with that warning, as well a list of four things that will mislead people.

We have to tune into these things, as well as Jesus' conclusion, because there has been a ton of misinformation spread throughout the church regarding some of these things, and their meaning.

False Christs

One big way that many will be misled will be imposters claiming to be the Christ. Throughout the years, history has seen its share of people claiming to be the Messiah. They started right after Jesus' ascension into heaven, and have never stopped.

One of the most prominent early imposters was a man named Shimon Bar-Kokhba, who had changed his name to Kokhba after the Messianic title of the "star" (Heb: "ko-KAWB") who would come forth from Jacob (Num. 24:17). From 132-135AD, he led many of the Jews in their rebellion against the Roman emperor Hadrian. But his defeat led to Jews being banished from Jerusalem - none were allowed to live there for centuries. Bar-Kokhba was one of many who claimed to be the Messiah in ancient times.

Even in the last fifty years, things have not let up. There are still continually people claiming to be Christ.

In the 1960's, Psychologist Milton Rokeach worked in Ypsilanti State Hospital in Michigan with three men - Leon, Joseph, and Clyde - who all believed that they were the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. In 1981, he released the book "The Three Christs of Ypsilanti," documenting the cases of these three men. After nothing worked to cure them, he decided to put them all together. This of course led to some interesting conversations, like when one of them would say, "I'm the Messiah, God told me." And another of them would say, "I never told you any such thing!"

These three guys in a mental institution are typical of people with a Christ complex, and didn't manage to deceive anybody, but many others have.

In 1951, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson was living in New York and became the leader of the Lubavitch movement, with a following of 200,000 people. Although he claimed to be the Messiah, he died in 1994.

In the 1950's, an ordained pastor of the Disciples of Christ church named James Warren Jones had a following of over 900 people. By the time their travels took them from Indiana to California to Guyana, Jones was claiming to be the Messiah. In 1978, 914 of them died when they drank Kool-Aid laced with cyanide and sedatives at Jonestown.

In the 1980's, Vernon Wayne Howell got involved with the Seventh-Day Adventist cult of the Branch Davidians. In 1990, he changed his name to David Koresh, believing that he was the Messiah. In 1993, he had 131 followers, who, after a 51-day siege by the FBI, died following this false Christ at Waco, Texas.

A woman called Sister Francis Michael claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus. She told the other members of her group that they would soon depart via a "Next Level" mother ship to assist "my Father and His other Next Level helpers." Thirty-nine members of that group - the Heaven's Gate cult - committed suicide near San Diego in March of 1997.

It should come as no surprise to us when we see many people come in the name of Christ, and mislead many more people.

Wars, Famines, Earthquakes

The next three items on Jesus' list of possible deceptions are wars, famines, and earthquakes. Of course these things kill thousands of people, and often are more horrifying than we can imagine. But they are more than devastating - they can also be deceiving. You see, when we experience them, or even hear of them, we are prone to panic over them, to say, "This is it! It's the end!"

How many people thought Armageddon had come when the Gulf War started in 1991? How many people thought the world was coming to an end on September 11, 2001? Jesus stresses to us how important it is that we keep a proper perspective on these events, no matter how devastating they may be.

Earthquakes

There is a lot of misinformation running around Christian circles today, claiming that earthquakes have been increasing radically. Ask just about anyone in church, and they'll tell you, "Yes, statistics show clearly that earthquakes have increased dramatically in the last few decades."

As a matter of fact, our planet does experience about 14,000 earthquakes each year. However, the only thing that has increased lately has

been our ability to detect them. Today, there are more than 4,000 seismograph stations in the world, which enable us to locate the many small earthquakes that we could not detect before. In reality, there are about 19 earthquakes around the world each year that are 7.0 or higher on the Richter scale (source: USGS). That number hasn't changed much at all in the last few years.

Famines

Famine is another terrible thing that afflicts the human race. Today, there are 842 million people in the world who are hungry. It is a terrible tragedy, but not a new one. Remember, Jesus said,

John 12:8 “...you always have the poor with you...”

There are famines today, just as there have been throughout the last 2,000 years.

War

Third, there is war. If you keep your eyes and ears open, you will realize that there are lots of wars happening around the world. At the end of 2003, there were 35 wars underway. The massive conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the largest and deadliest since World War II, with the death toll at over 3.3 million people over the last five years. Sudan's civil war has gone on for 17 years, with the number of dead approaching 2 million.

For many years, the USA lived under the illusion that war for us was a thing of the past. But now that over a thousand members of the US military have died in Iraq, and over 130 have died in Afghanistan, we are beginning to be reminded about the tragedy of war. At the same time, rumors are abounding regarding what will happen with Iran and North Korea.

Wars and rumors of wars. Is this a signal of the end? Not exactly. You see, it has been estimated that there has been just one year of peace for every 13 years of war in the last 2,000 years. As brutal as war is, it is common on the earth, just as false christs, earthquakes, and famine have been.

See That You Are Not Frightened

What I am trying to say is that in our fear of wars, famines, and earthquakes, we have a tendency to think that the end of the world is upon us. But again, don't miss the context of the passage: Jesus said we are NOT to be frightened about these, that it is NOT YET the end. It is just the BEGINNING of birth pangs.

Believe me, when war, famine, and earthquake signal the end of the world, the whole world will know it. In the book of Revelation, war, famine, and earthquakes will be world-wide and unbelievably devastating to huge percentages of the world's population.

And as far as false Christs, there will be a final one, who will deceive the whole world (Rev. 12:9).

Birth Pangs

And so for every false Christ that appears, for every outbreak of war, for every famine suffered, and every earthquake reported, we are to tell ourselves one thing: "That was a contraction."

Now, I would not presume to try and tell anyone here that I am an expert regarding contractions, labor, or anything to do with childbirth. But I do know this: each contraction is a signal that labor day is getting that much closer. And the closer together and more intense those contractions become, the closer the climactic event is getting. That's how we are to look at false Christs, famines, earthquakes, and wars.

Are we in the end times? I absolutely believe it. But not because of these four things. As we continue on into the Olivet Discourse, we will be shown exactly why I believe we are in the very last generation of the church. But that is the stuff of studies to come.