

The Beginning of Sorrows (Part III)

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[0 : 00] And so as you know, we've been looking at the Olivet Discourse, and again the reason it is called that recorded for us in Matthew, Matthew chapters 24 and 25, in his gospel account. And again, it is the longest recorded answer to a question in the Bible.

You know, two chapters worth there to answer a couple of questions, kind of two-part questions. And so the disciples asked, when will these things be? When will they be? And that's referring, of course, to those things that will occur at the end.

Whatever the disciples were thinking, that all meant. And when that was going to take place, and of course we already know pretty much what they were thinking. They were thinking the end is right now, right in their lifetime. They were ready for Jesus to declare himself as the Christ and the King, and to lead Israel against her enemy, her enemies, specifically at that time their enemy Rome, and deliver them from that bondage and establish his kingdom.

And so that's what they were expecting to happen very quickly. And so when they're asking the question, when will these things be? They're thinking, when in the next few days, you know, will all this transpire?

And the second part of the question is somewhat similar, but a little bit maybe more specific. What will be the sign of your coming? The sign of your coming?

[2 : 31] Today, obviously, and there are, you know, a number of books out there where scholars, well, I use the term loosely, they might claim to be scholars, have supposed to give us the answer to the question about the end of the age.

All right, so these are questions we're still asking today, and Jesus answers their question. He answers the second one first, specifically what will be the sign of the end?

That really is how we might rephrase the question. Or we might even rephrase it this way, the end of the end. Because as you remember, we're living in the end times.

All right, that's something we need to keep reminding ourselves, especially when we come across passages in the Bible that talk about the last days, the end times, or the end, or whatever.

We need to understand we're living in those end times. We have all our lives. And the end times began when Jesus came the first time.

[3 : 38] So it's been a pretty lengthy time. End times, you know, hardly qualifies as, you know, applying to the word end. End times, it's a lengthy period of time.

You remember the passage we've been studying in 1 John on Sunday mornings. The Apostle John used the term the last hour. So in 1 John 2, verse 18, he said this is the last hour, remember.

And so John was living in the last hour, the end times. And we are living in the last hour, the end times.

And so the end times, again, refers to a period of time between the two comings of Jesus Christ. First coming and his second coming. Well, his second coming hasn't occurred yet, has it?

So it's been a little over 2,000 years now. We don't know how much longer it will be. But in short, it really is something that describes or identifies this present age, this present evil age.

[4 : 40] An age that we sometimes call the church age, which is an accurate thing to call it. The age of grace sometimes is called that.

It is, you know, this period of time between the two comings of Christ. All right, so Jesus' Olivet Discourse is all about what will take place just before and at the end of the end.

Now, I want to mention here, and I'm going to mention it because Jerry showed me his Bible there, kind of a prophecy study Bible.

And there are those, of course, who view these signs we've been looking at, and we're going to finish that here tonight, who view them as signs that will take place before the tribulation.

But in my judgment, as I study scripture, I believe he's talking about things that will occur really during the seven years of tribulation, and specifically during the last half of it, the last three and a half years of it, which the Bible often calls or does call the great tribulation.

[6 : 00] So that's the perspective I'm coming from here. So then I say to you, as I've said before, that everything in this revelation of Jesus, and that's what it is in answer to a question, but it really is revelation, prophecy in a sense.

Jesus is revealing future events. So everything in these two chapters is future. It's future. Future certainly for his disciples, but future also for us today.

And so we kind of covered that ground last time. All right, so there are six signs the disciples asked for. What is the sign?

And Jesus gives them six of them, six signs that will occur before the end. That is, just before the coming, the second coming of Jesus.

And Jesus calls them, at least it's translated this way in the New King James Version, he calls them, in verse 8, the beginning of sorrows. The beginning of sorrows, or as the New American Standard translates it, the beginning of birth pangs.

[7 : 10] Birth pangs. And so the disciples, again, inquire of Jesus, what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? And the word sign in the Greek language refers to a distinguishing mark.

Generally in the Bible, it refers to some supernatural, very distinctive event that is going to take place. That's why it's often translated miracle. The word semeion in the Greek is translated miracle quite often in the New Testament.

And so these are signs. Now, the substance of these are not new, these signs. The substance of them are not new.

That's why some say that these seven signs are six signs. We see these things already happening and been happening. So we need to understand that these are not necessarily new, never before seen events or occurrences.

But they will be unique. They will be unique in at least a couple of ways. They will be unique in their intensity because these six signs are going to begin to happen very quickly, some of them simultaneously, and they will intensify, build up to the last sign, and then Jesus will return.

[8 : 41] Also, they are unique in their inclusivity. That is, they will include the whole world. So right now, you can take some of these signs that Jesus is going to mention, and you can say, well, I've seen this happen, and I've seen this happen, and these things are happening maybe even today over in such and such country, over in that such place or whatever.

But what we're talking about here is a global thing that are things that are going to take place. All right, so what are these birth pangs, these signs?

Well, Jesus, again, reveals six of them that will occur just before the end of the age, end of the end of the age, which, of course, is marked by his return.

All right, now, we've already looked at four of them. The first one, false Christs will deceive many. Second, wars and rumors of wars.

Third, famines and earthquakes. The fourth one, persecution of believers. And by the way, I was told last week that I muffed my outline, and nobody said a word while I was just waxing eloquently up here.

[10 : 01] But I have gone back and repaired that. I'm sorry about that. So you have all that in front of you. So we looked at those four signs last time, and tonight we want to look at the remaining two signs, or birth pangs.

I just noticed in my notes I have birth bangs. Well, that doesn't make sense. Somebody help the boy. All right, here's number five.

False professors of Christ will abandon the faith. They will abandon the faith. False professors, those who profess to be true believers, true Christians, they will abandon the faith.

False professors, those who profess to be true believers. And, you know, verses 10 through 13 is where we, where Jesus elaborates on this sign. He really elaborates more than he does on any of the previous signs.

And so let me go ahead and read verses 10 through 13 of chapter 24. And then it begins this way. And then, which, by the way, connects this birth pang, this fifth birth pang or sign, connects it with the preceding one.

[11 : 13] What was the preceding one? Persecution of the saints. So when he begins this way, and then that, he's telling us what will naturally happen as a result of this intense persecution.

Or so let me go ahead and read the passage. And then many will be offended. Some versions have fall away. Will betray one another.

And will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.

But he who endures to the end shall be saved. All right, now, we certainly know that throughout the history of the church, God has used persecution to purify his church.

I say we should know and do know. Well, we should know. But this is one method God has used to purify his church, and that is persecution. You know, it's amazing.

[12 : 23] When you read throughout the Old Testament, you find God using pagan people to judge his people. You know, they get off track, get off into sin, get off into rebellion, and God brings some invading country or army in, even to the point of taking his people captive.

And so you know that God uses persecution from the unbelieving world in order to purify his church. I remember a story that I heard years ago.

In fact, it's been so long that probably many of you have heard this same story. And I probably will not get all the details correct because it's just simply from memory.

So forgive me if I miss some of the specifics. But it's a story of the underground church in communist Russia years ago.

I still think communism flourishes in Russia and some of the former Soviet Union countries. But in those days, it was certainly communist Russia.

[13 : 34] And the true church had to go underground and meet in secret. And so the government had outlawed, you know, that kind of an assembly, an unlawful assembly.

They had outlawed, for all practical purposes, they had outlawed Christianity. And so, you know, the places of worship were being invaded by government officials and soldiers.

And pastors were being arrested and imprisoned and beaten and some of them even executed.

Even church members in some of these underground churches were being harassed and persecuted, many of them beaten, and even some of them jailed and killed.

But the story is told of one such church, a particular church in communist Russia. And while they were meeting for worship, armed soldiers barged into their church or this room, this secret room where they were holding their worship services.

And they had machine guns. And they demanded everyone in the room to stand up to one side of the room as they had their machine guns pointed in their direction. And one of the soldiers shouted to them, those who will denounce Jesus Christ right here, you're free to go and you must leave right now.

[15 : 09] And of course, several did. Several left, thereby denouncing their faith in Jesus Christ. And after the last one left the building, the soldiers lowered their machine guns, even their countenance changed from very grim to more relaxed and more friendly looking.

And the officer in charge instructed everyone to be seated. And then to their utter amazement, he said to them, we too are followers of Jesus Christ. And so now that the false believers are gone, let's have worship together.

Pretty interesting story. And so, you know, even though this was the threat, kind of a, not really a real threat of persecution, those who were false professors believed it to be real, and they left.

And this has been the story throughout the history of the church, that persecution has accomplished the purification of the church.

And it's still happening today. Now, getting back to this time period that Jesus is referring to, this seven-year tribulation, during that time, 144,000 Jewish evangelists are going to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ during that time period.

[16 : 37] The church is going to be gone. They'll be raptured before the tribulation begins, before the Antichrist is revealed. There will be evangelists sharing the gospel, and as a result, many countless millions are going to come to faith in Christ during the last half of the tribulation, called, again, the Great Tribulation.

And under the authority of the Antichrist, there will be intense worldwide persecution of the church or of believers.

And the result of this is going to be twofold. And it's the same result that we discover even in our day and have throughout the history of the church. And the first result is going to be countless millions of true believers will be martyred.

They will be martyred during the tribulation period. As we saw last Wednesday, and I referred to these passages in Revelation, Revelation chapter 6, verse 9, these tribulation Christians were slain, the Bible says, slain or martyred.

Why? For the word of God and for the testimony which they held. That is their testimony of faith, their faith in Christ. They were martyred. Countless, millions of them, in fact, a numberless amount of believers.

[18:04] Revelation chapter 7, verse 9, a great multitude which no one could number of all nations, tribes, people, and tongues. And these are the ones, it says in verse 14 of Revelation 7, who come out of the great tribulation.

All right, so because of persecution during the tribulation, first countless millions of true believers will be martyred. But second, and this is the, gets us to this sixth sign given by Jesus, many false believers will abandon the faith or what they claim to be their faith.

They will abandon it. And again, verse 10, and then many will be offended, offended, fall away, turn away. All right, so because of persecution, there will be a mass exodus of false believers, false professors of Christ during the tribulation period.

Now, on a much smaller scale, this has been going on throughout the age of the church, has it? I mean, there have always been false believers in the church, always.

and I would be so bold to say in every church, there are those who are not true believers. That doesn't mean that they're troublemakers necessarily or teachers of false doctrine, but they have a false profession.

[19:34] And it has always been that way throughout the history of the church. And there have always been those who have joined the church for reasons other than true faith in Jesus Christ.

And we could, you know, I perhaps could name some of those reasons. I think there are those who are naturally drawn to a cause, any cause. You know, so they, you know, they're just people ready to get on the bandwagon with some kind of cause or some, you know, something like that.

And some have seen the church as a cause they want to be a part of. There are also those who crave a sense of belongingness. Now, nothing wrong with that craving.

And welcome those to come because they want to belong. They want to be welcomed. They want to have relationship.

But if it ends there and that craving is simply satisfied by human relationships and a belongingness to something, then they're not saved.

[20:40] and this, I think, there are people in the church like that. I mean, it's kind of the, I was thinking, kind of like the, this kind of dates, dates us, although I never really did watch this TV program much, but it's kind of the cheers mentality.

Remember that TV show, Cheers? I mean, it all takes place inside of a bar. And you remember maybe perhaps the little song, the little jingle that goes with it, a theme song.

Here's part of it. Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name. And they're always glad you came. You want to be where you can see our troubles are all the same.

You want to be where everybody knows your name. All right? See, it's kind of an alluring kind of thought. And there are people who actually have come into the church just for that very reason, which is fine as far as it goes.

But if they don't go further than that, then they have a false profession. I think also there are those who are in the church today because they're just needy people.

[21:47] Nothing wrong with that. Having needs and having the thought that, you know, the church, Christians, you know, they want to meet needs of people, maybe their emotional needs, maybe their physical needs, things like that.

And they come seeking that and that's as far as their seeking goes. And so they're kind of part of the church. Sometimes they'll go from one church to the other and just seeking personal needs.

I think the church ought to provide the needs for people and provide it in Jesus' name. But the greatest need is the gospel. The greatest need is not temporal, it's eternal.

And there are those in the church who are part of churches all around the world who are there solely because they want personal needs met.

I think there are those who believe that Christianity holds the key to health and wealth. And we have a whole slew of preachers on the TV and radio who are teaching that and writing publications.

[22 : 55] And there are humongous churches that are all built upon this theology that Christianity and the Bible teaches that Christ wants you to be healthy and wealthy.

It's kind of a prosperity religion. And so there are many churches and people in churches who have joined, they've become a part of it because that's what they're looking for and that's what they think they're going to get out of it.

There are those who are seeking some, obviously seeking some works-based remedy for their sin problem and just can't quite or have refused, rejected outright the clear teaching of the gospel that it's not according to your works.

And whether that works is manifested in church membership or doing some point of service in the church or whatever it may be, there are those in the church who are there because that's what they're thinking.

I think there are those who recognize that church membership is good for business. I don't know if that's necessarily as big a deal as it once was because we're kind of living in a post-Christian kind of America.

[24 : 18] But I think it's still the case that in some localities, smaller towns especially, you run a business, it's good to be a part of a church in town and probably the biggest church in town.

And I think also there are those who want to identify with a church because it's advantageous to their political aspirations.

You know, to drop the I'm a believer in Jesus line and I'm part of this church or that church. and so those, you know, as you think of these possibilities, you know, the group of people that we can imagine who are members of churches, that is local churches, gets bigger and bigger and bigger and we can almost visualize, you know, that when the persecution comes, who are the ones who are going to fall out, fall away?

It'll be those people. And I think, of course, there are those who join the church because of family. You know, my family is in this church and my mom and dad brought me up in the church and so I go to the church and, you know, sometimes because I want to and most of the time because mom and dad make me and or send me on some kind of guilt trip if I don't and so there are those who just attach simply, loosely in that way and no spiritual attachment and friends, you know, that's where my friends go or, you know, maybe I'm looking for a wife or I'm looking for a husband and, you know, the church might be a good place to find a guy that my mother would approve.

You know, whatever the, you know, the motivation, the reason, we could go on and on and there are many other reasons that I've not mentioned. But when you think of those scenarios, you can imagine then a huge number of people who identify as believers, as Christians, but they're not true Christians.

[26 : 28] They're Christians in name or Christians according to some affiliation with a church, a local church. And so the point is that, you know, when persecution comes, and this has been the case throughout the history of the church, whether it's just kind of personal affliction or problems and you get, you know, kind of disheartened and because you don't have any real true foundation of faith, then you abandon, abandon it.

Or whether it is like in some countries today and one day possibly in our country, there is a government intervention and persecution, then those who are false professors are going to typically fall away.

All right, so, you know, this is not new and I would also say it's, again, not a bad thing either.

Although it's not something that we really want for ourselves personally, not something we're to go out and look for, persecution.

I mean, if you want Christian persecution, you can go out and create that if you want to. Just make yourself belligerent and, you know, certainly, but that's about what we're instructed to do.

But in reality, the church in America, I think, could use a good dose of persecution. I don't necessarily want it. Okay. But it has a purifying effect on the church.

[27 : 55] And now, all that said, what Jesus is talking about here in Matthew 24, verse 10, is something that will occur in the future on a much larger scale than it has ever occurred in the history of the church.

church. And we can imagine, you know, some of the reasons why people would join the church in this age and compound that in that time of tribulation, how many people are going to want to affiliate themselves with believers, but not because they are true believers, but because it's just a safe place for them to be and so forth.

But there will be an intensification of persecution and therefore kind of a mass exodus of false professors from the church.

All right. So now, from these three verses in Matthew 24, we're going to find three reasons for this falling away from the faith.

faith. The first one is faithlessness. Faithlessness. Verse 10 says, And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another.

[29 : 20] So, there will be many who are offended. I think, personally, that's a very mild word offended, as it's translated from the Greek word.

The Greek word translated offended comes from the word that we get our word scandalized from. It's kind of interesting. Scandalizo and Scandal.

So, the word, and the word is in the passive form. So, the idea is many, as it says, many will be offended. They will be scandalized.

That is, to them, and I'm talking about false professors, false believers, to them, suddenly the truth, the truth, the true faith, will become something scandalous.

Becomes scandalous. They're going to say, as soon as the persecution hits, they're going to say, I didn't sign up for this. Now, this is not what I thought I was getting into. This is not fair.

[30 : 22] And, and why will they take this position? Well, because they don't have any faith. Not true faith. It's a faithlessness. There's no true faith in them. That is, they never truly knew what it was all about.

This, this faith in Christ, this Christianity. They never really truly knew what it was about. Didn't know what they were believing in. Really didn't believe in it anyway. And so, they begin to think that any God that would allow this to happen to me cannot be the true God.

So, they go looking for another God. And they find one. In this case, it will be Antichrist in the tribulation. So, they leave. As we saw in 1 John 2, 19, they went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.

But they didn't just leave. Worse than that, they joined the opposition. They will join the opposition. This is part of the sign that Jesus says, will take place before the coming of the Lord.

And so, the beast, the Antichrist, becomes their God, with a small g. And so, guess what? The persecuted then become the persecutors, persecuting the church.

[31 : 43] This is what he says. They will betray, or deliver up one another, other believers, true believers, and will hate one another. So, with friends like that, who needs enemies?

And all because they have nothing real to stand on, no foundation of faith, something to stand on, something solid when the persecution comes.

It's faithlessness. Second, wordlessness, not worldliness, but wordlessness. And it is a real word, by the way.

Verse 11, then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. So, these people, not only do they get bent out of shape because God allowed all this persecution to come, and they abandoned it because they didn't have any true faith, but they also didn't have the word abiding in them.

So, many false prophets are going to be coming, during this time that's already been predicted. Jesus said this would happen, and they're going to be deceived. These people are going to be deceived and abandon the faith.

[32 : 55] And, you know, we think that we have a lot of false religions in our world today. Just wait until the tribulation. It's going to be unbelievable. I mean, when the church has been removed, and because the church is removed, the indwelling Holy Spirit who restrains through the presence of the church, will be removed.

Not the Holy Spirit himself, but his restraining power will be removed. And so, the world of the tribulation will not only be marked by overflowing evil, but it will also be marked by historic proliferation God's We'll get to verse 24 on down the road, but in Matthew 24, 24, Jesus said, for false Christs and false prophets will arise.

This is exactly what he said here in verse 11. But he added this, and show great signs, miracles, powers, and wonders to do what?

To deceive, and he says, if possible, even the elect. So, we're not just talking about those who are teaching a false religion as we have today, but we're talking about those who also have been given, been allowed to have the ability to perform supernatural signs and wonders, to make their deception even stronger, and he says even to the point, if it were possible to deceive true believers, the elect, and I think that's what the word elect means there.

The elect, talking about Jews and Gentiles, who are saved during the tribulation. And Jesus uses, I think, a hypothetical there to convey the, kind of the, to emphasize the persuasive power of these false teachers.

[35 : 05] leaders. So he's saying their deceptive powers will be so great, so strong, that if it were possible, even though it's not possible, God won't allow it, they might even deceive God's chosen and redeemed people.

All right, so why is it not possible then for them to deceive the elect? Because the elect, God's people have the word of God in them, dwelling in them, remaining in them.

And again, this perfectly dovetails what I've been preaching on Sunday mornings, 1 John 2, 24, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If you have heard from the beginning, if what you heard from the beginning abides in you, and that is if it really does, then you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.

And so it is not possible for you to be deceived to the point of abandoning the faith, not possible for you to fall away. He said this is the promise, John said, that he has promised us eternal life.

All right, but what about those who do not have the word in them? Well, obviously, as Jesus says in verse 11, when the false prophets rise up, they will be deceived.

[36 : 29] Many will be deceived. All right, so midway through the tribulation, persecution will intensify to a level never before seen on this planet, and faithless, the faithless, the fakers will abandon the faith, the true faith.

The wordless, those who don't really have the word of God, will be deceived by false doctrine, and they will abandon the true faith. So, faithlessness, wordlessness, and then one more, and I'll wrap it up, and we'll save the last sign for next week.

Lawlessness, that's number three. Lawlessness, verse 12, and because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.

That's an interesting passage. Lawlessness, lawlessness, and the world will love lawlessness like never before.

You know, like me, I think you probably have watched these protests against our new president, whether you like him or not, but these protests, and, you know, been taking place on the streets of some of our major cities, and on campuses of major colleges, universities, and, you know, the many of these protesters have become violent.

[38 : 04] I mean, we watch it on the TV, watch videos of this. They've become violent, destructive, and setting cars on fire, and stomping on top of cars, and turning them over, and setting them on fire, destroying businesses, you know, throwing bricks and rocks and whatever they can get their hands on, you know, plate glass windows on storefronts and buildings and so forth.

And the word that always comes to my mind when I see that is lawlessness. Absolute lawlessness. There's no justification for it.

And I guess I am, I tend to be comforted somewhat by the reality, I think it is a reality, that really those people who are doing that kind of thing represent a very small number of people.

Don't you get that sense? I mean, there are peaceful protesters, and then there are those who probably many of them paid to go in there and do this kind of stuff. Whatever. But, you know, of course, the video, when they video this thing, you have just this narrow frame, you can, if you're not careful, get the idea that this is just everybody, I mean, everybody is doing this stuff.

But I think it's just a small number of people. All right, so I say that because imagine that kind of thing taking place all over the world.

[39 : 31] Everywhere. In every country. In every city. And with the majority of people, the earth's population, the unbelieving world, engaged. In that kind of lawlessness.

You know, during the tribulation, there will only be one law to obey. Basically. And it's not going to be God's law. The one law really is going to be the worship of the Antichrist.

So, we cannot, I don't think we can begin to fathom what this world will be like during the tribulation. And especially in the final three and a half years of it.

But, interesting, Jesus identifies a group of people, a remnant of people, who will not abandon the truth in those days.

And who are they? Well, they're the ones who will make it through it. Make it through the tribulation. Verse 13, but he who endures to the end shall be saved.

[40 : 35] All right, so what we're talking about here. We're talking about Christian endurance. Perseverance. Not endurance as a means to salvation.

We'll be very careful to say that. That doesn't line up with scripture anywhere. So, it's not perseverance or endurance as a means to salvation. You know, like if you can just hold on and not give up, then you'll be rewarded with salvation if you make it.

That's not the idea. You know, and if you don't make it, too bad. You don't get salvation. That's not the message of scripture.

But rather, it is endurance as a proof of genuine salvation. A proof of it. Endurance has always been the mark of true salvation, genuine salvation.

Not the way to salvation, but the mark of it. Jesus said something similar in Matthew 10, 22. He said, you will be hated by all on account of my name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.

[41 : 41] So, you know, rather than look at that and say, well, this is going to be a reward if we make it. That's not what he's saying. This is actually a promise.

A promise. That because you are a believer, you have trusted me, you have genuine salvation, I promise you, you'll make it.

You'll make it. That's a whole different thing, isn't it? So, I guess we'll wrap this up in stark contrast then to these, you know, the faithlessness and wordlessness and lawlessness of those who will abandon the true faith.

In contrast to that, we have those who will endure. Endure in the faith of the one true God, the word of the one true God, and also the law of the one true God.

Alright, so next week we'll finish up the signs and look at the sixth one, which is the gospel preached to all the world. Which, considering everything that Jesus said thus far, it's a pretty amazing thing to think that that could even happen, but it will happen at the close of the tribulation.

[42 : 56] Thank you.