

UNDERSTANDING MATTHEW 24 & 25 – JOHN WALVOORD

Chapter 24

The Signs of the End of the Age

Introductory Considerations

The discourse of Christ on the Mount of Olives is one of the four major discourses of Christ and should be compared in its content to the Sermon on the Mount, dealing with the moral and ethical principles of the kingdom (Mt 5-7); the discourse on the present age; the kingdom in its mystery form while the King is absent (Mt 13); and the upper room discourse, dealing with the church as the body of Christ in the present age (Jn 13-17). By contrast, the discourse on the Mount of Olives contains Christ's teaching on the end of the age, the period leading up to the second coming of Christ to set up His kingdom on earth.

The Olivet discourse was delivered after Christ's scathing denunciation, in Matthew 23, of the hypocrisy and false religion which characterized the scribes and Pharisees, closing with His lament over Jerusalem, where the prophets of God through the centuries had been rejected and martyred.

Prediction of Destruction of the Temple, 24:1-2

After delivering the denunciation of the scribes and the Pharisees, Christ left the temple, according to Matthew 24:1-2; and as He left, His disciples pointed out the magnificence of the temple buildings. The temple had been under construction since 20 B.C., and, though not actually completed until a.d. 64, its main buildings apparently were largely finished. To the disciples, the temple seemed an impressive evidence of the solidarity of Israel's religious life and of God's blessing upon Jerusalem.

When the disciples pointed out the temple, according to verse 2, Jesus said, "See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." The disciples apparently received these solemn words in silence, but their thoughts were sobering. The temple was made of huge stones, some of them many tons in size, carved out in the stone quarries underneath the city of Jerusalem. Such large stones could be dislodged only through deliberate force. The sad fulfillment was to come in a.d. 70, only six years after the temple was completed, when the Roman soldiers deliberately destroyed the temple, prying off stones one by one and casting them into the valley below. Recent excavations have uncovered some of these stones.

Questions of the Disciples, 24:3

As they walked from the temple area through the Kidron Valley and up the slope of the Mount of Olives, the disciples, no doubt, were pondering these solemn words of Christ. Matthew 24:3 records that when Christ sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples then came with their questions. According to Mark 13:3, questions were asked by Peter, James, John, and Andrew.

Matthew 24:3 records, "And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" The disciples had in mind, of course, that the destruction of Solomon's temple, in 586 b.c, preceded the time of captivity. How did the temple's future

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destruction relate to the promise of the coming kingdom and their hope that Christ would reign over the nation of Israel?

The discourse that follows depends for its interpretation on the question of whether these prophecies should be interpreted literally. Amillenarians, who do not interpret literally any prophecy concerning a future millennial reign of Christ, tend to take the prophecies in this discourse in a general rather than a particular way, and frequently try to find fulfillment in the first century in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem. Postmillenarians, following the idea that the gospel will gradually triumph over the entire world, have to spiritualize it even more, because this discourse indicates a trend toward increasing evil, which Christ will judge at His second coming.

Liberal interpreters consider this discourse as only a summary of apocalyptic ideas current in the first century, presented here as if taught by Christ but probably not actually uttered by Christ. M'Neile, for instance, states, Some predictions of Jesus concerning the nearness of the End probably formed the basis upon which a Jewish-Christian writer compiled a series of sayings, many of them couched in the conventional language of Jewish eschatology. This theory of a Small Apocalypse is widely accepted in various forms by modern writings.

After citing Moffat, B. Weiss, J. Weiss, Zahn, and others, M'Neile adds, "The compiler of it gave some doubtless genuine sayings of Jesus, and also some that reflect a later date when Christians had begun to realize that some delay must be expected before the Parousia."

Those who take the Olivet discourse literally, of course, not only reject the liberal interpretation, but also the amillenarian view of this discourse. Premillenarians, accordingly, interpret the discourse as an accurate statement of end-time events, which will lead up to and climax in the second coming of Christ to set up His millennial kingdom on the earth.

Some variations, however, may also be observed in pre-millennial interpretation. Those who believe that the rapture, or translation of the church, occurs before the time of trouble at the end of the age usually do not believe that the rapture is in view at all in this discourse, as the rapture was first introduced in John 14:1-3, the night before Jesus was crucified, sometime after the Olivet discourse. Those accepting the posttribulational view, that the rapture of the church and the second coming of Christ occur at the same time, tend to ignore the details of this discourse in the same fashion as the amillenarians do. For instance, G. Campbell Morgan skips over Matthew 24:15-22, which is the most important portion of Matthew 24.

If the details of this discourse are observed and interpreted literally, it fits best with the view that the rapture is not revealed in this discourse at all, but is a later revelation, introduced by Christ in John 14 and revealed in more detail in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4. There, the "blessed hope" that Christ will come for His church before these end-time events overtake the world is revealed.

The period climaxing in the second coming of Christ to the earth, according to many premillenarians, begins with the rapture, or translation of the church, and is followed by the rapid rise of a dictator in the Middle East who makes a covenant with Israel. As a result of this covenant, Israel enjoys protection and peace for three-and-a-half-years. Then the covenant

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is broken, and the final three-and-a-half years leading up to the second coming of Christ is a period of great tribulation and time of Israel's trouble.

The second coming of Christ begins His millennial reign of one thousand years, which in turn is followed by the new heaven and the new earth and the eternal state. The Olivet discourse, accordingly, is in some sense a summary of the same period described in Revelation 6-19.

In Matthew 24:3, the disciples had asked three questions: (1) "Tell us, when shall these things be?"; (2) "What shall be the sign of thy coming?"; and (3) What shall be the sign "of the end of the world?" Matthew's gospel does not answer the first question, which relates to the destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70. This is given more in detail in Luke, while Matthew and Mark answer the second and third questions, which actually refer to Christ's coming and the end of the age as one and the same event. Matthew's account of the Olivet discourse records that portion of Christ's answer that relates to His future kingdom and how it will be brought in, which is one of the major purposes of the gospel.

Course of the Present Age, 24:4-14

Expositors have taken various approaches to the introductory remarks of Christ. G. Campbell Morgan, for instance, regards the whole section of Matthew 24:4-22 as already fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem. Morgan states, "Everything predicted from verse six to verse twenty-two was fulfilled to the letter in connection with the Fall of Jerusalem within a generation." Alfred Plummer goes a step further and includes verse 28 as fulfilled in a.d. 70.

Both Morgan and Plummer ignore the identification of the "great tribulation" in Matthew 24:15, 21 as a specific future period of time, and also ignore the details of the prophecy, not even attempting an exegesis of most of the verses.

Accordingly, if the interpreter of this section wants to take the prophecies literally and find a reasonable explanation of the predictions, he must limit the introductory section to Matthew 24:4-14. While variations in interpretation occur, H. A. Ironside expresses a plausible view that verses 4-8 give general characteristics of the age, and that verses 9-14 emphasize the particular signs of the end of the age.

Other premillennial interpreters, however, prefer to take Matthew 24:4-14 as a unit, describing the general characteristics of the age leading up to the end, while at the same time recognizing that the prediction of the difficulties, which will characterize the entire period between the first and second coming of Christ, are fulfilled in an intensified form as the age moves on to its conclusion. If Matthew 24:4-14 deals with general signs, then verses 15-26 may be considered as specific signs. The second coming of Christ is revealed in verses 27-31, which should be compared with the more detailed prophecy of Revelation 19:11-21.

In Matthew 24:4-14, at least nine major characteristics of this general period are described. These characteristics may be itemized as follows: (1) false Christs, 24:4-5; (2) wars and rumors of wars, 24:6-7; (3) famines, 24:7; (4) pestilence, 24:7; (5) earthquakes, 24:7; (6) many martyrs, 24:8-10; (7) false prophets, 24:11; (8) increasing evil and loss of fervent love, 24:12; and (9) worldwide preaching of the gospel of the kingdom, 24:13-14.

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In general, these signs have been at least partially fulfilled in the present age and have characterized the period between the first and second coming of Christ. They should be understood as general signs rather than specific signs that the end is near.

As stated in verse 8, these are the beginning rather than the end of the sorrows which characterize the close of the age.

Accordingly, through the centuries, there have been many false religious leaders or false Christs. War, famine, and pestilence are still with us. There is some evidence that there is an increase in earthquakes, and, of course, Scriptures record that the greatest earthquake of all time will occur just before the second coming of Christ (Rev 16:18-20). There have been many martyrs through the centuries and probably more in the twentieth century than even in the first century. False prophets and false teachings have plagued the church and the world. The increase in iniquity and loss of fervent love are all too evident in the world, and are detailed, for instance, in Christ's message to the churches of the first century in Revelation 2-3.

Throughout the age also there is the announcement of the coming kingdom when Christ will reign on earth, which, of course, will be preached in intensified form as the end approaches. The age in general, climaxing with the second coming of Christ, has the promise that those that endure to the end (Mt 24:13), that is, survive the tribulation and are still alive, will be saved, or delivered, by Christ at His second coming. This is not a reference to salvation from sin, but rather the deliverance of survivors at the end of the age as stated, for instance, in Romans 11:26, where the Deliverer will save the nation Israel from its persecutors. Many, of course, will not endure to the end, in the sense that they will be martyred, even though they are saved by faith in Christ, and the multitude of martyrs is mentioned in Revelation 7:9-17.

Taken as a whole, the opening section, ending with Matthew 24:14, itemizes general signs, events, and situations which mark the progress of the age, and, with growing intensity, indicate that the end of the age is approaching. These signs, however, by their very characteristics and because they have occurred throughout the present age, do not constitute a direct answer to the question of "the sign" of the coming of the Lord.

Sign of the Great Tribulation, 24:15-25

This portion of the Olivet discourse is crucial to understanding what Christ reveals about the end of the age. The tendency to explain away this section or ignore it constitutes the major difficulty in the interpretation of the Olivet discourse. In the background is the tendency of liberals to discount prophecy and the practice of some conservatives of not interpreting prophecy literally. If this prediction means what it says, it is referring to a specific time of great trouble which immediately precedes the second coming of Christ. As such, the prediction of the great tribulation is "the sign" of the second coming, and those who see the sign will be living in the generation which will see the second coming itself. Accordingly, the interpretation of G. Campbell Morgan, which relates this to the fall of Jerusalem in a.d. 70, and the view of Alfred Plummer, which relates it to the second coming of Christ as if fulfilled in the first century, are unjustified interpretations, if the passage is taken seriously.

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The fact that the book of Revelation, which practically all expositors date after the destruction of Jerusalem, coincides so exactly with this presentation makes it clear that Christ was not talking here about fulfillment in the first century, but prophecy to be related to His actual second coming to the earth in the future. William Kelly states it concisely, “The conclusion is clear and certain: in verse 15 of Matthew 24, our Lord alludes to that part of Daniel which is yet future, not to what was history when He spoke this on the mount of Olives.”

The sign of the future tribulation is identified with what Christ calls the sign of “the abomination of desolation” (v. 15).

Jesus said, “When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:) Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains” (vv. 15-16). The event is so specific that it will be a signal to the Jews living in Judea at the time to flee to the mountains. What did Christ mean by the expression “the abomination of desolation”?

This term is found three times in the book of Daniel (Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Its definition is found in Daniel 11:31 in the prophecy written by Daniel concerning a Syrian ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes, who reigned over Syria 175-164 B.C., about four hundred years after Daniel.

In his prophecy, Daniel predicted, “They shall pollute the sanctuary of strength, and shall take away the daily sacrifice, and they shall place the abomination that maketh desolate” (11:31). As this was fulfilled in history, it is comparatively easy to understand what Daniel meant. Antiochus Epiphanes was a great persecutor of the people of Israel, as recorded in the apocryphal books of 1 and 2 Maccabees. In attempting to stamp out the Jewish religion, he murdered thousands of Jews, including women and children, and desecrated the temple of Israel, which precipitated the Maccabean revolt.

Antiochus, in attempting to stop the temple sacrifices, offered a sow, an unclean animal, on the altar, to render the Jewish temple abominable to the Jews (cf. 1 Mac 1:48). According to 1 Maccabees 1:57, the abomination of desolation was actually set up, and a statue of a Greek god was installed in the temple. For a time, the sacrifices of the Jews were stopped, and the temple was left desolate. The action of Antiochus in stopping the sacrifices, desecrating the temple, and setting up an idol in the temple is going to be repeated in the future as the signal of the beginning of the great tribulation.

This future abomination is described in Daniel 9:27: “He [the prince that shall come] shall confirm the covenant with many [Israel] for one week” (literally, “one seven,” meaning seven years, as practically all commentators, even those who are liberal, agree). The prophecy continues, “And in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate.” The prediction is that a future prince will do just what Antiochus did in the second century B.C.

Further light is cast on this in Daniel 12:11, where it states, “And from the time that the daily sacrifice shall be taken away, and the abomination that maketh desolate set up, there shall be a thousand two hundred and ninety days,” or approximately three-and-a-half-years preceding the second coming of Christ. H. A. Ironside summarizes it, “Our Lord tells us

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definitely here that His second advent is to follow at once upon the close of that time of trouble; so it is evident that this day of trial is yet in the future.”

The New Testament, in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, describes the same period, with the ruler setting himself up as God in the temple. Revelation 13:14-15 also records that an image of the ruler will be set up in the temple. These events did not take place in the first century in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70, and are closely related to the future fulfillment on the second coming of Christ.

These predictions have raised questions concerning the meaning of Israel's present occupation of the city of Jerusalem. If sacrifices are going to be stopped in a Jewish temple in the future, it requires, first, that a Jewish temple be built, and second, that the sacrifices be reinstated. This has led to the conclusion that the present possession of Israel of the temple site since 1967 may be a divinely ordered preparation, that in God's time, the temple will be rebuilt and the sacrifices begun again.

Although this is difficult to understand in view of the fact that the shrine, the Dome of the Rock, is apparently on the site of the ancient temple and hinders any present erection of such a temple, many believe that, nevertheless, such a temple will be rebuilt and these prophecies literally fulfilled. If upon this revival of their sacrificial system such a future temple is suddenly desecrated, it would constitute a sign to the nation of Israel of the coming time of great trouble just preceding the second coming of Christ.

The sign is so specific that on the basis of it, Christ advised the children of Israel to flee to the mountain without hesitation when it occurs. His instructions were dramatic, as recorded in Matthew 24:16-20. They were to flee immediately to the mountains of Judea, not return to take clothes or other provisions, and pray that their flight will not be in the winter, when it would be most uncomfortable, or on the Sabbath, when their flight would be noticeable. Especially difficult would be the lot of those with small children. Christ summarizes these predictions in 24:21, “For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.”

The great tribulation, accordingly, is a specific period of time beginning with the abomination of desolation and closing with the second coming of Christ, in the light of Daniel's prophecies and confirmed by reference to forty-two months. In Revelation 11:2 and 13:5, the great tribulation is a specific three-and-a-half-year period leading up to the second coming and should not be confused with a general time of trouble, such as was predicted earlier in Matthew 24:4-14.

Jesus also predicted that the period would be “shortened” (v. 22), literally, terminated or cut off (*Gr. ekolobothesan*). This does not mean that the period will be less than three-and-a-half years, but that it will be definitely terminated suddenly by the second coming of Christ.

That the period would be a time of unprecedented trouble is brought out clearly in Revelation 6-19. One of the various judgments, the fourth seal (6:7-8), predicts a fourth part of the earth perishing. In Revelation 9:13-21, the sixth trumpet refers to a third part of the world's population being killed. These are only part of the great catastrophies which fall one after

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another upon the world and which will climax in a great world war (16:12-16). The final judgment just before the second coming, described as the seventh bowl of the wrath of God (vv. 17-21), consists in a great earthquake, which apparently destroys cities of the world, and a hailstorm, with hailstones weighing a talent, or as much as eighty pounds. Putting all these Scriptures together, it indicates that the great tribulation will mark the death of hundreds of millions of people in a comparatively short period of time.

Because the great tribulation is unprecedented in history and consists largely in judgments of God on an unbelieving world, many interpreters have come to the conclusion that the church will not have to go through this period. If the church must endure the great tribulation, the chances of survival are quite remote as it is obvious that many who do turn to Christ in that period perish as martyrs. They are described as “a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues” (Rev 7:9), referring to both Jews and Gentiles who will die in the great tribulation. The possibility of rapture for the few that survive is not “the blessed hope” which is held before Christians in the New Testament.

Our hope is not the horrors of the tribulation, but the blessed expectation of Christ’s coming for His own (cf. 1 Th 4:13-18). Having introduced the specific sign of the second coming, which is the great tribulation, Jesus then described other details of the period. Just as there have been false Christs throughout the age, so there will be an intensification of this at the end of the age. Jesus stated, “For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Mt 24:24). He went on, in verse 25, to state, “Behold, I have told you before.” Here, He was referring to His frequent mention of false prophets (cf. Mt 7:15; 15:3-14; 16:6-12; 23:1-36; 24:11). While false Christs and false prophets have always been in evidence, they will be especially prominent at the end of the age in Satan’s final attempt to turn people from faith in Christ.

Second Coming of Christ, 24:26-31

One who believes the prophetic Scripture will have no difficulty identifying the second coming of Christ, because it will be a public event. Accordingly, Christ, in 24:26, stated, “Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not.” Unlike the rapture of the church, which apparently the world will not see or hear, the second coming of Christ will be witnessed both by believers and unbelievers who are on the earth at that time. Christ described it in verse 27, “For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.” Apparently, the heavens will be ablaze with the glory of God. According to Revelation 1:7, “Every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him.”

This declaration is supported by a cryptic statement in Matthew 24:28, “For wheresoever the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together.” The meaning is that the glorious coming of Christ is the natural sequence to blasphemy and unbelief, which characterizes the preceding period. Just as when an animal dies, the vultures gather, so when there is moral corruption, there must be divine judgment.

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This is further described in verses 29-30, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” The frightening display of divine disruption of the heavens, which precedes the second coming described graphically in Revelation 6:12-14 and in many other of the judgments of God described in the book of Revelation, will be climaxed by the glorious appearing of Christ in heaven (cf. Rev 19:11-16). This will be a coming of the Lord to judge and subdue the earth and to bring in His earthly kingdom, and is in contrast to the rapture of the church, which is an entirely different event and with a different purpose.

His second coming to the earth is nevertheless a gathering of all “his elect” as stated in Matthew 24:31. Some believe this has a particular reference to the nation Israel as an elect nation. Probably the reference is to all those who are chosen, that is, the saints of all ages, whether in heaven or on earth, for all these will converge upon the millennial kingdom scene. While Matthew mentions only the elect of heaven, Mark 13:27 also mentions those on earth, referred to later in Matthew 25:32.

Taken as a whole, the second coming of Christ is a majestic event, not instantaneous like the rapture, but extending over many hours. This perhaps explains why everyone can see it, because in the course of a day, the earth will rotate and the entire world will be able to see the approach of Christ accompanied by the hosts of heaven, which will descend to the earth in the area of the Mount of Olives (Zee 14:4).

The entire passage from Matthew 24:15-31 is the specific answer to the disciples of the sign of His coming and of the end of the age, with the climactic sign being the second coming and the glory that attends it, and will fulfill the prophecy of Acts 1:11 that Christ will return as He went up into heaven, that is, His return will be physical, gradual, visible, and with clouds.

Matthew 24:31 brings to a close the first doctrinal section of the Olivet discourse, and what follows is a series of applications and illustrations.

Parable of the Fig Tree, 24:32-33

In interpreting the illustrations which follow, while there may be secondary applications of the truth to the church awaiting the rapture, the laws of exegesis would dictate that the illustrations should relate to the doctrine of the second coming of Christ. Accordingly, while this passage may have a general application to saints in the present age, it will have a particular application to those who will await the second coming of Christ to the earth. Accordingly, in interpreting illustrations, the question should be raised, What does the context indicate?

This is especially appropriate in consideration of the fig tree. In 24:32-33, Christ stated, “Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.” A very popular interpretation of this passage considers the fig tree

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as a type, or illustration, of Israel. According to this view, the fact that Israel in the twentieth century is back in the land constitutes a budding of the fig tree, and may be taken as conclusive proof that the Lord's return is near.

Commentaries which try to refer this entire passage to the destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70, of course, pass it over with no comment, as do G. Campbell Morgan and Willoughby C. Allen, or apply it to the destruction of Jerusalem, as does R. V. G. Tasker.

Actually, while the fig tree could be an apt illustration of Israel, it is not so used in the Bible. In Jeremiah 24:1-8, good and bad figs illustrate Israel in the captivity, and there is also mention of figs in 29:17. The reference to the fig tree in Judges 9:10-11 is obviously not Israel. Neither the reference in Matthew 21:18-20 nor that in Mark 11:12-14 with its interpretation in 11:20-26, gives any indication that it is referring to Israel, any more than the mountain referred to in the passage.

Accordingly, while this interpretation is held by many, there is no clear scriptural warrant. A better interpretation is that Christ was using a natural illustration. Because the fig tree brings forth new leaves late in the spring, the budding of the leaves is evidence that summer is near. In a similar way, when those living in the great tribulation see the signs predicted, they will know that the second coming of Christ is near. The signs in this passage, accordingly, are not the revival of Israel, but the great tribulation itself. Lenski, accordingly, is correct when he states that "all these things" mentioned in Matthew 24:33 refer to the preceding context.¹³² That Israel's presence in the holy land is a dramatic evidence that the age is approaching its end may be supported by other passages, but this is not the point here.

Christ further commented in verses 34-36, "This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only."

What is the meaning of the expression *this generation*? Some have cited this as an illustration of an error on the part of Christ, for a generation is normally from thirty to one hundred years, and obviously, the prophecy of the second coming was not fulfilled in that period. Commentators offer a variety of opinions. Some refer "generation" to the nation Israel.¹³³ The meaning, then, would be that Israel would continue as a nation until the second coming of Christ. Some take *generation* to refer to an indefinite period of time. Arndt and Gingrich, while offering the possibility that *generation* means nation or race, prefer age or period of time, and, accordingly, take it as instructing the disciples that the age leading up to the second coming will not end until the event of the second coming itself.¹³⁴ A third explanation is that the word *generation* means what it normally means, that is, a period of thirty to one hundred years, and refers to the particular generation that will see the specific signs, that is, the signs of the great tribulation. In other words, the same generation that will experience the great tribulation will also witness the second coming of Christ.

In any case, Christ points out that while prophecy is absolutely certain of fulfillment, the day of the second coming is not revealed, although the approximate time will be known by those living in the great tribulation.

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To illustrate this approximate time of the second coming, He used the historic flood in the time of Noah. While those observing Noah building the ark could anticipate that a flood was impending, it was obvious that the flood could not come until the ark was completed. So also with the second coming. Unlike the rapture, which has no preceding signs and therefore could occur any time, the second coming of Christ to the earth to set up His kingdom cannot occur until the preceding signs have been fulfilled. When the ark was completed and Noah and his family and the animals were in it, those observing could anticipate that the predicted flood could occur any day. But even then, they could not predict the day nor the hour.

Like the days of Noah, the time of the second coming will be a period of judgment on the earth. Just as the flood came “and took them all away,” referring to the judgment of unbelievers, so at the second coming, some will be taken away. According to Matthew 24:40-41, “Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left.” Because at the rapture believers will be taken out of the world, some have confused this with the rapture of the church.

Here, however, the situation is the reverse. The one who is left, is left to enter the kingdom; the one who is taken, is taken in judgment. This is in keeping with the illustration of the time of Noah when the ones taken away are the unbelievers. The word for “shall be taken” in verses 40-41 uses the same word found in John 19:16, where Christ was taken away to the judgment of the cross. Accordingly, no one can know the day nor the hour, but they can know that when the second coming occurs, it will be a time of separation of the saved from the unsaved.

Emphasizing the necessity of watchfulness for the Lord’s return, He used the illustration of the good man of the house who, anticipating the possibility that a thief would come, kept careful watch. Just as one cannot know when a thief may come, so the servants of God who live in the great tribulation should expect Christ to come (cf. 1 Th 5:2).

In addition to watchfulness, however, there should be careful service and preparation. This is illustrated in the parable of the servant, beginning in Matthew 24:45. Having been left in charge of his master’s household in the absence of the master, the servant was challenged to do his duty well and not to live carelessly, thinking that the lord would not be coming soon. The careless servant will be severely judged as an unbeliever, in contrast to the good servant who will be rewarded by his Lord.

An unfaithful slave could be put to death and punished severely. So will Christ judge a wicked world that does not look for His return.

While these illustrations, beginning in verse 32, have as their primary interpretation and exhortation the situation immediately preceding the second coming of Christ, there are parallels to those living today in expectation of the rapture.

Believers today also need to be faithful, to be recognizing the signs of the times, and to be living in such a way that they are ready for the Lord’s return. Even among those who differ in their basic interpretation of prophecy, there is this constant unifying note of being ready for

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the Lord's return. John Calvin, for instance, in commenting on 1 John 2:18, states, "It behooves us to comfort ourselves at this day, and to see by faith the near advent of Christ ... nothing more now remained but that Christ should appear for the redemption of the world."

Martin Luther likewise anticipated the early return of the Lord, stating "I think the last day is not far away."¹³⁶ He also adds, "The world runs and hastens so diligently to its end that it often occurs to me forcibly that the last day will break before we can completely turn the Holy Scriptures into German. For it is certain from the Holy Scriptures that we have no more temporal things to expect. All is done and fulfilled." So today, even though we may not understand all the prophetic Word and may not interpret it alike, believers should be looking for the coming of the Lord. As stated in 1 John 3:3, "And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure."

Chapter 25

Judgments at the End of the Age

Parable of the Ten Virgins, 25:1-13

The familiar illustration of the ten virgins, as presented in Matthew 25, is a further effort by Christ to drive home the necessity of watchfulness and preparation for His second coming. An oriental wedding had three stages: first, the legal marriage arranged by the parents of the bridegroom and the bride; second, the traditional ceremony, when the bridegroom, accompanied by his friends, would proceed from his home to the home of the bride and claim her as his own; third, the marriage feast held at the home of the bridegroom.

The illustration presumes that the legal marriage has already taken place and can reasonably be identified with the marriage of Christ and the church already consummated at the rapture. When Christ returns at His second coming, He will bring His bride with Him. The five virgins who bring oil in their vessels illustrate those that are ready for His return. The five foolish maidens, although outwardly prepared, are not really ready. When the time comes for the marriage feast, they are not prepared to enter into the procession and join the feast.

Although interpretation is not given in this passage, oil may be taken here as representative of the Holy Spirit and His work of salvation. When Christ comes to earth with His bride, only those prepared by new birth will enter into the wedding feast, which seems to be fulfilled in the millennium or at least the first portion of the millennium. Some commentators desire to apply the ten virgins to the church in the present age. The fact that the word *then* is used in 25:1 seems to refer to the second coming of Christ to the earth.

Although worthy expositors can be cited in support of this view,¹³⁸ it is preferable to interpret it strictly in the context of the second coming of Christ. Actually, the bride, the church, is not in view specifically. Although the Syriac and Vulgate versions of verse 1 read that they "went forth to meet the bridegroom and the bride,"¹³⁹ it is questionable whether this addition was in the original text, even though it is true that Christ will bring His bride with Him. The important point here, as in the preceding illustration, is that preparation should precede the second coming of Christ and that it will be too late when He comes.

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What is true of the second coming is, of course, also true of the rapture, and believers today can derive a secondary application of this passage for their own need. In our modern world, where superficial religion is all too evident, this passage reminds us once again that apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the oil, no one is ready for the coming of the Lord.

Parable of the Talents, 25:14-30

The familiar parable of the talents in Matthew 25 is the sixth and final illustration Christ used in regard to preparedness for His second coming. Here, the emphasis is on serving rather than watching, as in the parable of the virgins.

As was customary in the ancient world, the master of the servants was pictured as turning over his property to his servants because he was going on a journey. He divided his property to his three servants according to their ability, giving five talents to one, two to another, and one talent to the third.

A talent was a large sum of money, varying greatly in value according to whether it was silver or gold, and could weigh from fifty-eight to eighty pounds. A silver talent could be worth as much as \$2,000, and a gold talent could be worth as much as \$30,000. With the rise in price of these metals, today the value would even be higher. When taking into consideration that a man's wage in Christ's time was sixteen cents a day, the purchasing power of this amount of money was very large. At maximum, the five-talent man could have received as much as \$150,000, a fortune, which would be worth millions today in purchasing power.

In the absence of his lord, the five-talent man doubled his money. In like manner, the two-talent man also doubled his money. The one who had received the single talent, however, buried his money in the earth and did nothing with it.

In the illustration, the lord of the servants, upon his return, called in his servants for their report. The five-talent man was able to report proudly that he had doubled his money. The two-talent man did likewise. It is significant that both the five-talent and the two-talent man were given precisely the same commendation, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (25:21). The principle that rewards are given according to faithfulness is illustrated well in this parable.

The one-talent man, however, had to report that he had done nothing but bury his money. He offered the lame excuse, "Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine" (vv. 24-25). Whether or not the servant's accusation was true, it was only an excuse at best. If the servant had actually believed what he had said, it should have made him all the more diligent. His lord, accordingly, answered him abruptly and denounced him as a "wicked and slothful servant." He pointed out that the least he could have done was to put his money in the bank where it would have received interest.

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An interesting question that is not directly answered in the *text* is why the one-talent man did not put it in the bank. Most expositors are rather vague in their explanation of this detail. The explanation seems to be that this wicked man had the same kind of cunning that Judas Iscariot used when he accepted the money for the betrayal of Christ. Judas had reasoned that if Jesus was indeed the Messiah, his betrayal would not matter, and he would be ahead thirty pieces of silver. If Jesus was not the Messiah, he at least would have the silver. So, the wicked one-talent man likewise reasoned: *If my lord returns, I will be able to give him back his talent and cannot be accused of being a thief, but if he does not return, there will be no record that the money belongs to him, such as would be true if I deposited it in the bank, and then I will be able to use the money myself.*

His basic problem, like the problem of Judas, was a lack of faith. The one-talent man did not believe that it was sure his lord was coming back. It is therefore clear that his basic problem was that of being an unbeliever, not simply being unfaithful in service. Accordingly, the conclusion of the illustration, “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath” (v. 29), refers to everyone who has faith or who is lacking faith.

Here, as elsewhere in Scripture, while works may be an evidence of salvation, they are never the ground of salvation. The one-talent man, while deficient in works, was condemned because of his lack of faith. Accordingly, the one-talent man is not an illustration of a backsliding Christian, as no Christian justified by faith and declared righteous by God could ever be cast into the outer darkness. A person who really believes in the first coming of Christ will also believe in His second coming and for the same reasons.

Taken as a whole, the illustrations, which interpret the doctrine of the second coming and make practical application of the truth, emphasize the two themes of watching and serving. What is true for those anticipating the second coming is also true for those who anticipate Christ’s coming for His church.

Judgment of the Nations, 25:31-46

The third section of the Olivet discourse begins with 25:31. The first section, 24:4-31, had answered the questions of the disciples concerning the signs of the end of the age and the coming of the Lord. The second section, 24:32-25:30, presented interpretations and applications of the truth of the second coming of Christ. Beginning in 25:31, Jesus went beyond the questions of the disciples to describe the period following the second coming.

Although conservative expositors agree that this is a judgment related to the second coming of Christ, there is extensive disagreement as to the nature of the judgment and its relation to the total prophetic plan. Amillenarians, who deny a future millennial reign of Christ, believe that this is a general judgment of all men that ushers in the eternal state. Lenski, for instance, states, “The whole human race will be assembled for the final judgment.” Other amillenarians, such as R.V.G. Tasker, likewise picture it as a judgment “of *all nations*.”¹⁴² Postmillenarians likewise agree that it is a judgment of all men.

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Even Henry Alford, a premillenarian, states, “We now come to the great and universal judgment at the end of this period, also prophesied distinctly in order in Rev 20:11-15— in which *all the dead*, small and great shall stand before God.” Liberal writers, like A. H. M’Neile, agree. These commentaries, however, correctly hold that this is not a parable, as the preceding illustrations of the virgins and the talents, but a literal prophecy.

A strict exegesis of this passage, however, does not support the conclusion that this is a general judgment. There is no mention of resurrection of either the righteous or the wicked, and “all nations” seems to exclude Israel. The conclusion that this is a final judgment is necessary to the amillenarians’ point of view, but it is not taught in this passage. Accordingly, if the view that there is a kingdom of Christ on earth for a thousand years after His second advent is supported by other Scriptures, this passage fits naturally in such a prophetic framework, and, as such, constitutes the judgment of the living who are on earth at the time of the second coming of Christ in respect to their entrance into the millennial kingdom. This judgment therefore should be contrasted to the judgment of Israel (Eze 20:34-38) and the judgment of the wicked (Rev 20:11-15) which comes after the millennium has concluded. This passage, more precisely than any other, describes the judgment of the world at the beginning of Christ’s millennial kingdom.

The time of the judgment is stated to be the period following the second coming of Christ, Matthew 25:31, “When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory.” This judgment, therefore, should be distinguished from the judgment of the church in heaven, the judgment of the wicked at the end of the millennium, and the judgment of Israel.

At this judgment, “all nations,” better translated “all Gentiles,” are gathered before Him and are described as sheep and goats intermingled. In the judgment, the sheep are put on His right hand and the goats on His left. The sheep are invited to inherit His kingdom, and Christ will address them: “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me” (vv. 34-36). When the sheep reply, in verses 37-39, asking when they did these deeds of kindness, the King will reply, “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (v.40). In mentioning “my brethren,” He is referring to a third class, neither sheep nor goats, which can only be identified as Israel, the only remaining people who are in contrast to all the Gentiles.

The King will then address the goats and dismiss them into everlasting fire, declaring that they have not done these deeds of kindness. When they protest, asking when they omitted these deeds, the King will reply, “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me” (v. 45). The passage concludes with the goats dismissed into everlasting punishment and the righteous entering into the blessings of eternal life.

This judgment fits naturally and easily into the prophetic program as usually outlined by premillenarians. The throne is an earthly throne, fulfilling the prediction of Jeremiah 23:5.

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Those who are judged are Gentiles (Gr. *ethne*), which, although sometimes used for Jews (Lk 7:5; 23:2; Jn 11:48, 51, 52; 18:35; Ac 10:22), is more characteristically used of Gentiles as distinguished from Jews, as for instance in Romans 11:13; 15:27; 16:4; Galatians 2:12; and is used in contrast to Jews in Romans 3:29 and 9:24.

If the evidence sustains the conclusion that this applies to Gentiles living on earth at the time of the second coming of Christ, a further problem is introduced by the nature of the judgment. How can deeds, such as giving the thirsty to drink, clothing the naked, and doing other deeds of kindness, form a basis for salvation? Ephesians 2:8-9 makes plain, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, that any man should boast." The Bible clearly teaches in many passages that salvation is by grace and by faith alone and is not based on works (Ro 3:10-12, 21, 28). The answer to this problem is that works are presented here, not as the ground of salvation, but as the evidence of it, in the sense of James 2:26, where it is declared, "Faith without works is dead"; that is, it is not real faith unless it produces works. While this solves the problem in part, the question still remains whether such deeds of kindness are sufficient to demonstrate salvation.

The answer to this problem is found in the context of this passage. Those described here are people who have lived through the great tribulation, a time of unparalleled anti-Semitism, when the majority of Jews in the land will be killed. Under these circumstances, if a Gentile befriends a Jew to the extent of feeding and clothing and visiting him, it could only mean that he is a believer in Jesus Christ and recognizes the Jews as the chosen people. Accordingly, in this context, such works become a distinctive evidence that the Gentiles described as the sheep are those who are children of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

This judgment, which results in the goats being cast into everlasting fire, is in keeping with the previous prediction of Christ in the parable of the wheat and tares and the parable of the dragnet (Mt 13:24-30, 31-43, 47-50), and is also clearly taught in Revelation 14:11 and 19:15. No adults who are not converted will be allowed to enter the millennial kingdom. The judgment here is not a final judgment, but is preparatory to establishing the kingdom of righteousness and peace, of which many Scriptures speak.

The passage, while not dealing specifically with amillennialism or postmillennialism, clearly gives these views no support whatever. The postmillennial dream of a gradually improving world is not revealed here. Instead, Christ comes to a world that is basically anti-Christ and worshipping a man satanically empowered. A judgment like this does not fit into the amillennial interpretation either, because there is no basis here for concluding this to be a judgment of all men living and dead. It is quite different than the judgment of the great white throne (Rev 20:11-15), which takes place in space, whereas this judgment takes place on earth.

Although the question of whether Christ will come for His church before the tribulation (the pretribulational view) or at the time of His second coming to earth (the posttribulational view) is not dealt with in this passage, the implications are clearly in favor of the pretribulational view. If the rapture and translation of the church occur while Christ is coming from heaven to earth in His second coming to set up His kingdom, and the church meets the Lord in the air, it is obvious that this very act would separate all the saved from the unsaved. Under these

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circumstances, no judgment of the nations would be necessary subsequent to the second coming of Christ, because the sheep and the goats would already be separated.

The implication of this passage in Matthew is that no rapture of living saints occurs at the time Christ comes to set up His kingdom. This implies that there is a time period between the rapture and the time Christ comes to set up His kingdom, during which a new body of saints, both Jews and Gentiles, is created by faith in Christ.

Furthermore, when these saints are judged, they are not given new bodies, but enter the millennium in their natural bodies, in keeping with the millennial predictions of Scripture which describe the saints as bearing children, building houses, and otherwise having a natural life (Is 65:18-25).

A proper exegesis of this passage, accordingly, tends to support both the premillennial and the pretribulational point of view, even though this is not the main purpose of this prophecy. It is an interesting fact that posttribulationists generally ignore this passage in their treatment of the rapture question, and that amillenarians who attempt to harmonize it with their point of view ignore the fact that the passage does not state what they read into it.

Taken as a whole, the Olivet discourse is one of the great prophetic utterances of Scripture and provides facts nowhere else given in quite the same way. In it, Christ, the greatest of the prophets and the master Teacher, described the end of the age as the climax of the troubles of earth in a great tribulation. The time of unprecedented trouble will be terminated by the second coming of Christ. The saved and the unsaved will be separated, and only the saved will enter the millennial kingdom. This is the final word, which Matthew brings in answer to the leading question of this first gospel, concerning the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament of a glorious kingdom on earth. Matthew states clearly that while Christ, in His first coming, suffered and died and was rejected as both King and Saviour by His own people, He will come again and, in triumph, will bring in the prophesied kingdom literally, just as the Old Testament prophecies had anticipated. There is postponement but not annulment of the great prophecies of the kingdom on earth.

It is clear that the disciples did not understand these prophecies at the time. In the few days that followed, they were to witness the death and then the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were to ask again the question of when the kingdom would be brought in on the day of the ascension of Christ (Ac 1:6). As further revelation was given in the writing of the New Testament, and the disciples pondered the words that they had not understood before, they gradually comprehended the truth that Christ was first coming for His own in the rapture of the church, but then that there would be a fulfillment of the predicted time of trouble. This, in turn, would be climaxed by the second coming of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom. Not one prophecy will be left unfulfilled when history has completed its course and the saints are gathered in the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and the new earth.