15 “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), 16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 17 Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, 18 and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. 19 And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! 20 Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. 21 For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. 22 And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. 23 Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. 24 For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. 25 See, I have told you beforehand. 26 So, if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. 27 For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 28 Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. 29 “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 30 Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 31 And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Introduction

In Matthew 24.4-31, Jesus gives a prophetic story with mini-stories within it. Each mini-story covers the time between His comings and culminates at the end of the age. Note how this is the case in verses 14 and 31, passages that bring us to the consummation and return of Christ.

v. 14, then the end will come

v. 30, they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds

According to the first unit of the vision, and notably, when the signs occur, the end does not arrive, as Jesus says, this [complex of signs] must take place, but the end is not yet (24.6). Then after elaborating on the signs, He says, then the end will come (24.14). The signs do in fact point to the coming of Christ as an impending reality, even though they do not signal the end per se. Instead, they present us with the beginning stages of the end. In effect, the signs describe the time between. They give conditions that precede and lead up to the coming of Christ. Jesus gives five of them.

1) The appearance of false messiahs and prophets
2) Wars and rumors of wars
3) Famines and earthquakes
4) Gospel proclamation to all nations
5) Tribulation for the people of God (and for the world in general per wars, etc)

Today we are going to discuss the signs of His coming part two or the second mini-story in the prophetic vision. As soon as we turn to this section, we face a very difficult problem. We noted that the signs of the first mini-story point to the coming of Christ as an impending reality, but they do not signal the end itself. However, in part two on the signs, Jesus tells us that the signs immediately precede His coming (v. 29-30, immediately after the tribulation of those days ... they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory). We seem to have both delay and imminence in the same vision. If I mentioned that we had some work to do last time, we have even more this time. Thus, roll up your sleeves and prepare to dig for understanding. Jesus says,
let the reader understand (v. 15); so, we have His exhortation to make a concerted effort to grasp His teaching in this passage.

My title is “Signs of His Coming Part 2: Great Tribulation and the Return of Christ. The outline has two simple points: 1) the great tribulation is a complex time of judgment, and 2) the return of Christ is a decisive time of salvation. Once we cover these points, we can then draw some concluding implications and applications.

1A. The great tribulation is a complex time of judgment
   To say it is complex is surely understated because it refers to three things rolled together in a single mini-story. Great tribulation refers to A.D. 70, the time between, and it refers to Judgment Day.
   
   1B. Great Tribulation refers to 70 A.D.
   There are a number of reasons to conclude that the great tribulation (v. 29) refers to the destruction of Jerusalem some forty years after Jesus gave this prophecy.
   1) The tribulation in view takes place in “those days” (v. 29).
   In context, “those days” speak of the time of desolation that the abomination of desolation triggers: when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel (v. 15). In about 600 B.C., Daniel prophesied an abomination of the temple that happened in 168 B.C. by the infamous Antiochus Epiphanes who sought to spread Greek culture and extinguish Judaism. Reports are that he slaughtered a pig on the altar in the Jewish temple. Now Jesus says that temple desecration is coming again when Israel’s house (temple, city, land, and nation) becomes desolate (23.38) and her enemies cast every stone of the temple into a pile of rubble (24.2). We know that that happened in 70 A.D. at the hands of the Roman army.
   2) The Luke parallel confirms this point because he introduces part two of this same prophetic vision with a reference to armies surrounding Jerusalem and this, he says, brings its “desolation” near (Lk. 21.20).
   3) In Matthew’s account (and in Luke too), Jesus addresses the disciples (you, 24.15), and He exhorts quick escape from Judea to the mountains. So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains (v. 16). Indicative of the severity of suffering is the quickness Jesus calls for in their fleeing. They are to go without taking time to gather any possessions, even an overcoat: Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak (24.17-18). He also says that tribulation will over take women who are pregnant and women who are nursing (24.19): And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! The mention of women is striking in the first place since they did not typically go to war, but these women are especially vulnerable, and that fact will not prevent the slaughter of people who remain in Jerusalem and Judea by the Roman army. Furthermore, if the onslaught is in winter or on a Sabbath then escape will be even more difficult and complicated (24.20). Across the board, the suffering will begin with sorrows that accelerate into great tribulation as Rome desolates Jerusalem catching the Lord’s disciples in the crossfire (the twelve disciples represent the new Israel resting on Christ the solid rock).
   
   In light of these considerations, we can understand that the great tribulation took place in a complex of events surrounding 70 A.D. As Jesus goes on to say, For then there will be great tribulation (24.21a). Further, He describes the great tribulation as something unique and unparalleled in human history: such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be (24.21b). This language appears to be exaggeration that expresses the tragic horror of the suffering that the Romans inflicted on the Jews. The words are prophetic and metaphoric. They express what
happened in 70 A.D. and, as we shall see, they reach across time beyond that catastrophic judgment on the nation.

2B. Great tribulation refers to the time between

We get this point from the comments about false messiahs and prophets: Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it (24.23-26). This is parallel with the comments in the first mini-story: See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray (24.4-5; and false prophets, 24.11). As we discovered previously, the appearance of false messiahs is one of the signs that point to the coming of Christ as an impending reality but it does not signal the end per se. Therefore, the occurrences of the word “then” indicate that in the vision the great tribulation refers not only to 70 A.D., but also to the time between that leads up to the second coming (then will be great tribulation, v. 21 and then there will be false messiahs and false prophets, vs. 23-24). His coming ends the story marked by the clarity of lightening and the certainty of judgment: where the corpses are there are the vultures (24.27-28).

3B. Great tribulation refers to the Day of Judgment

Now we should return to the point we made earlier that the description of the great tribulation as unique and paralleled reaches beyond the catastrophic judgment of 70 A.D. The exaggeration of what happened in 70 A.D allows the language to transcend history. Thus, it reaches forward to the one and only event that is truly, finally, and fearfully like nothing else in the history of the human family, the Day of Judgment and the execution of God’s wrath that has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be (24.21b).

On one hand, verses 15-21 describe the horrors of the judgment and desolation that God brought on Israel through the Romans. On the other hand, verse 22 shows that more is going on here than the deliverance of Israelites and Christians from the sword of Rome: And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. It seems evident that the salvation of the elect at the end of history is now in view. If this is correct, then the shortening of days refers to the time between. God marks out the time in such a way that the tribulation judgment of 70 A.D, the time between, and the final Day that merge as a single event in prophetic vision will have the limits necessary to bring God’s elect people to salvation through great tribulation including the unparalleled tribulation of eternal judgment. This leads us to consider the return of Christ in this context.

2A. The return of Christ is a decisive time of salvation

Our Lord says that His return follows the great tribulation “immediately.” If we forget that Jesus is speaking as a prophet in prophetic metaphor and prophetic vision, then we will stumble at this language of immediacy. We will stumble and think that either Jesus says He will come immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. (and thus He erred) or that He will come after the Day of Judgment. Neither option works because Jesus did not come in 70 A.D. and He is the judge that separates the sheep and the goats on the Day of Judgment; that day is not prior to His return.

What then does immediately indicate? It refers to chronological succession within the prophetic vision. In terms of the story, different future events form a unit without temporal distinction. Thus, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D was the Day of Judgment as an intrusion of judgment ahead of its time and in anticipation of the final day. Likewise, the present time between the comings is the Day of Judgment in anticipation as the beginning of sorrows. Moreover, the vision leaps past the second coming to the execution of eternal judgment as has
never been and never will be again. Finally, the vision indicates that immediately after the Day of Judgment in its anticipatory forms the Son of Man will come in glory to save His elect people.

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Continuing the vision, Jesus says that a number of things will happen immediately after the tribulation of those days (by interpretation, immediately after the anticipatory forms of the Day of Judgment that lunge toward it, define it, and give the human family a bitter taste of it). They include:

Changes in the sun, moon, and stars
Appearance of the sign of the Son of Man
Mourning of the human family
Seeing the Son of Man coming
The sound of the trumpet
The gathering of His elect from one end of heaven to the other

1) The changes in the heavenly bodies may be literal (as when the sun became dark at the crucifixion). Alternatively, they may be figurative of great change that is taking place on some radical and comprehensive scale (as happened on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2.19-20, that describes the beginning of the church in this language of darkened sun and bloody moon). Thus, in our text, there is no question that a radical upheaval of human history on a universal and comprehensive level will take place after the anticipatory forms of judgment and tribulation have run their course.

2) Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear; we do not know what this is exactly, but it will be clear and unmistakable. In one sense, Jesus does not tell His disciples what the sign of His coming is though He tells them about many of the signs of His coming (cf. like lightening).

3) The human family will mourn at the prospect of the great tribulation in all its fullness, filled to the brim with the wrath of God.

4) They will mourn at the sight of Jesus coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

5) In the darkness of impending judgment, the vision shows us angels at work doing the bidding of the coming Christ. They sound a trumpet that gives a call like a call to arms, but this is a call to salvation. It brings together the entire history of the church in the single call that ends the vision (this culminates His effectual call to salvation by the gospel to the nations).

6) Thus, Christ calls His elect out from the domination of Roman rule and oppression, and out from the deception of false messiahs and prophets down through the ages. He calls them out and in fact gathers them to safety from all forms of judgment throughout history and at the last day.

Concluding remarks

First, focus your hope on His coming. The tribulation of our time is a sign that points to the certainty of His coming. The church must go through much tribulation to enter the kingdom of God. Sometimes that means that the church is caught in the crossfire. Other times, the church is the object of persecution in various forms as the Lord told us in the Sermon on the Mount. Whatever form of suffering you may experience on your journey, a key to endurance is to lift your eyes from the stormy waters around you and direct them to Christ by abiding in His word.
Part of the means of endurance with strength is to place your hope on His coming. All the signs are in place; so, lift up your heads for your redemption is nearer now then when you first believed.

Second, detach yourself from earthly things, set your mind on things above and labor in His kingdom for His glory.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. 5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices.

Third, the end of the story is the trumpet call. Then the trumpet will sound and the dead shall rise from the graves and we shall all be changed, in a moment, at the twinkling of an eye. Then this mortal shall put on immortality and this corruptible shall put on incorruption.

51 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” 55 “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Therefore, lift your heads high in anticipation as you go through tribulation judgment now. You go through it now, but safely, until you reach your heavenly rest at the end of our journey. On the way, you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God knowing full well that He can create and He destroy; may the Holy Spirit enable us to fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus longing for Him, longing for the day when we will see our friend. To Him be all glory both now and forevermore, amen.