

STUDY FOUR – THE BEGINNING OF SORROWS!

INTRODUCTION

As Jesus continues His prophetic discourse, He gives His disciples a sense of the progression of the events of the last days. Matthew records these words: *“For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows”* (**Matthew 24:7–8**).

I want to focus on that word sorrows for a moment. Here it means “birth pangs” or “labor pains.” When the events Jesus describes in verse 7 happen, the labor pains have begun. We all know what labor pains lead up to—some by experience and some by observation. After labor pains, the next major event will be a birth. That is exactly what is meant here. These labor pains must precede the birth of God’s Kingdom on earth.

We also know that the nearer the birth of a baby, the more frequent and more intense the birth pains become until the baby is eventually born. In the same way Jesus says that once these birth pains start in human history, they will become more frequent and more intense. There is no way of reversing that process; the birth will occur.

Here is a question that represents one way we can test ourselves regarding end time prophecy: Do we want to stop the pain or do we want to have the baby? If we want to have the baby, we must have the birth pangs, for there is no way to give birth without them. Let’s check ourselves by asking which is more important—the coming of God’s Kingdom on earth or not being involved in the birth pangs. We might as well make the right choice, because we will be involved in the birth pangs anyhow.

Here are five features Jesus gives us in this discourse, showing events as the sorrows of the end begin:

- Wars, famines, earthquakes and pestilences
- Worldwide persecution of Christians
- Apostasy and betrayal among Christians
- False prophets with cults
- Love growing cold

1. ***Wars and Natural Disasters***

Along with war—international and worldwide—we have in Matthew 24:7–8, there are three major attacks on the human race: famines, pestilences and earthquakes. Together these represent the beginning of birth pangs of the coming age.

In the world today there are two kinds of wars: political wars and ethnic wars. World War I and World War II were both essentially political wars—wars fought by world powers to establish their dominion.

Today famine is endemic in many areas of the world; probably more than ten million people perish yearly through famine. Wherever famine comes, pestilence almost always follows. There are areas of Southeast Asia where all this is being enacted before our eyes. And the scientific record of earthquakes shows an amazing increase in the frequency and intensity of earthquakes in the last fifty to one hundred years.

2. *Hatred Grows toward Christians . . .*

I mentioned above that Jesus gives us a sense of progression regarding the last days. This is enhanced by His use of a key word: “then”. This word, which occurs numerous times, indicates a succession of events following one another systematically. That is the nature of this discourse of Jesus—it is systematic, thorough and basic.

As we look at Matthew 24:9, bearing in mind that we have now entered the period of birth pangs, we see the first of the “thens”: *“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake.”*

“Who is the “you” mentioned there?” The answer is not grammatically correct, but you are us. Can we absorb this fact? At this point people will deliver us up—Christians, followers of Jesus—to tribulation and kill us. We will be hated by all nations for Jesus’ name’s sake.

Many people pray for revival, and that includes me. But when the Church experiences revival, it will discover for the first time how much the world really hates it. We need to bear that in mind.

3. *. . . And among Christians*

Now we look at the next “then”: *“And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another” (Matthew 24:10)*. Again, the word many refers to Christians. When Scripture speaks of turning away from the faith, it means the Christian faith.

Why will Christians betray one another? To save their own lives. Actually, this is not so unusual; it has been happening for years in China and the former Soviet Union and in some Muslim nations.

So, this is the progression: Under the pressure of the persecution Jesus is speaking about, some Christians will renounce their faith and betray their fellow Christians. Hatred will develop between the Christians who remain loyal to Jesus and those who betray Him. And those who betray their fellow Christians will betray them to the secular authorities for judgment. (Here is another “then”.) *“Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many” (verse 11)*.

4. *False Prophets Will Rise*

Every cult is the product of a false prophet, and we cannot number the cults that have confronted us in recent years. I hate to say it, but some of those false prophets are not outside the churches but inside the churches. Many of us have heard prophets who promise everything except what is really going to happen. If someone predicts something false, he is a false prophet. Under the Law of Moses, he would have been put to death. It is safe to say there would be far fewer prophets today if that law still applied!

5. *Love Will Grow Cold*

Jesus shows us the result of this turning away from the faith: *“And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold” (Matthew 24:12)*.

Again, the word many refers to Christians. The Greek word for love used here is agape, the word for Christian love, so this is not talking about the world’s brand of love. The love of many Christians will grow cold in this lawlessness generation. Here is a little saying I coined: “Lawlessness breeds lovelessness.” There is so much lawlessness in our culture today that we tend to become hardened.

How important it is to see that lawlessness leads to lovelessness! The world has a false idea of love being free and uninhibited - doing whatever one pleases. That is not God’s kind of love. God’s kind of love requires discipline and self-control. True love is not selfish, aggressive or self-seeking. Where lawlessness

abounds, the love of God is squeezed out of people. We must take the necessary precautions to maintain our love for the Lord and for one another.

Enduring to the End

These, then, are five main features of the beginning of birth pangs Jesus gives in His discourse. Not everyone will give in to fear or persecution or lawlessness. What does Jesus promise for those who remain faithful? *“He who endures to the end shall be saved” (Matthew 24:13).*

In the original Greek, this phrase is even more precise. It says, *“He who has endured to the end shall be saved.”* Thank God, we are saved now. But if we want to stay saved, we must endure. There is really only one way to learn endurance: by enduring. Endurance is God’s preparation for what lies ahead.

The Ultimate Sign: The Second Question Answered

So far in this discourse we have seen various signs (plural) of the end, but Jesus has not yet answered the disciples’ second question, *“What will be the one sign [singular] of the end of the age?”* When we get to Matthew 24:14 we have the answer: *“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.”*

When will the end come? When this Gospel of the Kingdom has been preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations. This is a very important statement. It means that the real initiative in world history is not with the politicians, the military commanders or the scientists, but with the Church. The Church is the only group of people who can bring about the closing sign of the age—the preaching of this Gospel of the Kingdom. I am so glad Jesus said this. He did not suggest that some watered down, humanistic version of the Gospel would be sufficient, but stated that the same Gospel preached by Him and by the apostles must be the one preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations.

Revelation 7 tells us something about the people from these nations. John, describing what he saw in a vision, declares:

“After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”” (Revelation 7:9-10)

The great multitude of people, all of whom received salvation through faith in Jesus, the Lamb of God, comes from all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues. In other words, before the age can close, there must be at least one representative in the Body of every nation, people, tribe and language on earth. I believe the reason is that God the Father is jealous for His Son’s glory. Because Jesus was willing to suffer for all humankind, God will not allow the age to close until there is at least one representative from every tribe, people, nation and tongue who has received the salvation offered through Jesus, the Lamb of God.

This responsibility is ours, and it is a tremendous responsibility. When we consider all the tragedies—the suffering, sickness, hatred, wars and poverty—that mark the present age and that are increasing steadily, we have to face the fact that unless we do our job as quickly as we can, we are responsible for unnecessary, additional suffering. We must never forget our responsibility, and I say this with the utmost passion of my soul. As I said earlier, this is the verse that motivates me: *“This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).* I take this responsibility seriously.

UNDERSTANDING END TIMES

We need to ask ourselves what we are living for. Is it for an easy life, the most we can get out of life, a better job, higher pay, a larger house, a faster car? Or are we living for this purpose—that this Gospel of the Kingdom may be proclaimed in all the world as a witness to all the nations?

When we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, as we must, one of the questions He is going to ask each of us individually is this: “What did you do to help the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom to all nations?” Will we have to stand before God one day and say, “I’m sorry, but I never really took this verse seriously. I just went on living my life as if the age were going to go on forever and all I had to do was look after number one and maybe number two.” This is a desperately serious issue. I do not want to dwell on it, but it would be unfair if I did not point out the sobriety of this prophecy.

Each of us can do something. Each of us can contribute to this goal. In Matthew 9, Jesus says, “*The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few.*” What did He say next? “*Pray the Lord of the harvest*” (Matthew 9:37–38). Everybody can pray; we are guilty if we do not pray. Most of us can give. If we view the whole world as it is today, with its population of more than 8 billion, most of us have more than enough to give.

To me, Matthew 24:14 is one of the most searching verses in the Bible: “*This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.*” Jesus said that as a sign of the end the Gospel will be preached. If He said it will be preached, then it will be preached. The question becomes, what are we going to do about it?