

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

A SERMON

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“So likewise, you, when you shall see all these things know that it is near, even at the doors.” Matthew 24:33

THIS chapter refers exclusively to the destruction of the Jewish nation; and there is no immediate reference to the end of the world; the signs laid down in this chapter of the end of that dispensation, and the signs given in the word of God of the end of this world are different in character, and feature, and order; and although many have taken the signs laid down in this chapter as signs of the end of the world, yet these signs will not bear it; and they have thought themselves justified especially because the disciples said, “Tell us when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the world?” But then the word translated “world” is not *cosmos*, meaning this material world; but the word translated “world” there is an *aionos*, meaning “age;” and therefore the proper meaning is, “Tell us when these things shall be, and what shall be the sign of your coming, in the end of the age.” Hence when it is said, “Once in the end of the world,” the original word there is not *cosmos*, but *aionos*; therefore, it might have been rendered “Once in the end of that age has he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” And I feel rather desirous to preach a sermon or two on the subject of the signs of the end of the Jewish world; and after I have done that, I should like if my mind should be so led, to preach a sermon or two on the signs of the end of the present world; that is to say, the ultimate end of the world. And I cannot find in existence now any more than one sign of the end of the world. The end of this world evidently lies yet many centuries in the distance; we are not near the end of this world yet; if we were, then we must unaccountably misunderstand the word of the Lord. But while I thus speak, I would just give you to understand that these things which were to the Jews assigned of their destruction, when these signs are applied to us personally; if they do apply to us, these same things which were signs of their destruction will also be signs of our destruction. And this is one end we have in view, to apply the signs to us; for death will be the end of the world with us; and that therefore if we are one with the signs of their destruction; then, as sure as the words came to pass with them, and they were destroyed so shall we be. But then while I thus speak, I must not forget that in the same chapter there is a people spoken of called the elect; and this chapter shows that the Lord takes care of those whom he calls his elect. I shall therefore this morning lay before you not so much the signs of coming judgment as signs of coming mercy; but yet I shall name the signs one by one as I go along, and then notice that in order to escape this destruction, in order to

be safe, we must stand in the position just the reverse of that in which the Jews stood associated thus with signs of their destruction. And I think all the signs given in detail in this chapter may be expressed under four main heads; and then under each head we may bring forward all the details belonging to that department. And the four heads, then, under which we may include all the signs of their destruction were, first, *the perversion of God's truth*; and secondly *the spirit of persecution*; and thirdly, *the obscuration of their government*; "The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon shall not give her light;" and fourthly *the presence and dominance of the Roman power*.

First. First then *the perversion of God's truth*. So that if we belong to them who shall escape the wrath to come; and shall share in his kingdom; then we shall be delivered from error. If we are not square with God's truth, that is a sign that we are still under sin, still under wrath, still under the curse, still under God's law; and the time with us would in that case be very, very short before we should lift up our eyes in hell. "When you see these things, know you that it is near, even at the doors." I will therefore first then notice the perversion of God's truth; or rather, as I have already hinted, take the reverse of that. How did they pervert God's truth in all its departments? First, the Savior said, "Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; for you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; and you neither go in yourselves, neither suffer you them that are entering to go in." Here then, friends, the first thing we have to attend to this morning is the opening of the kingdom of God. Now how is the kingdom of God opened? The kingdom of God means two things, first it means that state of things established by the mediatorial work of Christ; and secondly it means the government or reign of Christ; and that if you ask what kind of government that is, the answer is this, that grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life. The Lord Jesus Christ has gone to the end of the law, and to the end of sin; mercy and truth through him are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other; in a word, he has made peace with God, he has established everlasting peace. Now in order to enter into this peace, and to enter into the government of Christ so as to be governed by his grace, we must be born of God. Hence the Lord said to Nicodemus, after introducing the subject to him. "Are you a master in Israel;" that is, a teacher of Israel; "and know not these things?" Let us then this morning be right in this part of the matter; and see that we pervert not this part of God's truth, that of being born again. Now to be born again is for the soul to be quickened by the spirit of the living God; and I will tell you what it is sure to do, it is sure to enlighten the mind; and you will look about for some way of escape; the eyes of the understanding, the eyes of the mind, will be enlightened that you will in a measure, though not at first altogether; that you will be learning day after day as long as you live; but you will more or less see that you are exposed to wrath, that you are exposed to the just judgment of a holy God, a sin avenging God; you will see that there is a hell, and that some are there; and you will see that the judgments of God are judgments not in mere word, but that they are sure to take effect; and that even now, if you die unborn of God, these charitable judgments with you are near even at the doors; a little more sleep, a little more slumber, a little more folding of the hands to sleep, and your soul is in hell, and in hell forever. This, if you are born of God you will see and feel the force of; and you will begin to look about for a way of escape; and by-and-by in the Lord's own time, you will see that Jesus Christ is the way of escape, that he has suffered for sinners, that he has died for sinners, that God has laid on him the iniquities of us all; and you will look to him, and you will see how suited he is to your condition, that he can pluck you from the lowest hell, that he can fit you for heaven; and thus should begin to see the kingdom of God. Now I will not speak unnecessarily discouragingly; am I speaking, then, to one who is thus awakened; who does thus see his danger; who is thus concerned for the way of escape, and he was made to see that

without Jesus Christ he must perish to eternity; that Jesus Christ is the one thing needful; if you are brought to see that his blood can cleanse from all sin; that his righteous and obedient life was not for himself, but it was for poor sinners; if you are brought thus far, how came you by this feeling? I say to you, my hearer, that this arises from your being born again. You will say, ah, I wish I could be sure of that. Well, I do not wish you to rest upon what I say, any farther than that I want to speak encouragingly to such. You are born of God; for if the Lord meant to destroy you, he never would have thus enlightened your mind; only you must take heed lest the light which is in you become darkness. If the light that you have is merely intellectual; there has been no trembling at your condition, no fearful apprehension of your being lost; no real earnestness in your mind; then you have acquired a little head knowledge, and you are not born of God. But if this light be connected with that downward conviction that has discovered to you your danger; and if the Lord Jesus Christ appears to you above all things the one thing needful; and if you know what it is to go and hear the word of God with a prayerful, solemn, sincere desire that that word may be made life to you, that that word may be made everything to you, which the Lord has promised; then you are born of God; then you do not join with them that shut up the kingdom of God; you are not joining with them that set aside in whole or in part regeneration; you are not joining with them that would bring the creature to help perform this work of regeneration. Thus, then to open the kingdom of God we must open up the sinners need of that state of things which Christ has established. And then we have said the kingdom of God means the government of Christ. I do like that scripture; I have so often repeated it; but there is so much beauty in it that it must be my apology, I was going to say, for repeating it again; where it is said of Abraham "I know Abraham, that he will command his household after him;" that is, his spiritual descendants will be governed by the same truth that he was. Abraham was a believer in God's Christ; he saw the beauty of Christ; Abraham was a believer in God's immutable consuls; the Lord could swear by no greater unto Abraham, he swore by himself, saying, "In blessing I will bless you." Abraham then was a believer in God's Christ, in God's Melchizedek, in the eternal perfection of God's priesthood, and in the immutability of God's counsel, and "he will command his household after him." Let the believer try himself by this rule. Can you kick against the priesthood of Christ? You know, those of you that know him, that his eternal priesthood is dearer to you than mortal existence itself; that that eternal priesthood has carried everything before it; it is carried all your sins away, and carried all wrath away, and will carry all your tribulations away; and will present you at the last great day fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible to your adversaries as an army with banners; and you will stand on Mount Zion, and on the vantage ground of eternal triumph and eternal perfection by the priesthood of Jesus Christ. And if you are rightly taught, you will receive no doctrine that is contrary to it. Now, if this be your state, that is a sign of mercy. Also, Abraham, we observed, was a believer in the immutable counsel of God. Immutability, what should we do without it? How is it that we have come up here this morning in health, and spirits, and hope, and love to the Lord? It is because he changes not. Perhaps since the Lord last manifested himself to you, you have undergone many changes of feeling and many rebellions; and yet he loves you this morning just the same as he did when he favored you last with sweet communion with him; there is no variableness with him, neither shadow of turning. Abraham was a believer in this; and these truths command his spiritual descendants to this day; and they are all of them to a man obedient to these blessed truths; it is the obedience not of the flesh, for the flesh kicks against it; but it is the obedience of faith; Faith believes it, and the believer is united to it. Thus, then, except a man be born of God, he cannot see what Christ has done, nor feel what that Christ is the only thing needful; except a man be thus born again, he cannot thus enter the kingdom of God. The believer, then,

enters into peace, enters into reconciliation. I am fully aware there are several degrees as to the state of reconciliation; you may be reconciled to God's way of saving you, and yet not have enjoyed the pardon that is in reserve for you in that reconciliation; but if you are brought over to know the way in which you must be saved, to know your lost condition, and reconciled to God's way of saving you; then you are not a Pharisee, nor like the Pharisees; you are not among them, that are under the woe. "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees; you shut up the kingdom of God." Not so with us; no we would rather lose our mortal lives than that the kingdom of God should be closed against us; let all the friendship of the world go; yes, let Job's property go, let his family go, that his wife turned his enemy; that his friends form all sorts of conjectures, and try to condemn him; all this Job can bear, if the kingdom of God be not shut up against him. "I know that my Redeemer lives and shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; and when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold." Ah, if we are brought into this kingdom, if we have the living God on our side, we may laugh at our foes, we may defy our sins, for they are all taken away by that eternal ocean of mercy that is by Jesus Christ; we may laugh at the devil; we may laugh at the troubles of life; we may smile at death, for it is but a shadow, grim and gloomy as its appearance may be, that lost its sting and lost its power; and the apostle on this very subject says, "Thanks be to God, that always causes us to triumph in Christ." As soon as faith carries us into what Jesus Christ is, and what his kingdom is, and what the living God is by him, then we can triumph over all. I think myself sometimes 10,000 fools or fearing anything, for being in trouble about anything. I know we must have tribulation in the world; but what are they all? They are all shadows when set by the side of that eternal omnipotence on the side of those that love Jesus Christ. Where are you, my hearer? Can you see the suitability of Jesus Christ, and is see the object of your desire? Can you sometimes say secretly in your soul in the presence of a heart-searching God, and say it sincerely, that he is the chief of 10,000, and altogether lovely? Or have you no such feelings, no such affections, no such attachment? Then, whatever your light may be, if you have no such feelings, you are dead in trespasses and in sins; you are on your way to hell; and the signs you have about you prove that your destruction is near, even at the doors.

Again, if you belong to what is in this chapter called the elect of God, not only will you thus be born of God, but you will be real in prayer. Only think of it, these Pharisees devoured widows' houses, for a pretense make long prayers; they awed the poor creatures down by their apparent sanctity. "Long prayers;" but what sort of prayers? Formal prayers, only formal, no reality. I cannot conceive anything more awful than to mock your maker with a solemn sound upon a deceitful tongue. Do you profess to be a praying man? What kind of praying man are you? That is the question. Can you say that you do hunger after righteousness? Can you say with David "My soul thirsts for God?" Can you say that you sigh and mourn before God; and that so far from worldly aggrandizement being your object, worldly honor, worldly applause, or worldly health, the simple object you have in prayer is to realize that grace by which you may serve God acceptably, with reverence and godly fear; and, also, another object you have in solemn prayer, and that is that the Lord would appear for you in his providence. I think the people of God make much of the Lord in his providence; because they know that providence and grace in this time state stand very much connected; and therefore their language is, Leave me not to poverty, that shall tempt me to steal; and I would not, Lord, be elevated into the position of those riches that would be a snare to me, and make me forget you, and deny you; wax fat, and kick against you; O God, such riches would be accursed to me; and therefore I desire not that; but feed me with that food which is convenient for me; and, Lord, above all things fellowship with yourself; remember me with the favor you bear

to your people, visit me with your salvation, that I may from day to day see the good of your chosen, rejoice in the gladness of your nation, and glory with your inheritance. Now, if you have the second sign, if you have a praying heart, the spirit of grace and of supplication, if you are a real seeker after the Lord, I am sure that you will go to heaven as that you exist; but if you have not the sign, do not think you are a Christian just got home and think it over. Now, I am going to sit down to a dinner from God's table, from the bounties of his providence; but while I am doing this I am under his wrath, under sin, under the curse, and, for ought I know, I may drop dead before night, and, if I do, I shall go to hell. You may go home with that full assurance, if you do not know your need of Christ; if you have not the spirit of prayer, the spirit of longing after the Lord; but if you have these two things, then take courage, and look to the Lord; he will hear you in matters spiritual, he will hear you in matters temporal. If you have enemies, as one of old said, "Lord, we have no power to come before this multitude, neither know we what to do; but our "eyes are up unto you." And where their eyes up in vain? No! the Lord stepped in, and scattered the millions of Ethiopians, and brought off his praying people with that victory that he always did and always will. Here then, my hearer, I can hardly conceive a greater sin than that of prostituting the solemn privilege of prayer, reducing it to a mere formality, and making it a mere cover for worldly ends, carnal purposes, and devilish designs. I know plenty of this cast; we have plenty of it in our land; we have, to the disgrace of Christendom, somewhere about four or five and 20,000, I think it is, guinea¹ prayer books sold for people to pray; only think, selling prayers; pretty Christians, certainly; only think of it, paper prayers, guinea prayers, you viper, you formalist, you hypocrite, you pharisee; woe unto you, Pharisees, that buy long prayers, and say them through with no more feeling than a stock or a stone; and you do it at the same time to maintain your worldly respectability, and make people think well of you, and get more customers to your shop, and get on better; how can you escape the damnation of hell? You may amuse yourself, and deceive yourself, and make light of it, but the great God, the Searcher of all hearts, will not make light of these innovations upon his kingdom; he has promised to every inhabitant of new Jerusalem the spirit of grace and of supplication, but he has never promised a prayer book; you may depend upon it, though the Pharisee might want a prayerbook to make him recollect all his good works, the Publican needed no prayerbook but the feelings of his own heart; he felt that he was a sinner, breathed out the feelings of his heart, "God be merciful to me a sinner." What are you, my hearer? Ah, say you, but I don't say any prayers at all, don't trouble myself about religion. Well then, you are dead, and you will be lost if you die in that state. Not trouble yourself? You have a soul that is not worth your trouble; you are a sinner, and hastening to judgment, but you are not concerned about it; and as to the defense you make it is an insult to the majesty of heaven, that you are not concerned about it; that is a nice defense certainly, a very nice defense; come before God, and the defense you set up in your favor is that you don't trouble yourself; that you have sinned against him, and don't care about it; that you have insulted him, and don't care about it; that you partake of his bounties from day to day, and yet you ridicule him, or at least make light of him; and that is your defense is that? Woe be to you if you die with no better defense than that. On the other hand, those of you that are born of God, your prayers will be the feelings of your heart, the desires of your heart, the searching's of your heart, and they will have a reality. The first sign of mercy is, born of God, second sign is reality of prayer.

Again, the Savior said to the Pharisees, "You compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, you make him a twofold more the child of hell than yourselves;" because the

¹ A guinea at that time was worth just over one pound.

young one is more zealous when first converted. Say some, do you mean this as a rebuke against missionaries them? No! although very few missionaries I think I am one with in sentiment, yet I have a great respect for the missionary societies taken as a body; because the wonders they have done have been very great; I should be sorry, therefore, to make such a remark. There are plenty of quarters to apply it to where we should not make any mistake. Take the Pope, for instance, or Popery; if that convert a man, if he becomes a zealous advocate for Popish infallibility, and the other infernalabilities of that system, if I may coin a word for once; would not that man become twofold more the child of hell now than before he was converted to that system? Certainly, he would. But what will a true proselyte become; a man truly converted? Why something different. If a man be converted by the grace of God, it follows as a matter of course, that he will be converted to the truth of God. For a man to tell me that he is converted by the grace of God, and yet at the same time not converted to the grace of God, these are two propositions I cannot lay together, can't make them lie straight. If a man says to me, I was converted by the grace of God, and yet I still believe in free will, well I must leave you for a time. Say some, will you say that man is not converted? No, I will not say that. What will you do then with him? I know what to do with him. Oh, I thought you didn't; yes, I do. What will you do with him? I will do with him in my judgment as the priest did of old with the leper, when he hardly knew whether it was the leprosy or not, he shut him up for seven days, and then for another seven days, until he saw which way the matter went; so, I must leave the man for a time, and see which way the matter goes. If the little conviction of sin he has be real, it will spread and spread all over him, until he is brought to confess that he has no soundness in him, that he is nothing but a sinner, there is no soundness in his flesh; and then I will pronounce him clean directly. But sometimes this apparent leprosy turned out to be a burning boil, and then the man was clean without being cleansed. And so, perhaps, the man's conscience is a little sore; his conviction of sin may be temporary, it may go off by and bye; it is a mere burning boil; boils are very sore things while they last, but then they go off, and go off by themselves generally. So, the convictions will go off, and then I shall know how to put the matter, but until that I must leave it. So, we must not be rash, we must not say the man is not born of God, because it may turn out that his conviction is real, and he may come forth and be a free grace man; when he is the leper over all, he will be converted to the grace of God; and that will be the standing proof that he is converted by the grace of God. But the man that is converted by the grace of God will ere long be converted to the grace of God. But if the man is converted by Popery, he is converted to Popery; if a man be converted by the natural conscience; if a man be converted to mere natural conscience; if a man be converted by the mere letter of the word, he is converted to a mere letter religion; and thus, there are thousands of conversions in our day that are false in a variety of ways. My hearer here lies the mystery of the true conversion as distinguished from the false, mainly in the character of the conversion; that many are called, yet when it comes to the test at last, few are chosen; because the conversions prove that there are but few that are real conversions. Thus, then the Pharisees set aside regeneration, set aside real prayer, and set aside the true nature of conversion. Now my hearer, if you do not set aside regeneration, if you are a praying man, if you your conversion be to the grace of God; if you are somewhat leaning that way, that is an evidence your conversion is by the grace of God. It would be tedious, perhaps where I to dwell in detail upon all these ways; but they are very expressive; I have noticed only three; nor must I this morning dwell upon what I wish you all to remember, that in the fifth of Matthew there are eight beatitudes; in the 23rd of Matthew there are eight woes; and each beatitude and each woe stand in direct antagonism one to the other. I have gone through them in past time; you can run through them yourselves and compare each beatitude with each woe; and you will see that there is

an apparent reference in each woe to each beatitude. I may mention the first; and if I give the A, you must find out the B, and C, and so on. "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The first woe; "woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees; hypocrites; for you shut the kingdom of heaven." The first beatitude opens the kingdom of heaven to the poor and needy; the first woe, expressive of their perversion shuts up the kingdom of heaven. And so, if you trace these beatitudes and woes and set them side-by-side, you will find that each has a reference to the other in an antagonistic way; the one marking the Pharisees; the other the child of God; the one marking the man that cannot escape the damnation of hell; the other marking the man whose reward is exceedingly great in heaven.

These Pharisees made out not that the Lord sanctified the people, but that the people sanctified the Lord. Hence if a man swore by the temple, it was nothing; but if he swore by the gold of the temple, he was a debtor, or was under obligation; if a man swore by the altar, said the Pharisees it was nothing; but if he swore by the gift, he was under obligation. "You fools and blind," said the Savior, "which is greater the temple or the gold; which is greater, the altar or the gift?" The idea is this, that the gold was put there by the people, and the gift was brought there by the people; and so, they thereby, by their gold and their gifts, secured the Lord to themselves they consecrated God to themselves; they did not allow that the temple sanctified the gold, nor that the altar sanctified the gift; but that the gold sanctified the temple, and that the gift sanctified the altar. Now, you free Willer, look at this; this is just where you are, you think because of your gold, and your gifts, and your doings, that God will be your God, that you consecrate him to yourself, that you consecrate yourself to him; that the matter does not lie with him, but it lies with you; it is not that he has chosen you absolutely, but that you have chosen him; and as long as you choose him, he will choose you; and as long as you love him, he will love you; and as long as you do your part, he will do his. Now this is just the religion of the Pharisee of old, turning things upside down; whereas the Savior says on the subject "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you." So, the temple sanctified the gold. Let us take the gold as a kind of figure of the people, who were compared to gold, well, then, it is the Lord that purifies the gold, sanctifies, and consecrates the gold. "I will bring the third part of them through the fire and will refine them as silver is refined and will try them as gold is tried; they shall call upon my name, and I will hear them; I will say, it is my people; and they shall say, The Lord is my God." Thus, then, if you are taught of God, you will acknowledge that sanctification is of God, not of man. First by election, sanctified of God the Father before the foundation of the world, by giving you to Christ and imputing all your sins to him; God sanctified you at Calvary's cross; the Holy Spirit sanctified you when he quickened your souls from death; and he renews that sanctification now in every manifestation of his mercy. If you are taught of God, this will be your position. And if you hold the other position, namely, that the whole matter does not lie with God, then you are turning things upside down; you are making out yourself to be greater than God; for you are making out that your eternal safety, your eternal salvation, your hope of eternal glory, lies not with God, but with yourself, and there cannot be a more awful delusion. One more idea than I close. "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites for you pay the tithes of mint and anise, and cumin;" very punctual in little thing; and that is very right and proper; but while we thus take care of the little, don't let us be guilty if we can help it, of that which they were guilty of, by omitting the weightier matters; if we must omit anything, we had better omit the little than the great, certainly; "You have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment and mercy, and faith." You professed to be people of God; then how is it you have passed by judgment; how is it you have passed by the solemn fact of the state we are in by nature

under judgment? And then you have passed by mercy; and then of course you pass by faith. If then, my hearer, we are born of God we shall not make light of these three things; judgment will be an awful thing with us; mercy will be a precious thing with us; faith will be a precious thing with us. Thus, then, we have this knowledge of our need of Christ, if we have the spirit of prayer, this conversion to free grace, this right order of things; and if judgment, mercy, and faith have their do weight with us, then our signs are gospel signs, and we are certainly born of God; and we are obeying what the Savior said when he pointed out to the Pharisees; he said, "Be you not like unto them." The Lord deliver us from every delusion and keep us standing fast in the liberty of his blessed truth.