

NT LESSON 21: WHAT IS THE SIGN OF THY COMING?

Joseph Smith—Matthew (Matthew 24)
by Ted L. Gibbons

Introduction: An Editor from Chicago bragged that he could edit the entire New Testament down to just one paragraph. This is the result of his efforts:

CHRIST WAS BORN.
HE LIVED
HE DIED.
HE'S COMING BACK,
AND HE'S NOT VERY HAPPY.

This lesson will focus on the third line: "He's coming back."

No topic of discussion in the scriptures will elicit more discussion and speculation than this one. I urge you if you are reviewing this material for personal enrichment, to focus on the scriptures and the words of the living prophets. If you are preparing to teach Lesson 21 in a Sunday School setting, review the lesson in the manual with great care and use the information here to supplement, if necessary, what you find there. Discourage class members from unnecessary conjecture. Perhaps asking the question, "Where can we read that?" or "Where did you learn that?" will aid you in keeping the class focused on the messages of Matthew 24 rather than on hearsay and rumor.

The most frequently asked question about the Second Coming is this one: When will it happen? The scriptures give an answer to this question, one that specifies the very day of the second coming. We read in D&C 64 the following:

Behold, now it is called today until the coming of the Son of Man, and verily it is a day of sacrifice, and a day for the tithing of my people; for he that is tithed shall not be burned at his coming. For after today cometh the burning--this is speaking after the manner of the Lord--for verily I say, tomorrow all the proud and they that do wickedly shall be as stubble; and I will burn them up, for I am the Lord of Hosts; and I will not spare any that remain in Babylon. (D&C 64:23, 24)

"It is called today" until the time when Christ comes. But "after today" the burning will commence, In fact, "tomorrow all the proud and they that do wickedly shall be as stubble . . ." And there it is. He will not come today. He will come tomorrow. This is based, of course, on the Lord's timeline and on days as they occur where the Lord dwells. The explanation of figure 1 in facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham tells us, "One day in Kolob is equal to a thousand years according to the measurement of this earth . . ."

You may recall that in Revelation 5, John saw a book sealed with sevens seals, each one representing 1000 years of the earth's history. We find ourselves now near the end of the 6th seal or the six thousandth year. Tomorrow, sometime near the opening of the seventh seal, the Lord will come in his glory and the earth will be cleansed by fire.

The sermon we will review in this lesson is actually found in five different places: Joseph Smith—Matthew; Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21:5-36; and D&C 45:16-60. Each of these sources can be profitably reviewed for insights and information not found in the other locations. We will focus on the Joseph Smith—Matthew account.

I. JESUS FORETELLS THE IMPENDING DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM

(Joseph Smith—Matthew 1-20)

1 FOR I say unto you, that ye shall not see me henceforth and know that I am he of whom it is written by the prophets, until ye shall say: Blessed is he who cometh in the name of the Lord, in the clouds of heaven, and all the holy angels with him. Then understood his disciples that he should come again on the earth, after that he was glorified and crowned on the right hand of God.

2 And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple; and his disciples came to him, for to hear him, saying: Master, show us concerning the buildings of the temple, as thou hast said--They shall be thrown down, and left unto you desolate.

3 And Jesus said unto them: See ye not all these things, and do ye not understand them? Verily I say unto you, there shall not be left here, upon this temple, one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down.

4 And Jesus left them, and went upon the Mount of Olives. And as he sat upon

the Mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying: Tell us when shall these things be which thou hast said concerning the destruction of the temple, and the Jews; and what is the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world, or the destruction of the wicked, which is the end of the world?

5 And Jesus answered, and said unto them: Take heed that no man deceive you;

6 For many shall come in my name, saying--I am Christ--and shall deceive many;

7 Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you, and ye shall be hated of all nations, for my name's sake;

8 And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another;

9 And many false prophets shall arise, and shall deceive many;

10 And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold;

11 But he that remaineth steadfast and is not overcome, the same shall be saved.,p 12 When you, therefore, shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, then you shall stand in the holy place; whoso readeth let him understand.

13 Then let them who are in Judea flee into the mountains;

14 Let him who is on the housetop flee, and not return to take anything out of his house;

15 Neither let him who is in the field return back to take his clothes;

16 And wo unto them that are with child, and unto them that give suck in those days;

17 Therefore, pray ye the Lord that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the Sabbath day;

18 For then, in those days, shall be great tribulation on the Jews, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, such as was not before sent upon Israel, of God, since the beginning of their kingdom until this time; no, nor ever shall be sent again upon Israel.

19 All things which have befallen them are only the beginning of the sorrows which shall come upon them.

20 And except those days should be shortened, there should none of their flesh be saved; but for the elect's sake, according to the covenant, those days shall be shortened.

The disciples asked two questions of the Savior when they understood that he would return to the earth after his mortal ministry was completed (see JS—M1:1). Both are in verse 4. The first was, "when shall these things be which thou hast said concerning the destruction of the temple and the jews." The second, "What is the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world . . ."?

The Savior responded to question #1 in verses 5-20, and to question 2 in verses 21 to 55.

In his answer to the first question, Christ mentioned false Christs and false prophets, and of offended people who would betray one another. "The love of many shall wax cold" he promised. He warned his disciples to be watching for the "abomination of desolation." When that occurred, what actions did he tell his disciples to take? (JS—M 1:13-20) These prophecies were fulfilled in 70 A.D. when Titus attacked and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. Those who heeded the Lord's counsel to fled at once. Others, not so obedient, were destroyed or scattered.

Elder McConkie tells us "And when the day came, the true saints, guided as true saints always are by the spirit of revelation, fled to Pella in Perea and were spared." (*Mortal Messiah*, Vol 3. P. 430)

There are lessons to be learned in these passages. We are commanded to " lift a warning voice unto the inhabitants of the earth; and declare both by word and by flight that desolation shall come upon the wicked." (D&C 63:37) I think some Saints treat the Lord's word with a touch of indifference until they see the Roman Legions on the horizon. There will be time enough to flee when things are really bad. Meantime, it is business as usual—the same movies the world watches, the same fashions, the same TV shows. We know that Lucifer is trying to destroy the family, and that the prophets have warned again and again about the dangers lurking in worldliness, but there are some among us that refuse to set up the necessary defenses, who postpone erecting the suggested watchtowers, who procrastinate family home evening and family prayer and family scripture study. But when the

armies of evil come over the hill, it may be too late to return to our homes for the needed training and preparation.

II JESUS DESCRIBES HIS SECOND COMING

21 Behold, these things I have spoken unto you concerning the Jews; and again, after the tribulation of those days which shall come upon Jerusalem, if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there, believe him not;

22 For in those days there shall also arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders, insomuch, that, if possible, they shall deceive the very elect, who are the elect according to the covenant.

23 Behold, I speak these things unto you for the elect's sake; and you also shall hear of wars, and rumors of wars; see that ye be not troubled, for all I have told you must come to pass; but the end is not yet.

24 Behold, I have told you before;

25 Wherefore, if they shall say unto you: Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: Behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not;

26 For as the light of the morning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west, and covereth the whole earth, so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be.

27 And now I show unto you a parable. Behold, wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together; so likewise shall mine elect be gathered from the four quarters of the earth.

28 And they shall hear of wars, and rumors of wars.

29 Behold I speak for mine elect's sake; for nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places.

30 And again, because iniquity shall abound, the love of men shall wax cold; but he that shall not be overcome, the same shall be saved.

31 And again, this Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world, for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come, or the destruction of the wicked;

32 And again shall the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, be fulfilled.

33 And immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven shall be shaken.

34 Verily, I say unto you, this generation, in which these things shall be shown forth, shall not pass away until all I have told you shall be fulfilled.

35 Although, the days will come, that heaven and earth shall pass away; yet my words shall not pass away, but all shall be fulfilled.

36 And, as I said before, after the tribulation of those days, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken, then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven, and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn; and they shall see the Son of Man coming the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory;

37 And whoso treasureth up my word, shall not be deceived, for the Son of Man shall come, and he shall send his angels before him with the great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together the remainder of his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

38 Now learn a parable of the fig-tree--When its branches are yet tender, and it begins to put forth leaves, you know that summer is nigh at hand;

39 So likewise, mine elect, when they shall see all these things, they shall know that he is near, even at the doors;

40 But of that day, and hour, no one knoweth; no, not the angels of God in heaven, but my Father only.

41 But as it was in the days of Noah, so it shall be also at the coming of the Son of Man;

42 For it shall be with them, as it was in the days which were before the flood; for until the day that Noah entered into the ark they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage;

43 And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be.

44 Then shall be fulfilled that which is written, that in the last days, two shall be in the field, the one shall be taken, and the other left;

45 Two shall be grinding at the mill, the one shall be taken, and the other left;

46 And what I say unto one, I say unto all men; watch, therefore, for you know not at what hour your Lord doth come.

47 But know this, if the good man of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to have been broken up, but would have been ready.

48 Therefore be ye also ready, for in such an hour as ye think not, the Son of Man cometh.

49 Who, then, is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season?

50 Blessed is that servant whom his lord, when he cometh, shall find so doing; and verily I say unto you, he shall make him ruler over all his goods.

51 But if that evil servant shall say in his heart: My lord delayeth his coming,

52 And shall begin to smite his fellow-servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken,

53 The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of,

54 And shall cut him asunder, and shall appoint him his portion with the hypocrites; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

55 And thus cometh the end of the wicked, according to the prophecy of Moses, saying: They shall be cut off from among the people; but the end of the earth is not yet, but by and by.

An acquaintance told me an interesting story. It's message has dramatic implications for any discussion of the Second Coming.

He and his wife went on a date to a theater with two screens, one on the main floor and one on the upper floor. They arrived late and so the husband threw down the money and grabbed the tickets without taking time to listen to a comment from the

young lady in the box office. Anyway, his wife had heard the message, and so they ascended to the upper theater and settled back to enjoy the show, which had already begun.

About 2/3 of the way through the movie, the theater began to shake. The husband had been in an earthquake before and no desire to sit through another one on the upper floor of an old theater. He grabbed his wife's hand and started to MOVE!. But his bride stopped him. She then related the message he had missed at the box office earlier. The movie playing downstairs was *Earthquake!* At a certain spot in the movie, strategically placed speakers played very low frequencies in the theater to simulate the earthquake sound and movement. These sounds had caused the entire theater to vibrate.

This is a great analogy for the Second Coming. There are two theaters playing their programs in the last days. Theater one (the lower one, of course) is for the wicked. Theater two is for the righteous.

Thus the Lord said to the righteous, "Be not troubled, for, when all these things shall come to pass, ye may know that the promises which have been made unto you shall be fulfilled." (D&C 45:35, see also Matthew 24:6, JS—M 1:23. He has described the Second Coming as a "great" and "dreadful" day—dreadful for those experiencing things like earthquakes and tempests and wars and the rumors thereof, and great for the righteous who look forward with anticipation for the fulfillment of the promises.

All of the signs mentioned by the Savior are worth a close examination, a closer one than we have time for here, but he will review a few of the events mentioned by the Lord.

1. (JS—M 1:22) *False Christ and false prophets will show such signs and wonders that, if possible, even the very elect will be deceived.* We have two responsibilities here. First, we must identify these false leaders, and then we must make it impossible for them to deceive us. So, who are they? Certainly, apostate leaders and their followers have drawn away from the flock a small number of Saints. But are there other voices drawing us away from the truth and deceiving us? Samuel spoke of a kind of "prophet" that might corrupt our commitment to the gospel. He said,

If a man shall come among you and shall say: Do this, and there is no iniquity; do that and ye shall not suffer; yea, he will say: Walk after the

pride of your own hearts; yea, walk after the pride of your eyes, and do whatsoever your heart desireth--and if a man shall come among you and say this, ye will receive him, and say that he is a prophet. Yea, ye will lift him up, and ye will give unto him of your substance; ye will give unto him of your gold, and of your silver, and ye will clothe him with costly apparel; and because he speaketh flattering words unto you, and he saith that all is well, then ye will not find fault with him" (Helaman 13:27,28).

Where are the voices that preach this kind of doctrine in our day? To whom do we give of our substance for sending these very kinds of messages, often directly into our living rooms? The producers and stars of much of our modern media seem to fit precisely into this category of "false prophet."

2. (JS—M 1:28-29) *They shall hear of wars, and rumors of wars.* Which of us has not been captivated, even horrified by the visual imagery of war in news magazines and on the television in recent weeks. We have been enabled to sit in our living rooms and watch almost continuous coverage of the atrocity and brutality occurring in battlefields around the world. We hear of wars and rumors of wars almost constantly. When we couple that with the abundant degradation available in the media, we could almost say with Mormon, "a continual scene of wickedness and abominations has been before mine eyes ever since I have been sufficient to behold the ways of man." (Mormon 2:18)

3. (JS—M 1:29) *Famines, pestilences, and earthquakes* -- We have all seen the photographic evidence of starving children. SARS has secured and held the attention of the world. The management of the meteorological and geological patterns of the earth has been a method used frequently by the Lord to call people to repentance. See D&C 43:21-25; D&C 88:89-91; Isaiah 28:17. Revelation 16:21 speaks of hailstones that weigh a talent, or about 75 pounds. Revelation 16:18 speaks of the worst earthquake "since men were upon the earth." Since these things are prophesied, it is important for us to remember and to remind our children that we are in theater #2, and that we need not be troubled.

4. (JS—M 1:30) *Iniquity shall abound, causing the love of men to wax cold.* Sin puts out the fire of love. This is a powerful but apparently little understood doctrine. And we live in a time when iniquity is increasing.

The world is ripening in iniquity; and it must needs be that the children of men are stirred up unto repentance, both the Gentiles and also the house of Israel" (D&C 18:6).

This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come (2 Timothy 3:1).

For evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived (JST 2 Timothy 3:13).

The problem with this iniquity is, of course, that it doesn't always look like iniquity. I have been intrigued by the descriptions of Babylon (which according to D&C 133:14 is 'wickedness') given in the 18th chapter of Revelation. "Merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies" (18:3); "She hath . . . lived deliciously" (18:7); "The kings of the earth . . . have . . . lived deliciously with her" (18:9). We are commanded to abandon this iniquity. In Revelation 18:4, we read, "Come out of [Babylon], my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues."

5. (JS—M 1:27,31) *The gospel will be preached in all the world, and the elect will be gathered.* My children have been called to serve mission in Chile, New York, Brazil, the Canary Islands, El Salvador, California, and Indiana. My entire family has been called to preach in Logan, Utah and Columbus, Georgia and Pomerene, Arizona, and Fayetteville, North Carolina and Phoenix, Arizona and Snowflake, Arizona, and Orem, Utah. Those are the places in which my family has been charged to help prepare for the second coming. What about you. Where have your "fields of labor" been. Are you doing your part to gather the elect?

CONCLUSION:

I have a cartoon in my files. A mother stands at the doorway of her son's room, hands on her hips, surveying the rubble. The boy in the room is surrounded by unmade bed and unhung clothes. School work is scattered about, and banners and posters hang on the walls. The caption: "If we're living in last days, why do I need to make my bed?" With the increasing sense of doom and despair, there might be an

inclination to hide and wait, to leave the bed unmade, but we have another assignment. As the world winds down and the Lord prepares to come and assume control of this planet, we must be about our business. What business?

Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh. Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. (JS—M 1:48-50)

We are charged to be faithful rulers over the Lord's household, and we are commanded to give the members of his family meat in due season. When he comes, that is what he must find us doing. We must feed the flock, until tomorrow.

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