

LOOKING FOR SIGNS OR LOOKING FOR CHRIST?

Scripture Reading: Matthew 24:3

With the increased activity in the Middle East, many “prophesy preachers” are claiming that the signs of the return of Christ are coming to pass. Of course, many of these same preachers and Bible teachers fail to recognize the difference between the *Rapture* and the *revelation* of Jesus Christ.

Before the revelation, or Second Coming of Christ, there will be visible indicators of His soon return. The disciples asked our Lord, “Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the world?” (Matthew 24:3) Notice that they asked what the *sign* would be not *signs*. In the Lord’s answer, He pointed out that there would be wars, famines, pestilences and earthquakes (verses 6 & 7), but that the end was not yet. Even during the tribulation, these things are not “signs of His coming” rather only the “beginning of sorrows” (verse 8).

The true “sign” of His coming is found in verse twenty-seven, “For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.” This takes place after the heavenly bodies are darkened (verse 29). “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven” (Matthew 24:30).

There will be no mistaking the sign of Christ’s Second Coming, for God will “turn out the lights” in the universe right before Christ circles the globe like a flash of lightning. Later in the text, the Lord goes on to say, “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (Matthew 24:36). How futile it is to *set dates* for the return of Christ, especially when based on supposed “signs” of His return!

JF

Notes:

LOOKING FOR SIGNS OR LOOKING FOR CHRIST? (Part two)

Scripture Reading: Titus 2:13

As many Christians look for signs of the Second Coming of Christ, (See last lesson.) the apostle Paul urges us to look for Christ. “Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). It is important to recognize that the Rapture is the subject of the “mystery” (I Corinthians 15:51) and, as such, is not preceded by signs. The nature of this age is that “we walk by faith, not by sight” (II Corinthians 5:7). This is true during the course of this age and concerning the end of this age.

While the Second Coming of Christ will be preceded by many prophesied events of the tribulation, the “secret” coming of Christ in the Rapture is imminent, and therefore has nothing which must precede it. Paul teaches the imminence (or “any moment coming”) of the Rapture in I Thessalonians 4:17: “Then *we* which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds....” Paul clearly believed that he could be alive when the Rapture took place. If this is the case, how much more could the Rapture come at any moment in our generation!

The Lord wants us to be ready for Christ to return and catch us away at any moment, rather than looking for signs. This way we will be motivated to ever be diligent in our own Christian life, knowing that there will be no warning before His return for us. Furthermore, if we knew even an approximate time of the Rapture, some might become lazy like the Thessalonians and refuse to work while waiting for Christ’s return. God truly displayed His infinite wisdom when He told us to look for Christ, not for signs.

JF

Notes:

IS NOT ONE ENOUGH?

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:20

Growing up in a small church, it was common to hear Matthew 18:20 quoted as a sort of consolation for poor attendance at Wednesday prayer meeting. "We might be small in number," the Pastor would lament, "but remember that 'where two or three are gathered together' the Lord is there."

Though no one ever questioned this interpretation, the thought must have crossed someone's mind, "Is not one enough for the Lord to be there?" Of course, it is! Paul reminds us in Ephesians 3:17 that Christ dwells in our very hearts by faith. Why, then, does the Lord tell His disciples when "two or three are gathered" in His name, then He will be in the midst of them?

The answer to this question is the context in which it was spoken. In Matthew eighteen, the twelve apostles are instructed concerning church discipline in the kingdom. (Confer with Matthew 16:19 & 18:15-18.) In matters of judgment, the law required at least two or three witnesses for a matter to be established (Deuteronomy 19:15). Therefore, as the twelve apostles exercise judgment in the kingdom, they will have to abide by the legal requirement of two or three witnesses. When two or three agree together on any matter of judgment, the Lord will execute it according to their request (Matthew 18:19). Then, to officially seal the matter, Christ the King will personally attend the trial and sentencing (verse 20).

We can thank the Lord that even if we must stand alone, the Lord is with us, as He was with Paul: "At my first answer no man stood with me....Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me" (II Timothy 4:16, 17).

JF

Notes:

THROW OUT, TWIST, OR RIGHTLY DIVIDE?

Scripture Reading: Mark 16:16

Today's text has been a problem to many Bible expositors. It seems to be saying that baptism is required for salvation: "He that believeth *and is baptized* shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16). Some churches simply take it for what it says and require baptism for salvation. Those who understand Paul's epistles reject such a view, for Paul clearly teaches salvation by grace through faith *without works*. (Romans 4:5, Ephesians 2:8,9, etc.)

This leaves only three approaches to Mark 16:16-- throw out, twist, or rightly divide. Some choose to throw it out, claiming that Mark 16:9-20 is not found in the "oldest and best manuscripts." What they do not tell you is that this passage is found in the majority of manuscripts. The oldest and best (Sinaiticus and Vaticanus manuscripts) have thousands of discrepancies *between themselves*. No, let us not throw it out!

The second approach is to twist the text, so it does not really mean what it says. Some suggest that because the last half of the verse does not include "and is not baptized" that this somehow changes the plain meaning of the first half of the verse. The Lord did not have to add "and is not baptized" because if a person did not believe, it would not make any difference if he was baptized or not. He would still be damned.

This does not change the fact that the Lord still said, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Let us not twist what it says.

The solution is, of course, to "rightly divide the Word of truth." Baptism was *once* required as a demonstration of faith, but it is no longer.

JF

Notes:

BE A BEREAN!

Scripture Reading: Acts 17:11

“If this is true, then why are there so many churches that do not believe this way?”

This is the reaction we have heard countless times upon explaining the Grace Message to someone. It is unfortunate, but very typical, for people to initially reject something they have never heard before... especially if it conflicts with their tradition! In Acts 17:11, we find a refreshing contrast to this attitude. In fact in this verse, we find the balanced approach we should all have when we are approached with some “new” teaching.

First, the noble Bereans listened with open minds “in that they received the word with all readiness of mind” (Acts 17:11a). One of the saddest conditions to be in is to reject Bible teaching outright because it sounds “new.” Of course, the old saying is right. “If it is new, it is not true; and if it is true, it is not new.”

Remember that just because a teaching may sound “new” does not necessarily mean it is. The apostle Paul’s teaching concerning the Mystery is as old as the first century when it was revealed to him by the glorified Lord of heaven. Even before that, it was in the very mind of God (Ephesians 3:9).

Secondly, the Bereans balanced their open-mindedness with a holy skepticism. They were “from Missouri” saying, “Show me!” Luke records, “They searched the Scriptures daily whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11b). This is the attitude we too must have, for there are many false doctrines floating around in our world today. We must search the Scriptures, rightly divided (II Timothy 2:15), so we will not be “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine....” (Ephesians 4:14).

JF

Notes:

RED LETTER EDITION

Scripture Reading: I Corinthians 14:37, II Corinthians 13:3

Many Bibles come in a special edition with Christ’s words printed in red. While this may be useful for quickly distinguishing our Lord’s words from the narrative or words of others, it has led to confusion and misunderstanding of Scripture. For one thing, it causes some people to assume that the words of Christ spoken while on the earth were somehow more inspired or more important than the words He revealed to the apostles later. This is especially dangerous when it comes to the writings of Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles.

Paul repeatedly claimed that the words he spoke and wrote as an apostle were not his words at all, but rather the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. He made a special point of this to the carnal-minded Corinthians: “If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the *commandments of the Lord*” (I Corinthians 14:37).

In his second epistle to this church, Paul said that if he came to them again, he would not spare, “Since ye seek a proof of *Christ speaking in me*, which to you-ward is not weak, but is mighty in you” (II Corinthians 13:3).

If “red letter editions” were truly consistent, they would have to print all of Paul’s epistles in red, for Paul’s words are the words of Christ too. “For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:12). Furthermore, they are the words of Christ to us today!

JF

Notes:

PRIESTHOOD OF THE BELIEVER

*Scripture Reading: I Peter 2:9, Exodus 19:6,
I Timothy 2:5*

A popular teaching today is the doctrine of “the priesthood of the believer.” This doctrine says that all believers today are priests before God and mediators between God and man. The basis for this teaching is found in I Peter 2:9, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation....” There is no doubt that this text teaches a priesthood, but to whom was this written? I Peter 1:1 says it was written “to strangers scattered throughout....” Who were these strangers, and why were they scattered? The word “stranger” literally means “sojourners.” That is, they were not Gentile strangers, but Jews and proselytes who believed on Christ but were scattered because of the persecution in Jerusalem. (See Acts 11:19.) These were *kingdom saints* who were the true remnant of Israel. They were not members of the Body of Christ.

As Israelite believers, they were entitled to the promises made to this great nation. In fact, Peter is referring to one of those promises in our text. Exodus 19:6 says, “And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.” (See Isaiah 61:1.)

The Body of Christ is not a priesthood, nor is it a nation. Paul makes it abundantly clear that today “There is one God, and *one mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (I Timothy 2:5). The doctrine of “the priesthood of the believer” is just one more example of trying to apply the promises of Israel to the church which is His Body.

JF

Notes:

CHANGE OF NAME; CHANGE OF PROGRAM

Scripture Reading: Genesis 17:5, Acts 13:9

Several people in Scripture are given name changes by the Lord: Sarai/Sarah, Jacob/Israel, Simon/Peter. Each of these carries some significance, but no name change bears more significance than those of Abraham and Paul.

Abram became Abraham at the time of his circumcision. (See Genesis 17.) This signaled a new chapter in God’s dealings with men. At this time, a ritual was added as a demonstration of faith for those who would join themselves to the covenant of God. From this point on, circumcision (and later, other rituals) distinguished the people of God from other peoples of the earth. This ritual was so much a part of the prophetic program of God that God identifies the kingdom gospel committed to the Apostle Peter as “the gospel of the circumcision” (Galatians 2:7b).

Saul became Paul at the time that God removed circumcision (and all other Jewish rituals) as a required demonstration of faith. (See Acts 13:39; 15:1,2.)

Is it not interesting that the discussion of whether or not circumcision was required for salvation did not come up until after Paul’s first missionary journey? Peter and the rest of the twelve apostles had been preaching for over ten years at this point, yet they said nothing about a removal of circumcision or the law. That is because it was committed to Paul to reveal *after* Israel had been offered (and rejected) the kingdom through the preaching of the twelve.

What great significance we see in the name changes of Abraham and Paul!

JF

Notes: