

Great Commission Finished (Late 64)

By Ed Stevens -- Then and Now Podcast -- March 10, 2013

INTRODUCTION:

- A. We are now getting into the part of first century history which can rightly be called "the eve of destruction." This time we will wrap up our study of the canonization process, in preparation for study of the Neronic persecution.
- B. Before we begin I want to mention the Lesson Outlines for These Podcasts: If you are not a regular listener, you may not be aware that there is a PDF lesson outline available for each podcast. Many listeners find it helpful to have that in front of them as they listen. If you would like to get that PDF, simply email me and request it. If you are planning on being a regular listener to this program, and would like to automatically receive the PDF as soon as it is ready, without having to request each one separately, simply email me and ask to be put on the **PDF list**. My email address is: <preterist1@preterist.org>
- C. Let's ask God for His guidance in our study here --
Our Heavenly Father, Lord, Creator, and Sovereign of the Universe, we humble ourselves before you and ask for your forgiveness of our sins and your providential guidance in our lives. We pray for the leaders of this nation and of all nations who have forsaken Your Ways. You sent your Son to be a blessing to all the nations, but they have rejected Him and brought a curse upon themselves instead. We pray that our fellow Christians all around the world will join with us in humbling ourselves, and praying, and seeking Your Face, and turning from our wicked ways. We all desperately need to turn back to the Bible and reapply its absolute truths to our lives, so that we can set the example as shining lights upon a hill. Use these historical studies to teach us the mistakes of the past, so we can avoid them in the future. We praise Your Holy Name for your first century saints who suffered unspeakable tortures and unthinkable horrors in the Neronic persecution in order to be salt and light in the midst of a very perverse and crooked generation. They deserved the great resurrection and rapture reward that You gave them at the Coming of Your Son Jesus in 66 AD. By looking at their amazing examples of faithfulness in the midst of terrifying persecution and overwhelming hardship, may we all be inspired to "deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly" like they did. (Tit. 2:12) It is in the Name of our precious Savior, and Your Glorious Son, that we pray. Amen.
- D. Several have written to tell us how much they appreciate these historical studies, and how much it has helped them understand the Bible better. If you have benefited from these studies, we would encourage you to become partners with us in this teaching and publishing ministry, in order to share in all the good fruit that comes from it. I get emails every week from listeners all over the country and around the world expressing their appreciation for these historical studies. Those who contribute to International Preterist Association will receive some of our latest and greatest resources as our gift to you. Simply go to our website and click on the left sidebar button entitled "Make a Donation to IPA" where you can make a one-

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- E. In the last three sessions, we looked at the issue of Apostolic Canonization, and how the books of our New Testament were written, copied, circulated, collected, and certified by the apostles and their inspired co-workers. I hope all of our listeners have benefited from those studies as much as I have.
- F. This time we will tie up all the loose ends of that study, and get ready to launch into the Neronic persecution. The first thing we want to look at is the completion of the Great Commission. Jesus had told the disciples that the End would not arrive and the Kingdom would not come UNTIL they had preached the gospel throughout the whole Roman world.

Great Commission Finished

Dec - 64 – Gospel had been “preached in the whole world...to all the nations” (Matt. 24:14). From AD 58 onwards, Paul began to indicate in his epistles that the gospel had indeed been preached throughout the Diaspora, wherever there were Jewish communities. Notice what he said about this in his prison epistle to the Colossians (in AD 63):

Col. 1:5-6 ...the gospel...**in all the world** [Gk. *panti to kosmo*]...is constantly bearing fruit and increasing...

Col. 1:23 ...the gospel...was proclaimed in **all creation under heaven**...

1 Tim. 3:16 By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, **proclaimed among the nations** [Gk. *ekeruxthe en ethnesin*], **believed on in the world** [Gk. *episteuthe en kosmo*], taken up in glory.

Tommy Ice and other futurists point out that **all nations** in the **whole world** were not evangelized by AD 70. They reason that since the gospel was not preached in America and Australia before AD 70, the End of the Age could not have arrived then. But were America and Australia really included in this prophecy of Jesus?

In Col. 1:6, 23 quoted above, Paul says the gospel had already been proclaimed in “all creation under heaven” (Gk. *pase ktisei hupo ouranon*), and was already bearing fruit in “all the world” (Gk. *panti to kosmo*). And in Rom. 1:8 Paul states that news about the faith of the Roman Christians had spread throughout “the whole world” [Gk. *holo to kosmo*]. Did folks in Australia or America hear about the faith of the Roman Christians?

When we look at the usage of these two phrases (“the whole world” and “all the nations”) in the New Testament, we can easily see that they are not talking about every ethnic group on the whole planet, but rather the Roman world and the Diaspora of the first century.

“the whole world” -- Lk. 2:1; Acts 11:28; 17:31; 19:27; 24:5; Rom. 10:18; and Rev. 3:10. cf. Josephus *Antiq* 15:387 (15.11.1) where he records the speech of Herod the Great who said, “the Romans...are the rulers of the whole world.”

“all the nations” -- Lk. 21:24; 24:47; Acts 2:5; 21:21; Rom. 1:5; 16:26; and 2 Tim. 4:17

Notice that the phrase “*the whole world*” (Lk. 2:1) is translated “whole Roman empire” in the *Amplified Bible* and as “whole empire” in the *HCSB*. Futurist translators here admit that this phrase does not mean all individuals on the whole planet, nor even every continent on the planet. The famine predicted in Acts 11:28 actually occurred during the reign of Claudius, and it was not a global famine, but mainly in Palestine and Judea. In Acts 17:31 it is stated that Jesus was “about to judge” (Gk. *mello*) the world (Gk. *oikoumenen*). If futurists insist on taking “world” globally, then they need to show a universal judgment of all men on the whole planet that occurred shortly after Paul spoke these words. In Acts 19:27 the Ephesian silversmiths claimed that *the whole world* worshipped the goddess Artemis. But she was only a Mideastern and Mediterranean idol. Paul’s accusers (in Acts 24:5) claimed that he stirred up dissension among *all Jews throughout the world*, but we only know of his travels in Palestine, Turkey, Greece, and Italy (the **Roman world** or **Diaspora**). Paul claims (Rom. 10:18) that the gospel had already gone out to the ends of the world by that time (AD 58). In the letter to the church at Philadelphia (Rev 3:10) Jesus reveals that he would keep them safe from the hour of testing (the Neronic persecution) which was about to come (Gk. *mello*) upon the whole world (in AD 64-65). The Neronic persecution did not reach all the way to America and Australia, but it did affect the Roman world and the Diaspora.

The phrase “*all the nations*” as used in the texts listed above is also very revealing. In Luke’s parallel account of the Synoptic Apocalypse (Lk. 21:24) Jesus said the Jews “would be led captive into all the nations.” Did the Romans take them to Australia and America? Or is it referring only to those nations within the Roman sphere of influence? On the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:5) it says there were Jews residing in Jerusalem from “**every nation under heaven**.” Then it lists those regions (Acts 2:9-11) from which they originated: the Mideast (Persia) and all the nations on the Mediterranean Rim. Acts 2:9-11 does not mention Australia or America. Paul claims (Rom. 16:26) that the gospel “had been made known to all the nations” by the time he wrote Romans (AD 58). Was he including Australia and America in that list of “all the nations”? In his last epistle (2 Tim. 4:17) written just before he died in the Neronic persecution (AD 64-65), Paul stated that in his trial before the Roman court that “all the nations” had heard the gospel. Were there representatives from America and Australia in Nero’s courtroom?

The fourth century church historian Eusebius also affirmed that the gospel spread throughout “the whole world” in the first century, and there is not the slightest implication that America or Australia was included. [Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.* 2.3.1 and 3.8.11]

Josephus in his lamentation of the destruction of Jerusalem refers to **the Diaspora** where the Jewish nation had been scattered as being “**all the habitable earth**” -- “...yet hath not its great antiquity, nor its vast riches, nor the **diffusion of its**

nation over all the habitable earth [Gk. *holes tes oikoumenes*], nor the greatness of the veneration paid to it on a religious account, been sufficient to preserve it from being destroyed..." [Wars 6:442 (6.10.1)]

As an additional note, it is interesting that even in the Talmud [Bab. Talm. Mas. *Sanhedrin* 97a], one of the rabbis asserted that the Messiah would not come until the whole world was converted to the faith of the heretics (Christians):

It has been taught, R. Nehemiah said: in the generation of Messiah's coming impudence will increase, esteem be perverted, the vine yield its fruit, yet shall wine be dear, and the Kingdom will be converted to heresy with none to rebuke them. This supports R. Isaac, who said: **The son of David will not come until the whole world is converted to the belief of the heretics.** [Bab. Talm. Mas. *Sanhedrin* 97a]

We have seen that the two phrases ("the whole world" and "all the nations") as used throughout the NT are clearly referring to **the Roman world** and **the Diaspora** of the first century. Therefore, despite the shallow objections of the futurists, it seems conclusive that Matthew 24:14 (and the Great Commission in Matt. 28:19) was already fulfilled by the time Paul wrote his prison epistles in AD 63.

So, it should not be surprising that the completion of the canon of NT scripture occurred about the same time. In past sessions we have seen that all the NT writings were finished by the time Peter died in the Neronic persecution in 64. That was only about a year after Paul had written his last epistle to Timothy in 63.

New Testament Writings Complete

Early 65 – The Literary Efforts of the Apostles Ceased. And they stopped writing, not because they wanted to, but because they were killed in the Neronic persecution and were no longer around. The fact that their writings came to an abrupt end before 70, and we hear no more from them after that, tells us that they must have died. If any of them had remained alive on earth beyond AD 70, they would have continued to pump out more inspired epistles to the churches about the fulfillments of their prophecies.

Apostle John is a case in point. If he was still alive on earth after AD 70, he could easily have written more inspired scripture. And it would have been necessary for him to do that, in view of the statements of Papias, Polycarp, and Ignatius saying that the Parousia was still future. It would be criminal negligence for an inspired apostle to ignore that false teaching and let it go uncorrected. He should have spoken up and let everyone know that his book of Revelation had already been fulfilled.

Church historians like John A. T. Robinson find it extremely peculiar that missionary activity and the writing of epistles intensified in those last few years just before the Jewish revolt. And the time statements in those last few books were also intensified, both in quantity and imminency. Thirty-five years before this, Jesus told his disciples that all these things would occur in that generation sometime, before all of them died. But in the last dozen epistles that were written, the imminency language is extremely intense ("coming of the Lord is at hand" end of all things is at hand" "it is the last hour" "the world is passing away"). All their intense missionary activity and

epistle-writing came to a screeching halt in AD 64 with the deaths of Peter, John, and Paul in the Neronic persecution. We would think that some of Paul's traveling companions (Timothy, Titus, Gaius, Aristarchus, Tychicus, et al) would have survived the Neronic persecution and continued working with the churches, even if they had to go undercover after the Neronic persecution broke out. But we hear no more from any of them after Peter penned his final epistle (2 Peter), where he says that his departure (death) was at hand. *He sealed the New Testament canon with his blood.*

Paul mentions about eighty different individuals who worked with him in his missionary activities. After AD 64 we do not hear from a single one of them. A profound silence rolls in upon the church like a London fog. Robinson likens it to a noisy train going into a tunnel and coming out the other side radically changed. We are at a loss to know what happened to the train inside the tunnel to change it so radically. That is a good illustration of what happened in AD 64.

The Neronic persecution took out all the visible leaders of the church and most of the visible members as well. The few who did survive the Neronic purge were forced underground until they were raptured. They were literally running for their lives. They could not take time to write any more letters, nor were there any Christian couriers who were willing to risk their lives to carry the letters to churches that were in hiding or no longer in existence.

All missionary and literary activity ceased. The Great Commission had been accomplished. The canon of New Testament scripture was closed. There were no more inspired writers left alive on earth to write any more books. From here onwards in our chronology you will notice that there is no more mention of any visible activities of the apostles and the Christians before AD 70. The Christians have left the stage, and the spotlight shifted over to the Jews and their war with Rome.

Peter said in his first epistle that the saints would be judged and rewarded first (1 Pet. 4:17), before the wicked were judged and destroyed. That seems to be exactly what happened. The Neronic persecution was when judgment began with the household of God. The Christians were judged and rewarded first, then the wrath was poured out full strength upon their persecutors.

Hardship and suffering is how the apostles and their co-workers and fellow saints became "worthy" of the great reward that they received at the Parousia. It is how God shaped them into His useful servants. Their suffering purified them and inspired them to maximize their efforts to complete the great commission before the Parousia. They produced "much fruit" and gained "much glory" as a result. The greater the suffering, the greater the purity, the greater the fruit, and the greater the reward in heaven. The discipline is essential to our spiritual growth and well-being. All those who wish to serve Christ will suffer persecution, ridicule, rejection, and hardship. It goes with the territory. But the reward at the end of our lives is worth it. No pain, no gain. There really is no comparison between the lightweight sufferings we go through here, versus the infinite weight of glory we will receive in heaven after we die. Those dear saints in the first century understood that, and thrust away from them all their foolish and frivolous pursuits in order to complete the great commission and gain the glory that Christ had offered to them. They wanted that glory AT ALL COSTS. I am trying to have that same attitude that the apostles and Christ exhibited.

In Jesus' Parable of the Tares (Matt. 13:24-43), the wheat is gathered (raptured)

into the barn first (AD 66), and then the tares were burned (AD 70). The Neronic persecution eliminated the majority of remaining Christians. The few remaining went into hiding until the rapture. There were not a lot of Christians left on earth by the time of the Parousia. Jesus had already predicted this very scenario when he said, "when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Lk. 18:8), and "Unless those days had been cut short, no flesh would have been saved" (Matt 24:22). So, it wasn't a large number of saints left on earth to be raptured, and they were in hiding, running for their lives. If the world around them noticed their absence, they would only have thought that the Christians had either fled in the night to escape persecution, or they were rounded up by the Jewish and Roman authorities and taken away to be killed.

One of the arguments against the authenticity and canonicity of books like Jude, Second Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation, is that those books did not enjoy a wide circulation like the gospels and Paul's earlier epistles. The reason for this limited copying and distribution was its nearness to the outbreak of the Neronic persecution, not because of any lack of inspiration or acceptance by the churches. Those NT books that were written two or more years before the persecution had plenty of time to be copied and circulated widely. But those written less than a year before the persecution, did not have enough time to be copied and distributed widely. Consequently, there weren't many copies of them floating around after AD 70, and this lack of widespread circulation made them appear spurious. The liberal and skeptic argument runs something like this: If a book was in wide circulation, it was only because it had been widely accepted by all the churches. Conversely, if a book was not widely circulated, it was because it had not been "accepted" by most of the churches, and was therefore considered non-canonical.

However, that theory of canonization grossly overlooks the time factor involved with the Neronic persecution. It is easy to see how good apostolically-authorized books could get lost in the shuffle after the Neronic persecution broke out, simply because it was no longer safe for Christian scribes and couriers to do their work of copying and distributing the books. Writing, copying, and courier activities ceased when the last apostles, their scribes, and couriers were killed in the Neronic persecution. Any Christians who remained alive at that time (AD 64), went underground in hiding until the Parousia (AD 66).

Another factor that may have limited the wide circulation of some of these last few NT books, especially in Asia Minor and Turkey, was the fact that "all who are in Asia turned away" (apostasized) in AD 63 before the Neronic persecution broke out. That great apostasy of those churches in Asia (and elsewhere) would have broken the scribal and courier links in the distribution chain. This easily explains why some of those last few books of the NT did not get widely distributed, and were consequently questioned by the second century church.

So, we have seen that by the time of the Neronic persecution, all 27 books of our New Testament had been finished and put into circulation. Here is the list of those books in the order in which they were written and circulated (with their dates):

Matthew (before AD 49)	Revelation (AD 62-63)
Galatians (AD 51-52)	Ephesians (AD 62-63)
1 Thessalonians (AD 51-52)	Colossians (AD 62-63)
2 Thessalonians (AD 51-52)	Philemon (AD 62-63)
Mark (cir. AD 55)	Philippians (AD 62-63)
1 Corinthians (AD 57)	Hebrews (AD 62-63)
2 Corinthians (AD 57)	Titus (mid-AD 63)
Romans (AD 58)	1 Timothy (mid-AD 63)
Luke (AD 61)	1 Peter (mid-AD 63)
Acts (AD 61-62)	2 Timothy (late-AD 63)
John (AD 60-62)	Jude (late 64)
James (AD 61-62)	2 Peter (late 64)
1, 2, 3 John (AD 61-62)	

Late 64 – Matthias b. Theophilus (b. Ananus b. Seth) was appointed as High Priest by Agrippa II, in place of Jesus b. Gamaliel [*Antiq.* 20:223 (20.9.7)]. He ruled for at least two years (AD 64-66), and probably as long as four years (AD 64-68). We do not know whether he was replaced at the outbreak of the war in AD 66, or later in the midst of the war (AD 68) when the Zealots selected their own High Priest by casting lots (Phannias b. Samuel). According to Derenbourg (*Essai* 249), cited in VanderKam (p. 487n), Matthias was the last of the High Priests to be installed according to the normal procedure (appointed by Agrippa II and perhaps certified by the Sanhedrin). [VanderKam 487]

There is also some reason to suspect that the Neronic persecution, which began in the summer of 64, might have been the impetus for a change in both the procuratorship and the high priesthood. Florus may have been sent to Judea in the late summer of 64 for the express purpose of enforcing the Neronic persecution, while Agrippa II at the same time may have appointed a new high priest (Matthias b. Theophilus) who would be willing and able to carry out the dirty work of Nero against the Christians. This would have been late Summer or early Fall of AD 64.

A number of scholars suggest that the father of Matthias (**Theophilus**) was the son of Annas I, thus making Matthias the grandson of Annas I (the eighth and last member of the Annas family to be high priest).

Josephus for some strange reason does not say much about Matthias, raising some speculations about his identity and possible connections with Josephus. He was high priest at the time the war broke out in AD 66, and was supposedly appointed about the same time that Gessius Florus became the Procurator (in place of Albinus), which is probably Late 64 while the Neronic persecution was underway.

VanderKam thinks he might be mentioned by Josephus in the *Wars* [6.114 (6.2.2)], but the only thing that text says about him is that he had four sons who escaped to the Romans during the siege (AD 70). Matthias was the High Priest at the time of the Neronic persecution, which Josephus also does not say anything about, even though he was in Rome at the time the fire broke out, and afterwards when the Neronic persecution was raging.

The name Matthias was very common in the family of Josephus (i.e., his father and brother and several ancestors had that name). According to the autobiography

of Josephus (*Life* 5), the name of Josephus's father was Matthias, who was born in the tenth year of Archelaus (AD 6). He would have been 58 years old at the time this Matthias b. Theophilus became high priest. Some have wondered if this Matthias might have been the father of Josephus, but Josephus does not provide any clear support for that connection. If there was a family connection here, it would explain why Josephus was so complimentary to Annas II.

However, the most interesting thing about this **Matthias** is the fact that he became high priest during the time when Christians were still being rounded up and slaughtered by Nero and his Jewish helpers (AD 65), and while the Zealots and Sicarii were trying to stir up interest in a revolt. The Jews would have taken full advantage of this Neronic persecution to rid themselves of all Christians, not only in Rome, but in Judea especially, as well as all the major Jewish centers scattered throughout the Roman world. It is very strange that Josephus says nothing about the fire or the persecution afterwards, even though he was in Rome at that very time. There does not appear to be any further information about Matthias in the Talmudic sources, which were produced by the rabbis at Yavneh, who might also have had motives to cover up any connections between Matthias and the Neronic persecution.

Josephus said that some High Priest with this name was a son of Boethus and that he was slaughtered along with three of his sons by Simon son of Giora [*Wars* 5.527 (5.13.1); and 6.114 (6.2.2)]. It is not certain, however, that it was the same Matthias. There has been some speculation that this Matthias may have been related to Josephus in some way, since his father and brother both had that same name. However, Josephus mentions his father in the same context as being held in prison in isolation [*Wars* 5.533 (5.13.1)]. So, the identity and tenure of Matthias still remains somewhat mysterious and hard to nail down.

Well, that is all we need to cover in this session. Next time we will dive into the Great Fire in Rome and the Neronic persecution that followed soon afterwards. Thank you so much for listening. If any of our listeners have questions or comments about what we have looked here in this session, do not hesitate to email me. My email address is: **preterist1@preterist.org**

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If you would like a couple of great books which detail all of these events, I would recommend **ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS** by F. F. Bruce, which is available for order at our website (www.preterist.org), and **JEWISH BACKGROUNDS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT** by J. Julius Scott, which is available from Amazon.com. Be sure to get a copy of my book, **First Century Events**, which deals with the Roman, Jewish, and Christian events of the first century. We will be using it as a study guide here in our studies of the first century. You can purchase it from our website: www.preterist.org

Some further recommended reading:

Josephus *Antiquities* and *Wars* (sections which deal with the Herodian rulers)