

## VULTURES AND CARCASSES

### **Matthew 24:27-28** (Signs of the End Times)

<sup>27</sup> For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>28</sup> Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.

#### MESSAGE:

What an odd thing for Jesus to say! After describing the eruptions of sin and the earth-shaking cataclysms which will usher in the end of the age, Jesus quotes an old Palestinian shepherd's proverb: "Where there's a carcass, there'll be vultures." What does he mean?

The point of the folk-saying was that certain things just naturally go together—like fish and water, and thunder and lightning. Where you have carrion, you'll have scavengers; they just go together, But what does that have to do with the endtimes?

The most likely explanation would be that the carcass represents this world in its final death-throes and the vultures represent the demonic forces that will prey upon the human beings who have abandoned themselves to sin and death along with the world. In the endtimes, the convulsions of a creation under the curse of sin are going to intensify as more and more people fall into despair and abandon themselves to destruction. This will signal the beginning of God's final judgment upon the world. Jesus lists these death-throes: deceitfulness, wars, famines, earthquakes, the persecution of Christians, people falling away from their faith, hatred between factions, the rise of false prophets, an increase in wickedness, and love growing cold. Such are the signs of the endtimes.

The first thing we can say about these signs is that all of them have already been given. Is there any we haven't seen? Lies, wars, famine, earthquakes, the persecution of Christians, people falling away from their faith, hatred, false prophets, wickedness, love growing cold? We see all of these going on around us, even as we speak, and that is why a lot of people are convinced that these may be the endtimes. Where ever you look, you can see the social fabric unraveling. Wars all over the planet, nuclear threats from rogue nations, suicide bombings, acrimony between political factions in our own country, terrorist threats everywhere. It certainly seems like these could be the endtimes!

But, then we're not the first to see signs of the endtimes in our own generation. After the carnage of the First World War, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats thought the end of history was imminent, and he described it in his poem *The Second Coming*: *"Turning and turning in the widening gyre; the falcon cannot hear the falconer; things fall apart—the center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity. Surely some revelation is at hand; surely the second coming is at hand!"*

For anyone willing to look, it's not hard to see the signs of the endtimes and the vultures circling overhead as the human race abandons itself to sin. Lies and half-truths have become the stock in trade of politicians. Love grows cold, as evidenced by a 50% divorce rate and the loss of civility in our daily lives. The entertainment industry excels in coarseness and vulgarity and openly mocks the Christian faith. Unborn children are dispensed with for the sake of convenience and some states have legalized euthanasia. Fornication and sexual perversion are mainstreamed as acceptable lifestyles. As someone said, *"If God doesn't destroy America for her sins he'll have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah."* It's not hard to see that sin is tearing our world apart.

What's harder for us to see is the sin in our own lives that tears us apart. We like to think that we're separate from—and impervious to—the sin that surrounds us, and we don't tend to see that the vultures are laying their eggs in us as well. Jesus said, *"Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."* The human heart, which the Psalmist calls "deceitful above all things" is the hatching ground for sin and it can make vultures out of us as well. Every time we scavenge the newspaper for news of fresh disasters; every time we get a thrill out of hearing about a new catastrophe; every time we resent our neighbor's success or take pleasure in his misfortune [the Germans have a perfect word for this: "schadenfreude" which means "taking joy in the misery of others"]; every time we covet our neighbor's wife or his house or his car or his boat—every time we do these things we are treating our fellow human beings like carrion instead of brothers and sisters. We are trying to draw life from their suffering. We don't like to think of ourselves as vultures, but deep down, we've got it in us to be one. That's why we don't like to peer into our own dark souls—because we have a pretty good idea of what's lurking there.

But if we don't look, then we don't learn to take our sin seriously. And if we don't take our sin seriously—how can we take our redemption seriously? And if we don't take our redemption seriously, our religion becomes a shallow thing, consisting only of some vague idea of minor offenses on our part; minor irritation on God's part; and a minor inconvenience on Jesus' part. And that, my friends, is blasphemy.

Of all the horror we should feel over sin, none should terrify us more than our inability to take our own sins seriously. We're like a teenager who knows he's going to receive a lousy report card in a few weeks and be in big trouble with his parents, but isn't particularly concerned because that is then and now is now!

I think that's why Jesus uses shocking language to get our attention. The world is collapsing in its own sins and the vultures are circling **and we don't seem to care!** We're a little like the vulturous crowd that stood around the cross that day—laughing and wagging their heads while the Lord of life hung there in agony, dying for their sins. They didn't understand what was going on and they didn't care to understand it.

But the Good News that I have for you today is that Jesus knows all this, **and he loves us anyway!** He loved those who abandoned him, He loved those who gloated over his misery, and He loves us. He didn't die just for the sins of Peter and St. Augustine and Martin Luther and Mother Theresa; he died for the sins of Ted Bundy and Charles Manson and Sadam Hussein and Osama bin Laden—and you and me. He became a carcass and turned himself over to the vultures so that we wouldn't have to; He died so that we could draw life from him.

Who can imagine a God like that? A God who would actually go through hell itself for people who hated him? As Charles Wesley wrote in his hymn "And Can It Be?": *"And can it be that I should gain an interest in my Savior's blood? Died he for me who caused his pain, for me who scorned his perfect love. Amazing love! How can it be that you, my God, would die for me?"*

Our problem is that we lose sight of the wonder of it. As the world takes sin more and more casually we are tempted to take our sins casually, and as our consciences are bothered less and less by our sins, the Atonement counts for less and less in our faith. Our hearts lose sight of the awe of it and we end up with a pabulum faith: life's pretty good in this world; it'll be even better in the next. Sin is an inconvenience instead of a lethal poison; a common cold instead of cancer.

And since we take our sin lightly, we take our salvation lightly as well. What is there to be saved from? Hell and damnation? Who believes in that anymore? Well, you'd better believe in it! Because all the horrible signs of the end of the age that are playing out before our eyes—the tsunamis and hurricanes, the genocidal wars and mass murders, the famines and earthquakes—they're a small sampling of what hell is like. When the wrath of God finally falls upon this earth, men will crawl into caves and beg the mountains to fall upon them to save them from its horrors.

But not believers! The same signs that will paralyze unbelievers with fear will bring rejoicing to God's children! Paul called all the horrible signs that will accompany

the end of the age “the beginning of birth pains”? Under El Shaddai’s control, the death spasms of this world ***are converted into birth pains!*** Out of destruction, disaster and death, God will bring new life and a new creation! And while those who have placed their trust and their hope in the kingdom of this world will be begging the mountains to fall upon them to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb, we who have placed all our hopes in Him will be lifting up our heads and beholding our salvation drawing near!

The vultures at Calvary gloated over a dead carcass. But God had a resurrection in mind! And when the great and terrible day of the Lord comes upon this earth; when men are fainting from terror at the roaring of the sea and the shaking of the heavens; all those who have placed their hope in Jesus will gaze upon the sun of righteousness as it rises with healing in its wings, and they will rejoice, leaping like calves who have been released from their stalls into the field!

Let us pray that that day is soon! Come Lord Jesus.  
Amen.