

SECTION II :
**CHRISTIANITY'S REDEMPTION FROM EARTHLY
JERUSALEM**

70 AD

CHAPTER 4 : REDEMPTION IN THE MIDST OF DESTRUCTION

The instigators of most of the persecution of the godly in the Apostolic era of the church were the wicked Judaists who rejected Jesus Christ. They used their Roman overlords to do their dirty work when they could, but often they did it themselves. The wrath of God was burning at their stiff-necked rebellion against His Son and His Son's disciples. So in mercy to His people, He judged them. The focus of that judgment was the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Jesus had prophesied this judgment thus: "And as He went forth out of the temple, one of his disciples saith unto Him, Master, behold, what manner of stones and what manner of buildings! And Jesus said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? *There shall not be left here one stone upon another, which shall not be thrown down.*"—Mark 13:1,2.

There is scarcely another period in history so full of vice, corruption, and disaster as the six years between the Neronian persecution and the destruction of Jerusalem. The prophetic description of the last days by our Lord began to be fulfilled before the generation to which he spoke had passed away, and the provisional day of judgment seemed to be close at hand. So the Christians believed and had good reason to believe. Even to earnest heathen minds that period looked as dark as midnight. We have elsewhere quoted Seneca's picture of the frightful moral depravity and decay under the reign of Nero, his pupil and murderer. Tacitus begins his history of Rome after the death of Nero with these words: "I proceed to a work rich in disasters, full of atrocious battles, of discord and rebellion, yea, horrible even in peace. Four princes - Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Domitian - killed by the sword; three civil wars; several foreign wars; and mostly raging at the same time. Favorable events in the East the subjugation of the Jews, unfortunate ones in the West. Illyria disturbed, Gaul uneasy; Britain conquered and soon relinquished; the nations of Sarmatia and Suevia rising against us; the Parthians excited by the deception of a pseudo-Nero. Italy also weighed down by Dew or oft-repeated calamities; cities swallowed up or buried in ruins; Rome laid waste by conflagrations, the old temples burned up, even the capitol set on fire by citizens; sanctuaries desecrated; adultery rampant in high places. The sea filled with exiles; the rocky islands contaminated with murder. Still more horrible the fury in the city. Nobility, riches, places of honor, whether declined or occupied, counted as crimes, and virtue sure of destruction."

The most unfortunate country in that period was Palestine, where an ancient and venerable nation brought upon itself unspeakable suffering and destruction. The tragedy of Jerusalem prefigures in miniature the final judgment, and in this light it is represented in the eschatological discourses of Christ, who foresaw the end from the beginning.

The forbearance of God with his covenant people, who had crucified their own Savior, reached at last its limit. As many as could be saved in the usual way were rescued. The mass of the people had obstinately set themselves against all improvement. James the Just, the man who was fitted, if any could be, to reconcile the Jews to the Christian religion, had been stoned by his hardened brethren, for whom he daily interceded in the

temple; and with him the Christian community in Jerusalem had lost its importance for that city. The hour of the "great tribulation" and fearful judgment drew near. The prophecy of the Lord approached its literal fulfillment: Jerusalem was razed to the ground, the temple burned, and not one stone was left upon another.

Under the last governors- Felix, Festus, Albinus, and Florus- moral corruption and the dissolution of all social ties, but at the same time the oppressiveness of the Roman yoke, increased every year. After the accession of Felix, assassins, called "Sicarians" (from *sica*, a dagger), armed with daggers and purchasable for any crime, endangering safety in city and country, roamed over Palestine. Besides this, the party spirit among the Jews themselves, and their hatred of their heathen oppressors, rose to the most insolent political and religious fanaticism, and was continually inflamed by false prophets and Messiahs, one of whom, for example, according to Josephus, drew after him thirty thousand men. Thus came to pass what our Lord had predicted: "There shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall lead many astray."

At last, in the month of May, A.D. 66, under the last procurator, Gessius Florus (from 65 onward), a wicked and cruel tyrant who, as Josephus says, was placed as a hangman over evil-doers, an organized rebellion broke out against the Romans. But at the same time a terrible civil war also broke out between different parties of the revolters themselves, especially between the Zealots and the Moderates. The ferocious party of the Zealots had all the fire and energy which religious and patriotic fanaticism could inspire; they have been justly compared with the Montagnards of the French Revolution. They gained the ascendancy in the progress of the war, took forcible possession of the city and the temple and introduced a reign of terror. They kept up the Messianic expectations of the people and hailed every step towards destruction as a step towards deliverance. Reports of comets, meteors, and all sorts of fearful omens and prodigies were interpreted as signs of the coming of the Messiah and his reign over the heathen.

To defy Rome in that age, without a single ally, was to defy the world in arms; but religious fanaticism, inspired by the recollection of the heroic achievements of the Maccabees, blinded the Jews against the inevitable failure of this mad and desperate revolt.

The emperor Nero, informed of the rebellion, sent his most famous general, Vespasian, with a large force to Palestine. Vespasian opened the campaign in the year 67 from the Syrian port-town, Ptolemais (Acco), and against a stout resistance overran Galilee with an army of sixty thousand men. But events in Rome hindered him from completing the victory, and required him to return thither.

Various delays, the result of God's sovereign grace, allowed the disciples of Jesus Christ to heed His warnings from years earlier. He had then testified: "But when ye shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not, (let him that readeth understand,) then let them that be in Judaea flee to the mountains: And let him that is on the housetop not go down into the house, neither enter therein, to take any thing out of his house: And let him that is in the field not turn back

again for to take up his garment.” So Jewish Christians were able to flee, leaving the unbelieving Jews in the path of destruction.

Meantime, Nero had killed himself. The emperors, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius followed one another in rapid succession. The latter was taken out of a dog’s kennel in Rome while drunk, dragged through the streets, and shamefully put to death. Vespasian, in the year 69, was universally proclaimed emperor, and restored order and prosperity.

His son, Titus, who himself ten years after became emperor, then undertook the prosecution of the Jewish war, and became the instrument in the hand of God of destroying the holy city and the temple. He had an army of not less than eighty thousand trained soldiers, and planted his camp on Mount Scopus and the adjoining Mount Olivet, in full view of the city and the temple, which from this height show to the best advantage. The valley of the Kedron divided the besiegers from the besieged.

In April, A.D. 70, immediately after the Passover, when Jerusalem was filled with strangers, the siege began. The zealots rejected, with sneering defiance, the repeated proposals of Titus and the prayers of Josephus, who accompanied him as interpreter and mediator; and they struck down every one who spoke of surrender. They made sorties down the valley of the Kedron and the tip of the mountain, and inflicted great loss on the Romans. As the difficulties multiplied their courage increased. The crucifixion of hundreds of prisoners (as many as five hundred a day) only enraged them the more. Even the famine which began to rage and sweep away thousands daily, and forced a woman to roast her own child, the cries of mothers and babes, the most pitiable scenes of misery around them, could not move the crazy fanatics. History records no other instance of such obstinate resistance, such desperate bravery and contempt of death. The Jews fought, not only for civil liberty, life, and their native land, but for that which constituted their national pride and glory, and gave their whole history its significance—for their religion, which, even in this state of horrible degeneracy, infused into them an almost superhuman power of endurance.

At last, in July, the castle of Antonia was surprised and taken by night. This prepared the way for the destruction of the Temple in which the tragedy culminated. The daily sacrifices ceased July 17th, because the hands were all needed for defense. The last and the bloodiest sacrifice at the altar of burnt offerings was the slaughter of thousands of Jews who had crowded around it.

Titus (according to Josephus) intended at first to save that magnificent work of architecture, as a trophy of victory, and perhaps from some superstitious fear; and when the flames threatened to reach the Holy of Holies he forced his way through flame and smoke, over the dead and dying, to arrest the fire. But the destruction was determined by a higher decree. His own soldiers, roused to madness by the stubborn resistance, and greedy of the golden treasures, could not be restrained from the work of destruction. At first the halls around the temple were set on fire. Then a firebrand was hurled through the golden gate. When the flames arose the Jews raised a hideous yell and tried to put out the fire; while others, clinging with a last convulsive grasp to their Messianic hopes, rested in the declaration of a false prophet, that God in the midst of the conflagration of the

Temple would give a signal for the deliverance of his people. The legions vied with each other in feeding the flames, and made the unhappy people feel the full force of their unchained rage. Soon the whole prodigious structure was in a blaze and illuminated the skies. It was burned on the tenth of August, A.D. 70, the same day of the year on which, according to tradition, the first temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. "No one," says Josephus, "can conceive a louder, more terrible shriek than arose from all sides during the burning of the temple. The shout of victory and the jubilee of the legions sounded through the wailings of the people, now surrounded with fire and sword, upon the mountain, and throughout the city. The echo from all the mountains around, even to Peraea, increased the deafening roar. Yet the misery itself was more terrible than this disorder. The hill on which the temple stood was seething hot, and seemed enveloped to its base in one sheet of flame. The blood was larger in quantity than the fire, and those that were slain more in number than those that slew them. The ground was nowhere visible. All was covered with corpses; over these heaps the soldiers pursued the fugitives."

The Romans planted their eagles on the shapeless ruins, over against the eastern gate, offered their sacrifices to them, and proclaimed Titus *Imperator* with the greatest acclamations of joy. Thus was fulfilled the prophecy concerning the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place.

Jerusalem was razed to the ground; only three towers of the palace of Herod, together with a portion of the western wall, were left as monuments of the strength of the conquered city, once the center of the Jewish theocracy and the cradle of the Christian Church.

Even the heathen Titus is reported to have publicly declared that God, by a special providence, aided the Romans and drove the Jews from their impregnable strongholds. Josephus, who went through the war himself from beginning to end, at first as governor of Galilee and general of the Jewish army, then as a prisoner of Vespasian, finally as a companion of Titus and mediator between the Romans and Jews, recognized in this tragic event a divine judgment and admitted of his degenerate countrymen, to whom he was otherwise sincerely attached: "I will not hesitate to say what gives me pain: I believe that, had the Romans delayed their punishment of these villains, the city would have been swallowed up by the earth, or overwhelmed with a flood, or, like Sodom, consumed with fire from heaven. For the generation which was in it was far more ungodly than the men on whom these punishments had in former times fallen. By their madness the whole nation came to be ruined."

Thus, therefore, must one of the best Roman emperors execute the long threatened judgment of God, and the most learned Jew of his time describe it, and thereby, without willing or knowing it, bear testimony to the truth of the prophecy and the divinity of the mission of Jesus Christ, the rejection of whom brought all this and the subsequent misfortune upon the apostate race who persecuted Christ and Christians.

After a siege of five months the entire city was in the hands of the victors. The number of the Jews slain during the siege, including all those who had crowded into the city from

the country, is stated by Josephus at the enormous figure of one million and one hundred thousand. Eleven thousand perished from starvation shortly after the close of the siege. Ninety-seven thousand were carried captive and sold into slavery, or sent to the mines, or sacrificed in the gladiatorial shows at Caesarea, Berytus, Antioch, and other cities. The strongest and handsomest men were selected for the triumphal procession in Rome, among them the chief defenders and leaders of the revolt, Simon Bar-Giora and John of Gischala.

Vespasian and Titus celebrated the dearly bought victory together. No expense was spared for the pageant. Crowned with laurel, and clothed in purple garments, the two conquerors rode slowly in separate chariots, Domitian on a splendid charger, to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, amid the shouts of the people and the aristocracy. They were preceded by the soldiers in festive attire and seven hundred Jewish captives. The images of the gods, and the sacred furniture of the temple—the table of show-bread, the seven-armed candlestick, the trumpets which announced the year of jubilee, the vessel of incense, and the rolls of the Law—were borne along in the procession and deposited in the newly built Temple of Peace, except the Law and the purple veils of the holy place, which Vespasian reserved for his palace. Simon Bar-Giora was thrown down from the Tarpeian Rock; John of Gischala doomed to perpetual imprisonment. Coins were cast with the legend *Judaea capta, Judaea devicta*. *But neither Vespasian nor Titus assumed the victorious epithet Judaeus; they despised a people which had lost its fatherland.* Josephus saw the pompous spectacle of the humiliation and wholesale crucifixion of his nation, and described it without a tear. The thoughtful Christian, looking at the representation of the temple furniture borne by captive Jews on the triumphal arch of Titus, still standing between the Colosseum and the Forum, is filled with awe at the fulfillment of divine prophecy. Thus was fulfilled Christ's prophecy: "But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people. And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." (Luke 21:23-24)

The conquest of Palestine involved the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth. Vespasian retained the land as his private property or distributed it among his veterans. The people were by the five years' war reduced to extreme poverty, and left without a magistrate (in the Jewish sense), without a temple, without a country. The renewal of the revolt under the false Messiah, Bar-Cocheba, led only to a still more complete destruction of Jerusalem and devastation of Palestine by the army of Hadrian (132–135 A.D.).

The Christians of Jerusalem, remembering the Lord's admonition, forsook the doomed city in good time and fled to the town of Pella in the Decapolis, beyond the Jordan, in the north of Peraea, where king Herod Agrippa II, before whom Paul once stood, opened to them a safe asylum. There, in the midst of a population chiefly Gentile, the church of the circumcision was reconstructed. The awful catastrophe of the destruction of the Jewish theocracy must have produced the profoundest sensation among the Christians, of which we now, in the absence of all particular information respecting it, can hardly form a true conception. It was the greatest calamity of Judaism and a great benefit to Christianity; a refutation of the one, a vindication and emancipation of the other. It not only gave a

mighty impulse to faith, but at the same time formed a proper epoch in the history of the relation between the two religious bodies. It separated them forever. It is true the Apostle Paul had before now inwardly completed this separation by the Christian universality of his whole system of doctrine; but outwardly he had in various ways accommodated himself to Judaism, and had more than once religiously visited the temple. He wished not to appear as a revolutionist, nor to anticipate the natural course of history, the ways of Providence. But now the rupture was also outwardly consummated by the thunderbolt of divine omnipotence. God himself destroyed the house, in which he had thus far dwelt, in which Jesus had taught, in which the Apostles had prayed. He rejected his peculiar people for their obstinate rejection of the Messiah. He demolished the whole fabric of the Mosaic theocracy, whose system of worship was, in its very nature, associated exclusively with the tabernacle at first and afterwards with the temple. But in so doing, he cut the cords which had hitherto bound, and according to the law of organic development necessarily bound the infant church to the outward economy of the old covenant, and to Jerusalem as its center. Henceforth the heathen could no longer look upon Christianity as a mere sect of Judaism, but must regard and treat it as a new, peculiar religion. The destruction of Jerusalem, therefore, marks that momentous crisis at which the Christian church as a whole burst forth forever from the chrysalis of Judaism, awoke to a sense of its maturity, and in government and worship at once took its independent stand before the world.

This breaking away from hardened Judaism and its religious forms, however, involved no departure from the spirit of the Old Testament revelation. The church, on the contrary, entered into the inheritance of Israel. The Christians appeared as genuine Jews, as spiritual children of Abraham, who, following the inward current of the Mosaic religion, had found Him, who was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets; the perfect fruit of the old covenant and the living germ of the new; the beginning and the principle of a new moral creation.

The judgment of the earthly Jerusalem and the redemption of the Christians in 70 AD prefigures the future Great Day of Judgment and new heaven and new earth. But whereas the Christian church on earth could enjoy only a short sigh of relief for “the space of half an hour” (Revelation 8:1), the church entering the new heavens and new earth will enter an eternal rest. So the redemption of the past is a sign of the greater redemption in the future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

CHAPTER 4 : REDEMPTION IN THE MIDST OF DESTRUCTION

This second volume in a two-part series on church history is primarily an edited version of the following works on church history and Biblical interpretation:

James A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism* (Cassell & Company, Limited: London, Paris & New York. 1878). (see electronic version at <http://www.whatsaiththescripture.com/Fellowship/James.A.Wylie.html>)

Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA, 1997). (see electronic version at <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/About.htm>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Sabbath Bible Survey Tests and Assignments* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Let My People Go* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.