

Born to Win

Jesus and the Last Days

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Predicting what's going to happen next in the Middle East is a fool's game. Or maybe it's a prophet's task. But since I'm not a prophet, and I'm trying not to be a fool, it seems necessary to look at what's going on there in the light of the Bible. Christian people pay close attention to what happens in the Middle East for good reason. The reason grows out of a prophecy Jesus handed down in response to a question by his disciples. Country boys that they were, they were exclaiming over the beauty of the temple when Jesus shocked them into silence when he said:

Matthew 24

NKJV

² [...] Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not *one* stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.

This actually came to pass a few decades later when the Romans sacked Jerusalem, burned the temple, killed Jews in the thousands, and they say that in the years following you could actually walk by that site and not even realize that a building, a wall, or anything else had been there. But there's one curious thing about that. It happened in AD 70 to be sure. But it also happened some 650 years before that, when the Babylonians came, sacked Jerusalem, and destroyed the temple. Because the temple that those boys were admiring in Jerusalem that day was not Solomon's temple, it was a second temple built after the return from Babylon. And that reflection is kind of disturbing. I know you've heard the old saying that history repeats itself. Well, it does. History repeats itself, because human nature does not change, so men keep on doing the same stupid things over and over again with the same results. And if that were not enough, the divine nature of God doesn't change either. As he said to the prophet Malachi:

Malachi 3

AKJV

⁶ For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore you sons of Jacob are not consumed.

To some degree, this little comparison between human nature and the divine nature accounts for a lot of the repetitive nature of prophecy. If an event happened because of a given condition, and the condition recurs, it will happen again. While I was pondering this one day, I came upon a Scripture that almost spells it out. God was challenging Israel because of their constant chasing around after one god and then another. Through the prophet Isaiah, God said this:

Isaiah 41

AKJV

²¹ Produce your cause, said the LORD; bring forth your strong reasons, said the King of Jacob.

²² Let them bring them forth, and show us what shall happen: let them show the former things, what they be, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare us things for to come.

Now that's a stunning thing to say. He said, if you're going to understand the future, look at former things, consider them, and then you can understand the end of it all.

Isaiah 41

AKJV

²³ Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods: yes, do good, or do evil, that we may be dismayed, and behold it together.

The things that are to come are reflections of things that have already happened. The terminology adopted by Bible students for this sort of thing is “type” and “anti-type”. The word type comes from the Greek and basically means a model, a shape, or a form. An anti-type means that which the thing was modeled after. So we have types and anti-types all through the Bible. It is, however, a mistake to assume that you only have type and anti-type—two occurrences. You may have many more.

So, the things to come are reflections of things that have already happened. If you are a prophet, your prophecy has to have roots in history or it is meaningless. This is one of the most helpful things to know when you hear all these would-be prophets in the world today—people who come to your church or to another church and say, “I have a word of prophecy from the Lord.” Does the prophecy have roots in history? If not, you can safely brush it aside. Now consider Jesus’ disciples ooh-ing and aah-ing over the grand temple of God, and compare it to something Jeremiah said one day. God customarily sent Jeremiah down to the city gates. It was the equivalent in more recent times to the courthouse steps, where business was done. The Lord said:

Jeremiah 7

AKJV

² Stand in the gate of the LORD’S house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah, that enter in at these gates to worship the LORD.

³ Thus said the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place.

In other words, repent, you sinners, and do the right thing.

Jeremiah 7

AKJV

⁴ Trust you not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these.

I can almost see Jeremiah standing there repeating this, sweeping his arm around first to the west, then to the east, then to the south, exclaiming at all the magnificent buildings—each with a “This is the temple of the LORD.” I can hear Jesus’ disciples exclaiming the same words in awe of the temple and all that it stood for as they showed the buildings of the temple to Jesus.

Jeremiah said...

Jeremiah 7

AKJV

⁵ For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; [...]

We’ve got to have, not half-baked amends; we’ve got to have the real thing.

Jeremiah 7

AKJV

⁵ [...] if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor;

⁶ If you oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt:

He is standing on the courthouse steps and he's talking about judicial proceedings. Let's have judgment, let's have honesty, let's put a stop to this nonsense. Do these things,

Jeremiah 7

AKJV

⁷ Then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.

⁸ Behold, you trust in lying words, that cannot profit.

⁹ Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely [*right here in court*], and burn incense to Baal [*which, in fact, people were doing in the temple grounds*], and walk after other gods whom you know not;

¹⁰ And come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations?

Then he said something in this prophecy that was echoed all the way down to Jesus when he ran the thieves out of the temple. He said:

Jeremiah 7

AKJV

¹¹ Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, said the LORD.

That's the way it is. Then he says this,

Jeremiah 7

AKJV

¹² But go you now to my place which was in Shiloh, where I set my name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel.

Go to Shiloh.

Years ago, when my wife and I were visiting Israel, we rented a Volkswagen and we were driving north from Jerusalem to a place called Jacob's Well. As we drove along, I saw a sign along the road pointing to the right to a place called Shiloh. Now I didn't remember the context at the time, but the words of Jeremiah, "Go to Shiloh", were in my ears. I was very familiar with it because we kept coming across it in a class I taught in college called "Old Testament Survey". So, when I saw that sign—Go to Shiloh—I said, we'd better do it. I slammed on the brakes and took a right turn without thinking. We bounced over a rather poor road for a little while and then came to the end of the road. I stopped. I got out. I looked around and I saw...nothing. Absolutely nothing.

And, that seems to be the point. I recalled the history of the place, but it was only when I got back to where we were staying and read the context of Jeremiah's prophecy, that I really understood what he was driving at. He said:

Jeremiah 7

AKJV

¹³ And now, because you have done all these works, said the LORD, and I spoke to you, rising up early and speaking, but you heard not; and I called you, but you answered not;

¹⁴ Therefore will I do to this house, which is called by my name, wherein you trust, and to the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh.

¹⁵ And I will cast you out of my sight, as I have cast out all your brothers, even the whole seed of Ephraim.

That happened, you know. Ephraim had long since gone into captivity into Assyria and, because Judah didn't listen, the same thing happened to them. So, there I stood on a bald patch of ground that once was Shiloh and there was nothing there. Off in the distance, there was a small very old mosque and sometimes I wonder if even that was symbolic.

So now we know the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 was not the second shrine of God that had been destroyed. It was the third. Now, I've not been appointed a prophet of God and I'm not stupid enough to appoint myself, but I have a sinking feeling that what has happened three times, will happen again. Why? Because we're still here, and we're still making the same evil mistakes.

When the disciples had recovered sufficiently to ask some questions, they had a big one.

Matthew 24

NKJV

³ Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what *will* be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

The disciples plainly understood Jesus to be talking about the end of time, not merely another sacking of Jerusalem. I mean, it happened in AD70 They understood all this because they knew what the prophets said. They knew there would be another destruction. They knew that there would be a destruction that would come in the last days. And they knew it from the prophets. And they wanted to know when it was going to happen. One important note, all the events prophesied here happened in AD 70, except one. It was not the last days, and the disciples were looking for that. What Jesus said in reply to this is called the "Olivet Prophecy" because of where it was given on Mount Olivet, or the Mount of Olives.

The remainder of chapter 24 and all of chapter 25 answer the disciples' questions. Part of it may be familiar to you. He said,

Matthew 24

NKJV

⁴ [...] Take heed that no one deceives you.

⁵ For many will come in My name, saying, "I am the Christ," and will deceive many.

I took the time to look through a number of translations because there is sometimes a misunderstanding of this. People think it means, "People will come in my name admitting that I am the Christ and deceive many." But apparently he is saying, "Many are going to come saying, 'I am the Christ', and deceive a lot of people." There will be false christs and you will:

Matthew 24

NKJV

⁶ [...] hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all *these things* must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines,

pestilences, and earthquakes in various places.

⁸ All these *are* the beginning of sorrows.

When I was growing up during World War II, I recall hearing somebody say that wars and rumors of wars were a sign of the time of the end. I think there were a lot of people in World War II who thought, “Boy, we must be coming right up on the end of the age; the end of the world.” What I didn’t hear from any of them was Jesus’ statement,

Matthew 24

NKJV

⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all *these things* must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

So wars and rumors of wars are not a sign that the end is here. The signs are really going to be coming from that time until this. These things, said Jesus, are only the beginning. That sounds a little creepy in the present world situation, as you look around and think that maybe what we are seeing today is only the beginning.

Matthew 24

NIV

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.

¹⁰ At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other,

That’s a little hard to figure. I suppose it happened, and I suppose it will happen again because Jesus said it would. I also suppose it because I know human nature, but it’s distressing nonetheless.

Jesus was talking to his disciples at this point, but it has an eerie echo of the days of Jeremiah. In those days, Judah was hated of all nations. But the words “you’ll be hated because of me” have a double meaning. Look at where the Jews sit in the world. They are hated of all nations. It is really staggering to consider when you look at what the Jews have done throughout, say, the modern world at least. What have they done to be hated as they are? How is it that we have anti-Semitism so rabid in the world, yet it seems the Islamists who are murdering men, women and children, are not hated of all nations? People make excuses for them. People try their dead-level best to keep from condemning them for what they have done. They condemn Israel. They don’t condemn the Arabs; they don’t condemn Islamists. You see this double standard everywhere from the United Nations to the Arab press, from Western television to Al Jazeera, and maybe all the way to Reuters. They all blame the Jews, not the people that hate them.

Why do they hate them? They give all kinds of reasons for it, going all the way back to the 1948 War and the United Nations’ decision that gave them the nation of Israel. But I think the real reason is that they are a people chosen by God. They are, for better or worse, his covenant people. And, pursuant to his promises, they have survived. They have been punished, but they have survived. They have been destroyed, but they have survived. The whole world is guilty of anti-Semitism. It is there for any objective person to see. Efforts to stamp out Jews have gone on throughout history—the most recent being characterized as the Holocaust—and they’ve survived...for now.

In Matthew 24:11–12, Jesus continued:

Matthew 24

NIV

¹¹ and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.

¹² Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold,

He seems to have been talking about people who really did love God, but because they lived in an environment of so much iniquity, even those who loved God grew cold.

Matthew 24

NIV

¹³ but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

You can't stand firm halfway and be saved, you have to stay with it all the way.

Matthew 24

NIV

¹⁴ 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.

There's an interesting thought that arises out of all this. Is that last statement, "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come", a prophecy or a commission? Is it a statement of what's going to happen or a statement of what the disciples of Jesus were supposed to make happen? Whatever the case, Jesus appears to be setting this prophecy to conclude at the time of the end.

In Matthew 24:15–18, Jesus continues:

Matthew 24

NIV

¹⁵ So when you see standing in the holy place "the abomination that causes desolation," spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—

¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

¹⁷ Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house.

¹⁸ Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak.

The reference to Daniel here is of more than passing interest. The *Holman Bible Dictionary* has an interesting rundown on it. Basically, in the second century B.C., there was a man named Antiochus Epiphanes who was ruling this whole area out of Syria. And he was trying to completely Hellenize and de-Judaize, I guess, Jerusalem. He went there to set up an altar of Zeus in the Holy Place, which seems to have been what Daniel's prophecy was all about. Antiochus had fancied himself to be a god who greatly resembled Zeus Olympus. Zeus was known as Baal-Shamin [*Ba'al-Šamem*], that is, lord of heaven. The Hebrews didn't want to write or pronounce the pagan term, Baal, so they substituted "abomination" [*šiqqus*, Strong's H8251], and "desolation" [*šomem*, Strong's H8074], as a typical play on words. It was written "desolating one". Thus Zeus, lord of heaven, is loosely referred to as "abominations, one who makes desolate". That's where this whole thing came from in the Book of Daniel.

Later literature picks up this same type of violation of proper worship in Jerusalem, when Caligula, about AD 40, tried to erect his own statute in the temple. Josephus even identified the Abomination of the Desolater in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman, Titus, in AD 69–70. The Abomination of Daniel would have been understood in the terms the *Holman Bible Dictionary* has of the time of Antiochus Epiphanes. That's the way they would have understood it. But for some reason Matthew adds this little phrase, "*Let the reader understand*", as though the obvious meaning was not necessarily the intended meaning, that there was more to it. We'll have to wait to see what that might mean. But Jesus goes on in Matthew 24:19–21 to say this:

Matthew 24

NKJV

- ¹⁹ But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days!
²⁰ And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath.
²¹ For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.

The thought came to mind, unbidden, when I read this recently, one of the truly disturbing things about war is the destruction of innocent life. Normally you would like to think that women and children are spared, but because they are weak, it would be a burden to try to move them, or carry them around. Generally speaking, pregnant women, infants, sucklings, are dealt with very harshly. The Germans killed them outright when they were exporting the Jews in boxcars to Buchenwald, to Dachau, to Auschwitz. The mind boggles at things that were done. It has always been so; it always will be.

But what I have seen in more recent months in the Middle East may have served to clarify a passage from the Old Testament that disturbs a lot of people.

1 Samuel 15

AKJV

- ² Thus said the LORD of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt.
³ Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.

The first thing to know about this passage, is that when Israel first came up against Amalek, the Amalekites ambushed the rear of the Israelite column, which is where the women, the children, and the animals would have been. Men normally fought from the front; they protected their women and children who were behind. And the expectation is that real men would have met them head on and they could have fought. I think in those days there were rules of engagement that called for sparing women and children, because what the Amalekites did was unusual. There were people, in those times, who lived by these rules and people who did not. And here is the key: if you were fighting a people who cared nothing for life, you would lose if you fought by humanitarian rules, for they fought from behind women and children.

One of the most stunning examples of that I ever saw was in the Iraqi war when Tommy Frank's boys were fighting their way through Iraq toward Baghdad. They were ready to cross a bridge and, what should they encounter, but men fighting behind a line of women and children ranged across the bridge. They were using human shields. And similar to the more recent war between the Israelis and Hezbollah in Lebanon, coming up against the Amalekites who would have had their women and children up front, the Israelites would have hesitated. They were told they would have to fight through that, and that included women and children. Now, with the Hezbollah fighters not caring who they kill, and actually fighting from behind women and children, the Israelis encounter a situation not that different from when Saul went after the Amalekites. When I read this in the words of Jesus later in this prophecy, where he makes it very clear he's talking about the time of his return, I have to realize the prophets are showing us that, as we come down to the last days, there will be yet another holocaust. Only after that will a lasting peace be achieved.

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