

## The Handwriting Is On The Wall (2004)

A Sense of Weariness

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**Matthew 24:9-13** Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and you shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.

It has been my custom for the last seven or eight years to begin the Feast with a sermon that feeds off events and trends reported in the news and then combine them with the "handwriting on the wall" cliché derived from the Daniel 5 episode when Belshazzar was king of Babylon. The cliché essentially means that given the circumstances that were occurring before a certain event occurred, we should have known what was coming and then been prepared.

Americans especially, it seems, have a historical proclivity of not being prepared. Perhaps that is signaled by the name of our ancestor, Manasseh, which can mean "forgetful." As a nation, many times we should have understood the times we were living in and made whatever necessary adjustment that our thinking and conduct to circumstances required, and had been ready for what happened. We have not though, and thus we have experienced our Pearl Harbors and our 9/11 attacks.

As a spiritual nation, the church must not fall into the same pattern because the One warning us is our God. These verses are an ominous warning that the times just prior to Christ's return are going to be very difficult.

How difficult they might be is hard to estimate. But last July, as I was beginning to prepare these sermons, I think that I was given an insight from Evelyn. She was reading the novel *Windswept House* by Malachi Martin for the second time. You might recall that he was a Jesuit priest stationed in the Vatican. He also authored such books as *The Jesuits*, *The Final Conclave*, *The Vatican*, and *Keys of This Blood*, all of which deal with what was happening within and to the Catholic Church.

Malachi Martin believed that we are in the time of the end, and sincerely desired to see a change in his church. He also believed that the Catholic Church was in chaos, and steadily weakening as a positive moral and spiritual force. He did not live long enough to see the current child abuse problem that has been going on for the past several years. I wonder if there would have been another novel that maybe revolved around that were he still alive.

My interest is not in the Catholic Church, but the Church of God. What Evelyn told me was that since the church is the body of Christ, Malachi Martin believed that the intensity of what the church will face just before Christ returns is that the test provided by God through the times will be parallel to what Christ experienced through the crucifixion. I will tell you, that is pretty intense stuff to meditate on, and it makes Jesus' warning here in Matthew 24 leap off the page as a possibility. It is not a weak possibility either, because, as you will see in a moment, there is scriptural authority to back up such a possibility.

Christ does not say something as ominous and as serious as in verse 13 without good reason. He meant what He said because He reinforced verse 13 with what is now recorded in verse 22, where it says, "And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved *alive*," as it should read, because that is the implication of what He is saying. It is not "saved" in terms of salvation. It is "*saved*" in terms of our physical life being taken from us.

Sometimes it seems to me that Evelyn is an interesting source of information for me. She was in a J. C. Penney store today and got into a conversation with one of the workers there. It was a religious conversation. I do not mean that Evelyn was trying to convert this lady. She was not. It was just a matter that they got to talking about these things.

In many ways this lady believes many of the same things that we do. However, she believes in a rapture. This is what stirred Evelyn's interest, because this woman was very confident that she is going to be raptured away and escape all the trouble that she herself is able to perceive is going on in the world. It is building, and she can see it, but on the other hand she is confident that it is not going to touch her very strongly.

I want you to look at a scripture in the book of Zephaniah. This is something that is written to Jerusalem, to Israel.

**Zephaniah 2:1-3** Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O nation not desired [Sometimes that "not desired" is referring to the church]; before the decree bring forth, before the day pass as the chaff, before the fierce anger of the Lord come upon you, before the day of the Lord's anger come upon you. Seek you the Lord all you meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it *may* be you shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger.

That does not sound to me as though being taken away from the Tribulation and the Day of the Lord is written in stone. I do not believe that we can have the kind of blithe confidence that this woman apparently has, that she is just going to be lifted away from it and not have to face some of the very difficult things God prophesies are going to occur.

I think we understand enough about God's sovereignty and about God's purpose to know that because He is God, and has His purpose in mind as to what He is going to do, and because He is love, He is going to do that which is right in His eyes. It *is* going to be the right thing for every person that He will determine those future events in our life. It may be that He may *choose* us—any one of us—to have to be a witness for Him in very frightening circumstances.

Let us go back to the New Testament once again. I think we can understand from the patterns that are in the Bible that many very fine men and women—people of God—have had to go through some pretty horrible things.

**John 16:1-4** These things have I spoken unto you, that you should not be offended [or, caused to stumble]. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yes, the time comes that whosoever kills you will think that he does God service. And these things will they do unto you because they have not known the Father, nor me. But these things have I told

you, that when the time shall come, you may remember that I told you of them. And these things I said not unto you at the beginning, because I was with you. [In other words, He was there to protect them.]

I think history shows that this warning given here did not just apply to the apostles who were gathered before Him at that moment. Try to reconcile this series of verses to a presumptuous, careless "Well, we will just float away to a place of safety and wait out the terrible troubles the world is going through." It just does not match. As you can begin to see, the drift of this sermon this evening is: Are you **ready** for anything that these verses might say? You are probably not, and neither am I. God will have us there, but we have to have our minds set to the place that we will follow whichever route God wants us to go on.

We are going to go back to Matthew 10. Jesus said these words very early in His ministry. In fact, it was right after He chose the apostles, and after teaching them a while sent them out.

**Matthew 10:16-18** Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be you therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues: And you shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles.

**Matthew 10:21-25** And the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, [That hits home!], brother and brother, and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death. And you shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endures to the end shall be saved. But when they persecute you in this city, flee you into another, for verily I say unto you, You shall not have gone over the cities of Israel till the Son of man be come. The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?

**John 15:18-21** If the world hate you, you know that it hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love his own: but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you: if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me.

Just in this very brief amount of time we have read many scriptures in which Jesus is warning His followers that tough times are coming. Of course when we read a chapter like Matthew 24, that brings us right to home, our time, our day.

In terms of these serious warnings, we have had a very easy run of it compared to other centuries during the church's existence. But given things we are beginning to see occur in this nation—things such as the rejection of God and His word, especially the Ten Commandments from public life; and things like the Patriot and Homeland Security Acts, which have removed formerly guaranteed Constitutional protections—now almost anybody can be attacked by the government with little pretext.

In addition, there is the overt teaching of evolution which denies God's creation of the heavens, earth, and mankind, and is now taught throughout the United States of America by government order; maybe not federal government order, but state government order.

Infanticide is occurring through abortion. AIDS, for which there is some evidence of it being a deadly, human-manufactured, deliberately-planted plague, is devastating the lives of untold numbers of people. War seems to be occurring all around the planet. There is in the United States the rise of feminism, which destroys families. There is homosexuality, lesbianism, same-sex marriage, and all the attacks on nominal Christians.

Are you aware of what is going on in the Sudan? If my memory serves me correctly, almost a million people in Sudan who professed to be Christians have been killed; have been systemically slaughtered in that nation by Islamists.

I think that we are getting evidence that might indicate pretty strongly that Satan has been cast down.

**Revelation 12:7-12** And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon: and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent called the Devil, and Satan, which deceives the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony: and they loved not their lives unto the death. Therefore rejoice you heavens, and you that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! For the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has but a short time.

We are witnessing a rapidly intensifying worldwide culture of death. In general, we are witnessing the fulfillment of things, and the persecution and death of God's people may not be far off. Brethren, let us understand that Satan's wrath is aimed at the church of God, not the world. He already has got them in his pocket, so to speak, and it is the world that gets caught in what is intended to destroy the church.

**Psalms 11:1** In the Lord put I my trust: how say you to my soul, Flee as a bird to your mountain?

Is that something that you sometimes feel like doing? "Stop the world, I want to get off!" That is nothing new. David felt that way at times. He was the king, and you would think he would not feel that way with all the authority and power he had, but David had an awful lot of enemies. I know that we have speculated from time to time that it is possible that he might have been *the only converted person* in the country at the time. There is a possibility that others were too, but there were not very many that were really in tune with God's purpose. But David certainly was, and there were times that he felt like fleeing to a place of safety, up in the mountains somewhere.

**Psalms 11:2-3** For, lo, the wicked bend their bow, they make ready their arrow upon the string that they may privily [secretly] shoot at the upright in heart. If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?

I will tell you this. The foundations of the United States of America are *shaking*, and liberties that we have enjoyed for 225 or so years are being taken away. They are not taken away entirely yet, but like I said a little bit earlier, the laws are in place that on very slight pretext, they *could* be taken away.

I might remind you of something that happened to the Branch Davidians a little while ago. What kind of a pretext did they need to wipe out almost one hundred people. Our own government did that. About 45 of those people were helpless children who were burned to death. When that was over, President Bill Clinton said, "Let this be a lesson." And now laws are in place that were *not* in place then so that it can be done legally. Things are happening. They may not be *big* things, but things are moving into place.

From things that I hear from you in telephone conversations and email regarding the stresses you are going through, I believe that we are already feeling the effects of the preliminaries, and the foundations are shaking. We are feeling the effects of what the book, *The Fourth Turning*, calls "the unraveling of our culture."

The attack to unravel traditional values really began in earnest in the sixties, and it has continued with gradual increasing intensity. The governing concepts and moral virtues by which this nation operated, and which the overwhelming majority of Americans had since its founding, are being trashed and set aside *against* the will of the majority who do not want those things to be changed.

Governmental power in the United States is supposed to be shared by the three branches: the Executive, the Legislative, and the Judicial. However, the Judicial branch has seized control to such an extent that two author/scholars, William Quirk and R. Randall Bridwell, concluded that we now live in a judicial dictatorship. Federal judges now establish laws never enacted by the Legislative and Executive branches.

Beginning with the Constitution and its Bill of Rights, the laws of this nation and its judicial processes were founded upon biblical law, especially the Ten Commandment law, in both its letter and spirit. But a spiritual revolution has been underway now for about 75 years, and those concepts are being set aside in favor of a completely secular approach.

I think that all of us who have our hearts focused on the Kingdom of God, and at the same time observing what is happening around us, are experiencing a weariness brought on by the tensions flowing from a world that seems in endless rapidly changing turmoil. All the while we wonder, "When is this going to end? When is Christ going to return?" This tension creates a degree of stressful desperation borne of having to deal with uncertainty.

Let us look at Psalm 13. Listen to what David wrote. How often have you said something like this?

**Psalm 13:1-4** How long will you forget me, O Lord? Forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and hear me, O Lord my God: lighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death: Lest my enemy say, I have prevailed against him; and those that trouble me rejoice when I am moved.

I do not think that it is uncertainty regarding Christ's return that is the problem. Rather, the weariness arises from having to endure the stresses of this age without having solid, true answers and real solutions to give one hope, the things that will energize as you live your life. I say "energize" because

I have found in my experience that once I know exactly what I need to do, my weariness disappears, and I become revitalized and start charging toward working out a solution. But in the world, in this situation, the solutions that we have will not work yet. It is not our time to apply them, and it will not be until Christ returns. Until then we have to be content, watching a world gradually tear itself to pieces, and at the same time be anxious to begin solving problems, but knowing in our heart the conditions are going to get worse—much worse. How bad is it going to get? Well, I will tell you it is not a pretty picture that God paints.

Let us look at Isaiah 24, and this will give you a pretty good idea of what is coming.

**Isaiah 24:1-2** Behold, the Lord makes the earth empty, and makes it waste, and turns it upside down, and scatters abroad the inhabitants thereof. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest: as with the servant, so with his master: as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the taker of usury, so with the giver of usury to him.

That verse is just God's way of saying that everybody is going to get caught in this. Nobody escapes.

**Isaiah 24:3-6** The land shall be utterly emptied, and utterly spoiled: for the Lord has spoken this word. The earth mourns and fades away, the world languishes and fades away, the haughty people of the earth do languish. The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore has the curse devoured the earth, and they that dwell therein are desolate: therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men left.

How many are left? How many are alive on earth right now? Estimates are that there are somewhere between five and six billion people. But let us take a look at Amos 5. We know from Isaiah 24:6 that there are going to be some people left.

**Amos 5:3** For thus says the Lord God; The city that went out by a thousand shall leave an hundred, and that which went forth by an hundred shall leave ten, to the house of Israel.

If Israel is any model at all, when we reach the point of Isaiah 24:6, the population of the world will be reduced by ninety percent.

It has been already several years since I gave a couple of sermons largely drawn from the book *The Fourth Turning* by William Strauss and Neil Howe. All of these things I have already mentioned in this message fit within the context of the term that they use as "unraveling." By that they mean a *cultural* unraveling. Our culture is being torn to shreds. They are saying it is falling apart.

You may recall those men found evidence, that in 600 years of British and American history, every 80 to 100 years the same cultural condition repeats as occurred 80 to 100 years before, and that there are 4 distinct cultural conditions that metaphorically correspond to spring, summer, fall, and winter. As far as the timing of the cycles proceeds, we are about to enter a fourth turning; that is, from fall to winter. Fall is an unraveling. Winter is a crisis. We are moving from an unraveling to a crisis.

When the book was published, they felt that the year 2005 would be the beginning of the crisis cycle. They did not mean that it would begin abruptly just as soon as the year turned, but rather we would be getting very close to that time. They believe that the current unraveling cycle began in 1984, as Ronald Reagan's second term as President began.

The unraveling did not begin abruptly either. The way was paved by the hippie culture, the dropping out of young adults, rebellions in which parts of major cities burned, the war in court was in full swing, and "abortion on demand" became law. All that occurred before Ronald Reagan ever came into his first term. What those things did was set the stage for the "Me" generation, the "Gen-Xers," and the "13<sup>th</sup> Generation" who were the ones born to the ones rebelling in the sixties.

By the time President Reagan's second term began, the "Me" attitudes were flourishing. Public trust of institutions, including churches, was already sinking very low in peoples' opinions. America was awash in self-esteem, and as a culture we had become rooted to the self to an extent not before experienced by anyone alive. Instead of being a nation moving unitedly in one direction, as we had been in World War II and for a short time afterward, we exploded into a nation struggling in a confusing thousand directions at once.

It was also at the same time that the Worldwide Church of God unraveled. This time was during Reagan's second term, which is very interesting, because the Worldwide Church of God followed the same general pattern as the British and American cultures. I think this revealed that many of those people fellowshiping with the Worldwide Church of God were attuned to the heartbeat of the world rather than to God's kingdom.

As the culture unraveled, the search for personal meaning of life became a major concern, because the purpose for life was becoming ever more vague. A solid balance in life became ever more difficult to hold, as variety of choices as to what one could hold just multiplied exponentially. The culture wars were on, and people struggled to find their niche. Americans became increasingly cynical, not knowing who or what to trust.

What we are feeling is the stress, brethren, of impatience and of having too narrow a vision of what is being worked out. When that occurs, what is really happening is that our focus is beginning to drift. We are becoming more concerned about the around and the about than the above. The culture wars were on, and we got caught in them.

Turn with me to Colossians 1. Verse 19 is speaking of Christ, and it says:

**Colossians 1:19-23** For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell; and having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself: by him, I say, whether they be things in earth or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now has he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreprieveable in his sight: If you continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister.

**Here** is where our focus should be. **Here** is where our hope should be. It should be in the gospel. That hope lies in the establishment of God's governance of earth, through Jesus Christ.

Christ has already fulfilled the hope of reconciliation, given us His spirit, and is preparing us for His coming, but more yet must be done. Every one of us realizes a crisis of major proportion is right on the horizon, because we know and believe a fair amount of biblical prophecy.

Today's weaponry is of such a horrific magnitude that death and destruction is going to be the greatest this world has ever seen, and mankind has no solution. So in this sense there is very much to fear, because as the tensions continue, the frustrations of leaders increase, tempers rise, and serious consequences come closer to reality. But God has a solution, and what lies beyond is beautiful beyond our ability to even dream, but we want to get on with it, do we not? Sometimes we are very uncertain about which direction to move, especially since the church is in such a scattered and weakened state. There is a great deal of stress in uncertainty.

**Proverbs 13:12** Hope deferred makes the heart sick.

If we take that proverb only for what it says on the surface, there is little else I think that can be added. But if we look at it from a slightly different perspective, there is very much here in the way of contentment and encouragement, and so I want to give you a little bit different perspective.

Did we ever stop to think that having our hope deferred is not an unmitigated evil? In fact, a case can be made for having one's hope deferred—that it is the very best thing that can occur, especially when God is involved in the equation.

The problem more often than not is the way in which we are looking and are perceiving what it is we are going through. This is because we tend to focus on our desire and want it fulfilled, and that is the root of the discontentment and the weariness. This is because focusing has a tendency to narrow one's view to everything else that might be involved.

God not only sees the individual parts, but also the entire picture and how all of the individual parts fit into the whole, and He only knows the precise purpose that He is bringing to pass.

Hope deferred is better than hope destroyed. The author, A. J. Cronin said in one of his books, "The true hell is not when hope is deferred, but when people cease to have hope."

Jesus asked, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?" We are finding that hope—even the hope of the gospel—requires a great deal of faith.

Hebrews 11:1 says that "faith is the assurance of hope." The word translated "assurance" I think can be better understood literally. It says, "Faith stands *under* hope." Faith is hope's foundation. In fact, real hope grows out of faith. We do not want to get things backwards here, because we have got to learn that faith is not the realization of things hoped for. It is the foundation. It is the assurance of them, but it is not the realization of things hoped for. Many, many great men and women of faith before us died while their hope was deferred. Did you ever notice what the Bible says about those people? Let us go to Hebrews 11 and take a look.

**Hebrews 11:13** These all died in faith, [specifically the ones mentioned in verse 4, beginning with Abel], not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.



Here is where faith arises from—the kind of faith that will stand under our hope that we will not allow to diminish. We are focused on *it* because we have faith that this hope is absolutely sure, and our weariness will evaporate in the face of that kind of faith.

**Hebrews 11:14-16** For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he has prepared for them a city.

**Hebrews 11:35** Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection.

Brethren, we are in ***GREAT*** company! If our hope is deferred, and we still have faith that the God who gave us that hope is still sitting on His throne, working things out, it still lies ahead. It has not evaporated, because God is still alive. Where is our faith? What are we focusing on? Is it the gospel of the Kingdom of God, or is it the around and the about? If our focus is on the bad news we are hearing from the world all the time, you are going to be down.

There are ***GREAT*** times that lie before us—awesome, beautiful, wonderful times forever! Abraham died before he received it, and so did Isaac, and so did Jacob, and so did Sarah, and so did David, and so did all of the prophets. We are in great company. We are still alive yet. It could even happen while we are yet alive. The point is, brethren, if they did it, so can we! The same God is still on His throne. It will work out.

One man, whose name unfortunately I cannot remember, said that "hope is the devotion of one's life to the unfulfilled good." Think about that. There is a lot of meat there.

We are facing a daunting future, but instead of becoming wearily heartsick because our hope is not realized yet, thus maybe allowing ourselves to settle down into Laodiceanism, frustration, and even utter hopelessness, the hopeful person believes that the Creator God is always at work, and therefore the very best of possibilities exist to this very moment.

Do we understand that what we might consider as being bad is, in reality, the very best thing that can occur, because God is on His throne? That is the different perspective. If He defers things happening, it can only mean it is good that it is occurring. Can we accept that, and not let it get us down?

Let us go to the book of Lamentations 3 as we begin to draw this to a close. This is a dirge of seemingly utter dejection over the destruction of Jeremiah's homeland.

**Lamentations 3:18-22** And I said, My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord: Remembering my affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall [the bad things, you see]. My soul has them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me. This I recall in my mind, **therefore have I hope**. It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.

How about that? With all of the bad things that happened to Jeremiah personally, and the things that he witnessed, he said, "How merciful God is that I am still alive, because His compassions fail not." I tell you, there was a man of faith. That is really admirable.

**Lamentations 3:23-26** They [His compassions] are new every morning: great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The Lord is good unto them that wait for Him, to the soul that seeks him. [Remember, I said earlier that the stress is coming from our impatience.] It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.

One would think that there would be no hope remaining in him, but Jeremiah believed in God, knowing that God overrules all, and that from this horror would come things far better than if God permitted what caused the devastation to go on. Jeremiah knew that he had to be patient and let God do His thing.

Let us go back now to Proverbs 13:12. We only read one part of that verse, and the last part of the verse says:

**Proverbs 13:12** But when the desire [that which one hopes for] comes, it is a tree of life.

That is, it fills our life with soul-stirring and energizing possibilities. The apostle Paul said in Romans 5:2 that "We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God," and that is having glory as God is glorified. What an awesome end to look forward to! A sense of weariness arises because we are allowing our focus to shift to the around and the about. Remember, when Peter was walking on the water he began to sink when he allowed his eyes to drift away from the fulfillment of his true goal—to get to Christ. Is it even possible to have a greater hope than what we can have? I do not think so.

**I John 3:1-3** Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knows us not because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him: for we shall see him as he is. And every man that has *this* hope in him purifies himself, even as *he* is pure.

God seemingly delays because He is not willing that any man should perish. But not only that they should not perish, but that they should have the opportunity to grow to the greatest degree possible for them, and that means you and me. Let us not become weary in well doing, but let us use this Feast to once again be regenerated with enthusiasm to finish what we started with the same kind of boldness and confidence with which we began our conversion.