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The MacArthur NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 1-7

John MacArthur Jr.

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The Gracious King (1:1-17)

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

To Abraham was born Isaac; and to Isaac, Jacob; and to Jacob, Judah and his brothers; and to Judah were born Perez and Zerah by Tamar; and to Perez was born Hezron; and to Hezron, Ram; and to Ram was born Amminadab; and to Amminadab, Nahshon; and to Nahshon, Salmon; and to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab; and to Boaz was born Obed by Ruth; and to Obed, Jesse; and to Jesse was born David the king. And to David was born Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah; and to Solomon was born Rehoboam; and to Rehoboam, Abijah; and to Abijah, Asa; and to Asa was born Jehoshaphat; and to Jehoshaphat, Joram; and to Joram, Uzziah; and to Uzziah was born Jotham; and to Jotham, Ahaz; and to Ahaz, Hezekiah; and to Hezekiah was born Manasseh; and to Manasseh, Amon; and to Amon, Josiah; and to Josiah were born Jeconiah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon, to Jeconiah was born Shealtiel; and to Shealtiel, Zerubbabel; and to Zerubbabel was born Abiud; and to Abiud, Eliakim; and to Eliakim, Azor; and to Azor was born Zadok; and to Zadok, Achim; and to Achim, Eliud; and to Eliud was born Eleazar; and to Eleazar, Matthan; and to Matthan, Jacob; and to Jacob was born Joseph the

husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

Therefore all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ fourteen generations. (1:1-17)

As discussed in the introduction, one of Matthew's major purposes in his gospel, and the primary purpose of chapters 1 and 2, is to establish Jesus' right to Israel's kingship. To any honest observer, and certainly to Jews who knew and believed their own Scriptures, these two chapters vindicate Jesus' claim before Pilate: "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world" (John 18:37).

Consistent with that purpose of revealing Jesus to be the Christ (Messiah) and the King of the Jews, Matthew begins his gospel by showing Jesus' lineage from the royal line of Israel. If Jesus is to be heralded and proclaimed king there must be proof that He comes from the recognized royal family.

Messiah's royal line began with David. Through the prophet Nathan, God promised that it would be David's descendants through whom He would bring the great King who would ultimately reign over Israel and establish His eternal kingdom (2 Sam. 7:12-16). The promise was not fulfilled in Solomon, David's son who succeeded him, or in any other king who ruled in Israel or Judah; and the people waited for another one to be born of David's line to fulfill the prophecy. At the time Jesus was born the Jews were still anticipating the arrival of the promised monarch and the restored glory of the kingdom.

The Jews' concern for pedigrees, however, existed long before they had a king. After they entered Canaan under Joshua and conquered the region God had promised to them, the land was carefully and precisely divided into territories for each tribe—except the priestly tribe of Levi, for whom special cities were designated. In order to know where to live, each Israelite family had to determine accurately the tribe to which it belonged (see Num. 26; 34-35). And in order to qualify for priestly function, a Levite had to prove his descent from Levi. After the return from exile in Babylon, certain "sons of the priests" were not allowed to serve in the priesthood because "their ancestral registration . . . could not be located" (Ezra 2:61-62).

The transfer of property also required accurate knowledge of the family tree (see, e.g., Ruth 3-4). Even under Roman rule, the census of Jews in Palestine was based on tribe—as can be seen from the fact that Joseph and Mary were required to register in "Bethlehem, because he [Joseph] was of the house and family of David" (Luke 2:4). We learn from the Jewish historian Josephus that in New Testament times many Jewish families maintained detailed and highly valued ancestral files. Before his conversion, the apostle Paul had been greatly concerned about his lineage from "the tribe of Benjamin" (see Rom. 11:1; 2 Cor. 11:22; Phil. 3:5). For Jews, tribal identification and line of descent were all-important.

It is both interesting and significant that since the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 no genealogies exist that can trace the ancestry of any Jew now living. The primary significance of that fact is that, for those Jews who still look for the Messiah, his lineage to David could never be established. Jesus Christ is the last verifiable claimant to the throne of David, and therefore to the messianic line.

Matthew's genealogy presents a descending line, from **Abraham** through **David**, through **Joseph**, to **Jesus, who is called Christ**. Luke's genealogy presents an ascending line, starting from Jesus and going back through David, Abraham, and even to "Adam, the son of God" (Luke 3:23-38). Luke's record is apparently traced from Mary's side, the Eli of Luke 3:23 probably being Joseph's father-in-law (often referred to as a father) and therefore Mary's natural father. Matthew's intent is to validate Jesus' royal claim by showing His legal descent from David through Joseph, who was Jesus' legal, though not natural, father. Luke's intent is to trace Jesus' actual royal blood ancestry through his mother, thereby establishing His racial lineage from David. Matthew follows the royal line through David and Solomon, David's son and successor to the throne. Luke follows the royal line through Nathan, another son of David. Jesus was therefore the blood descendant of David through Mary and the legal descendant of David through Joseph. Genealogically, Jesus was perfectly qualified to take the throne of David.

It is essential to note that in His virgin birth Jesus not only was divinely conceived but through that miracle was protected from regal disqualification because of Joseph's being a descendant of **Jeconiah** (v. 12). Because of that king's wickedness, God had declared of Jeconiah (also called Jehoiachin or Coniah) that, though he was in David's line, "no man of his descendants will prosper, sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah" (Jer. 22:30). That curse would have precluded Jesus' right to kingship had He been the natural son of Joseph, who was in Jeconiah's line. Jesus' legal descent from David, which was always traced through the father, came through Jeconiah to Joseph. But His blood descent, *and His human right to rule*, came through Mary, who was not in Jeconiah's lineage. Thus the curse on Jeconiah's offspring was circumvented, while still maintaining the royal privilege.

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (1:1)

Biblos (**book**) can also refer to a record or account, as is the case here. Matthew is giving a brief record of **the genealogy** (*genesis*, "beginning, origin") of **Jesus Christ**. **Jesus** is from the Greek equivalent of Jeshua, or Jehoshua, which means "Jehovah (Yahweh) saves." It was the name the angel told Joseph to give to the Son who had been miraculously conceived in his betrothed, Mary, because this One who would soon be born would indeed "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). **Christos** (**Christ**) is the Greek form of the Hebrew *māshîah* (Eng., messiah), which means "anointed one." Israel's prophets, priests, and kings were anointed,

and Jesus was anointed as all three. He was *the* Anointed One, *the* Messiah, whom the Jews had long expected to come as their great deliverer and monarch.

Yet because of their unbelief and misunderstanding of Scripture, many Jews refused to recognize Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. Some rejected Him for the very reason that His parents were known to them. When He went back to His hometown of Nazareth He "began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they became astonished, and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us?'" (Matt. 13:54-56). On another occasion, others in Jerusalem said of Jesus, "The rulers do not really know that this is the Christ, do they? However, we know where this man is from; but whenever the Christ may come, no one knows where He is from" (John 7:26-27). A short while later, "Some of the multitude therefore, when they heard these words, were saying, 'This certainly is the Prophet.' Others were saying, 'This is the Christ.' Still others were saying, 'Surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee, is He?'" (John 7:40-41). Still others, better taught in the Scriptures but unaware of Jesus' lineage and birthplace, said, "Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" (v. 42).

The genealogy establishes the Messiah's royal lineage. Matthew's intent is not to have the reader digress into a study of each person listed, but is to show that all of these persons point to the royalty of Christ.

THE GRACIOUS KING

Even so, from Matthew's genealogy we learn more than Jesus' lineage. We also see beautiful reflections of God's grace. Jesus was sent by a God of grace to be a King of grace. He would not be a King of law and of iron force, but a King of grace. His royal credentials testify of royal grace. And the people He chose to be His ancestors reveal the wonder of grace, and give hope to all sinners.

The graciousness of this King and of the God who sent Him can be seen in the genealogy in four places and ways. We will look at these in logical, rather than chronological, order.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE CHOICE OF ONE WOMAN

And to Jacob was born Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. (1:16)

God showed His grace to Mary by choosing her to be the mother of Jesus. Although descended from the royal line of David, Mary was an ordinary, unknown young woman. Contrary to claims of her own immaculate conception (her being conceived miraculously in her own mother's womb), Mary was just as much a sinner as all other human beings ever born. She was likely much better, morally and

spiritually, than most people of her time, but she was not sinless. She was deeply devout and faithful to the Lord, as she demonstrated by her humble and submissive response to the angel's announcement (Luke 1:38).

Mary needed a Savior, as she herself acknowledged at the very beginning of her song of praise, often called the Magnificat: "My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave" (Luke 1:46-48). The notions of her being co-redemptrix and co-mediator with Christ are wholly unscriptural and were never a part of early church doctrine. Those heretical ideas came into the church several centuries later, through accommodations to pagan myths that originated in the Babylonian mystery religions.

Nimrod, a grandson of Ham, one of Noah's three sons, founded the great cities of Babel (Babylon), Erech, Accad, Calneh, and Nineveh (Gen. 10:10-11). It was at Babel that the first organized system of idolatry began with the tower built there. Nimrod's wife, Semiramis, became the first high priestess of idolatry, and Babylon became the fountainhead of all evil systems of religion. In the last days, "the great harlot" will have written on her forehead, "BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (Rev. 17:5). When Babylon was destroyed, the pagan high priest at that time fled to Pergamum (or Pergamos; called "where Satan's throne is" in Rev. 2:13) and then to Rome. By the fourth century A.D. much of the polytheistic paganism of Rome had found its way into the church. It was from that source that the ideas of Lent, of Mary's immaculate conception, and of her being the "queen of heaven" originated. In the pagan legends, Semiramis was miraculously conceived by a sunbeam, and her son, Tammuz, was killed and was raised from the dead after forty days of fasting by his mother (the origin of Lent). The same basic legends were found in counterpart religions throughout the ancient world. Semiramis was known variously as Ashtoreth, Isis, Aphrodite, Venus, and Ishtar. Tammuz was known as Baal, Osiris, Eros, and Cupid.

Those pagan systems had infected Israel centuries before the coming of Christ. It was to Ishtar, "the queen of heaven," that the wicked and rebellious Israelite exiles in Egypt insisted on turning (Jer. 44:17-19; cf. 7:18). While exiled in Babylon with his fellow Jews, Ezekiel had a vision from the Lord about the "abominations" some Israelites were committing even in the Temple at Jerusalem— practices that included "weeping for Tammuz" (Ezek. 8:13-14). Here we see some of the origins of the mother-child cult, which has drawn Mary into its grasp.

The Bible knows nothing of Mary's grace except that which she received from the Lord. She was the recipient, never the dispenser, of grace. The literal translation of "favored one" (Luke 1:28) is "one endued with grace." Just as all the rest of fallen mankind, Mary needed God's grace and salvation. That is why she "rejoiced in God [her] Savior" (Luke 1:47). She received a special measure of the Lord's grace by being chosen to be the mother of Jesus; but she was never a source of grace. God's grace chose a sinful woman to have the unequaled privilege of giving birth to the Messiah.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE DESCENDANTS OF TWO MEN

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (1:1)

Both **David** and **Abraham** were sinners, yet by God's grace they were ancestors of the Messiah, the **Christ**.

David sinned terribly in committing adultery with Bathsheba and then compounded the sin by having her husband, Uriah, killed so that he could marry her. As a warrior he had slaughtered countless men, and for that reason was not allowed to build the Temple (1 Chron. 22:8). David was a classic example of a poor father, who failed to discipline his children, one of whom (Absalom) even tried to usurp the throne from his own father by armed rebellion.

Abraham, though a man of great faith, twice lied about his wife, Sarah. Out of fear for his life and lack of trust in God, he told two different pagan kings that she was his sister (Gen. 12:11-19; 20:1-18). In so doing he brought shame on Sarah, on himself, and on the God in whom he believed and whom he claimed to serve.

Yet God made Abraham the father of His chosen people, Israel, from whom the Messiah would arise; and He made David father of the royal line from whom the Messiah would descend. Jesus was the Son of David by royal descent and Son of Abraham by racial descent.

God's grace also extended to the intervening descendants of those two men. Isaac was the son of promise, and a type of the sacrificial Savior, being himself willingly offered to God (Gen. 22:1-13). God gave the name of Isaac's son, Jacob, (later renamed Israel) to His chosen people. Jacob's sons (Judah and his brothers) became heads of the tribes of Israel. All of those men were sinful and at times were weak and unfaithful. But God was continually faithful to them, and His grace was always with them, even in times of rebuke and discipline.

Solomon, David's son and successor to the throne, was peaceful and wise, but also in many ways foolish. He sowed seeds of both domestic and spiritual corruption by marrying hundreds of wives—most of them from pagan countries throughout the world of that time. They turned Solomon's heart, and the hearts of many other Israelites, away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1-8). The unity of Israel was broken, and the kingdom soon became divided. But the royal line remained unbroken, and God's promise to David eventually was fulfilled. God's grace prevailed.

A careful look at the descendants both of Abraham and of David (vv. 2-16) reveals people who were often characterized by unfaithfulness, immorality, idolatry, and apostasy. But God's dealing with them was always characterized by grace. **Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham**, was sent to overcome the failures of both those men and of all their descendants, and to accomplish what they could never have accomplished. The King of grace came through the line of two sinful men.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE HISTORY OF THREE ERAS

Therefore all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ fourteen generations. (1:17)

From Matthew's summary of the genealogy we see God's grace at work in three periods, or eras, of Israel's history.

The first period, **from Abraham to David**, was that of the patriarchs, and of Moses, Joshua, and the judges. It was a period of wandering, of enslavement in a foreign land, of deliverance, of covenant-making and law-giving, and of conquest and victory.

The second period, **from David to the deportation to Babylon**, was that of the monarchy, when Israel, having insisted on having human kings like all the nations around them, discovered that those kings more often led them away from God and into trouble than to God and into peace and prosperity. That was a period of almost uninterrupted decline, degeneracy, apostasy, and tragedy. There was defeat, conquest, exile, and the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. Only in David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah do we see much evidence of godliness.

The third period, **from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ**, was that of captivity, exile, frustration, and of marking time. Most of the men Matthew mentions in this period—from Shealtiel to Jacob the father of Joseph—are unknown to us apart from this list. It is a period shrouded largely in darkness and characterized largely by inconsequence. It was Israel's Dark Ages.

Nevertheless, God's grace was at work on behalf of His people through all three periods. The national genealogy of Jesus is one of mingled glory and pathos, heroism and disgrace, renown and obscurity. Israel rises, falls, stagnates, and finally rejects and crucifies the Messiah that God sent *to* them. But God, in His infinite grace, yet sent His Messiah *through* them.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE INCLUSION OF FOUR OUTCASTS

and to Judah were born Perez and Zerah by Tamar; and to Perez was born Hezron; and to Hezron, Ram; and to Ram was born Amminadab; and to Amminadab, Nahshon; and to Nahshon, Salmon; and to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab; and to Boaz was born Obed by Ruth; and to Obed, Jesse; and to Jesse was born David the king. And to David was born Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah. (1:3-6)

Matthew's genealogy also shows us the work of God's grace in His choosing four former outcasts, each of them women (the only women listed until the

mention of Mary), through whom the Messiah and great King would descend. These women are exceptional illustrations of God's grace and are included for that reason in the genealogy that otherwise is all men.

The first outcast was **Tamar**, the Canaanite daughter-in-law of **Judah**. God had taken the lives of her husband, Er, and of his next oldest brother, Onan, because of their wickedness. Judah then promised the young, childless widow that his third son, Shelah, would become her husband and raise up children in his brother's name when he grew up. After Judah failed to keep that promise, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and tricked him into having sexual relations with her. From that illicit union were born twin sons, **Perez and Zerah**. The sordid story is found in Genesis 38. As we learn from the genealogy, **Tamar** and **Perez** joined **Judah** in the messianic line. Despite prostitution and incest, God's grace fell on all three of those undeserving persons, including a desperate and deceptive Gentile harlot.

The second outcast also was a woman and a Gentile. She, too, was guilty of prostitution, but for her, unlike Tamar, it was a profession. **Rahab**, an inhabitant of Jericho, protected the two Israelite men Joshua sent to spy out the city. She lied to the messengers of the king of Jericho in order to save the spies; but because of her fear of Him and her kind act toward His people, God spared her life and the lives of her family when Jericho was besieged and destroyed (Josh. 2:1-21; 6:22-25). God's grace not only spared her life but brought her into the messianic line, as the wife of **Salmon** and the mother of the godly **Boaz**, who was David's great-grandfather.

The third outcast was **Ruth**, the wife of **Boaz**. Like Tamar and Rahab, **Ruth** was a Gentile. After her first husband, an Israelite, had died, she returned to Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth was a godly, loving, and sensitive woman who had accepted the Lord as her own God. Her people, the pagan Moabites, were the product of the incestuous relations of Lot with his two unmarried daughters. In order to preserve the family line, because they had no husbands or brothers, each of the daughters got their father drunk and caused him to unknowingly have sexual relations with them. The son produced by Lot's union with his oldest daughter was Moab, father of a people who became one of Israel's most implacable enemies. Mahlon, the Israelite man who married **Ruth**, did so in violation of the Mosaic law (Deut. 7:3; cf. 23:3; Ezra 9:2; Neh. 13:23) and many Jewish writers say his early death, and that of his brother, were a divine judgment on their disobedience. Though she was a Moabite and former pagan, with no right to marry an Israelite, God's grace not only brought **Ruth** into the family of Israel, but later, through Boaz, into the royal line. She became the grandmother of Israel's great King David.

The fourth outcast was Bathsheba. She is not identified in the genealogy by name, but is mentioned simply as the wife of **David** and the former **wife of Uriah**. As already mentioned, David committed adultery with her, had her husband sent to the battlefield to be killed, and then took her as his own wife. The son produced by the adultery died in infancy, but the next son born to them was **Solomon** (2 Sam. 11:1-27; 12:14, 24), successor to David's throne and continuer of the messianic line.

By God's grace, Bathsheba became the wife of David, the mother of Solomon, and an ancestor of the Messiah.

The genealogy of Jesus Christ is immeasurably more than a list of ancient names; it is even more than a list of Jesus' human forebears. It is a beautiful testimony to God's grace and to the ministry of His Son, Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners, who "did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:13). If He has called sinners by grace to be His forefathers, should we be surprised when He calls them by grace to be His descendants? The King presented here is truly the King of grace!

The MacArthur
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY
MATTHEW 8-15

John MacArthur Jr.

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Jesus' Power over Disease (8:1-15)

And when He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came to Him, and bowed down to Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them."

And when He had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, entreating Him, and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain." And He said to him, "I will come and heal him." But the centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And

Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that very hour.

And when Jesus had come to Peter's home, He saw his mother-in-law lying sick in bed with a fever. And He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him. (8:1-15)

Matthew 8 begins where chapter 4 leaves off, with the Sermon on the Mount as a sort of parenthesis in between. At the end of chapter 4, Jesus was “going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. And the news about Him went out into all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. And great multitudes followed Him from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan” (vv. 23-25). Jesus then “went up on the mountain” (5:1), where He preached His great sermon, and then came down from the mountain, still followed by “great multitudes” (8:1).

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus turned the religious beliefs and practices of popular Judaism, especially those of the scribes and Pharisees, topsy-turvy. He had told them, in effect, that their teaching was wrong, their living was wrong, and their attitude was wrong. Virtually everything they believed in, stood for, and hoped in was unbiblical and ungodly. The Lord overturned their entire religious system and exposed them as religious hypocrites and spiritual phonies.

Unlike other Jewish teachers of that day, Jesus did not quote the Talmud, the Midrash, the Mishnah, or other rabbis. He recognized no written authority but the Old Testament Scripture and even put His own words on a par with Scripture. “The result was,” Matthew explains, “that when Jesus had finished these words [the Sermon on the Mount], the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one with authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:28-29).

In establishing Jesus' messiahship Matthew demonstrated His legal qualification through His genealogy, His prophetic qualification through the fulfillment of prophecy by His birth and infancy, His divine qualification by the Father's own attestation at His baptism, His spiritual qualification by His perfect resistance to Satan's temptations, and His theological qualification through the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

In chapters 8 and 9 Matthew dramatically sets forth still another qualification: Jesus' divine power. Through the miracles of these two chapters, Matthew shows beyond doubt that Jesus is, in fact, the very Son of God, because only God could perform such supernatural feats. In an astounding display of power, Jesus cleansed a leper, healed two paralytics, cooled a fever, calmed a storm at sea, cast out demons, raised a girl from the dead, gave sight to two blind men, restored speech to a man made dumb by demons, and healed every other kind of disease and sickness.

These two chapters are particularly critical to understanding the life and ministry of Christ. In this section Matthew records a series of nine miracles performed

by the Lord, each one selected out of the thousands He performed during His three-year ministry. The nine miracles of Matthew 8-9 are presented in three groups of three miracles each. In each group Matthew recounts the miracles and then reports the Jews' response.

Jesus' miracles were the supreme proof of His divinity and the irrefutable credentials of His messiahship. Matthew's purpose in recording the miracles, like Jesus' purpose in performing them, was to confirm His deity and His claim to be the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world. In many ways this section is the heart of Matthew's message.

When Jesus first called His twelve disciples, He charged them not to go to Gentiles or Samaritans but "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 'And as you go, preach, saying "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give'" (10:5-8).

Tragically, however—and inexplicably from a human point of view—many of the Jews who saw Jesus' miracles concluded that He performed them by demonic rather than by divine power (Matt. 12:24). As more and more Jews rejected Him, Jesus turned His attention to the establishment of the Gentile church. He also began to speak more in parables, which the unbelieving Jews could not understand because of their spiritually hardened hearts (13:11-13).

It should be noted that the apostle John also recorded the miracles in his gospel as proof signs of Jesus' divinity and messiahship. When the Jewish leaders criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, accused Him of blasphemy, and then sought to kill Him for claiming to be equal to God, "Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, that you may marvel. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes'" (John 5:16-21). A short while later He further explained, "The works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me" (v. 36).

Still later Jesus said to His Jewish listeners, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these bear witness of Me. . . . I and the Father are one" (John 10:25, 30). When "the Jews took up stones again to stone Him," Jesus said, "I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me? . . . If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father" (vv. 31-32, 37-38).

To His troubled disciples, who even late in His ministry could not comprehend His relationship to the Father, Jesus had to explain again, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves" (John 14:10-11; 15:24).

In his stated purpose for writing this gospel, John says, “Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (20:30-31).

The first three miracles reported in detail by Matthew (cf. 4:23-24) all involve the healing of physical affliction. In New Testament times disease was rampant and medical science as we know it did not exist. If a person survived a serious disease it was usually because the malady had run its course. Whether or not it was fatal, most disease caused great pain and suffering, for which there was little remedy. Sufferers were often left scarred, deformed, crippled, or otherwise debilitated for the rest of their lives. Plagues would sometimes wipe out entire villages, cities, or even regions. The list of diseases was long, and life expectancy was short.

Many diseases are mentioned in Scripture. We read of various forms of paralysis and atrophy, which would encompass such things as muscular dystrophy and poliomyelitis. The Bible frequently speaks of blindness, which was rampant because it could be caused by countless forms of disease, infection, and injury. Deafness was almost as common and had almost as many causes. We are told of boils, infected glands, various forms of edema, dysentery, mutism and other speech disorders, epilepsy, intestinal disorders, and many unidentified diseases.

When Jesus healed, He did so with a word or a touch, without gimmicks, formulas, or fanfare. He healed instantaneously, with no drawn out period of waiting or of gradual restoration. He healed totally, not partially, no matter how serious the disease or deformity. He healed everyone who came to Him and even some who never saw Him. He healed organic as well as functional afflictions. Most dramatically and powerfully of all, He even raised the dead.

It is small wonder, therefore, that Jesus' healing miracles brought such immediate and widespread attention. For people who seldom had means to alleviate even the symptoms of disease, the prospect of complete cure was almost too astounding to be believed. Even the rumor of such a thing would bring a multitude of the curious and hopeful. For those of us who live in a society where basic good health is accepted largely as a matter of course, it is difficult to appreciate the impact Jesus' healing ministry had in Palestine. Jesus instructed the disciples not to take any money, because people would have paid them all they had for health, and that could easily have corrupted the disciples' motives and objectives (see 10:8-9). For a brief period of time disease and other physical afflictions were virtually eliminated as Jesus went through the land healing thousands upon thousands (see Matt. 4:23-24; 8:16-17; 9:35; 14:14; 15:30; 19:2; 21:14; etc.). As Jesus Himself said on several occasions, His miraculous works alone should have been more than enough reason to believe in Him (John 10:38; 14:11). Such things had never happened before in the history of the world and could only have a divine cause. That is what made the rejection of the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and others so self-condemnatory. No one could deny that Jesus performed the miracles, and only the most hard-hearted resistance to the truth could make a person reject His divinity in the face of such overpowering evidence. Those who would not believe in Jesus were indicted by every miracle He performed.

In the first three miracles of Matthew 8 the Lord healed a leper, a paralytic, and a woman with a fever. Beside the fact that each of them involved healing, these three miracles have four other common characteristics. First of all, in each of them Jesus dealt with the lowest level of human need, the physical. Although even earthly life involves much more than the physical, the physical part has its importance, and Jesus was lovingly sympathetic to those with physical needs. He thereby revealed the compassion of God toward those who suffer in this life.

Second, in each of the first three miracles Jesus responded to direct appeals, either by the afflicted person himself or by a friend or relative. In the first case the leper himself asked Jesus to make him clean (8:2); in the second the centurion asked in behalf of his servant (v.6); and in the third (v.14), several unnamed friends or relatives asked on behalf of Peter's mother-in-law, as we learn from the parallel account in Luke 4:38.

Third, in each of the first three miracles Jesus acted by His own will. Though He was sympathetic to the needs of those who were afflicted and was moved by the appeals for help, He nevertheless acted sovereignly by His own volition (vv. 3, 13, 15).

Fourth, in all three miracles Jesus ministered to the needs of someone who, especially in the eyes of the proud Jewish leaders, was on the lowest plane of human existence. The first person He helped was a leper, the second was a Gentile soldier and his slave, and the third was a woman. We learn from John that Jesus first revealed His messiahship to a despised Samaritan adulteress in Sychar (John 4:25-26), and we learn from Matthew that these three miracles of His early ministry served the humblest members of society. Our Lord showed special compassion toward those for whom society had special disdain.

THE WRETCHED MAN: A LEPER

And when He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came to Him, and bowed down to Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them." (8:1-4)

The **great multitudes** that **followed Jesus when He had come down from the mountain** did not do so because they adored Him as their Messiah. Most of the crowd, no doubt, was simply curious, never before having seen anyone perform miracles or heard anyone speak with such authority (4:23-25; 7:28-29). They were uncommitted observers, amazed by what Jesus said and did but not convicted of their need of Him as Lord and Savior.

The root word behind *lepros* (**leper**) means "scaly," which describes one of the earliest and most obvious characteristics of leprosy. There continues to be much

debate among scholars as to whether or not the disease commonly called Hansen's disease today is the same as biblical leprosy. Many biblical terms for diseases simply describe observable symptoms that could apply to several different physical afflictions. In addition to that, some diseases change over the course of years, as immunities develop and new strains of infectious microorganisms are formed.

Most medical historians believe that leprosy originated in Egypt, and the leprosy bacillus called myobacterium leprae has been found in at least one mummy that also showed the typical scaly evidence of the disease on its skin. The Old Testament scholar R. K. Harrison maintains that the symptoms described in Leviticus 13 "could presage clinical leprosy" (Colin Brown, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975], 2:465). It seems safe to assume, therefore, that ancient leprosy was virtually the same as contemporary Hansen's disease.

This severe form of leprosy was the most feared disease of the ancient world, and even today it cannot be totally cured, though it can be kept in check by proper medication. Although some 90 percent of people in modern times are immune to such contagion of leprosy, it was much more communicable in ancient times. Spongy, tumorlike swellings would eventually grow on the face and body, and the bacillus would become systemic and affect internal organs, while the bones would begin to deteriorate. Untreated in ancient times, it produced a weakness which made the victim vulnerable to tuberculosis or other diseases.

In order to protect His chosen people, God gave strict and specific regulations to Moses regarding leprosy, the details of which are found in Leviticus 13. A person suspected of having the disease was taken to a priest for examination. If he showed signs of having more than a superficial skin problem, he was isolated for seven days. If the symptoms became worse, the person was isolated for seven more days. If, at that time, the rash had not spread further, the person was pronounced clean. If, however, the rash had become worse, he was pronounced unclean. When leprosy was immediately evident from a person's hair turning white and his having raw, swollen flesh, he was pronounced unclean on the spot and no isolation period was involved. A less serious type of disease caused the entire skin to turn white, in which case the affected person could be considered clean. That disease was probably a form of psoriasis, eczema, vitiligo, tuberculoid leprosy, or perhaps a condition which Herodotus and the great Greek physician Hippocrates called leukoderma. When a person was found to have the serious form of leprosy, his clothes were to be torn, his head uncovered, his mouth covered (to prevent spread of the disease), and he was to cry, "Unclean! Unclean!" wherever he went to warn others to stay clear of him. Lepers were legally ostracized and forbidden to live in any community with their fellow Israelites (Num. 5:2). Among the sixty-one defilements of ancient Judaism, leprosy was second only to a dead body in seriousness. The Talmud forbade a Jew from coming closer than six feet to a leper, and if the wind was blowing, the limit was one hundred fifty feet.

Recent medical studies confirm that Hansen's disease can be passed on to others when it is inhaled through the air—a good reason for a leper to cover his mouth, as the Leviticus regulations required. People have also contacted the disease

from touching an object handled by a leper—again showing the value of the Leviticus standard, which required the burning of contaminated clothes.

In his book *Unclean! Unclean!* L. S. Huizenga describes some of the horrors of leprosy.

The disease which we today call leprosy generally begins with pain in certain areas of the body. Numbness follows. Soon the skin in such spots loses its original color. It gets to be thick, glossy, and scaly. . . . As the sickness progresses, the thickened spots become dirty sores and ulcers due to poor blood supply. The skin, especially around the eyes and ears, begins to bunch, with deep furrows between the swellings, so that the face of the afflicted individual begins to resemble that of a lion. Fingers drop off or are absorbed; toes are affected similarly. Eyebrows and eyelashes drop out. By this time one can see the person in this pitiable condition is a leper. By a touch of the finger one can also feel it. One can even smell it, for the leper emits a very unpleasant odor. Moreover, in view of the fact that the disease-producing agent frequently also attacks the larynx, the leper's voice acquires a grating quality. His throat becomes hoarse, and you can now not only see, feel, and smell the leper, but you can hear his rasping voice. And if you stay with him for some time, you can even imagine a peculiar taste in your mouth, probably due to the odor. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1927, p. 149; cited in William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], p. 388)

Although advanced leprosy is generally not painful, because of the nerve damage it is disfiguring, debilitating, and can be repulsive in the extreme, and has therefore for millennia been one of the most dreaded of diseases. One ancient rabbi said, "When I see lepers I throw stones at them lest they come near me." Another said, "I would not so much as eat an egg that was purchased on a street where a leper had walked."

An up-to-date look at modern leprosy reveals more of its character. Dr. Paul Brand, world-renowned expert on the treatment of Hansen's disease has provided much help in understanding the unique nature of this affliction.

Hansen's disease (HD) is cruel, but not at all the way other diseases are. It primarily acts as an anesthetic, numbing the pain cells of hands, feet, nose, ears, and eyes. Not so bad, really, one might think. Most diseases are feared *because* of their pain—what makes a painless disease so horrible?

Hansen's disease's numbing quality is precisely the reason such fabled destruction and decay of tissue occurs. For thousands of years people thought HD caused the ulcers on hands and feet and face which eventually led to rotting flesh and loss of limbs. Mainly through Dr. Brand's research, it has been established that in 99 percent of the cases, HD only numbs the extremities. The destruction follows solely because the warning system of pain is gone.

How does the decay happen? In villages of Africa and Asia, a person

with HD has been known to reach directly into a charcoal fire to retrieve a dropped potato. Nothing in his body told him not to. Patients at Brand's hospital in India would work all day gripping a shovel with a protruding nail, or extinguish a burning wick with their bare hands, or walk on splintered glass. Watching them, Brand began formulating his radical theory that HD was chiefly anesthetic, and only indirectly a destroyer.

On one occasion, he tried to open the door of a little storeroom, but a rusty padlock would not yield. A patient—an undersized, malnourished ten-year-old—approached him smiling.

“Let me try, sahib, doctor,” he offered and reached for the key. With a quick jerk of his hand he turned the key in the lock.

Brand was dumbfounded. How could this weak youngster out-exert him? His eyes caught a telltale clue. Was that a drop of blood on the floor?

Upon examining the boy's fingers, Brand discovered the act of turning the key had gashed a finger open to the bone; skin, fat, and joint were all exposed. Yet the boy was completely unaware of it! To him, the sensation of cutting his finger to the bone was no different from picking up a stone or turning a coin in his pocket.

The daily routines of life ground away at the HD patient's hands and feet, but no warning system alerted him. If an ankle turned, tearing tendon and muscle, he would adjust and walk crooked. If a rat chewed off a finger in the night, he would not discover it missing until the next morning. . . .

. . . Stanley Stein (author of *Alone No Longer*) went blind because of another cruel quirk of HD. Each morning he would wash his face with a hot washcloth. But neither his hand nor his face was sensitive enough to temperature to warn him that he was using scalding water. Gradually he destroyed his eyes with his daily washing. (Philip Yancey, *Where Are You God When It Hurts?* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977, pp. 32-34])

Leprosy is a graphic illustration of sin. Like leprosy, sin infects the whole person, and it is ugly, loathsome, corrupting, contaminating, alienating, and incurable by man. Lepers in ancient Israel were vivid object lessons of sin.

Yet a leper was the first to be healed by Jesus in this series of miracles in Matthew, and the fact that the **leper came to Him** was astounding in itself, because lepers were forbidden to come close to nonlepers.

Four things about this particular leper stand out. First of all he came to Jesus with confidence. He obviously sensed a love and tenderness in Jesus that allowed him to approach **Him** without fear of reprisal (such as being stoned) or even of reprimand. He somehow knew that Jesus was neither afraid of him nor ashamed to associate with him. He did not shout to Jesus from a distance, as he was supposed to do, but approached Him directly and without hesitation. Because he realized Jesus was not ashamed of him, he was less ashamed of himself. He thought of nothing but his great need and of Jesus' ability and willingness to meet that need.

Second, the man came to Jesus with reverence. His boldness did not come from presumption but from humble adoration. When he reached Jesus he **bowed down to Him**. *Proskuneō* (from which comes **bowed down**) literally means to

prostrate oneself and is most often translated “to worship” (see Matt. 2:2; 4:9,10; John 4:20-24; Acts 7:43; Rev 4:10; 19:10). From the reverential nature of his request it seems that the leper addressed Jesus as **Lord** not simply in the sense of “Sir,” but as an acknowledgment of deity. He felt he was in the presence of God and that therefore Jesus could heal him of his terrible disease. It is both interesting and instructive to note that the scribes and Pharisees who were doubtlessly in the multitude that day were beautifully and richly attired, yet were inwardly corrupt, proud, and unbelieving. By contrast, the **leper** appeared loathsome and repulsive on the outside, but inwardly he was reverent and believing.

Third, the leper came to Jesus with humility. He came expectantly but not demandingly saying, **Lord, if you are willing**. He asked to be healed only if it were the Lord's will. He did not claim to be worthy or deserving, but left himself in the Lord's hands to do as He would. The implication seems to be that the leper was quite willing to remain leprous if that were the Lord's will. Obviously he wanted to be healed, but he did not explicitly ask Jesus for healing, almost as if that were too much to presume. He simply acknowledged Jesus' ability to heal him. How far that humble spirit is from the demands of many Christians today who make claims on God's healing, blessing, and favor as if those were their inherent rights. This man claimed no rights, and his first concern was not his own welfare at all, but the Lord's will and glory.

Fourth, the leper came with faith, declaring, **You can make me clean**. He literally said, “You have the power to make me clean.” That is faith at its highest—the absolute conviction that God is able, coupled with humble submission to His Sovereignty in the exercise of His power. The man knew that Jesus was not obligated to heal him, but he also knew that He was perfectly capable of doing it. He had the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, who declared to Nebuchadnezzar, “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Dan. 3:17-18).

The leper came with confidence because he believed Jesus was compassionate, with reverence because he believed Jesus was God, with humility because he believed Jesus was sovereign, and with faith because he believed Jesus had the power to heal him.

In response to that faith, Jesus **stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.”** Jews were forbidden by the Mosaic law to touch a leper, because he was unclean (Lev 5:3). To do so was to expose themselves to both ceremonial and physical contamination. They could not help a leper by touching him, but only harm themselves. Yet it is certain that lepers yearned for the touch of another human being. In their isolation and social stigma they no doubt would have given anything for even brief intimate contact with someone besides other lepers.

Jesus could have healed with only a word, as He did on numerous other occasions. But He made an obvious point of touching this man. That simple act in itself was amazing, not in the sense of being sensational and spectacular—as are the supposed miracles of many modern healers—but simply in the fact that the Son of

God lovingly condescended to touch the outcast of outcasts whom no other man would even come near.

The healing was instantaneous: **immediately his leprosy was cleansed.** Jesus did not need to heal in stages, although at times He chose to do so (Mark 8:22-26; John 9:6-7). When He touched defilement it went away. The scene on this occasion must have been startling—to see a deformed, shriveled, scaly, sore-covered, derelict suddenly stand upright, with perfect arms and legs, with his face smooth and unscarred, his hair restored, his voice normal, and his eyes bright. The marvels of modern medical science pale beside such miraculous restoration.

The first requirement of faith is obedience, and as soon as the leper was cleansed, **Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them.”** Before he celebrated his new lease on life, and even before he testified to others about his miraculous cleansing, the man was to fulfill the requirements of the Mosaic law by having the temple priests attest to his cure.

This process, described in Leviticus 14, involved taking two birds and killing one of them over running water. The live bird, along with cedar wood, a scarlet string, and some hyssop, was then dipped in the blood of the slain bird. The former leper was then sprinkled seven times and pronounced clean by the priest, and the live bird was set free. The cleansed person was then to wash his clothes, shave off all his hair, and bathe himself. He could then rejoin Israelite society, although he had to remain outside his tent for seven days. The final act on the eighth day was to bring the required guilt, sin, and grain offerings—according to what could be afforded—and to be anointed by the priest on various parts of the body.

Jesus may have told the man not to say anything about his healing in order not to increase the crowd's adulation of Him simply as a miracle worker, or perhaps He wanted to discourage their looking to Him as a political deliverer. It may have been that the Lord was still in His period of humiliation and that His exaltation by the crowd at this time would have been premature in the divine plan.

All of those reasons could have been involved, but Jesus' instruction to **go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded,** was specifically given **for a testimony to them,** that is, to the multitude and especially to the Jewish leaders. Although Jesus devastated the hypocritical, superficial, and unbiblical standards and practices of the scribes and Pharisees, He did not want the people to think He was violating the requirements of God's law—which He had just declared He came to fulfill, not destroy (5:17). In addition to that, when the priest declared the man clean—as he would have to do because of the obvious healing—Jesus' miracle would be officially confirmed by the Jewish establishment. It is likely also for this reason that Jesus told the man not to tell anyone else before he presented himself to the priest for examination. If word that his healing was done by Jesus reached Jerusalem ahead of the man, the priests would no doubt have been reluctant to verify the cleansing.

Sadly, the man who had shown such confident and humble faith in his joyous exuberance did not also show immediate obedience. We learn from Mark that he

became so excited that “he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news about, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere” (Mark 1:45).

As Jesus remarked several times in various words, “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’” (Matt. 9:5; cf. Mark 2:9; Luke 5:23). The Lord's greatest purpose was to cleanse sin, not sickness, and even His physical cleansings became illustrations of the spiritual cleansing He offered. The healing of leprosy was especially powerful in that regard, because its great physical destructiveness, pervasiveness, ugliness, and incurableness represent the even greater destructiveness, pervasiveness, ugliness, and incurableness of sin. Just as leprosy destroys physical health and makes a person an outcast with other men, so sin destroys spiritual health and makes a person an outcast with God. But just as Christ can cure leprosy, He can also cure sin; and just as His cleansing from leprosy restored men to human fellowship, His cleansing from sin restores them to God's.

Much modern evangelism and personal witness is weakened by failure to confront men with the terribleness and danger of their sin. Coming to Christ is not getting on a popular bandwagon of religious sentimentality. It is facing and confessing one's sin and bringing it to the Lord for cleansing. True conversion takes place when, like the leper, desperate people come to Christ humbly confessing their need and reverently seeking His restoration. The truly repentant person, like this leper, comes with no pride, no self-will, no rights, and no claim to worthiness. He sees himself as a repulsive sinner who has absolutely no claim to salvation apart from the abundant grace of God. He comes believing that God can and will save him only as he places his trust in Jesus Christ.

After a person is saved from sin, Jesus' first requirement is that he henceforth obey the Word of God. Only a life-style of holy living can give proper testimony to what Jesus Christ has done in saving us. It is best to say nothing of our relationship to Jesus Christ unless our living reflects something of His holiness and will. When a Christian lives obediently, then both his actions and his words testify to Christ's goodness and power.

THE RESPECTED MAN: A GENTILE

And when He had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, entreating Him, and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain.” And He said to him, “I will come and heal him.” But the centurion answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.” Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west,

and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that very hour. (8:5-13)

Many commentators believe that the first three miracles of Matthew 8 occurred on the same day. If so, Jesus entered **Capernaum** only a short while after healing the leper. Because Jesus pronounced a curse on it (Matt. 11:23), the ancient city no longer exists, except in the form of the ruins of a synagogue and of a few houses, including, according to tradition, that of Peter. It was a lovely town in Jesus’ day and He spent considerable time there, much of it perhaps in Peter’s home (see 8:14).

The **centurion** who **came to Him** not only was a Gentile but an officer in the Roman occupation army, a man who ordinarily would have been greatly hated by the Jews. Such soldiers were often hated still more because the Romans usually chose alien residents of a region to make up its occupation force—making those soldiers not only oppressors but traitors in the eyes of the populace.

We learn from Luke that this **centurion** actually **came to** Jesus through some Jewish intermediaries, because he felt spiritually unworthy of approaching Jesus personally and perhaps also because he thought he would be rebuffed because of his military position. He was probably in the troops of the wicked Antipas and was possibly even a Samaritan, a half-breed Jew who was traditionally hated even more than Gentiles by “pure” Jews. Yet this man was held in great esteem by the Jews of Capernaum, because, as they told Jesus, “He is worthy for You to grant this to him; for he loves our nation, and it was he who built us our synagogue” (Luke 7:2-5). Like Cornelius (Acts 10:2), this **centurion** was undoubtedly a God-fearing Gentile. It is noteworthy that each of the Roman centurions mentioned in the New Testament are spoken of favorably. And from the biblical record it seems likely that each of them became a believer in Christ.

Pais, here translated **servant**, literally means a young child. Luke calls him a slave (*doulos*), indicating he was probably born into the slave household of the centurion. In any case, the boy “was highly regarded” by the centurion, who was now afraid that his servant would die (Luke 7:2). **Lord**, he said to Jesus through his emissaries, **my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain**. Whatever the disease was, it was paralyzing, painful, and fatal. Like the leper, it seems the centurion was reluctant to ask Jesus specifically for a healing, since he simply states the young man’s terrible condition—although the request is clearly implied.

The fact that the **centurion** cared so much for his **servant** set him apart from the typical Roman soldier, who could be brutally heartless. The average slave owner of that day, whether military or civilian, had no more regard for his slave than for an animal. The great Greek philosopher Aristotle said there could be no friendship and no justice toward inanimate things, not even toward a horse, an ox, or a slave, because master and slave were considered to have nothing in common. “A slave,” he said, “is a

living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave" (*Ethics*, 1161b). The Roman law expert Gaius wrote that it was universally accepted that the master possessed the power of life and death over his slave (*Institutes*, 1:52). Still another Roman writer, Varro, maintained that the only difference between a slave, a beast, and a cart was that the slave talked (*On Landed Estates*, 1:17.1). Cato the Elder advised those in economic difficulty to look over their livestock and hold a sale. They should sell their worn-out oxen, their blemished cattle, sheep, wool, and hides, their old wagons and tools, their old and sickly slaves, and whatever else was superfluous (*On Agriculture*, 2.7).

But the **centurion** from **Capernaum** had no such inhumane ideas. He was a seasoned and capable fighting man or he would not have been a centurion—who, as the title indicates, was responsible for a hundred men. He was a man's man, and a soldier's soldier. Yet he had deep compassion for his dying slave boy and felt unworthy to approach Jesus personally. Jesus knew the man's heart and did not need to hear a direct request, either from the centurion or from the Jews who came in his behalf. He simply responded in love, saying, **I will come and heal him.**

When Jesus came near to his house, **the centurion** saw Him and sent some friends out to meet Him (Luke 7:3). In his behalf they **answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof."** He felt genuinely unworthy for Jesus to go to that much trouble for him, and no doubt also did not want Him to break the Jewish tradition of not entering the house of a Gentile in order to avoid ceremonial contamination.

The centurion's twice addressing Jesus as **Lord** indicates much more than courtesy. Jesus testified of the man that He had not seen such great faith in all of Israel (v. 10). The man here affirmed the divine lordship of Christ, believing that Jesus was indeed God and consequently had the power to heal his paralyzed servant. Because the servant was too ill to be carried out to Jesus and because he felt unworthy to have Jesus come into his house, the centurion said to Him, **Just say the word, and my servant will be healed.** From the many reports he had doubtlessly heard of Jesus' healing power, and perhaps from having witnessed some of the healings himself, he knew that distance presented no barrier.

The centurion also understood delegation of power. **For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me,** he said. **And I say to this one, "Go!" and he goes, and to another, "Come!" and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this!" and he does it.** He recognized **authority** when he saw it, even in a realm in which he had no experience or understanding. He knew that if he had the power to make his soldiers and slaves do his bidding by simply giving them orders, Jesus' supernatural powers could even more easily allow Him simply to **say the word** and cause the **servant [to] be healed.**

Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel." Although, as God, Jesus knew all men's hearts, in His humanness He was amazed that this Gentile soldier showed more genuine **faith** in Him than He had found **with anyone in Israel.** Many Jews had believed in Jesus, but none had shown the sincerity, sensitivity, humility, love, and depth of faith of this Gentile soldier. Even

to His disciples Jesus would say a short time later, “You men of little faith” (8:26). Still later in His ministry He would say to Philip, “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me?” (John 14:9).

This Gentile would not be alone in his belief. Jesus went on to say, **many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** Those who had less spiritual advantage and less opportunity to know God’s truth—the Gentiles **from east and west**—would show greater response to the gospel than God’s own chosen people, who considered themselves to be **the sons of the kingdom** simply by virtue of racial descent.

The gospel came through Abraham’s seed, as Matthew has already attested through Jesus’ genealogy. But the benefit of the gospel, which is salvation, is appropriated by faith, not by genealogical descent. The Jews played an integral part in God’s bringing the Messiah and His gospel, and they are yet destined to play an important role in the end times. It was integral to God’s plan of salvation that His own Son be born, live, and die as a Jew. But the fact that **Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**—or any other Jew—will be **in the kingdom of heaven** will not be because of their Jewishness but because of their saving faith.

Jesus’ words to those Capernaum Jews was startling in the extreme. What He said utterly contradicted everything taught by their rabbis. The twenty-ninth chapter of the apocryphal book of Second Baruch pictures what Jews believed would be the great heavenly feast at which all Jews were going to sit down and eat behemoth, the elephant, and leviathan, the giant sea monster, or whale—symbolic of an unlimited amount of food. In the eyes of many Jews, one of the most significant and appealing things about the feast was that it would be totally free of Gentiles.

But at that meal, Jesus said, many Gentiles would be present and many Jews absent. The presumed **sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** To the Jews God had given the unique promises and privileges of His kingdom, but because they rejected the King when He came to them, they disqualified themselves from God’s blessing of light and destined themselves for **outer darkness**, where, instead of feasting throughout eternity, they would suffer forever in the horror of **weeping and gnashing of teeth.** Jewish tradition taught that sinners—a term synonymous with Gentiles in their thinking—would spend eternity in the outer darkness of gehenna. Jesus concurred with them about the destiny of condemned sinners (see also Matt. 22:13; 24:51), but He declared them totally wrong about the identity of those condemned sinners.

Hell is a place both of darkness and of fire, a combination not found in our present world. Part of the supernatural quality of hell is that it will be a place of fire, pain, and torment that will continue for all eternity in total darkness.

Being a physical descendant of Abraham was a great privilege and advantage (Rom. 3:1-2), but in spite of what most Jews believed, it did not guarantee salvation. It is the children of Abraham’s spiritual faith, not the children of his physical body,

whom God adopts as His own children (Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 3:7-9, 26-29; cf. Rom. 4:11, 16). Those who reject Christ, even though they are physical descendants of Abraham, will have no place **at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven**. By their rejection of the Son of God—especially in light of the irrefutable evidence of His miracles—they prove they are really sons of Satan (John 8:42-44). Because they are false **sons of the kingdom**, they annul the divine promise, forfeit the divine blessing, and are forever barred from the divine **kingdom**. That was the substance of Jesus' brief but sobering message to the unbelieving Jews just before He pronounced the healing of the centurion's slave.

Jesus again reaffirmed the greatness of the centurion's faith as He said to him, **"Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed."** And the servant was **healed that very hour**. That the **servant was healed** was Jesus' affirmation that **the centurion truly believed**, because otherwise his servant would have remained sick and probably soon died. The servant's healing was *according to* the centurion's faith (**as you have believed**), and because the healing was complete so had to have been the faith. And if the centurion had such great faith before the miracle, how much greater must it have been when he saw his beloved young friend get up from his deathbed and go about his work in perfect health and without pain?

Jesus did not give the principle **as you have believed** as a universal promise to all believers. The principle of healing in proportion to faith was sovereignly applied as the Lord saw fit (see also, e. g., Matt. 9:29). Paul had absolute faith in God's ability to heal him, and he personally experienced, and was often used as the instrument of, God's miraculous healing. But when he prayed three times in great earnestness for his "thorn in the flesh" to be removed, the Lord's answer to him was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

THE RELATIVE: A WOMAN

And when Jesus had come to Peter's home, He saw his mother-in-law lying sick in bed with a fever. And He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him. (8:14-15)

The first thing many male Jews did every morning was to pray, "Lord, I thank Thee that I was not born a slave, a Gentile, or a woman." In the first two miracles of Matthew 8, Jesus showed mercy and compassion not only to an outcast leper but to an outcast Gentile and his slave. Now He shows mercy and compassion to a woman. The proud, self-righteous Jewish men could not have missed Jesus' point: physical health, race, social status, or gender made no difference to Him. None of those things in itself was an advantage or disadvantage as far as His ministry and message were concerned. That the disadvantaged more often received His blessing was due to their more often being humble and aware of their need. Likewise, that the advantaged more often failed to receive His blessing was due to their more often being proud and self-satisfied.

Mark tells us that when Jesus, Peter, Andrew, James, and John arrived at

Peter's home, some of the group discovered that Peter's **mother-in-law** was ill, "and immediately they spoke to Him about her" (Mark 1:30). Luke adds the information that her fever was high and that the unidentified friends or relatives "made request of Him on her behalf" (Luke 4:38). In response to their request, Jesus then went to her room and **saw her lying sick in bed with a fever**.

We do not know the cause of the fever, but the facts that it was high and that the woman was too sick to get up suggest an extremely serious and probably life-threatening illness. The demands of everyday living did not allow most people in that day the luxury of going to bed whenever they felt bad. Physical pain and discomfort were a regular part of life, and, unless they were severe, did not normally interfere with a person's responsibilities.

Again Jesus' response and healing were immediate. **And He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him**. We know from both Mark and Luke that she also served the other people there (Mark 1:31; Luke 4:39), but Matthew emphasizes her special ministry to Jesus: **she waited on Him**. His healing touch had instantly removed her fever and pain, and most likely saved her life. We can be sure she served her gracious Lord with special attention and care.

Although Peter's mother-in-law obviously was a woman, she was also a Jew. It may therefore be that, after His strong words of verses 11-12, Jesus did not want to leave the impression that God had forsaken His chosen people, even though most of them had forsaken Him. That the kingdom was open to faithful Gentiles certainly did not mean it was closed to faithful Jews. As Paul makes clear in his letter to the Romans, "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew ... There has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. . . . For if you [Gentiles] were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?" (Rom. 11:2, 5, 24).

THE MACARTHUR
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 16-23

John MacArthur

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The Blind Who Will Never See

(16:1-4)



And the Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Him asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. But He answered and said to them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.” And He left them, and went away. (16:1-4)

Good eyesight is a marvelous blessing, and in order to see better, Americans spend some five billion dollars a year on eye care. About seven percent of the population is considered legally blind. In many parts of the world, of course, the percentage of blind people is much higher.

It is even more significant that, since the fall of Adam, every person on earth has been born spiritually blind. They fall into two categories: those who will never see and know God and those who, by the grace of God and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, are enabled to see and to have intimate fellowship with Him. The deciding factor is how a person is related to Jesus Christ. The person who rejects the Savior remains forever blind; the person who confesses Him as Lord is given spiritual

sight as well as spiritual life. Unfortunately, men do not universally have the desire for spiritual sight that they do for physical. The vast majority do not know they are spiritually blind and do not care. Even when offered sight, many refuse it.

Jesus “was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:9-11). Paul declares that, although “since the creation of the world [God’s] invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made,” rebellious mankind “did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (Rom. 1:20-21). Even with evidence of God plainly before them, unregenerate men refuse to see Him. Their eyes reject the evidence because their hearts reject the One who gives it.

“A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God,” Paul explains; “for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14). Unredeemed men are “darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart” (Eph. 4:18).

The Old Testament writers also testified to men’s natural spiritual blindness. The wicked “do not know nor do they understand,” wrote the psalmist; “they walk about in darkness” (Ps. 82:5). The same writer confessed that before he came to know God he “was senseless and ignorant, . . . like a beast before Thee” (Ps. 73:22). We learn from Proverbs that “the way of the wicked is like darkness; they do not know over what they stumble” (Prov. 4:19). Because of their sin and rebelliousness, Jeremiah described God’s chosen nation of Israel as “foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not; who have ears, but hear not” (Jer. 5:21). Micah described Israel’s pagan enemies as those who “do not know the thoughts of the Lord, and they do not understand His purpose” (Mic. 4:12).

Three things contribute to man’s spiritual blindness. The first is sin. When God’s own Son came to earth as the light of the world, “men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). The second contributor to spiritual blindness is Satan. As “the god of this world [he] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). The third contributor is God’s sovereign judgment. When, because of their sin and their allegiance to Satan, men persistently reject God’s light, He judicially confirms them in their self-chosen darkness. Of those in Jerusalem who rejected Him, Jesus declared, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:42).

Through the seven parables of Matthew 13 Jesus describes the characteristics of the age between His rejection and His coming again to establish His millennial kingdom. Those parables present “the mysteries of the kingdom,” truths not revealed in the Old Testament but given only to those who during this age trust in Jesus Christ for salvation (13:11). The singular purpose of those particular parables was

to teach that the mystery time, which has now lasted some 2,000 years, is a time of both belief and of unbelief, of receiving and of rejecting.

Following the seven parables, Jesus presented eight illustrations (Matt. 13:53—16:12), six of which focus on His rejection and two on His acceptance. History verifies that rejection of Jesus has been vastly greater than reception of Him, just as those parables and illustrations indicate.

The gospel accounts make clear that, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist, the most vocal and determined rejection of Christ and His gospel was by the Jewish religious leaders, especially the influential and powerful **Pharisees and Sadducees**.

The events of Matthew 16 began just after the Lord crossed the Sea of Galilee from the Gentile area of Decapolis, where He had miraculously fed “four thousand men, besides women and children,” and came to the Jewish “region of Magadan,” on the western shore (Matt. 15:32-39). The exact location of Magadan, which Mark refers to as Dalmanutha (8:10), is unknown, but Jesus’ opponents came there as soon as they heard He had arrived.

In 16:1-4, Matthew records Jesus’ final invitation to those religious leaders; and by their persistent rejection of Him they confirmed themselves as among the spiritually blind who steadfastly refuse to see. In this brief passage we see four characteristics of those whose spiritual blindness will never end: they seek darkness, they curse the light, they regress still deeper into darkness, and finally they are abandoned by God.

THEY SEEK DARKNESS

The first characteristic is seen in the fact that **the Pharisees and Sadducees came up** to Jesus together. Although they ordinarily criticized and despised each other, the two religious groups found common cause in their opposition to Jesus. They were bound together by their love of spiritual darkness.

For the most part, the **Sadducees** were aristocratic, and they traditionally boasted the high priests and chief priests among their numbers. Many of them made fortunes operating the lucrative Temple concessions of money changing and selling of sacrificial animals. **The Pharisees**, on the other hand, were generally from the working class, and many of them, like Paul (Acts 18:3), made their living from a trade. Scribes and priests were found in both parties (see Matt. 3:7; 15:12; 21:15; 23:2-36; Mark 2:16; 3:6; Luke 7:30; 16:14; John 7:32; 8:3-6; 9:40-41).

The Pharisees were the more conservative and fundamental, but they held rabbinic tradition to be of equal authority with Scripture (see Matt. 15:2, 6). They were strongly separatistic, continuing the zealous protection of Judaism from Gentile influence that was begun several centuries earlier by the Hasidim in their resistance to the Hellenization campaigns of Antiochus Epiphanes.

The **Sadducees**, on the other hand, cared nothing for rabbinic tradition and had no compunction about making religious, cultural, or political compromises. Their cardinal principle was expediency. Although they claimed to believe Scripture,

their interpretations were so spiritualized that all significant meaning was lost. They were thoroughly liberal and materialistic, not believing in angels, immortality, resurrection of the dead, or anything else supernatural.

Once when Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin he capitalized on the great doctrinal differences between the two groups by identifying himself as a Pharisee and affirming his belief in the resurrection. When he did so, "there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. And there arose a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, 'We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?'" (Acts 23:6-9).

Matthew's use of a single article (**the**) suggests that **the Pharisees** were the main group, with **Sadducees** intermingled among them; and from Mark 8:11 we learn that the Pharisees took the lead in confronting Jesus. Those "blind guides of the blind" (Matt. 15:14) enlisted the support of men who, if anything, were more spiritually blind than themselves. Instead of coming to Jesus for spiritual sight, they confirmed their love of blindness by making league with other ungodly men against Him. The ritualists and the rationalists joined forces on the basis of mutual contempt for Jesus. That is always the way of those who are willfully, sinfully blind. Their common trust is in themselves and in their own good works, and therefore their common enemy is God and His sovereign grace.

THEY CURSE THE LIGHT

A second characteristic of the willfully blind is the other side of the first: they curse the light. The person who is content in his spiritual blindness has no use for spiritual light, because it intrudes into his darkness and exposes his sin. "And this is the judgment," Jesus said, "that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God" (John 3:19-21). The Pharisees and Sadducees did not come to Jesus in hope of finding truth for themselves but in hope of finding falsehood in Him. Therefore, **testing Him**, they **asked Him to show them a sign from heaven**.

They did not expect Jesus to perform such **a sign**, and if He had given them one, their unbelief would have remained just as strong. They had already seen sign after sign, the miraculous nature of which was irrefutable. They did not deny His supernatural power but refused to recognize it as being from God, having even accused Him of working as an agent of Satan (Matt. 12:24).

Popular Jewish superstition held that demons could perform earthly miracles but that only God could perform heavenly ones. **From heaven** indicates the desire

to see a miraculous **sign** in the sky. The Pharisees and Sadducees demanded a miracle they thought was beyond Jesus, hoping to prove that His power, and therefore His message, were not divine. He would be publicly discredited, and they would be vindicated.

In their blindness they could not see that Jesus Himself was **a sign from heaven**. Nor could they see that they themselves were helping to fulfill that sign. As the godly Simeon held the infant Jesus in his arms he prophesied, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed" (Luke 2:34). Because the unbelieving religious leaders refused to recognize God's supreme Sign, His only Son, they could not accept His lesser signs, despite the evidence they saw with their own eyes. Physical sight is of no help to spiritual blindness, and had those leaders seen a hundred more miracles a hundred times more dramatic, they would simply have been driven to deeper darkness—as their rejection of the miracle of Jesus' resurrection proved. As Abraham said of the brothers in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31). Like Pharaoh before Moses, the more they saw God's power demonstrated, the more they hardened their hearts against Him (Ex. 7-11). Heavenly signs would come in the future (Matt. 24:29-30; Luke 21:11, 25; Acts 2:19; Rev. 15:1), but they would signal the very end.

If a person's heart is set on darkness, when the light comes he curses it. Proudly confessing that very disposition, the French atheist Voltaire declared, "Even if a miracle should be wrought in the open marketplace before a thousand sober witnesses, I would rather mistrust my senses than admit a miracle." Unbelief will always find a way to reject the truth, even to the point of denying the undeniable.

The liberal theologian does not prefer the speculations of philosophy or psychology because these are more provable or persuasive than the truths of Scripture but because he prefers man's wisdom to God's. And, contrary to his claim, the agnostic does not refuse to believe because he *cannot* know about God but because he *will not* know about Him. The person who turns to rationalism, evolution, skepticism, or simply to himself for meaning and purpose does not do so because of lack of evidence about God and Christ but in spite of it. The person who turns to man-made religion does not do so because no light about the true God is available but because he despises that light and that God.

Men turn to acts of penance, to self-affliction, to confessionals, and to every other human resource to try to expiate particular sins; but they refuse to deal with the root in their hearts, their basic sinful nature with which they do not want to part.

Knowing that the true intent of the Pharisees' and Sadducees' demand for a heavenly sign was to discredit Him, Jesus **answered and said to them**, "**When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.'**" Those sayings correspond to the age-old mariner's ditty, "Red sky at night, sailor's

delight. Red sky in the morning, sailor's warning." From many years of observation men learned that a red sky in the evening is usually followed by good weather, whereas a red sky in the morning is often followed by a storm. The religious leaders who confronted Jesus accepted the reliability of that folk meteorology without question.

"Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky," Jesus asked them, **"but cannot discern the signs of the times?"** Both the Pharisees and Sadducees were proud of their religious heritage and considered themselves experts on the things of God. But despite their religious training and positions, their primitive and limited knowledge of weather was far superior to their knowledge of God. "Your sensitivity to weather," Jesus said in effect, "makes a mockery of your insensitivity to God's kingdom. You have no idea of what God is doing in the world. You are oblivious to **the times** in which you are privileged to live, the very times of redemption by God's own Son, before whom you now stand." It was the beginning of the messianic age that Jews had long hoped for, but those Jewish leaders did not recognize it. They were better weathermen than biblical scholars (cf. Luke 12:54-56). They were "blind guides of the blind" (Matt. 15:14). In Matthew 23, Jesus labeled them blind guides (vv. 16, 24) and blind fools (v. 17).

Modern society also has many people with great insight and discernment about the things of the world but who have no comprehension of the things of God. Experts are able to predict whether the stock market will go up or down, whether gold and silver will become more or less valuable, and whether the dollar will become stronger or weaker. Others can predict the direction of interest rates, fashions, the real estate market, and of import/export ratios. Others can predict trends in education, sociology, morality, and government. But our society is short of those who know what God's plan for the world is and that it is still the "last time," the time of the Messiah. What it means to be a citizen of His kingdom escapes them.

In answer to the disciples' question about "the sign of [His] coming, and of the end of the age," Jesus said, "You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; . . . nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. . . . And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold" (Matt. 24:3, 6-7, 11-12).

Those signs that Jesus will return abound in our day. No period of history has experienced more wars or been so preoccupied with the prospect of war as our own. With unprecedented surpluses of food in some parts of the world, other parts still experience devastating famines. Cults and false religions of every sort are proliferating even in countries that have been nominally Christian for hundreds of years. The spirit of lawlessness and self-will is rampant.

Paul declared, "The mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming" (2 Thess. 2:7-8). The apostle explained to

Timothy that “the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1). Peter wrote of the great apostasy, false teaching, heresies, mockery, and denial of Christ’s return that would characterize the last days (2 Pet. 2:1-3; 3:3-4).

Ezekiel predicted that in the end times God would restore His chosen people to the land He had promised them (Ezek. 34:11-31); and in our present generation that promise has begun to be fulfilled with the reestablishment of the state of Israel. The same prophet wrote of a hostile power from the north that would attack Israel (Ezek. 38); and Russia’s great military might, geography, atheism, and anti-Semitism make that nation a prime prospect for being that hostile power.

Scripture also declares that the end times will be characterized by great concern for world unity, world government, world economics, and world religion (see Dan. 2; 7; Rev. 13; 17-18). The world is looking for stability and security and is ripe for the unifying role of a world leader who can stop wars and bring an end to political, economic, and social chaos—the role that one day will be filled by the antichrist.

All of those signs that mark the end times are characteristic of our day. There can be no doubt that we live near the end of the age, and the concern of believers should be for what the Bible says rather than for what men say and for what God is doing rather than for what men are doing.

THEY REGRESS DEEPER INTO SIN

A third characteristic of the spiritually blind who will never see is that they continue to regress deeper and deeper into darkness. They become more and more hardened and blinded, and the very things they suppose make them more pleasing to God drive them further from Him.

Jesus knew the true motive of the Pharisees and Sadducees was to entrap Him, not to be convinced of His messiahship. He also knew that another sign, no matter how astonishing, would not convince them about that which they were determined to reject. It was for this reason He spoke to them in parables, as indicated in Matthew 13:13-15. He would not capitulate to their hypocritical and wicked demand. **“An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign,”** He told them; **“and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.”**

The sign of Jonah was the final sign Jesus gave to the world, the sign of His victory over sin, death, and Satan through His resurrection. As He had declared to a group of scribes and Pharisees on an earlier occasion, “Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Matt. 12:39-41; for further explanation, see the author’s commentary volume *Matthew 8-15*).

That **sign**, too, would be rejected by the Jewish religious leaders. When they heard of Jesus' resurrection, they bribed the soldiers who guarded His tomb to say that His body was stolen by His disciples (Matt. 28:11-15).

THEY ARE ABANDONED BY GOD

The fourth characteristic of those who persist in their love of darkness and rejection of the light is that they are finally abandoned by God, given over by Him to their lusts, impurities, degrading passions, and depraved minds (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). That which is willful, sinful, and satanic blindness becomes God's sovereign blindness.

Because the unbelieving Pharisees and Sadducees would not have Him as Lord and Savior, Jesus **left them and went away**. *Kataleipō* (**left**) means to leave behind, and it often carried the idea of forsaking or abandoning (see 2 Pet. 2:15).

That event marked an important transition in Jesus' ministry. Henceforth the Lord spent most of His time with His disciples and little time with the crowds or religious leaders. He turned **away** from those who rejected Him and focused His attention on His own. He gave no more arguments or signs for unbelievers, only additional truth for those who believed.

THE MACARTHUR
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY
MATTHEW 24-28

John MacArthur Jr.

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The Signs of Christ's Coming—part 1

The Background

(24:1-3)



And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He answered and said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.”

And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (24:1-3)

Jesus' message in Matthew 24-25 is commonly known as the Olivet discourse, so named because it was delivered to the disciples on the Mount of Olives. The theme of the discourse is Christ's second coming at the end of the present age to establish His millennial kingdom on earth.

The message was prompted by the disciples' question in 24:3, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” The answer Jesus gave is the longest answer given to any question asked in the New Testament, and its truths are absolutely essential for understanding His return and the amazing

events associated with it. It is the revelation of our Lord, directly from His own lips, about His return to earth in glory and power.

The teaching of the Olivet discourse is much debated and frequently misunderstood, largely because it is viewed through the lens of a particular theological system or interpretive scheme that makes the message appear complex and enigmatic. But the disciples were not learned men, and Jesus' purpose was to give them clarity and encouragement, not complexity and anxiety. The intricate interpretations that are sometimes proposed for this passage would have left the disciples utterly dumbfounded. It is preferable to take Jesus' words as simply and as straightforwardly as possible.

PROPHETIC EXPECTATIONS IN JUDAISM

In order to understand better the disciples' question on this occasion it is necessary to know something of the basic hopes and aspirations of the Judaism of that day. As always, the historical setting is an important key to the context. Throughout history people have had a strong desire to know the future, and few societies have been without their seers, mediums, fortune-tellers, and other prognosticators. By various means, all of them deceitful and many of them demonic, such futurists have offered gullible inquirers purported revelations of what lies ahead. Although the Mosaic law strictly forbade consulting mediums and soothsayers (Deut. 18:9-14), Israelites had frequently fallen prey to them, the most prominent instance being that of King Saul's consulting the medium of Endor (1 Sam. 28:3-25; see also 2 Kings 21:6).

There is no evidence that many Jews of Jesus' day were guilty of Saul's offense, but they did have an intense interest in the future. They were tired of being under the domination of pagan oppressors and were eager for the divinely-promised deliverance of their Messiah. The Jews were a noble, highly intelligent, and highly gifted people who, humanly speaking, were entirely capable of competent self-rule. Yet for many centuries they had been subdued by one foreign tyrant after another. The northern ten tribes had been conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C., and the southern two tribes fell to Babylon in 586 B.C. Following that were conquests by the Medo-Persians, the Greeks, and finally the Romans.

In their own minds, however, the Jews had always been their own people and had never truly been subjugated to any foreign ruler. It was that abiding and sometimes arrogant spirit of independence even in the midst of oppression that induced some of the Jews to declare before Jesus in the Temple, "We are Abraham's offspring, and have never yet been enslaved to anyone" (John 8:33). They knew all too well, of course, that outwardly they were indeed enslaved, and freedom from that enslavement was the overriding passion of most Jews. Although the majority of them

were not associated with the militant Zealots, they all yearned for Rome to be overthrown and for Israel to become a free nation once again.

The Jews knew intimately the many Old Testament promises of future blessing, deliverance, and prosperity. They knew God had promised to vanquish all the enemies of His chosen people and to establish His eternal kingdom of righteousness and justice on earth. They knew that the Lord's Anointed One—His Messiah, or Christ—would come and establish the rule and reign of David again on earth, a reign of peace, prosperity, and safety that would never end. Their great longing was to see that day when God restored the kingdom as He had promised.

The Jews therefore had great hope for the future. They exulted as they read, "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this" (Isa. 9:6-7). They thrilled at the promise that "a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (Isa. 11:1-2).

Israel took immense encouragement from the words of Jeremiah: "'Behold, the days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I shall raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, 'The Lord our righteousness'" (Jer. 23:5-6; cf. 30:9-10). They longed for the day when the spoil taken from them would be divided among them (Zech. 14:1), when "living waters [would] flow out of Jerusalem" (v. 8), and "there [would] be no more curse, for Jerusalem [would] dwell in security" (v. 11). They rejoiced that "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people . . . but it will itself endure forever" (Dan. 2:44).

By the time of Jesus, the Jews had formed in their minds a very clear scenario of how they believed those predicted events would unfold. To understand what the Jewish expectations were, it is helpful to read their literature from that time. In his *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* ([Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1893], pp. 154-87), Emil Schuer gives excerpts from numerous extrabiblical Jewish writings of that era which reveal those expectations.

First, consistent with the teaching of Zechariah 14 and other Old Testament prophecies, they believed that the coming of the Messiah would

be preceded by a time of terrible tribulation. Just as a woman experiences intense pain shortly before the delivery of a child, so Israel would experience great torment shortly before the Messiah arrived.

2 Baruch 27 reported,

And honour shall be turned into shame,
 And strength humiliated into contempt,
 And probity destroyed,
 And beauty shall become ugliness . . .
 And envy shall rise in those who had not thought aught
 of themselves,
 And passion shall seize him that is peaceful,
 And many shall be stirred up in anger to injure many,
 And they shall rouse up armies in order to shed blood,
 And in the end they shall perish together with them.

According to another source, there would be "quakings of places, tumult of peoples, schemings of nations, confusion of leaders, disquietude of princes" (2 Esdras [4 Ezra] 9:3).

The Jewish Sibylline Oracles declared,

From heaven shall fall fiery swords down to the earth. Lights shall come, bright and great, flashing into the midst of men; and earth, the universal mother, shall shake in these days at the hand of the Eternal. And the fishes of the sea and the beasts of the earth and the countless tribes of flying things and all the souls of men and every sea shall shudder at the presence of the Eternal and there shall be panic. And the towering mountain peaks and the hills of the giants he shall rend, and the murky abyss shall be visible to all. And the high ravines in the lofty mountains shall be full of dead bodies and rocks shall flow with blood and each torrent shall flood the plain. . . . And God shall judge all with war and sword, and there shall be brimstone from heaven, yea stones and rain and hail incessant and grievous. And death shall be upon the four-footed beasts. . . . Yea the land itself shall drink of the blood of the perishing and beasts shall eat their fill of flesh. (3:363ff.)

The Mishna anticipated that just before the coming of Messiah,

arrogance increases, ambition shoots up, . . . the vine yields fruit yet wine is dear. The government turns to heresy. There is no instruction. The synagogue is devoted to lewdness. Galilee is destroyed, Gablan laid waste. The inhabitants of a district go from city to city without finding compassion. The wisdom of the learned is hated, the godly despised, truth is absent.

Boys insult old men, old men stand in the presence of children. The son depreciates the father, the daughter rebels against the mother, the daughter-in-law against the mother-in-law. A man's enemies are his house-fellows.

Second, the popular eschatology of Jesus' day held that in the midst of that turmoil would appear an Elijah-like forerunner heralding the Messiah's coming. It was for that reason that so many Jews were drawn to John the Baptist. Jewish oral tradition maintained that the ownership of any disputed money or property would have to wait "till Elijah comes" before being finally settled.

The third event of that eschatology was the Messiah's appearance, at which time He would establish His kingdom age of glory and would vindicate His people.

The fourth event would be the alliance of the nations to fight against the Messiah. The *Sibylline Oracles* declared,

The kings of the nations shall throw themselves against this land bringing retribution on themselves. They shall seek to ravage the shrine of the mighty God and of the noblest men whensoever they come to the land. In a ring round the city the accursed kings shall place each one his throne with the infidel people by him. And then with a mighty voice God shall speak unto all the undisciplined, empty-minded people and judgment shall come upon them from the mighty God, and all shall perish at the hand of the Eternal. (3:363-72)

In 2 Esdras [4 Ezra] is the prediction, "It shall be that when all the nations hear his (the Messiah's) voice, every man shall leave his own land and the warfare they have one against the other, and the innumerable multitude shall be gathered together desiring to fight against him" (13:33-35). In other words, unbelieving mankind will interrupt all its other warfare in order to unite against the Messiah.

The fifth eschatological event would be the destruction of those opposing nations. Philo wrote that the Messiah would "take the field and make war and destroy great and populous nations." The writer of 2 Esdras declared that the Messiah "shall reprove them for their ungodliness, rebuke them for their unrighteousness, reproach them to their faces with their treacheries—and when he has rebuked them he shall destroy them" (12:32-33). The book of Enoch reported that "it shall come to pass in those days that none shall be saved, either by gold or by silver, and none shall be able to escape. And there shall be no iron for war, nor shall one clothe oneself with a breastplate. Bronze shall be of no service, and tin shall not be esteemed, and lead shall not be desired. And all things shall

be destroyed from the surface of the earth" (52:7-9). All the vast armaments and defenses of the nations will be useless against the Messiah.

Sixth would be the restoration of Jerusalem, either by renovation of the existing city or by the coming down of a completely new Jerusalem from heaven. In either case, the city of the great King would henceforth be pure, holy, and incorruptible. In the book of Enoch, Jerusalem was envisioned as having "all the pillars . . . new and the ornaments larger than those of the first" (Enoch 90:28-29).

Seventh, the Jews scattered throughout the world would be gathered back to Israel. Many Jews today still utter the ancient prayer "Lift up a banner to gather our dispersed and assemble us from the four ends of the earth." The eleventh chapter of the Psalms of Solomon gives a graphic picture of that regathering:

Blow ye in Zion on the trumpet to summon the saints,
Cause ye to be heard in Jerusalem the voice of him
that bringeth good tidings;
For God hath had pity on Israel in visiting them.
Stand on the height, O Jerusalem, and behold thy children,
From the East and the West, gathered together by the Lord;
From the North they come in the gladness of their God,
From the isles afar off God hath gathered them.
High mountains hath he abased into a plain for them;
The hills fled at their entrance.
The woods gave them shelter as they passed by;
Every sweet-smelling tree God caused to spring up for them,
That Israel might pass by in the visitation of the glory of
their God.

Put on, O Jerusalem, thy glorious garments;
Make ready thy holy robe;
For God hath spoken good for Israel forever and ever,
Let the Lord do what he hath spoken concerning
Israel and Jerusalem;
Let the Lord raise up Israel by his glorious name.
The mercy of the Lord be upon Israel forever and ever.

In the eighth event of the Messiah's coming Palestine would become the center of the world, and all nations would be subjugated to the Lord. "And all the isles and the cities shall say, How doth the Eternal love those men! For all things work in sympathy with them and help them. . . . Come let us all fall upon the earth and supplicate the eternal King, the mighty, everlasting God. Let us make procession to His Temple,

for He is the sole Potentate" (*Sibylline Oracles* 3:690ff.).

Ninth and finally, the Jews of Jesus' day believed that with the establishment of the Messiah's kingdom would come a new and eternal age of peace, righteousness, and divine glory.

Those ancient views of the coming of Christ were extrapolated largely from Old Testament teachings, and they closely correspond to New Testament premillennial doctrine about His second coming. The major difference is that those Jews had no knowledge of His coming twice, the first time to offer Himself as a sacrifice for the world's sin and the second to establish His millennial kingdom on earth. The Jewish people were not looking for inward deliverance from sin but for outward deliverance from political oppression.

In the minds of the Jews of Jesus' day, the time was ripe for the Messiah's coming. They had suffered persecution and subjugation for many centuries and were at that time under the relentless power of Rome. When John the Baptist appeared on the scene, reminiscent of the preaching and life-style of Elijah, the people's interest was intensely piqued. And when Jesus began His ministry of preaching, with unheard of authority and of healing every sort of disease, many Jews were convinced that He was indeed the Messiah. When He rode into Jerusalem on the colt, the crowds were beside themselves with anticipation, and they openly hailed Him as the Messiah, the long-awaited Son of David (Matt. 21:9).

At that point, however, Jesus' ministry rapidly and radically departed from their expectations. According to their thinking, the next steps would be the gathering of the nations against the Messiah and His dramatic and effortless victory over them.

That idea apparently was also still in the minds of the Twelve. Jesus' many predictions that He must suffer, die, and be resurrected had simply not registered with them. In some way or another they either had discounted those teachings or had rationalized and spiritualized them into being something other than literal, physical, and historical realities.

PROPHETIC DISCUSSIONS WITH JESUS

In fairness to the disciples, the Old Testament prophets also saw the Messiah's coming and establishing His kingdom as a single event. The church age was a mystery to them, a mystery, as Paul explained, "which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested" (Rom. 16:25-26). Because Israel had obviously experienced tremendous tribulation, because Jesus declared Himself to be the Messiah and identified John the Baptist as His forerunner, and because He had accepted the Messianic acclaim of the people a few days earlier, the disciples understandably thought that the sequence of events would continue as

they expected. They were now certain that Jesus' next move would be to demonstrate His inexorable power over the nations that would soon rise up against Him.

It was doubtlessly such thoughts that had kept Judas superficially committed to stay with Jesus. He expected to be in the Messiah's inner circle when the kingdom was inaugurated and to be given power, wealth, and prestige commensurate with that position.

NEAR THE TEMPLE

And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He answered and said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down." (24:1-2)

Jesus had spent all day Wednesday of Passover week in **the temple**, giving His last public teaching and pronouncing His final and most intense judgment on the false religious leaders and on the nation of Israel. Now He **was going away** to the Mount of Olives to be alone with **His disciples**.

As they were leaving Jerusalem, the **disciples came up to point out the temple buildings** to Jesus. The other two synoptic gospels report that they were pointing to **the temple** in admiration, saying, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" (Mark 13:1; cf. Luke 21:5).

The temple and its adjunct **buildings** stood on the top of a mount. A massive retaining wall on the south and west sides helped support the mount itself as well as the Temple. The Temple was awe-inspiring by any standards, but to a group of common men from rural Galilee it must have been a breathtaking marvel. They could not conceive how such an enormous structure could have been built or decorated so magnificently. The Roman historian Tacitus reported that it was a place of immense wealth, and the Babylonian Talmud said, "He that never saw the temple of Herod never saw a fine building." Some of the stones measured 40 feet by 12 by 12 and weighed up to a hundred tons, quarried as a single piece and transported many miles to the building site.

The disciples were perhaps wondering how such an amazing edifice, especially one dedicated to the glory of God, could be left desolate, as Jesus had just predicted. They should have remembered Ezekiel's vision of God's glory departing from the Temple and going "up from the midst of the city" (Ezek. 11:23). The holy sanctuary that had once been God's house was His no longer. It is now "your house" Jesus had said to

the unbelieving Jews before He left **the temple**, and it “is being left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:38), because the glory of the Lord would soon depart from it. The beautiful **buildings** that had been devoted to God’s glory and that should have honored Jesus would henceforth be devoted to desolation and destruction.

Jesus therefore responded to the disciples’ admiring comments by saying, **Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.** The disciples’ jaws must have dropped when they heard those incredible words. They could not imagine how the Temple could be destroyed or why God would allow such a thing to happen.

Yet that is exactly what God allowed less than forty years later. When the Romans sacked Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and massacred most of its citizens, they also set fire to the Temple and razed it, just as Jesus predicted. The only stones left intact were the huge foundation stones, which were not part of the Temple edifice proper. Josephus commented that a person visiting the site after the destruction could not believe that anyone had ever inhabited the place, much less that one of the most magnificent structures of the ancient world had stood there only a short while before.

Shocked as they were to realize that the Temple would be destroyed, the disciples were no doubt heartened as well, thinking that that event would be related to the Messiah’s expected purification of Jerusalem, which would occur immediately after He destroyed the nations.

ON THE MOUNT

And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (24:3)

Upon leaving the Temple, Jesus and the Twelve left Jerusalem through the eastern gate, crossed the Kidron Valley, and ascended the Mount of Olives. As they traveled that short distance, the disciples were probably discussing the question that Peter, James, John, and Andrew would ask Jesus on their behalf (Mark 13:3). As the sun was setting over Jerusalem and the Temple was silhouetted by the last rays of sunlight, they asked the Lord, **“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”**

For some time the disciples had been convinced “that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11). Therefore, in the context of the situation and of the disciples’ probable frame of mind, the word **when** seems to imply immediacy, suggesting the time might be

tomorrow, the day after, or no later than the end of Passover.

These things referred to what Jesus had just been talking about, namely, the former house of God that would soon be left desolate (23:38) and destroyed (24:2). The disciples were expecting the final stages of the Messiah's work to unfold in rather quick succession. The nations surely would rise up against Him, He would defeat them swiftly, purify Jerusalem, regather the Jews from around the world, and establish His glorious kingdom.

"What will be the sign of Your coming?" they now wanted to know. "What would the first indicator be? How will we know when those remaining events will transpire?" They still understood the Messiah's **coming** as a single continuum of events, having no comprehension of the church age that would intervene between His two comings. And they probably thought that **the sign of Christ's coming** would be something appropriately spectacular, such as a great darkness at midday, a brilliant light at night, the appearance of an angelic host, or a great blare of heavenly trumpets.

This was possibly the most exciting part of the disciples' experience with Christ, as they contemplated the imminence of His millennial kingdom. Based on what Jesus had just said, the disciples believed that the next time the unbelieving Jews whom Jesus had just confronted in the Temple would see Him would be when He came in His glory and they would be constrained to declare, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" (23:39). More than ever, they were persuaded that that day could not be far off.

Even after the resurrection, the disciples still held to the same expectation. The last question they asked Jesus before His ascension was, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jesus' death and resurrection had not lessened their anticipation but immensely heightened it. Surely now that He had proved death had no hold over Him it was time to proclaim Himself King, destroy His enemies, and inaugurate His kingdom.

The **coming** that the disciples had in mind was not a second coming. They saw His **coming** just as the Old Testament prophets had seen and predicted it, compressed into an unbroken series of events that would occur over a relatively short period of time.

Coming translates *parousia*, which has the basic meaning of presence and secondarily carries the idea of arrival. The disciples' question might therefore be paraphrased, "What will be the sign of Your manifesting Yourself in Your full, permanent presence as Messiah and King?" They did not use *parousia* in the specific and more technical sense that Jesus used it later in this chapter (vv. 27, 37, 39) and as it is often used elsewhere in the New Testament in referring to His second coming (see, e.g., 1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Thess. 2:8; 1 John 2:28). They were not thinking of Jesus'

returning, because they had no idea of His leaving, but were thinking rather of His perfected Messianic presence, which they expected Him to manifest presently.

End translates *sunteleia*, a compound word that refers to completion, as in the final culmination of a planned series of events. In the disciples' minds **the end of the age** would accompany Jesus' full manifestation of His messianic power and glory, bringing to a close the era of man's sin and rebellion against God and ushering in the divine kingdom of righteousness and justice.

Jesus used the phrase **the end of the age** in the parable of the wheat and tares and the parable of the dragnet, where in both cases it represented the gathering of the wicked by God's angels in preparation for judgment (Matt. 13:39, 49). He also used the phrase at the conclusion of the Great Commission, assuring the disciples, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

The disciples' question was about the ultimate **end of the age**, not simply the end of an era or epoch of history, but the final end to the present world system of darkness and sin—an end they expected soon. It was also, of course, a question about the beginning of a new and eternal age of light, righteousness, truth, and justice. The ungodly would be forever damned, and the godly would be forever blessed. When would that transpire, they wanted to know, and what sign would herald its arrival?