

The First Half Matt. 24:4-14

Intro. Sept. 11, 2001 was the most tragic day in the history of New York City. It was a day when the unthinkable happened with such suddenness. It was a day we'll never forget. The Bible contains a clear warning that another day is coming...a day when life on earth will dramatically change. Without warning the Church will be raptured. Millions will literally be snatched off the planet. Sometime afterward, those who remain on earth will enter the period known as the Day of the Lord or the Tribulation. During this seven year period God will punish the unbelieving world and prepare Israel to receive the Messiah they rejected and crucified. Last time we began to consider the first half of the Tribulation which Jesus called **the beginning of birth pains. (v.8)** This morning I want to explore the correlation between **Matt. 24:4-14** and the Seal Judgments of **Rev. 6:1-14**. As we look at these prophecies, I ask you to consider what time it is and the possibility of Christ's sudden return.

But let's take a few moments to review several points we've made during the past two Sundays:

- The church is not in view in **Matt. 24, 25**. As we've said, *"this is not our mail."* We can profit from these chapters, because *"all Scripture is...profitable."* But these chapters were written specifically for Jews who will suffer through this coming seven year period known as the Time of Jacob's trouble or the Tribulation.
- Our *"blessed hope"* (**Titus 2:13**) is Christ's promise to rapture the Church before this period of worldwide punishment begins. Aside from promises in **Jn. 14:1-3; I Cor. 15** and **I Thess. 4:13-18**...we know the punishment for our sin was completely paid for by Jesus who died in our place. As a legal principle...God never punishes the righteous with the wicked.
- It's very tempting to interpret the conditions prophesied in **vs. 4-14** as conditions characterizing the age between Christ's ascension and return. Since Jesus calls these conditions **the beginning of birth pains (v. 8)** it's more accurate to see them as the first part of the birth process that leads to the spiritual rebirth of Israel and Christ's return. They are conditions that will mark the first half of the Tribulation. Just like childbirth, these early birth pains are followed by hard labor or the second half of the Tribulation. (**vs.15 -31**) Both phases lead to Christ's physical return and the establishment of His kingdom on earth.
- Since *"All parts of Scripture are equally God-breathed,"* we should expect complete harmony between the prophecies of the Old and New Testaments as well as harmony between the prophecies given by Jesus and His apostles. During my years of studying God's Word, I've found the prophecies of both testaments to fit together perfectly, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

So let's turn to **Matt. 24** to see how each condition Jesus prophesied is repeated and fleshed out by other NT prophecies and especially the Seal Judgments of **Rev. 6**.

1. False Messiahs, false prophets - Matt. 24, 4, 5, 11 / Rev. 6:2 - vs. 4, 5 - 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. v. 11...and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. The first half of the Tribulation will be marked by wholesale deception...deception like we've never known. Jesus said, **many** deceivers **will come in His name**, and they will successfully **deceive many** people. Donald Hagner writes, *"The claim to be the Christ here means the claim to be the eschatological (or coming) Messiah."* Leon Morris explains, *"This will surely be a reference to the last days, for there is little evidence that any of the turbulent men so active proceeding the fall of Jerusalem ever claimed to be the Messiah. Some claimed to be prophets, but that is not the same thing."* Like the other punishments unleashed in **Rev. 6-19**, the deception continues throughout this 7 yr. period. The same warning applies to second 42 months.

Matt. 24:23-26 says, **At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect--if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time. "So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it.**

In the spiritual vacuum created when the Church and restraining influence of God's Holy Spirit are suddenly removed, people will be groping for answers. **Rev. 7:1-14** shows how God's grace will still be in effect. Despite the deception, a great multitude will turn to Jesus and be saved. But it will be open season for satanically inspired deceivers and one deceiver in particular. Let's compare this prophecy of false messiah's and false prophets with the first seal of **Rev. 6:1, 2 - I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.**

This **first seal** unleashes the Antichrist who rises to prominence as a problem solver and peace-maker. **White** is a symbol of peace. Initially, this man is all about non-violent conquest. He emerges with policies and solutions people are desperately seeking. **Dan. 9:27** sets a benchmark for the start of the Tribulation. The seven year clock begins when some unnamed world leader establishes a multi-national agreement that brings peace to the Middle East. This man succeeds where others have failed. Because of his success, he wears a *stephanos*...a victor's crown. But this white-horse rider isn't the prince of peace, he's an imposter...a deceiver. The true Prince of Peace doesn't come until **Rev. 19:11** which says, **I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice He judges and makes war.**

The prefix *anti* in the title AntiChrist, means *in the place of or instead of*. Jesus spoke the truth and Jesus is the truth. But this man is deceitfulness personified. He presents himself as the Messiah and the hope of humanity, but he's a counterfeit. The Antichrist's rise to prominence may be facilitated by worldwide confusion caused when millions of Christians suddenly disappear. He may offer a plausible explanation. This makes sense when you consider the growing acceptance of the new age concept of a *planetary purge* where "mother earth" expels her enemies. Is there any doubt that Christians are increasingly hated because of our resistance to policies the world favors? I'm convinced the aftermath of the recent election reveals the conflict in the US is more spiritual than political.

I Thess. 5:3 describes the climate following the rapture. **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.** Today the cry for peace is heard everywhere. Since it's formation in March, 2004, The Peace Alliance is a growing movement in the US. Peace demonstrations like this one in Israel are taking place in every nation. Many of the world's thinkers talk freely of the urgent need for a new world order. Billionaires like George Soros are funding this initiative. With so much emphasis on globalism and the world community, it's not hard to imagine the formation of a world government led by some charismatic personality. The influence that seduces the world to embrace the Antichrist will be punishment from God and the natural consequence of rejecting God's truth. **II Thess. 2:9-12** says, **The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.** Whether this white-horse rider is the Antichrist or a forerunner, Jesus told His disciples the end of the age would be marked by wholesale deception. **Matt. 24:5 - For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ, ' and will deceive many.**

2. Wars and International discord – Matt. 24:6, 7 / Rev. 6:3, 4 - 24:6, 7 - 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. Even though it's tempting to see this prophecy fulfilled by two world wars, a more faithful interpretation places these conflicts in the future...wars that are yet to come.

Let's look again at **Rev. 6:3, 4 - When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.** With the opening of the **second seal**, the rider on a fiery red horse unleashes war and bloodshed on earth. This second seal runs parallel to Christ's prophecy of **wars and rumors of wars**. Even though international tension and saber rattling has happened and will continue to happen, war as widespread as this won't break out until after the Church is removed and the Tribulation begins. The first phase of these future wars could involve China, Iran, North Korea or a dozen other hot spots on the planet. But this may also be the Russian led invasion of Israel described in **Ezek. 38, 39**. And little imagination is required to believe this invasion could happen in the foreseeable future. The friendly relations between Russia / Iran / and Syria are undeniable. Turkey, whose ancient name is also included in the coalition of **Ezek. 38**, is presently uncommitted. But Turkey is leaning more toward alignment with Russia and the Arab states than with Europe and the west.

The **fiery red** color of this horse may also provide a clue to the nation it represents. In 1918 Leon Trotsky demobilized Russia's old army and ordered the formation of the Red Army under the banner of a red flag. If Russia is the king of the north of **Ezek. 38**, her friendship with Arab states pledged to destroy Israel, is today's news. And no one who seriously considers current geo-political realities believes the Red army is armed to the teeth for nothing. Russian's recent incursions into Georgia / Crimea / Ukraine and their participation in the fight against ISIS and Syrian rebels, may be warm-up drills for the main event. Someday Russia with her Arab allies will flex their military might against Israel. And when they do...God will intervene. The Bible says the whole world will learn that Israel's God is God. **Ezek. 39:7 - "I will make known my holy name among my people Israel. I will no longer let my holy name be profaned, and the nations will know that I the LORD am the Holy One in Israel.** So the deception and false peace the world enjoys at the start of the Tribulation will be short-lived. When the second seal is opened, conflicts will begin to erupt all over the earth.

An interesting detail arises out of the construction of the Greek phrase translated **make men slay each other** in **Rev. 6:4**. This phrase doesn't denote wars between nations. It has the idea of civil war and people turning on each other. The meaning leans more toward terrorism than organized warfare. We're not told the cause of the fighting, but when the Church and the restraining influence of God's Spirit is removed, Jesus said, **wickedness will increase**. A UN spokesman has predicted that blood-thirsty groups like ISIS / and Boko Haram, (which is more deadly than ISIS) / the Revolutionary Guard / and Hezbollah will never be eliminated. In other words, get used to terrorism because it's here to stay. In the first half of the Tribulation, this second seal will unleash violence, bloodshed and war.

And would you notice, **vs. 4** says, the rider on the red horse **was given a large sword**. The **large sword** symbolizes terrible destructive power. Once again, it takes little imagination to connect this **large sword** with the destructive power of a single nuclear weapon. Whether that weapon is in the hands of a rogue nation or a terrorist, the outcome in terms of lives lost is horrific.

3. Famines – Matt. 24:7 / Rev. 6:5-8 - vs. 7 - There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. Famines typically follow war when normal cycles of planting / harvesting as well as the shipment of goods and produce are interrupted. Let's compare this with **Rev. 6:5-8 - When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before**

me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"

Once opened, the **third seal** unleashes famine and a shortage of food so severe, a quart of wheat will cost a day's wage. **Black** is the color of fearfulness and mourning. The scales in the rider's hand suggest that food will be weighed out and rationed because of diminished supply.

When the rider on the black horse is released, a day's wages will buy a quart of wheat with nothing left over for other basic needs. Unlike local famines, this will be worldwide. It will result in terrible shortages and spiraling inflation. Panic in the market will lead to wholesale sell-offs which will only serve to deepen the depression. As earth's troubles intensify, the rich will suffer along with the poor. But at this early stage, the poor will suffer more than the rich. Notice **v. 6** says the famine won't affect the **oil and wine**. While essential food items are depleted, stores will be overstocked with luxury items. Food the poorest need to survive will be scarce, but things people can live without will be available in abundance. This judgment seems to be retributive justice for waste and materialism as well as selfishness that ignores the needy.

4. Pestilences and mass death – (Lk. 21:11) / Rev. 6:8 - Matthew's account doesn't include **pestilences**. But in the context of the Olivet Discourse it appears in **Lk. 21:11 - There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places...** The word **pestilence** refers to *any sudden and fatal epidemic*. In the Bible pestilences were often the result of divine judgment. It occurs 25 x's in Jeremiah and Ezekiel and is always associated with the sword (or war), and famine. In history, the **Black Death** claimed an estimated 75 to 200 million people. The effects of these divine punishments are seen when the fourth seal is opened.

Rev. 6:7, 8 - When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth. The color of this horse is ashen, or yellow green. The Greek term is **chloros**, from which we get the English words chlorophyll and chlorine. This fourth seal is opened in the aftermath of war. By opening this seal, 1/4th of the world's population die as a result of the **sword** or military conflict / **famine** and accompanying malnutrition / **plagues** or pestilence / and predatory animals. By today's count, 1/4th is nearly 2 billion people! But notice, physical death isn't the end for anyone! John saw **Hades** following close behind, like a man on foot following a mounted warrior. Since every human being is destined to live forever in God's presence or banished from it, death claims the body while **Hades** claims the soul. The picture of **Hades** following behind death leaves no doubt the dead are the unsaved who will be cast into this place of torment until they are resurrected to be judged at the Great White Throne Judgment. And remember...these catastrophes are still just **the beginning of birth pains**.

In **Rev. 1:18** we're told that Jesus holds the keys to death and Hades. Because we are sinners, we all deserve the punishment of death and Hell. While the Bible says Satan never releases his captives, Jesus came **to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.** - **Isa. 42:7** Aren't you glad the One who loves us is the One holding the keys. Only Jesus can release us from the punishment we deserved! He did that for me and He'll do that for you if you'll trust Him to.

5. Persecution-Martyrdom – Matt. 24:9 / Rev. 6:9-11 - v. 9 - Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other...

Since the Olivet Discourse centers on Jerusalem, the primary focus here is the persecution and martyrdom of the Jewish people who will be **hated by all nations**. This is Anti-Semitism at its zenith. But it's anti-Christian as well. All who follow Jesus will be hated and persecuted. Under extreme pressure, many will turn from the faith and turn against each other. John MacArthur writes, "...*paradidomi*, translated **handed over**, means to give over and was often used in a technical sense for arrest by the police or military." During the Third Reich, this sort of betrayal ripped apart friends and families in Nazi Germany. It will happen to an even greater degree in the Tribulation.

The entire 12th chapter of the Revelation is devoted to this future persecution of the Jewish remnant in the second half of the Tribulation. Today there can be no doubt that Anti-Semitism is on the rise worldwide. But let's see how this prophecy of Jesus runs parallel to the fifth seal of **Rev. 6:9-11** - **When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.** Notice that John's attention was drawn to the souls which appear under the altar in heaven. These souls represent believers martyred during the Tribulation because they were faithful to the Word of God. When faced with death, they refused to recant their testimony. John saw souls. I have no idea what a soul looks like. He didn't see bodies because the bodies of these believers won't be resurrected until the end of the Tribulation. But from their place under the altar, the souls of these martyred believers cry out for justice and vindication.

When we compare our situation to the persecution coming in the Tribulation, it's easy to be a Christian today. In **Lk. 23:31** Jesus used an analogy to illustrate the trouble that's ahead. He told His disciples, "**For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?**" When it comes to making a decision about Jesus, "wait and see" is the wrong approach! It's much wiser to trust Jesus while the tree is green and opposition is minimal. It will be much harder later.

6. Earthquakes – Matt. 24:7b / Rev. 6:12a - v. 7b - There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. Earthquakes have happened throughout history. But the quakes in Revelation are multiplied and extreme. And destructive earth-quakes are often associated with volcanic eruptions and monstrous Tsunami's that ravage shorelines and wipe away everything in their path.

Listen to **Rev. 6:12 - I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red...** The **sixth seal** unleashes a series of catastrophic events that will strike terror in people. An earthquake of this magnitude will decimate populated areas and change the topography of earth's landscape. Tim LaHaye tells of a seminar he led with a group of California educators. His session on Bible prophecy was scheduled right after lunch. 10 mins. into the session, a earthquake suddenly awakened the groggy group who remained tuned in for the rest of his talk. Funny how the earth quaking beneath us tends to open our ears.

7. Cosmic Phenomena – (Lk. 21:11) / Rev. 6:12-14 - Once again, not mentioned by Matthew is the cosmic phenomena included in Luke's Gospel. **Lk. 21:11 - There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.**

These cosmic signs are unleashed when the sixth seal is opened. **Rev. 6:12-14 - The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.**

More terrifying than the earthquake beneath is the sights above. The sun will be blackened. The moon will turn blood red. Anarchy will result. In the midst of chaos, **vs.15-17** say people will seek places to hide and find none. In utter desperation, they will pray for death, but death will elude them. At this moment every human will know that God is responsible for all that's happening. But as difficult as it is to imagine the terror of these catastrophes, this is only the beginning ...the worst and most destructive punishments are yet to come.

In our lifetimes we know something about deceivers. We know something about wars and terrorism / famines / martyrdom / and earthquakes. But thankfully, we have no experience with the cosmic phenomena detailed here. Yes, a meteor lit up the sky and crashed into Lake Michigan a few weeks ago...But stars cascading to earth like overripe figs falling from a shaken fig tree? We can't even begin to imagine what it means for the sky to recede and roll up like a scroll.

Along with all this bad news, this section describing the first half of the Tribulation ends with some good news. **Matt. 24:12-14** say, **Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.** At a time when love for God and Christ are tested to the limit, **the love of most will grow cold.** What a sobering phrase...**the love of most will grow cold.** Isn't it note worthy that the one virtue said to be tested is love. The main thing and the highest motivation in the Christian life is love for Jesus Christ. 3x's Jesus asked Peter this essential question...**Simon, do you love Me?** Friends, do you love Jesus?...I mean, do you really love Him? How is that love recognized? Even now, I feel that our love for Christ is on a downward slide.

Saved is the greek word, *sozo*. In some contexts *sozo* refers to spiritual salvation...we are saved by grace. But in other contexts *sozo* can mean physical deliverance. That's the meaning here. Believers who **stand firm** in their faith will be protected and delivered. These believers will survive the Tribulation and enter the kingdom alive. Some of them represent 1/3rd of the Israeli population who are protected, refined and purified by the blood of Christ. (**Zech. 13:8, 9**) So that's one element of good news. When all is said and done, some Tribulation saints who stood firm in their faith will survive.

But there's another element of good news here. **v. 14** says, **And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.** The Church has been preaching Christ's Gospel for the past 2,000 years. In the Tribulation God will save and seal 144,000 Jews who will serve as evangelists preaching the Gospel everywhere. Then some-time later God will raise up two powerful witnesses like Moses and Elijah.

But that isn't the end of God's efforts to reach and save. Just before the final punishments are poured out, **Rev. 14:6** says, **Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth--to every nation, tribe, language and people.** This will be God's final gracious appeal and it will be the world's final opportunity to hear the Gospel and be saved. An angel of God finish the work Christ began. But don't miss it....Here we see the patience and persistence of God. He's been called the "hound of heaven"...a God who is unwilling for even one soul to perish. He loves us that much. Have you trusted Him to save you? Do you love Him in return for His love? We can't know exactly when Jesus will come for us. Those who have presumed to set dates have proven to false prophets and foolish. The emphasis in the NT is to order our lives as people who believe Jesus could come at any moment. Even though **Matt. 24, 25** is not our mail, we'll see how Jesus illustrated and taught the principle of readiness in coming Sundays.