

CHAPTER 11

THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM

Matthew 24:1-28, 32-35; Mark 13:1-23, 28-31; Luke 21:5-24, 29-33

The Temple

A generation which has witnessed the destruction of so many majestic buildings and so much of the material heritage of the civilized world, should not find it difficult to share the meditations of the apostles as they looked again upon the indescribable beauty of the temple at the close of the final day of Jesus' public ministry. "And Jesus went out from the temple, and was going on his way; and his disciples came to him. to show him the buildings of the temple" (Matt. 24:1); "One of his disciples saith unto him, Teacher, behold, what manner of stones and what manner of buildings!" (Mark 13:1); "As some spake of the temple, how it was adorned with goodly stones and offerings" (Luke 21:5). The apostles had already been warned of the impending destruction of Jerusalem: it was to come as the judgment of God upon the nation for its rebellion and rejection of His final Messenger. Amid the shock of the first desperate clash between Jesus and the wicked rulers of the nation, as He had driven the traders out of the temple in the opening days of His ministry, they had heard that solemn prediction: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). Since they had not understood at the time that Jesus was speaking concerning His own death at the hands of the Jews, it was inevitable that they should have been influenced in their thinking by the reply of the Jewish leaders who thought Jesus spoke of the destruction of the temple structure. In fact, the manner in which Jesus had phrased his prediction seems definitely to have been calculated to prepare the way for an association of the fact of His death with the destruction of the temple.

Love of the Temple

As Jesus prepared to leave Galilee on this final journey to Jerusalem (Luke 11:50; 13:35) and, again, in the midst of the

excitement of the triumphal entry (Luke 19:41-44), they had been deeply moved by His laments over the terrible fate of the unbelieving city which had rejected God's supreme Messenger and was about to be rejected of God. And now in the closing hours of this final appeal of Jesus to the nation, they had just listened to the blistering denunciations [1184] which Jesus had delivered against the scribes and Pharisees, and had heard Him repeat His lament over the fate of the city (Matt. 23:29-39). Thus, when they called His attention to the immense stones and the beauty of adornment, there was much more in the comment of the apostles to Jesus than admiration and awe at grandeur of great buildings and exquisite architecture. Weighed down with sorrow over the fearful predictions of His imminent death, they likewise were appalled at the dark background of the destruction of the holy city and the nation. Seeking further light upon this whole dreadful theme, they tactfully called His attention to the solidity and beauty of the temple buildings. There seems to be a wistful color of sadness in their tribute to the noble structure which they had known and loved from their youth.

The Greatest Loss

It may not have occurred to them at the time of the earlier predictions that Jesus had not devoted His expressions of regret to the subject of the wanton destruction of magnificent buildings and vast waste of material resources and years of skilled labor. He had spoken with breaking heart of lost souls; He had grieved over suffering too terrible to be related. In His tender words is heard especially the cry of helpless, little children caught in the vortex of man's wickedness (Luke 19:44; 23:28, 29). It is hard for man to realize that there is no real profit in gaining the whole world of material things, if he loses his soul in the process. He is continually tempted to stand in awe of vast buildings and piled up treasures which many generations have accumulated, and fail in his estimate of the incalculable worth of one human soul.

The Church and the Temple

It was not a simple process, at first, for the Jerusalem church to gain a clear enough understanding of the gospel to view the temple in proper perspective. Here was one of the ways in which the Holy Spirit was leading the apostles and the inspired messengers into all truth. With his own lifeblood, Stephen wrote indelibly upon the heart of the church the passing of the temple, and the all-sufficiency of Christ who makes holy with His presence even the assembly of two or three in His name. However garbled the testimony of the embittered Jews against Stephen may have been, it is evident that the Holy Spirit was thrusting Stephen forward into the forefront of the battle to make plain to all that the law had passed and the temple was no longer sacred: "This man ceaseth not to speak words against this holy place, and the law: for we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the [1186] customs which Moses delivered unto us" (Acts 6:13, 14). In the moment of Jesus' death, the veil of the temple had been rent in twain leaving the holy of holies exposed, barren, deserted, but it was hard for friend or foe to seize the significance of this startling miracle. One might write over the masterful sermon of Stephen, broken and interrupted at the very critical point of introduction of the facts of the gospel and its commands and promises, the cryptic prediction of Jesus to the Samaritan woman: "Neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem . . . [but in any place in all the world] . . . [if] in spirit and in truth" (John 4:21-24). With amazing skill that dumbfounded his hearers Stephen surveyed the history of Israel to show that the spot on which Moses had stood before God in the wilderness as the bush burned and was not consumed, was also holy, and that God really does not dwell in houses made with hands.

The Prediction

The apostles had much to learn as they pointed to the temple buildings and spoke to Jesus in praise and admiration of the sacred structure. The answer of Jesus was blunt and unmistakably clear: "See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down"

(Matt. 24:2). Shocked and thrilled by the awesome words of Jesus, the disciples could hardly wait until they had reached the privacy of their meeting place on the Mount of Olives, which was evidently the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was wont to go with his disciples, before asking Him anxiously for further information as to the portentous events ahead.

The Great Buildings

It may well be true that the disciples pointed to "the walls and fortifications surrounding the outer court and constituting the defenses of the temple," since Jesus had already "gone out from the temple," and since these contained the most massive stones that would remind one of "the everlasting hills" from which they had been quarried. Josephus describes great stones in the temple buildings that were 25 cubits long, 12 cubits wide, and 8 cubits high. Ferguson's estimates of the temple itself are that it was 100 cubits by 60; that the inner enclosure was 180 cubits by 240; the outer, 400 cubits square. In the magnificent porticos and cloisters about the temple were great monoliths of marble 40 feet high. Even though outside the temple area, Jesus and His disciples may have been looking also at the temple itself with all its beautiful adornments, for Luke reports the comments of the disciples upon "how it was adorned with goodly stones and offerings." II Maccabees 3:2-7 tells of rich gifts presented by princes or [1187] men of wealth to adorn the temple. This had been the inferior structure erected by Zerubbabel and his helpers. Herod the Great was a great builder, and the greatest of his achievements in this field was the temple which he constructed. The Jews had been loath to permit him to tear down the temple, fearing his promise to replace it with a structure rivaling the grandeur of the temple of Solomon itself would not be kept. Herod began the work of rebuilding the temple in the eighteenth year of his reign, 19 B.C. The main edifice was built by priests in a year and a half, and the cloisters finished in eight years; the work on the labyrinth of outside courts and buildings continued until the reign of Albinus as governor of Palestine in A.D. 62-64. Typical of the lavish adornments of the temple structure was the great golden vine that

was placed by Herod over the entrance to the temple, a vine that had golden bunches of grapes as tall as a man (Jos. Antiq. 15.11.3). The Jews, reflecting the assurance with which they viewed the building and its future, had said to Jesus on the occasion of the first cleansing of the temple: "Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou raise it up in three days?" (John 2:20).

The Two Questions

Much of the confusion in interpreting the predictions of Jesus recorded in Matthew 24 and the parallel passages arises from the failure to see that the disciples asked and Jesus answered two questions: one, concerning the fall of Jerusalem; the other, concerning His second coming. "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (v.3). The manner in which these questions were asked shows that the disciples asked two questions, not three; they related together the second coming and the end of the world; hence, this constituted one question. It is also evident that the disciples were so profoundly impressed by the prediction of the utter destruction of Jerusalem that they immediately began to wonder if this event was related in time to the second coming. They wanted to know when the destruction of Jerusalem would occur and how they would be able to discern the approach of the second coming and the end of the world. This does not prove that they thought this would all occur in their lifetime; much less does it show that they so thought after receiving further instruction and after the guidance of the Holy Spirit directed them at Pentecost and following. The disciples were struggling to free themselves from the materialistic ideas of the kingdom which prevailed among so many and to follow Jesus' revelation of His spiritual program. At the ascension they were still asking: "Lord, dost thou at this time [1188] restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6), but this does not reveal the balance of the material and the spiritual in their conception. They certainly did not by this question relate the establishment of the kingdom to the second coming and the end of the world, though they had to be rebuked again for undertaking to know beforehand the time of the fulfillment of God's plans.

Approaching Disaster

In answering the first of the two questions, Jesus began by predicting the time of terror and disaster that would precede it. It would be important for the Christians to discern the approach of the annihilation of the Jewish nation. In the light of the history of the church and the vast amount of completely contradictory teaching which has been propagated concerning this entire field, it is most impressive that Jesus should have begun this discourse with a strong warning against the false leaders who would claim to be the Christ, and the false teachers who would claim to be able to declare the presence of Christ.

False Christ's

First among the signs of the approaching doom of the city of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans was to be the appearance of false Christ's. We can understand how naturally mountebanks witnessing the amazing sweep of Christianity over the Roman world would want to try their hand at such false pretensions. Jewish political leaders, disappointed that Jesus had insisted upon a spiritual ministry and had permitted His enemies to slay Him, and seeking desperately for relief from the increasingly cruel oppression of a Roman government rapidly growing more corrupt, attempted to use the name of Christ and delude the multitudes: "For many shall come in my name, saying, I am the Christ; and shall lead many astray" (v. 5). The fact that we do not have any historical records that give any detailed account concerning the rise of false Christ's in the period preceding the fall of Jerusalem proves nothing but the fragmentary character of extant records. The rise of Bar Cochebas (Son of the Star — see how he attempted to use the star of Bethlehem in the messianic title he chose) which occurred in A.D. 132-4, when the final, despairing effort of the Jews to regain Jerusalem resulted in their annihilation, is an extreme illustration of what was common in this whole period. Theudas (Acts 5:36), Simon Magus (Acts 8:9), The Egyptian (Acts 21:38), are examples of this type of false leadership. Wars The second sign which Jesus declared would help the Christians to

foresee the approaching destruction of Jerusalem and escape being caught in the holocaust is: "Ye shall hear [1189] of wars and rumors of wars. . . . Nation shall rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; and there shall be famines and earthquakes in divers places" (Matt. 24:6, 7.) The historical writings of Josephus give abundant records of such calamities. In the decade immediately preceding the fall of Jerusalem disorders and violence of every kind increased like a whirlwind in Palestine. During this whole period leading to the final disaster there were three definite threats of wars from Roman emperors, three uprisings of Gentiles against the Jews, a number of famines and at least one pestilence in Rome which caused the death of 30,000 people. The Roman historians, Tacitus and Seutonius, give corroborative details. It is a common mistake in the interpretation of this chapter to overlook the fact that Jesus is answering the first question in the early part of this discourse, and to attempt the application of this prediction of "wars and rumors of wars" to recent world conflicts which are supposed to give the key for determining the date of the second coming and the end of the world. But it is clear that Jesus is giving signs by which they can anticipate the fall of Jerusalem, for He explicitly declares: "Then let them that are in Judaea flee unto the mountains: let him that is on the housetop 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 cloak" (vv. 16-18). The Christians are to flee the country and escape the dire calamity that impends as the Romans advance against Jerusalem. The Christians are set for the propagation and defense of the gospel and for the salvation of lost souls; they must keep themselves dedicated to this task. It would be absurd, of course, for anyone to imagine he could escape the day of judgment by fleeing to the mountains or by not returning to his house when working in the field. Furthermore, Jesus goes on to describe their flight out of the stricken land as the savage war between Romans and Zealot Jews rages to its final climax: "And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on a sabbath" (v. 20). Winter with the rainy season, flooded streams out of their banks, ice and snow, would make any travel hazardous, and swift, assured travel

exceedingly improbable. The Christians would not be keeping the Sabbath, but the Jews would, and that would make it very difficult to purchase supplies and secure means of swift travel.

Persecution

Jesus declares that all this war and bloodshed, famine and calamity "is the beginning of travail": the beginning of the tragic series of events in Palestine which [1190] would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem (v. 8). A further sign is added in the terrible persecution which is to be heaped upon the Christians as both Jew and Gentile seek to destroy Christianity. Jesus had clearly predicted such suffering when He had given the solemn commission to the twelve apostles (Matt. 10), and had instructed them to flee from one city to another in order to preserve and to deliver their message. There is no indication that the apostles experienced any such persecution in their first mission, but toward the close of Jesus' ministry the warnings are being made sharp and imperative as to what they must expect: "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" (v. 9). The Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of Paul and Peter give abundant evidence of the fulfillment of this prediction in the years preceding the fall of Jerusalem.

Apostasy

The effect of these terrible persecutions is to be seen in the apostasy of many, the rise of many false prophets, the growth of corruption and iniquity in the world, and the cooling of the ardor of many Christians (vv. 10-12). Since the greater part of the New Testament was written in this very period from A.D. 40-68, and carries the history of the church either in direct form or the indirect pattern of the Epistles, it is a simple matter to see the fulfillment of these predictions during this period. This urgent warning is given: "iniquity shall be multiplied, the love of many shall wax cold." Jesus adds: "But he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved" (v. 13). This evidently refers to the end of the life of the individual. It cannot mean the end of the city and nation (destruction of Jerusalem), since those who were slain because of

their faith in Christ before the destruction of the city could not endure to the end of the city; those who proved faithful to the time of the destruction of the city, but apostatized after that, could not be included in the promise.

The End

It is equally clear that "the end" in verse 14 does refer to the end of the city. The same word should not be interpreted in different ways in the same passage unless the context requires it, but here the context does compel the interpretation of "the end" in verse 13 as the end of life of the individual, and in verse 14 as the end of the city. The context following verse 14, shows plainly the reference in that verse is to the fall of Jerusalem, for it offers the warning to the disciples that they must flee from the city. [1191] be able to predict the time of the second coming is this verse 14 which is so solidly imbedded in the warnings and predictions of the destruction of Jerusalem: "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." But when Paul wrote to the Colossians in A.D. 63, we find him affirming such a world-wide proclamation of the gospel had been fulfilled: "the hope of the gospel which ye heard, which was preached in all creation under heaven; whereof I Paul was made a minister" (1:23). Neither the prediction of Jesus nor the affirmation of Paul is to be taken to mean that every single individual had actually heard the gospel, but that the whole Roman world had had opportunity to hear; it had been broadcast to every nation. Mark and Luke contain a noteworthy addition in this section of the sermon of Jesus by recording one of the most explicit of all the claims to miraculous inspiration for the apostles and their associates. "Whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye; for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11); "I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to withstand or to gainsay" (Luke 21:15). Matthew had already recorded an earlier, similar prediction by Jesus (Matt. 10:19, 20). More precise in character than predictions of wars, bloodshed, calamities, persecutions, apostasies, and world-wide proclamation of the gospel, and yet

sufficiently veiled in character to rebuff the unbelieving, is the famous prophecy concerning the abomination of desolation: "When therefore ye see the abomination of desolation, which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let him that readeth understand), then let them that are in Judaea flee unto the mountains" (vv. 15, 16). The parenthetical warning for those who read to give the strictest attention to what is read, in order that they may understand, is seized by radicals as prime evidence of their theory that the Gospel writers copied from one another or from common sources, since the warning is in both Matthew and Mark. But they are assuming that the parenthesis is added by the writer and refers to the Gospel narrative; if it was spoken by Jesus and meant: "Let every person who reads in the book of Daniel the prediction concerning the abomination pay the strictest attention," then it is simply a factual report of the speech by Matthew and Mark and offers not the slightest [1192] aid and comfort to the radicals as they spin out their thin web of "form criticism."

Abomination of Desolation

A study of Daniel 8:13; 11:31; 12:11 will show that the abomination of desolation was to be something which was an abomination because it desecrated the temple, and "was an abomination of desolation" because it would leave the city desolate. "And forces shall stand on his part, and they shall profane the sanctuary, even the fortress, and shall take away the continual burnt offering, and they shall set up the abomination that maketh desolate" (Dan. 11:31); "And from the time that the continual burnt-offering shall be taken away, and the abomination that maketh desolate set up, there shall be a thousand two hundred and ninety days" (Dan. 12:11). Various specific facts or events associated with the approaching siege of Jerusalem are selected by various commentators as being the exact fulfillment of what was meant by the abomination of desolation, but Luke gives the key to the interpretation of the prophecy by showing that Jesus also said: "But when ye see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that her desolation is at hand" (21:20). The Greek has a present

participle "being compassed," so that the Christians are warned to flee as they see the hostile armies closing in on the city; after the city had been "compassed," it would have been too late. Their work of evangelization which had been so fruitful in the capital is now to be made impossible by violence; they are to flee to other places with their precious message. Many Jews fled into the capital for refuge as outlying cities and fortresses were reduced to ruins. But the Christians gave heed to these warnings of Jesus and fled out of Jerusalem into the mountains and the open country, across the Jordan to safety. Eusebius declares: "The people in the church in Jerusalem being commanded to leave and dwell in a city of Peraea called Pella, in accordance with a certain oracle which was uttered before the war to the approved men there by way of revelation" (H. E. 111:5, 3). He evidently is giving a free reference to this prediction of Jesus to the apostles, and records the fact that the Christians all escaped from the city. Josephus seems to refer to a general exodus at the time of the flight of the Christians when he writes: "Many of the most eminent of the Jews swam away from the city as from a ship when it was going to sink" (Wars 2:20:1). Since Cestus Callus started to lay siege to Jerusalem and then retired without any evident reason, it was probably at this juncture that the Christians fled. Plummer remarks that the Christians may have fled to other [1193] places also, but the flight to Pella, recorded by Eusebius, illustrates the way the Christians obeyed the warning of Christ. He points out that if this prediction in the Gospel narratives had been invented by Christians after the fall of Jerusalem, its wording would have been made definite instead of general, to fit this historic incident of their escape. Eusebius quotes the prophecy as definite, but the words of Jesus are indefinite. This is very strong evidence of their genuineness. It is also plain that if the Synoptic Gospels had been written after A.D. 70 as the radical scholars claim, then the writers most certainly would have cited the fact that the predictions of Jesus covering the fall of Jerusalem had been fulfilled, as Luke does in regard to the famine predicted by Agabus (Acts 11:28). Gibson says: "Those who deny the divinity of Christ are greatly troubled with this prophecy, so much so that the only way in which they can get rid of its witness to Him is by

suggesting that it was really composed after the destruction of Jerusalem, and therefore never spoken by Christ at all. There are difficulties enough of other kinds in the way of such a disposal of the prophecy; but there is one consideration which absolutely forbids it — viz., that any one writing after the event would have avoided all the vagueness of language which gives trouble to expositors. To those who can judge the internal evidence, its obscurity is clear proof that this discourse could not have been produced in the full light of subsequent history, but must have been what it professes to be — a foreshadowing of coming events" (*Commentary on Matthew*, p. 344).

Destruction of Jerusalem

The tragic character of the fall of Jerusalem was described by Jesus in dramatic language: "For then shall be great tribulation, such as hath not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, nor ever shall be" (v. 21). Although the vast number of soldiers and civilians involved in modern conflicts dwarfs the opposing forces in the final days of the Jewish capital, yet the siege and destruction of Jerusalem remain the type and symbol of all the horrible cruelty of war and the suffering it entails. The fact that the inhabitants were completely engulfed in the disaster does not tell the whole story. It is recorded that 1,100,000 were slain and 97,000 taken captive, forced to fight to the death in the arena, tortured, or sold as slaves. Josephus, who shows many signs of having read various New Testament books with care, says in language which appears to be influenced strongly by this statement of Jesus: "It appears to me that the misfortune of all men from the beginning of the world, if they were compared to those of the Jews, are not so considerable [1194] as they were" (Preface to Wars, Sec. 4). Added to the total annihilation of the city, the fact that five wars were going on at once in the city, made it an incredible mad-house. The city was in the hands of four warring factions of the Jews with each quarter fortified and fighting against every other quarter as well as against the Romans on the outside. When the Romans attempted to storm the wall in one quarter, the Jewish factions in the other quarters immediately attacked the Jewish rival faction from the rear, broke

into the beleaguered section, burned, pillaged, and murdered, while the Jews of this desperately assailed section fought off the Romans on the outside. Surely, nothing like this has ever been witnessed in military history. Josephus, who was a prisoner of the Romans during the siege and had the opportunity to witness the entire series of events at close range and the leisure to record his observations and impressions, has left a fascinating account. The final breach of the walls was made at the northeast corner as in the case of every other capture of Jerusalem of which we have record. It was at this point in A.D. 1099, that the famous crusader, Godfrey De Bouillon, using a prefabricated, movable, wooden tower which had been shipped across from Venice, managed to lead his knights in desperate assault over the wall for final conquest of the city from the Saracens. When the Romans finally broke into the city, the temple area, a powerful fortress in itself, held out to the last. The tremendous fortification at the northwest corner of the temple area, which had been erected by Herod the Great and named Antonia, after Mark Antony, was the anchor of the temple defenses. Like a typical Roman general committing suicide in the moment of overwhelming defeat, the Jews themselves set fire to the temple. When the Romans gained entrance to the temple area, Titus rushed into the holy place and viewing the indescribable beauty of the building and its contents, cried out to his soldiers to put out the fire and save the building. But it was too late. Carved into the stones of the triumphal arch of Titus still standing in Rome, may be seen the forms of the Jewish captives carrying the seven branched candlestick, the table of shewbread, and the altar of incense through the streets of Rome in the triumphal procession of the Roman conqueror. But there is nothing to be seen that resembles the ark of the covenant, an object that would be easily identifiable by reason of the cherubim with outstretched wings. The ark had disappeared at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. When the captives returned from Babylon and rebuilt the [1195] temple, they made no attempt to replace the ark of the covenant. A simple block of stone marked the place in the holy of holies where it had been. And eventually in their fury the Romans tore the very buildings of the temple down to the

foundations and finally plowed over the surface of the area in their contempt "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold your house is left unto you desolate."