

JC RYLE COMMENTS – The chapter we have now begun is full of prophecy – prophecy of which part has been fulfilled, and part remains to be accomplished. Two great events form the subject of this prophecy. One is the destruction of Jerusalem, and the consequent end of the Jewish dispensation. The other is the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the winding up of the state of things under which we now live. The destruction of Jerusalem was an event which happened only forty years after our Lord was crucified. The second coming of Christ is an event which is yet to come, and we may yet live to see it with our own eyes.

Chapters like this ought to be deeply interesting to every true Christian. No history ought to receive so much of our attention as the past and future history of the Church of Christ. The rise and fall of worldly empires are events of comparatively small importance in the sight of God. Babylon, and Greece, and Rome, and France, and England, are as nothing in His eyes by the side of the mystical body of Christ. The march of armies and the victories of conquerors are mere trifles in comparison with the progress of the Gospel, and the final triumph of the Prince of Peace. May we remember this in reading prophetic Scripture! “Blessed is he that readeth.” (Rev. 1:3)

The first thing that demands our attention in the verses before us, is *the prediction of our Lord concerning the temple at Jerusalem*. The disciples, with the natural pride of Jews, had called their Master’s attention to the architectural splendour of the temple. “See,” they said, “what manner of stones and what buildings are here!” They received an answer from the Lord very different from what they expected, a heart-saddening answer, and one well calculated to stir up inquisitive thoughts in their minds. No word of admiration falls from His lips. He expresses no commendation of the design or workmanship of the gorgeous structure before Him. He appears to lose sight of the form and comeliness of the material building, in His concern for the wickedness of the nation to which it belonged. “Seest thou,” He replies, “these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be cast down.”

Let us learn from this solemn saying, that the true glory of a Church does not consist in its buildings for public worship, but in the faith and godliness of its members. The eyes of our Lord Jesus Christ could find no pleasure in looking at the very temple which contained the holy of holies, and the golden candlestick, and the altar of burnt offering. Much less, may we suppose, can He find pleasure in the most splendid places of worship among professing Christians, if His Word and His Spirit are not honoured in it.

We shall all do well to remember this. We are naturally inclined to judge things by the outward appearance, like children who value poppies more than corn. We are too apt to suppose that where there is a stately ecclesiastical building and a magnificent ceremonial, carved stone and painted glass, fine music and gorgeously-dressed ministers, there must be some real religion. And yet there may be no religion at all. It may be all form, and show, and appeal to the senses. There may be nothing to satisfy the conscience, nothing to cure the heart. It may prove on inquiry that Christ is not preached in that stately building, and the Word of God not expounded. The ministers may perhaps be utterly ignorant of the Gospel, and the worshipers may be dead in trespasses and sins. We need not doubt that God sees no beauty in such a building as this. We need not doubt the Parthenon had no glory in God’s sight compared to the dens and caves where the early Christians worshipped, or that the meanest room where Christ is preached at this day, is more honourable in his eyes than any cathedral.

Let us however not run into the absurd extreme of supposing that it matters not what kind of building we set apart for God’s service. There is nothing wrong in making a church handsome. There is no true religion in having a dirty, mean, shabby, and disorderly place of worship. “Let all things be done decently and in order.” (1 Cor. 14:40) But let it be a settled principle in our religion, however beautiful we make our churches, to regard pure doctrine and holy practice as their principal ornaments. Without these two things, the noblest ecclesiastical edifice is radically defective. It has no glory if God is not there. With these two things, the humblest brick cottage

where the Gospel is preached, is lovely and beautiful. It is consecrated by Christ's own presence and the Holy Spirit's own blessing.

The second thing that demands our attention in these verses, is *the remarkable manner in which our Lord commences the great prophecy of this chapter*. We are told that four of His disciples, aroused no doubt by His warning prediction about the temple, applied to Him for further information. "Tell us," they said, "when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign when all these things shall be fulfilled?"

The answer which our Lord gives to these questions, begins at once with a prediction of coming false doctrine and coming wars. If His disciples thought He would promise them immediate success and temporal prosperity in this world, they were soon undeceived. So far from bidding them expect a speedy victory of truth, He tells them to look out for the rise of error. "Take heed lest any man deceive you. Many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ." So far from bidding them expect a general reign of peace and quietness, He tells them to prepare for wars and troubles. "Nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There shall be earthquakes in divers places, and there shall be famines and troubles: these are the beginnings of sorrows."

There is something deeply instructive in this opening of our Lord's prophetic discourse. It seems like the key note of what His Church is to expect between His first and second advents. It looks as if it were specially intended to correct the mistaken views, not only of His apostles, but of the vast body of professing Christians in every age. It looks as if our Lord knew well that man is always catching at the idea of a "good time coming," and as if He would give us plain notice that there will be no "good time" until He returns. It may not be pleasant to us to hear such tidings. But it is in strict accordance with what we read in the prophet Jeremiah: "The prophets that have been before, prophesied of war, and of evil, and of pestilence. The prophet which prophesieth of peace, when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known, that the Lord hath truly sent him." (Jer. 28:8, 9)

Let us learn from our Lord's opening prediction to *be moderate in our expectations*. Nothing has created so much disappointment in the Church of Christ, as the extravagant expectations in which many of its members have indulged. Let us not be carried away by the common idea, that the world will be converted before the Lord Jesus returns, and the earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord. It will not be so. There is nothing in Scripture to justify such expectations. Let us cease to expect a reign of peace. Let us rather look for wars. Let us cease to expect all men to be made holy by any existing instrumentality, schools, missions, preaching, or anything of the kind. Let us rather look for the rise of Antichrist himself. Let us understand that we live in a day of election, and not of universal conversion.

There will be no universal peace until the Prince of Peace appears. There will be no universal holiness until Satan is bound. It may cost us much to hold such opinions as these. But there is not a church or congregation on earth, whose state does not show that these opinions are true, and that while "Many are called, few are chosen." It may bring on us the unkind remarks and the unfavourable judgment of many. But the end will prove who is right and who is wrong. For that end let us wait patiently. Let us labour, and teach, and work, and pray. But let it not surprise us if we find our Lord's word strictly true: "Narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." (Matt. 7:14)

**HYMN (HGG 557):** *Temples of the Spirit*<sup>1</sup>

**PRAYER:** Keep Us from Pride in Outward Achievements

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<sup>1</sup> Lyrics available at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/hymnlist.asp>