

The Beginning of Birth Pains

Matt. 24:1-8

Intro. People wonder what the future holds, but we believe the Bible has the answers. From the lips of Jesus, **Matt. 24, 25** is the centerpiece of Bible prophecy for the future of Israel and the nations. Except for the destruction of the Temple in **v.2**, the prophecies here were not fulfilled in history past nor are they being fulfilled in the present. They all belong to a future time which may not be very far off. The content of these two chapters focuses on Israel and the nations and they contain no reference to the Church. At this time in the life and ministry of Jesus, the disciples knew almost nothing about the Church beyond the fact that *ecclesia* in their language means *a called out assembly*. They knew nothing about the uniqueness of the body of Christ made up of believing Jews and Gentiles. They knew nothing about the 2,000 year interval between Christ's ascension and 2nd coming. They knew nothing at all about the rapture or the sudden snatching away of the Church that would happen before the Tribulation. Jesus hadn't yet revealed these things because, like men at a marriage conference, their minds couldn't take it all in. They were maxed out just trying to comprehend His promise to be resurrected three days after His crucifixion!

Then on the night before He was crucified, Jesus said He was going to His Father's house to prepare a place for them. He then promised to return and take them to be with Him forever. (**Jn.14:1-3**) This event is called the *rapture* and many Christians believe it's the next supernatural event on God's prophetic calendar. **Titus 2:13** calls it "**the Blessed Hope**" believers are waiting to experience. The promise Jesus made to His disciples that night was simple and clear. For the next 20 years, this promise was all the first century Christians had to go on until Paul was given new revelation about the mysteries of the Church and our destiny to be airlifted by Jesus.

Even though Christ's promise to rapture us before the Tribulation seems clear, not everyone views the timing of these events the same way. While most believe a resurrection and rapture will happen at some point in the future, some see the rapture in the middle of the Tribulation and some see it happening at the end. If you take the Bible's description of the Tribulation literally as you should, this becomes a very serious matter. Jesus described the judgments of the Tribulation as being worldwide in scope. No part of the earth will be spared. He said the **distress** of this 7 year period would be **unequaled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equaled again.** - **Matt. 24:21** Along with God's purpose of preparing Israel to embrace the Messiah they rejected, **Isa. 13:9** describes the Tribulation this way... **See, the day of the LORD is coming --a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger-- to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.** More than 1/2 of the earth's population will die resulting from the catastrophes on earth.

We believe the Church will escape these punishments because of a legal principle illustrated in **Gen. 18**. The principle arises out of the occasion when God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Let me read the questions Abraham asked an angelic visitor. **23-25 - Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing--to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"** The answer to Abraham's rhetorical question is "yes", God only does what is right and just. And "no", He will not destroy the righteous with the wicked. It is never God's way to do such a thing.

This principle was illustrated earlier when the Lord spared Noah and his family at the time of the Flood. God spared them because they were righteous in His sight. Here in **Gen.18**, God removed Lot and his wife from the Sodom before fire and brimstone destroyed the city. Even though Lot was the only righteous man in the city, He spared Sodom until Lot was evacuated.

God's way is to rescue the righteous while punishing the wicked. **Psa. 91:7, 8** promises, **A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.** **II Pet. 2:9** says, **the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.**

From historical precedent and from this legal principle in **Gen.18**, we can be sure that we who have been declared righteous in the Church Age will not go through the Tribulation. But along with these arguments, the NT contains several direct NT promises. Let me string a few of them together. **Rom. 5:9 - Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!** To be **justified** means to be declared righteous by God. And as we found in **Gen. 18**, God will not destroy the righteous with the unrighteous. **I Thess. 1:9b-10 - They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead--Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.** Notice this verse doesn't speak of divine wrath in general. It speaks of **the coming wrath**...the Tribulation. **I Thess. 5:9 - For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. Wrath** is the key word the prophets used to describe the coming Day of the Lord. So here in these NT promises, God's **wrath** is precisely what Christ's salvation delivers us from.

But some will say, "*Pastor, haven't you read Foxe's Book of Martyrs? Except for John each of the first apostles was martyred. Many of the first century believers suffered and were persecuted. Under Nero and Domitian, the Romans tortured Christians / fed them to lions / and burned them at the stake. All through history and right to the present, Christians have suffered the wrath of man.*" That's true and to be expected. But persecution and martyrdom are the result of man's wrath. What makes the Tribulation unique is that it's like a perfect storm.

Remember the story of the six Gloucester sword fishermen who lost their lives back in 1991? A movie was made called, The perfect storm. (It's hard for me to watch that movie and not think about an afternoon on Saginaw Bay I'd rather forget.) These veteran fishermen pushed the limits and found themselves in the teeth of not one storm system, but three. That's what the Tribulation will be like in terms of wrath poured out on Christ-rejecting humanity. Let me read three passages from Revelation which explain what I'm talking about. I've underscored several key words so we don't miss them.

- **Rev. 6:15-17 - Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"**
- **Rev. 12:12 - Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short."**
- **Rev. 16:1 - Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth."**

The Tribulation will be humanity's perfect storm. Along with the wrath of man, the earth will be subjected to **the wrath of the Lamb** (Christ), **the fury** (or wrath) **of Satan**, and the **wrath of God**. What makes the Tribulation unique is the fact that people will know these catastrophes are punishment sent from God. Today we live under friendly skies. God's wrath is restrained by His mercy.

But a day is coming when divine wrath will be poured out without restraint. As Daniel and Jesus said, in terms of severity and destruction, this seven year period will be **unequaled** in all of history. That was a long introduction. To stay in context, let's start reading this AM at **Matt. 23:37**.

1. Jesus rejected and Israel's destiny – 23:37-39

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Here Jesus explains why the Lord will enter into judgment with Israel. Jesus explains how God has so often reached out to this people but they have repeatedly rejected Him. The Lord's relentless efforts to reach His people is seen in **Isa. 65:2 - All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations--** Just as Israel was held accountable for their unwillingness, every human being will be held accountable for their unbelief. But think of the exposure and benefits we've enjoyed in Christian America. Think of the multiplied opportunities we've had to hear the Gospel. Yet despite these privileges, most have turned their backs on God in unbelief. Like Israel's Temple, so many lives and homes and churches are empty.

But God has plans to keep the covenant promises He made to Israel. After the Jews experience devastation more terrible than Hitler's holocaust, a remnant of Jewish people will turn to the Lord and plead with Him to save them. **Zech. 13:1, - "On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity. But the punishment for their unbelief and disobedience will be horrific. vs. 8, 9 - In the whole land," declares the LORD, "two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'"** The silver lining is the fact that those who survive the Tribulation, repent and turn to Christ will enter the Millennial Kingdom. They will see the One they pierced and say, **Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.**

2. Jesus walks away and His disciples ask questions – 24:1-3

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Can you sense the sadness and pathos in v.1? Jesus **walked away** from His Temple? Every attempt to reach Israel's leaders had failed. His miracles were dismissed and His teachings were unheeded. The nation's spiritual leaders wanted nothing to do with this carpenter from Nazareth. They were plotting to eliminate Him. So Jesus walked away. The glorious One the Temple was built to honor was walking away for the last time.

But in the pathos of these moments, notice what the disciples were thinking about. At least one of them called attention to the magnificent temple structures. Mark reports it this way...**13:1 - As He was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"** Once again Jesus and His followers were not on the same wavelength. They saw the material grandeur, He saw the spiritual emptiness. They were impressed, but

Jesus was sorrowful. The massive stones seemed glorious and permanent like their ancient religion. **"Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." - Mk. 13:2**

This situation reminds me of a story told by Max Lucado. An Arab prince by the name of Shah Jahan was passionately in love with his young princess when suddenly she became ill and died. In the depths of grief and anguish he determined to build a temple in her honor. No expense would be spared to memorialize the royalty she bore with such dignity and charm. Her remains were held in state in the middle of the temple site to be enshrined there later. As work progressed and time passed, careless workers allowed her tomb to be covered over with dirt and construction materials. In the excitement of building the temple, the one for whom the temple was built was forgotten.

Can that happen to a church? Can we become so occupied with buildings, programs and the excitement of ministry...that we forget the One the Church is about? That's what happened to Israel. The Jews loved Judaism and their magnificent temple. But the nation lost sight of the Lord their temple was built to honor. Their blindness was so complete...they didn't even recognize their Messiah when He came. So Jesus walked away. He told His disciples that utter destruction was ahead for their Temple...a destruction so complete **not one stone would be left upon another**. The account in **Lk. 19:41-44** reveals the anguish of Jesus as well as details of the Roman invasion that happened 40 yrs. later. **As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."**

The destruction of the Temple is the one part of this prophecy that has already been fulfilled. It was fulfilled in AD 70 when the Roman army led by Titus besieged and destroyed Jerusalem. **Lk. 21:20-24** supplies more details about this invasion. **"When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.** The Jews felt safe inside their Jerusalem walls, but Jesus warned them to **flee to the mountains**. He said the Romans would **build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side**...which they did. Instead of heeding Christ's warning to flee to the mountains, the people grouped together inside the city walls which had been successfully defended since AD 66. The result was a wholesale slaughter that claimed more than a million lives.

The prediction of the Temple's destruction prompted questions. With one voice, the OT prophets said a time of terrible calamity and destruction would precede the Messiah's coming to establish His kingdom. What Jesus prophesied about the Temple caused the disciples to wonder if this assault on Jerusalem was what the prophets foretold and the kingdom was at hand. **v. 2** says, **As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"** Mark says it was **Peter, James, John and Andrew. (Mk. 13:3)** The disciples seem to ask three questions, but actually there were just two. First, they wanted to know **when** the Temple would be destroyed. When should they expect all this to happen?

In the original language the second question reads this way...*and what will be the sign of your coming and end of the age*. Since the Greek text doesn't have a definite article before **end, your coming** and **end of the age** signify one event not two. In answering this second question Jesus foretold certain conditions that would characterize the Tribulation and signal the end of the age. Now remember, this is not our mail. Jesus was not speaking to or about the Church in **Matt. 24, 25**. Instead, He gave this prophecy for the benefit of a future generation of godly Jews who would be forced to endure these horrific judgments. The disciples are representatives of this future generation even though they would never live to see these things unfold.

3. Jesus describes the “beginning of birth pains” – 24:4-8

Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ, ' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.

A key that unlocks the interpretation of this passage is found in **v. 8** where Jesus said, **All these are the beginning of birth pains**. In other words, the conditions described in **vs. 4-7** are just the beginning. I have no experience with birth pains, but I've witnessed them 3x's. I tried to comfort my wife by saying "*Honey I feel your pain.*" I can't repeat what she said in response. Dr. John MacArthur writes, "*Labor pains do not occur at conception or throughout pregnancy but just before birth. The figure of birth pains therefore would not have been appropriate to represent either the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred very near the beginning of the church age, nor the church age as a whole.*"

Now mothers, nod your heads if I'm right about this...Braxton Hicks aside, true labor pains don't begin until shortly before delivery. They occur with increasing frequency and intensity until the baby is born. Both the early pains and the hard labor which follow are part of the birth process. Am I right so far? I remember the story of a young first time father who was instructed to call the doctor when his wife's contractions were 5 minutes apart. When he finally called he said, "*Listen doctor, her contractions are one minute apart but I don't think we can wait any longer. I don't think she'll ever make it to five.*"

Like labor pains, the calamities that precede the Lord's return and Israel's delivery, will increase in frequency and intensity until they culminate in an explosion of catastrophic events. This is precisely the crescendoing effect of the seal / trumpet / and bowl judgments of **Rev. 6-19**. The seal judgments happen over a period of 42 months / the trumpet judgments happen during a period of weeks / and the bowl judgments are poured out during a period lasting only days. Each judgment is more severe than those that precede it. Randall Price writes, "*The birth pangs are significant in the timing of the Tribulation...The events of the first half of the Tribulation are merely the "beginning" with the expectation of greater birth pains in the second half.*" *Based on this analogy, the entire period of the 70th week, (or 7 years), is like birth pangs. Just as a woman must endure the entire period of labor before giving birth, so Israel must endure the entire seven year Tribulation...until Christ's second coming.*"

The analogy of birth pains wasn't new to those familiar with the OT and the rabbinical writings. Listen to **Jer. 30:6, 7 - Ask and see: Can a man bear children? Then why do I see every strong man with his hands on his stomach like a woman in labor, every face turned deathly pale? How awful that day will be! None will be like it. It will be a time of trouble for Jacob, but he will be saved out of it.** Now let's be clear. These verses do not suggest that a man will ever give birth! Amen? The answer to the rhetorical question in **v. 6** is "No!"

Instead, this verse is describing a time when strong men will suffer intense pain, like that of a woman in labor. Notice, every face will be **turned deathly pale**. That's hurtin for certain! The prophet here describes what it will be like in the Day of the Lord...the Tribulation. So the analogy of **Matt. 24** is rooted in OT prophecy. As we've said so often, "*the Scriptures are their own best interpreter!*"

In his book entitled, The Messiah Texts, Raphael Patai (who is not a believer) has dozens of references to extra-biblical commentary from Jewish writings in a chapter called, "The Pangs of the Times." Patai writes, "*The Pangs of the Messianic Times are imagined as having heavenly as well as earthly sources and expressions...things that will come to such a head that people will despair of Redemption. This will last for 7 years. And then, unexpectedly, the Messiah will come.*"

About 20 yrs. after Jesus ascended, the Apostle Paul also repeated this analogy in his letter to the believers in Thessalonica. **I Thess. 5:3 - While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.** In the context of Paul's letter, he had just described the rapture of the Church and the **comfort** that is ours because of it. (**I Thess. 4:13-18.**) His next subject is **the day of the Lord.** (**I Thess. 5:1, 2**) After the analogy of labor pains from which no one will escape, Paul wrote in **vs. 4-9 - But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ...But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breast-plate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

To the Jewish mind, this analogy of **labor pains** wasn't new. Here in **Matt. 24:4-8**, Jesus compared conditions at the first half of the Tribulation to the early labor pains of a woman about to give birth. Contrary to what many evangelicals have said and written, these conditions are not signs we see happening today, though it's tempting to make that association. Instead, **vs. 4-8** list signs that will emerge in the first half of the Tribulation...signs specifically given to the generation of godly Jews who will enter and suffer the horrors of the Tribulation. Let me read these verses again. **Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains."** Next time we'll see how these early birth pains are exactly parallel to conditions prophesied by **Daniel**. They align perfectly and literally with the Seal judgments of **Rev. 6**. I've provided a chart on the back of your sermon notes. Let me encourage you to open your Bible this week and do a self-study to check these things out for yourself.

Let me close with Christ's promise to the faithful of the church at Philadelphia. **Rev. 3:10, 11 - Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.** Notice that Jesus has promised to keep faithful believers, not just from the **trial**, but from **the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world...** This verse again supports our confidence that the church will be raptured before the tribulation. Christians are never referred to as *earth dwellers* or as the NIV has it...**those who live on the earth**. Throughout Revelation, earth dwellers are unbelievers. That's not us. **Phil 3:20 - But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ...** Instead of watching for signs, we who believe and are saved are waiting for our Savior. With the Apostle John we say, "**Amen, come Lord Jesus.**" - **Rev. 22:20**