



Minutes With Messiah

Volume 2, Issue 12

Web site: www.geocities.com/riversidecoc

October 2001

A Building of Trust

Between Yom Kippur and Succoth (the Feast of Booths), Jewish families spend some time (often a lot of time) constructing a Sukkah, a booth in which to “dwell” for a seven-day period. There are a number of requirements for this booth. No more than one wall may be a permanent wall, such as that of the family’s regular house. It is usually decorated with fruit. And the roof can not be tight like a normal house; one must be able to see the stars through the roof. Often it is made of branches with the leaves on them or, in warmer climates, palm fronds.

In some parts of the world, like Albuquerque, New Mexico, late summer and early fall are the rainy season. Why would someone want to build a dwelling place with a leaky roof during the wettest time of the year?

Perhaps an answer can be found in the reason for this holiday. Leviticus 23:42-43 says, “Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”

How did God *make* the Israelites dwell in booths/tents? What else were they going to dwell in? They had just left their houses in Egypt, and were not yet to the houses waiting for them in Canaan. They had apparently brought tents with them. Other than that, they had little in the way of building materials. And even if they had brick or stone, or even wood, God kept leading them onward. They could not build permanent houses.

Therein is one answer. God kept leading them onward. There were several stages of the journey in which they spent a considerable time. They spent months at Sinai, for instance. Even after months in a place, though, God led them onward. He would not let them get comfortable and settle in one place, because He was taking them to a different place. He made them dwell in booths by moving the cloud/fire that led them.

He *made* them dwell in booths by not allowing them to settle.

That doesn’t answer the initial question, though. Why would God ask people to dwell in a house with holes in the roof during the rainy season? I think that relates to the next part of the statement in Leviticus 23:43: “when I brought them out of Egypt.”

Israel was a nation of slaves. Albeit they were a strong nation of slaves, they were still slaves. They had no ambition to leave Egypt. Even when Moses came to them, their concern was that he was stirring up trouble and making their slavery harder (Ex 5:20-23). God provided signs and wonders. He led them out of Egypt “by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm” (Deut 4:34). He led them. They did not lead themselves. They had to rely on God, when he brought them out of the land of Egypt.

By ordaining living in booths, God is reminding his people that it was not by their might that they came out of Egypt. From the first step into the wilderness they had to depend on God. They had to count on him for food and guidance. He provided protection and warmth at night, with the fiery pillar. He provided air conditioning during the day with the cloud. Don’t you think He could hold off the rain for seven days, if His people would trust Him. That is what Succoth is really about, isn’t it? After the Day of Atonement comes a week to say, “I believe you forgave me, God. And to prove it, I will trust you not to get me wet. And even if you do, I will trust you, anyway.”

(Succoth begins on 2 October this year.)

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Is This the Beginning?

I am writing this on the morning of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. At a prayer session in my office this morning, and at other times throughout the morning, I have heard words and phrases such as “apocalypse” and “things that must happen before the end.” Of course such horrendous events as we have witnessed today remind people that life is short and the end of all things is coming. But it also points out how many people have a view of scripture that differs significantly from what I read in the Bible. This doesn’t surprise me. I have been aware of the popularity of certain doctrines since before the movie “The Omen” was made. Since then we have had many other books and movies, the most popular right now being the “Left Behind” series.

What makes the most popular premillennial scenarios so popular? There are certainly a number of factors. One of the most significant, in my opinion, is that the typical “rapture” scenario offers people a second chance. Those who aren’t taken at the second coming will have the chance to repent before the third coming and the final judgment. While proponents of these theories deny that in word, that is precisely what the doctrines teach. If you are lucky enough to be alive at the time of the rapture but not taken, no “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb 9:27); no “mighty angels in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thes 1:7-8);

Tribulation has been a fact of daily Christian life for two thousand years.

no “the lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, and shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 28:50-51). Otherwise, what would be the point of the thousand year reign on earth? Why make God, through Jeremiah, a liar, if not to provide a second chance for some few people?

But in the context of the events of today, can terrorist attacks on the United States and Israel be seen as apocalyptic? Obviously some think so. But what do the scriptures say?

The Tribulation

One of the first things that every believer in premillennialism has to clarify when talking to another is whether they are of the pre- or post-tribulation persuasion. Is the “rapture” going to come before or after a seven-year period of tribulation? (They almost always refer to a given time period, although the word “tribulation” never appears in the Bible in the same context as any seven-year period.) In either case, it is generally conceded that there will be (or was) a period of tribulation, or intense troubling of God’s people.

Other than in Matthew 24 and its companion passage in Mark 13, the Bible does not talk about “tribulation” in the future, but in the present, with one possible exception.

For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know. (1 Thes 3:4)

Great is my boldness of speech toward you, great is my glorying of you: I am filled with comfort, I am exceeding joyful in all our tribulation. (2 Cor 7:4)

I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Rev 1:9)

The possible exception is Rev 2:10, which says, “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” Since the previous verse says that the church at Smyrna had already been in tribulation, this verse is apparently telling them that period would be of a set length. It is saying that you are enduring now, but be of good cheer because it will end. It is more of a promise of an end of tribulation rather than tribulation to come.

There are a couple of other passages (Jn 16:33, Rom 2:9) that indicate that the tribulations and trials which come upon Christians are an ongoing thing. Tribulation is not reserved for some future time, but is a fact of daily Christian life. It is now, and has been for almost two thousand years.

One other passage indicates that the tribulation of Revelation was something then occurring (in the First Century). Of a numberless multitude around the throne

of God, Rev 7:14 says, “These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Those that John saw at that time had already come out of the great tribulation. Since the book of Revelation was written to Christians in the latter part of the First Century about things that they were going through or would soon be going through, that great tribulation was contemporary to the writer.

Nothing in the context of the passages about tribulation indicate that the events of today have any bearing on them. The destruction in New York and Washington can have no bearing on the “beginning of” any biblical period of tribulation.

Matthew 24

The most significant, and misapplied, passage concerning tribulation is Matthew 24 (and the parallel passages in Mark 13 and Luke 17). This is the passage where people turn for the signs of the end of the world and see such things as the events of August 11, 2001 as being among those signs.

At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus’ disciples ask him two questions: (1) when will the Temple be destroyed, as he had just predicted; and (2) what were the signs of the end of the world? Jesus’ discourse in the remainder of the chapter is to tell them that, contrary to their apparent belief these are two different events. One will have signs of its imminence; the other will not.

Verses 7-14 list several things that were to come before (but not at) the end of the world. There would be wars, famine, pestilence, and earthquakes (physical events). Christians would be persecuted and some lose their love of Christ; there would be false prophets; and the gospel would be preached throughout the world (spiritual events). But even with the physical and the spiritual events, Jesus is very clear that these are just “the beginning of sorrows” (verse 8). These things have been going on since Jesus spoke the words, and are not just beginning now.

The Lord was very careful to point out that the disciples were not to be deceived by these signs. If anyone told them that he had come during one of these events they were not to believe them. He says this in verse 4, and then he says it again.

Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before. Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth:

behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not. (Verses 23-26)

In verse 25 he even says, in essence, “I told you before and now I will repeat it for absolute clarity.” It was important to understand, according to Jesus, that wars, disasters, and persecutions were *not* signs of his coming. The events of this nightmarish day in September, 2001, according to Jesus’ own words, must not be interpreted as signs of his coming.

On the other hand, verse 27 says that his coming will not be known by signs, but will be obvious to all. It will be as obvious as lightning at night. “For as

Wars, disasters, and persecutions were not signs of his coming.

the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.”

In verses 32-36 he further emphasizes the difference between the events of the destruction of the Temple and his coming. Note the distinction between “these” things (the destruction of the Temple) and “that” day (the end of the world).

Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.

The first could be identified by the signs of its coming. As the fig tree in leaf is a sign that summer is close, so would the coming of the Romans be a sign of the destruction of the Temple. On the other hand, “Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.” (Verse 44)

The only signs of the coming of Christ will occur when it happens (verses 29-31). While the attacks on civilian targets in the United States are deplorable we must be careful not to say they are signs of the imminent coming of Christ. Rather we must be ever watchful, knowing there will be no such signs.

“Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.” (Matt 24:42)

Upslide Down

Over the years I have spent a lot of time in public playgrounds and I have noticed something significant. The natural reaction of almost every child over the age of two is to try to climb *up* the slide. No matter that everyone else is sliding down, they want to go up the hard way. I admit that I am sometimes the same way with the escalators in the malls. I want to go, as the old book title put it, up the down staircase.

It is encouraging to see these “up the slide” people. They are the people Jesus wants to follow him. “Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 19:14) Maybe he had seen children going up the slide and recognized a characteristic of those who would obey him.

Going up the slide is not easy. I have seen two year olds that manage to get one big step up before sliding down. As they get older, stronger, smarter, they get farther up the slide. Sometimes they lose their grip or tire out and slide back down, but they keep trying. Then comes that triumphant day when they make it to the top! What sense of accomplishment. What elation! What joy!

Christianity is an upslide climb. “Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” (Matt 7:14) “And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel’s, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and

sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, *with persecutions*; and in the world to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30, emphasis mine)

Jesus warned in Luke 14:25-35 that following him could involve some loss in this world. He offered the advice that one should count the cost before beginning to follow him, as a builder projects the cost of a tower. I have known individuals who actually had to forsake mother and father to follow Christ; who were treated as if dead by their families because of their obedience to the Lord. Theirs was truly a climb up a particularly slippery slide.

The easiest thing when going up the slide or up the down escalator is just to quit. You don’t have to worry about staying in the same place. You will reach a destination, and with no effort at all. The problem is, you end up right where you started. You will have expended energy and gone nowhere.

That is just what Satan wants in our spiritual climb. He doesn’t have to tempt us with a “serious” sin. All he has to say is, “let go.” Satan knows that if we stop climbing, if we decide just to let go of the sides of the slide, that we will slide back down into his grasp. I frequently see kids playing tag. One might try to get away by going up the slide, but can’t make it to the top. The child who is “it” doesn’t need to climb up to tag them. He just has to wait for the other one to quit going up. Well, Satan is waiting.

Are you going to go down the slide to Satan, or up the slide against him?

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