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SERMON BY THE LATE DR. R. W. DALE.

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# The Coming of Christ.

A SERMON

BY THE LATE DR. R. W. DALE.

*Preached in Carr's Lane Chapel, Birmingham, on Sunday Morning,  
January 16, 1887.*

The twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth chapters of the Gospel according to Matthew contain a succession of great predictions concerning the Coming of Christ and the Judgment of the human race. These predictions have asserted in age after age an immense power on the moral and spiritual life of the Christian Church. Their power, as I think, has been greatest when the moral earnestness of the Church has been most vigorous and its religious faith most intense. It is a sign that the Church has fallen on evil days, when it regards these predictions with indifference. And yet I think that every competent Biblical scholar will admit that there are passages in these two chapters about the precise meaning of which it is impossible to be certain, and that there is a want of coherence and consistency in the attempts which have been made to bring together the prophecies which plainly refer to the destruction of Jerusalem, and the prophecies which refer as plainly to the judgment of all nations. There is something wonderful in the words of Christ: even when we are sure that we have not perfectly apprehended His meaning, they arouse and invigorate the conscience, they reveal the solemnity and grandeur of human life and destiny, they inspire faith in God, they give reality to God's invisible and eternal kingdom. In attempting to explain what seems to me to be the meaning of these prophecies, I speak with hesitation. On points about which the judgment of the most eminent and devout students of the New Testament is divided, no man ought to speak with unmeasured confidence.

## THE HOUSE LEFT DESOLATE.

In the preceding chapter our Lord had foretold the destruction of the Temple. "*Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.*" "*Your house,*"—not the house—the home—of God. Its sacredness was soon to be lost; its glory was about to pass away. And as our Lord was about to leave the Temple, His disciples pointed out its magnificence. According to Mark, one of them said to Him:—" *Master, behold what manner of stones*"—how immense, how finely wrought—" *and what manner of buildings*"—how stately,—as if to ask Him whether He really meant that all this splendour consecrated to God was to perish. And our Lord answered:—" *Seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left here one stone upon another which shall not be thrown down.*"

The disciples were profoundly impressed by His words. They left the city and went with Him to the Mount of Olives, and as they were sitting with Him there, looking across the Vale of Kedron at Jerusalem and especially at the Temple whose destruction He had just predicted, they said to Him: "*Tell us when shall these things be, and what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the world,*"—or, as the Revisers have put in the margin—" *what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the consummation of the age?*"

It was in answer to this question that our Lord delivered the predictions which follow. The Temple was to be no longer the home of the Eternal; it was to be destroyed. They wanted to know by what signs they were to be warned of the approach of that awful calamity. They assume that the desolation of the Temple would bring to a close the old spiritual order; they also assume that when the old order passed away, Christ would come and introduce a new age. That was the common way of speaking amongst the Jews. The coming of the Messiah was to be the most wonderful of all things. It was to change everything. The world, as men knew it, was to come to an end, and there was to be a new world—a new age—the glory and blessedness

of which transcended all human thought. Our Lord's own words—words which He had just spoken—suggested that at the time of the destruction of the Temple, or immediately after, He would come again. “*Behold your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth till ye shall say, Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.*” The disciples, in this question, put these three things together—the destruction of the Temple—the end of the world, or the old spiritual order—and the coming of Christ; and they wanted Christ to tell them how they were to know that these great events were about to happen.

To the first part of the question—that which concerned the destruction of the Temple—our Lord replies immediately. Nearly everybody admits that this is the only subject of which He is speaking from verse five in this chapter right on to verse twenty-eight. The passage is sufficiently clear to need very little explanation or comment.

“*What shall be the sign of Thy coming and of the end of the age? Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man lead you astray. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am the Christ; and shall lead many astray.*” Through the seven and thirty years between the crucifixion of our Lord and the destruction of Jerusalem there was a succession of false prophets, some of whom created fanatical excitement among the Jewish people. Whether any of them claimed to be the Christ—the Messiah—we do not know; the claim may have been made, but in the literature of that period which has reached us there is no record of it.

#### WARS AND FAMINES AND EARTHQUAKES.

“*And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for these things must needs come to pass; but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; and there shall be famines and earthquakes in divers places.*” Within a very few years after our Lord's crucifixion fierce conflicts broke out between the Jews

and Greeks in Syria, Egypt, and the East, which occasioned the destruction of many thousands of Jews. The Romans generally took part with the Greeks and left the Jews unprotected against their violence. In Alexandria, with the connivance of the Roman Governor, the Macedonian inhabitants inflicted upon the Jews the most flagrant cruelties,—insulted them, polluted their synagogues, plundered their houses, tortured many of them to death, and drove the great body of them out of the city.<sup>1</sup> A few years later, a Roman soldier insulted the people assembled at the feast of the Passover, and there was a tumult which ended in the destruction of ten thousand persons.<sup>2</sup> Then came an irregular war between the Galileans and the Samaritans, occasioned by the murder of some Galileans on their way to Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> Under Felix, Judæa was infested with bands of robbers and assassins. Under Florus, crime was so prevalent that large parts of the country became a desert, and crowds of Jews fled for safety to foreign countries. In the year 66 the Jews of Cæsarea, impatient of the Roman tyranny, broke out into revolt, and at Jerusalem the soldiers were let loose on the city, and 3,600 people perished. Florus was not content with this wholesale massacre, and some eminent Jews were scourged and crucified. In the same year 20,000 Jews were killed by the Greeks at Cæsarea; not one was suffered to remain in the city, and the few that escaped death were sent to the galleys. Then the whole nation broke out into a wide revolt, burning the Syrian cities and murdering the people. The fury provoked among the Greeks by these outrages extended to Alexandria, and in that city alone the Roman soldiers put 50,000 Jews to death. From this time till the destruction of Jerusalem the whole country was in disorder. During this period there were dreadful famines in different parts of the world. Suetonius, a Roman historian, speaks of the reign of Claudius as marked by

<sup>1</sup>Milman: *History of the Jews*, 3rd edition—vol. ii., book 12. p. 134 foll.

<sup>2</sup>Milman: *History of the Jews*, vol. ii., book 13. p. 166. The number of victims has been put as high as 20,000.

<sup>3</sup>pp. 167, 168.

continued scarcity. During these same years there were also many earthquakes. A recent writer says: "Perhaps no period of the world's history has ever been so marked by these convulsions as that which intervened between the crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem." Josephus records one in Judæa. Tacitus tells of them in Crete, Phrygia and Campania. Seneca, in the year 58, speaks of them as extending their devastations over Asia—the proconsular province—Achaia, Syria, and Macedonia.

#### PERSECUTION AND APOSTASY.

All these things, our Lord goes on to say, "*are the beginning of travail*;" that is to say, these political disorders and these physical convulsions were the birth-pains of the new Divine order. "*Then shall they deliver you up unto tribulation, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all the nations for my name's sake.*" The Christians, as Tacitus says, were hated for the crimes that were attributed to them; and the hatred broke out into persecution. Peter says to the Christians that were scattered abroad: "*They speak against you as evil-doers*" (1 Peter ii. 12). Paul, when he reached Rome, was told that the sect of Christians was everywhere spoken against. In the Church itself, as our Lord goes on to say, there were to be troubles; many would fall away from the faith; traitors would betray their brethren; false teachers would arise and corrupt the faith of the Church; the general prevalence of unfaithfulness would cause the love and faith of the commonalty of the Church to wax cold. What happened in the seven churches of Asia would happen elsewhere: the early zeal and even the morals of the Church would suffer. "*And then shall many stumble, and shall deliver up one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall arise, and shall lead many astray. And because iniquity shall be multiplied, the love of the many shall wax cold. But he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.*" Then our Lord goes on to say, "*And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come.*"

**A WORLD-WIDE DIFFUSION OF THE GOSPEL.**

Some think that, in these words, our Lord passes beyond the destruction of Jerusalem, though He presently returns to it again. Here, it is urged, He must be blending what was to happen in remote ages with what was to happen in the time of men then living. But this would surely be a very extraordinary and misleading method of speaking. The *end* of which He speaks here is the *end* of which He had spoken before. The disciples had asked Him : “ *What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the age ?* ” (verse 3.) “ *Ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars : see that ye be not troubled : for these things must needs come to pass ; but the end is not yet* ” (verse 6.) “ *The love of the many shall wax cold ; but he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved* ” (verse 12). Then He continues : “ *This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations ; and then shall the end come* ” (verse 14). Surely “ *the end* ” in each of these passages must refer to one and the same thing. “ *The whole world* ” must be taken in the sense which it bore in Christ’s time and among the Jewish people. It practically means the great nations included in the Roman Empire. And before the destruction of Jerusalem, the gospel of Christ had actually reached every known land. Paul says much the same thing in the Epistle to the Colossians. He speaks of “ *the word of the truth of the gospel* ” which, he says, has “ *come unto you ; even as it is also in all the world bearing fruit and increasing, as it doth in you also* ” (Colossians i. 5, 6). And again, in the same epistle, he speaks of the “ *hope of the gospel which ye heard, and which was preached in all creation under heaven ; whereof I Paul was made a minister* ” (Colossians i. 23). Thus the apostle declares that, at the time he wrote, that had happened which Christ had said should happen before the end came.

**THE ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION.**

Our Lord then proceeds :—“ *When therefore ye see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of by Daniel the prophet,*



*standing in the holy place (let him that readeth understand), then let them that are in Judæa flee unto the mountains: let him that is on the house top not go down to take out the things that are in his house: and let him that is in the field not return back to take his cloke. But woe unto them that are with child and to them that give suck in those days! And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on a sabbath: for then shall be great tribulation, such as hath not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been saved; but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.*" It is possible that Matthew himself inserted the words, "*Let him that readeth understand,*" in order to call special attention to the prophecy. It is also possible that our Lord Himself used the words, meaning that those who read the prophecy in Daniel were to consider it carefully and try to understand it. The original prophecy seems to refer to the attempt of Antiochus Epiphanes to stop the daily sacrifice and to set up idolatrous worship in the temple. To what profanation of the temple in later times, and when its final destruction was near, our Lord refers, we do not know—it is unnecessary that we should know. The Christians of Judæa in that age would recognise the profanation when it came, and when they heard of it they would know that now the time had come for them to escape the horrors which were finally to break up the Jewish state and bring the ancient institutions of Judæa to an end.

#### THE TIME OF UNPARALLELED DISTRESS.

Of the sufferings endured during the prolonged siege of Jerusalem, Josephus has given an appalling description: in his *Wars of the Jews* there is passage after passage which it is hardly possible to read without horror. He sums up the miseries of his countrymen in these words:—"The number of those that were carried captive during the whole war was 97,000; and the number of those that perished during the whole siege 1,100,000, the greater part of whom did not belong to the city

itself, for they were come up from all parts of the country to the Feast of the Covenant, and were on a sudden shut up by an army; which at the very first occasioned so great straitness—or crowding—amongst them, that there came a pestilential destruction upon them, and soon afterward such a famine as destroyed them more suddenly. . . . The entire nation was now shut up by fate as in a prison, and accordingly the multitude of those that therein perished exceeded all destructions which either men or God ever brought upon the world.”

#### FALSE CHRISTS AND FALSE TEACHERS.

Then our Lord goes on to say:—“*Then if any man shall say unto you Lo, here is the Christ, or here, believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and great wonders; so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you beforehand. If, therefore, they shall say unto you, Behold he is in the wilderness; go not forth: Behold, he is in the inner chambers; believe it not.*” Josephus, in his account of Judæa under Felix, says that “imposters and deceivers persuaded multitudes to follow them into the wilderness, and pretended that they would exhibit manifest wonders and signs” that would be performed by the providence of God.” And these imposters who promised wonders to the people continued to the end. Even when the Roman army had broken into the city, a false prophet told the people to crowd into the temple, and that God would miraculously deliver them. Many thousands of men, women, and children believed him. The Roman soldiers in their fury set the temple on fire, and some of the wretched people who had fled there for safety flung themselves down from the roof into the valley below; others perished in the flames. The disciples therefore were not to believe the prophets who spoke of any appearance of the Christ in the desert, or in secret chambers. “For as the lightning cometh forth from the east, and is seen even unto the west, so,” says Christ, “shall be the coming of the Son of man.”

Now, the whole passage up to this point plainly refers to the final breaking up of the old spiritual order, the tragic close of a wonderful history,—a history which had begun with the Divine call of the ancestors of the Jewish race, which had been illustrated by the miracles of chastisement inflicted upon their oppressors in Egypt, and which was to close in chastisement still more awful inflicted upon themselves. And the coming of the Son of man—which was to be apparent to those who had eyes to see,—must surely be in close connection with this dreadful catastrophe. This is made, if possible, still more certain by what follows :—“*Wheresoever the carcase is,*” our Lord goes on to say, “*there will the vultures be gathered together.*” When a nation, a race, has reached the end of its days,—when there is no more to be hoped from it,—when its true life has gone and it lies on the earth a mere corpse, then the vultures of God will gather to consume it. And when Jerusalem was laid desolate the Jewish nation was dead and corrupt ; there was nothing to be done but to let loose the armies of Rome to destroy it.

**“IMMEDIATELY AFTER.”**

At this point Christ is generally supposed to pass suddenly from an event which was to take place within forty years to another event which after eighteen hundred years is still future. Our Lord goes on to say :—“*But 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 the heavens shall be shaken : and 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 on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send forth his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. Now from the fig tree learn her parable ; when her branch is now become tender and putteth forth its leaves, ye know that the summer is nigh. Even so ye also, when ye see all these things, know ye that he is nigh even at the doors.*”

“IMMEDIATELY after the tribulation of those days.” Is it conceivable that Jesus intended to speak of an event which was to happen at least eighteen hundred years after it? Some inconsiderate people say, “A thousand years with the Lord are but as a day.” Yes, but He was speaking to men, and used words which would obviously have been altogether misleading, if when He said ‘immediately’ He meant a couple of thousand years. And as if to remove all doubt He adds with great solemnity: “*Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.*” It looks as if our Lord had anticipated the manner in which these words would be dealt with by devout Christian people in later times, who have said that these things did not happen before that generation passed away. As if to rebuke them by anticipation, He made this solemn affirmation, so rarely occurring in connection with His statements, “*Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.*” The precise hour—the precise day—at which He was to come was not to be revealed; but all that He had said was to be accomplished within the lifetime of men to whom He was speaking. It is sheer evasion of His words to say that *this generation* means the Jewish race, and that the Jewish race would be kept in existence until these things were fulfilled. It cannot mean that. That is only an attempt to escape from the difficulties which beset the interpretation of Christ’s words. It is sufficient that we should know that the great scheme was near completion when all the troubles which He had described came upon the Jewish race, and the vultures were gathered together to consume the dead body of a great and elect nation.

Let me refer again for a moment to the interpretation by which some endeavour to escape the real meaning of our Lord’s words. They say that “this generation shall not pass away till all these things are accomplished” must mean that although Jerusalem itself was to be destroyed, the Jewish race would

be preserved till the Son of man came. I repeat that such an interpretation is wholly inadmissible. "*This generation*" denotes men then living; and that this was Christ's meaning appears from other passages in the first gospel. Turn for instance to Matthew xvi. 27, 28. "*For the Son of man shall soon come in the glory of his father with his angels; and then shall he render unto every man according to his deeds.*" This is the very coming of which He is speaking in this chapter. "*Verily I say unto you, there be some of them that stand here that shall in no wise taste of death till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.*" He was to come in His glory,—come with His angels, to judge the world within the lifetime of some who were then listening to Him. The same words are reported by Mark with a slight variation (viii. 38), and they are also reported by Luke (ix. 26, 27).

#### THE DARKENING OF THE SUN AND MOON.

How then are we to understand the words "*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*"? It may be said,—and is said very naturally by those who are unfamiliar with Jewish literature,—that this great confusion in the physical order has not happened. Must we not suppose that until it happens, the words of Christ are not accomplished? Is not His coming to be preceded by appalling signs in the material universe? Until we witness these, is not His coming delayed?

But our Lord was speaking to Jews; the language which he used was perfectly familiar to them, and they knew its meaning. His words are almost a quotation from the book of Isaiah (ch. xiii. 17). The prophet is there describing the approaching fall of Babylon: "*Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them, which shall not regard silver; and as for gold, they shall not delight in it. Their bows shall dash the young men to pieces, and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eye shall not spare children. And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the*

*beauty of the Chaldeans' pride, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation, neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there, neither shall shepherds make their flocks to lie down there.*" (xiii. 19, 20). That is a somewhat prosaic account, poetical as it is, of the fall of a great empire. But the judgment of God on Babylon seemed to the prophet so terrible that he introduced a more poetic description of it in the ninth verse of the chapter:—"Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger; to make the land a desolation, and to destroy the sinners thereof out of it. For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light; the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine." And in fortelling the destruction of Idumea and of its neighbour Bozrah, the prophet uses similar imagery. "All the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll, and all their host shall fade away as the leaf fadeth off from the vine, and as a fading leaf from the fig tree. For my sword hath drunk its fill in heaven; behold it shall come down upon Edom and upon the people of my curse, to judgment" (Isaiah xxxiv. 4, 5). That is, the fall of a great earthly state was to the eyes of the prophet so awful that it was adequately symbolised only by the most terrible natural catastrophes. This method of thought was familiar to the Jews and familiar to our Lord, and in describing the fall of the Jewish state He uses the very words which had been used to describe the fall of the empire of Babylon.

#### A MOMENTOUS EPOCH.

And the change in the order of the world which was consummated by the destruction of Jerusalem was far more momentous than that which came upon the destruction of Babylon. It was the passing away of a great religion, founded by God Himself—the religion of patriarchs, prophets, psalmists, and of innumerable saints; a religion whose institutions, sacred books and worship had been the discipline of the moral and spiritual life of the Son

of God Himself during His earthly history; a religion which was glorious with great traditions and with greater hopes,—hopes which through the sin of the Jewish people were to receive their fulfilment in forms which were to give no national greatness to the elect race. To describe such a catastrophe, the imagery which Isaiah used to describe the fall of Babylon had an awful appropriateness. What seemed eternal was perishing, what was most glorious was ending in the blackness of a night of terror. It was as if the sun were darkened, as if the moon no longer gave her light, as if the stars fell from heaven, and the great forces which held the universe together—the powers of heaven—were shaken. And then was to be fulfilled Daniel's great prophecy: "*I saw in the night visions, and behold there came with the clouds of heaven one like unto a Son of man, and He came even to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before Him. And there was given him dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed*" (Dan. vii. 13, 14).

#### THE SIGN OF THE SON OF MAN:

These words of Christ, "*Then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven,*" recall the words of Daniel. By the sign of the Son of man many people have understood some visible symbol in the heavens announcing His approach. The real sense seems to be that the Son of man Himself would come. When we speak of the sign of the cross we mean the cross itself, and the sign of the Son of man is the Son of man Himself. He Himself is the sign of the beginning of a new spiritual order. His words in this prophecy are almost identical with His words in some earlier prophecies (Matt x. 23; xvi. 27, 28). "*The Son of man will soon come in the glory of his Father with his angels; then shall he render unto every man according to his deeds. Verily I say unto you, there be some of them that stand here which shall in no wise taste of death till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.*"

This is a great apocalypse. It makes known to us in the imagery of apocalyptic revelation the wonders of the invisible and eternal world. The outward and visible signs which were immediately to precede the appearance of the Son of man in heaven have been enumerated in the preceding verses. All these signs have long ago been accomplished. The vultures—the ministers of Divine anger—gathered together, and the Jewish state was destroyed by the armies of Rome. The sacred city was laid desolate; the temple was consumed by fire; the altars were ruined; the priests, elect of God and consecrated to His service for fifteen centuries, were driven as fugitives into distant lands; the sacrifices ceased. All these things—with the horrors that accompanied them—had their place in the external history of the world, and they are known to us through contemporary historians. What happened in the invisible and eternal world “*immediately after the tribulation of those days*” is made known to us through these words of Christ, as far as can be made known under earthly symbols. The Son of man—who had been crucified, who had risen from the dead and ascended to God—asserted in some new form His august sovereignty. There was given to Him, according to the words of Daniel, “*dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and languages should serve Him.*” Or to use His own words, He came “*on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.*” Why this glory did not immediately succeed His ascension to the Father is a question to which only speculative answers can be given. But His own words make it clear that there was to be an interval of delay; when that interval was passed, that which was to lie within the earthly life of persons who listened to His prophecy, would happen. He came to rule and to judge the world. And all the tribes of the earth must see Him—not the men of one generation also, but of every generation; not a solitary soul can escape that awful glorious vision. Death has but to draw aside the veil from the eyes of men, and they discover at once the invisible world which



environs them ; and those who asked, Where is the promise of His coming? find that He has already come ; and the vision will fill them with sorrow and with fear.

But He saves men as well as judges them. He sends forth His angels, His ministers, with the great sound of a trumpet, and they are gathering together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. Through age after age, in land after land, the ministers of His grace are gathering into His blessed and eternal kingdom all that will listen to His voice. They are His elect—all that receive His redemption. In the invisible world there is judgment ; in the visible world there is salvation. We who are here may still be gathered into the great company of the saved. The Unseen King of men is near, and nearer than we know ; and if we listen to the voice of those that call us to His feet, the vision of Christ when it suddenly comes at a moment we look not for it.—Christ, King, and Judge, sitting on the clouds of heaven with power and with great glory—will occasion no mourning to us. It will be the fulfilment of all our most passionate hopes and the beginning of our eternal blessedness. What lies beyond we cannot tell. There are intimations in Holy Scripture elsewhere that the presence and glory of Christ in the invisible and eternal world, where He has ascended His throne as King and Judge of all, will, at last, after He has gathered through age after age His elect to Himself, break through even into the material order, and the last generation of mankind will suddenly pass into His presence.

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