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“WHEN WILL THESE THINGS BE?”
UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY IN
THE OLIVET DISCOURSE OF MATTHEW 24-25

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David Andrew Prairie
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“WHEN WILL THESE THINGS BE?”

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David Andrew Prairie

Read and Approved by:

Jonathan T. Pennington (Faculty Supervisor)

Brian J. Vickers

Date _____

Dedicated to my wife, Brandi.

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PREFACE

I first became interested in the biblical doctrine of last things when my dad passed away in 1999. I was 14 years old at the time, and knowing that my dad was in heaven made me long for the promises of Scripture about eternity future to come true. Even as a teenager, I desired to know about heaven, to experience it, and I prayed for Christ to return and make good on the things so wonderfully anticipated in the Bible.

Since then, I have seen many other loved ones go on to be with the Lord, including my mom, three grandparents, three uncles, a child of ours through miscarriage, and countless church members. With each loss, I envy those who are now in his presence. My siblings have felt these longings with me, and they share my passion for them.

My interest in eternity future has led to this project, which I hope gives its readers a yearning for the coming of Christ and an urgency to proclaim the gospel until that day comes. I am grateful to the faculty and staff of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, especially to my supervisor, Dr. Jonathan Pennington, whose expertise in Matthew's Gospel has sharpened my thoughts on Jesus' eschatological discourse. I also wish to thank Dr. Brian Vickers, who read this project while also giving incredible classroom instruction, and Dr. James Hamilton, whose remarkable oversight of the program has been exceeded only by his contagious passion for the Scriptures and the God they reveal. Additionally, I am indebted to the fellow pastors in my cohort at SBTS. Their scholarship has been inspiring, and their friendship has been a most unexpected blessing.

As I have labored in the classroom and at the keyboard, I have maintained the role of youth pastor at Grace Baptist Church. Many thanks belong to the members of the GBC staff who have encouraged and challenged me to work humbly for God's glory and

not my own. I wish to thank the colleagues and friends who have read much of this project and offered insight that has improved it greatly. Thank you to the youth leaders who have served faithfully with me during this process, helping me to teach the Bible and to make disciples of students. I am overwhelmed when I think of the students who continue to pass through the GBC youth ministry. Their interest in the Bible and the things of God is something most youth pastors only dream of. I feel as though I have lived a dream in getting to search the Scriptures with them.

Since I first enrolled at SBTS, I went from a father of three to now a father of four. I pray that my children grow to desire the riches of Christ more than the passing pleasures of sin and the treasures in Egypt. Finally, words fail to express my gratitude for my wife, Brandi. She is my best friend, and her support throughout this process has truly made this journey a partnership. My marriage with her gives me a taste of heaven here between the advents. May God be glorified as he is known and made known through the proclamation of his Word.

David Prairie

Chattanooga, Tennessee

May 2018

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The Discipline of Biblical Theology

The practice of examining individual sections of the Bible in light of the whole is known as biblical theology. It allows the readers to understand what the biblical authors intended to articulate based on the information they had. Without the discipline of biblical theology, readers can get bogged down in the details of the text without ever making sense of the whole, or they may be able to survey the whole while avoiding the details. In either case, the intended message of the Bible is compromised.

What Is Biblical Theology?

To some extent, “biblical theology” is not so much a term that can be defined, as it is a process that must be explained. It is an ongoing discipline, so a full explanation of it requires more than what most succinct definitions provide. For example, Geerhardus Vos said, “Biblical Theology is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.”¹ This definition requires much elaboration, which Vos provides in great detail.² To analyze his specifics here would be a task that exceeds the scope of this project. Suffice it to say for now that biblical theology differs from other disciplines such as systematic theology in that it seeks to provide a grid for understanding divine truth as it was revealed progressively to the human authors of the Bible.

¹Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000), 5.

²Ibid., 5-9.

Along these lines, James Hamilton describes biblical theology as “the interpretive perspective reflected in the way the biblical authors have presented their understanding of earlier Scripture, redemptive history, and the events they are describing, recounting, celebrating, or addressing in narratives, poems, proverbs, letters, and apocalypses.”³ One who practices biblical theology will have the perspective of the biblical writers, including the perspective that the Bible is the sufficiently true, necessary, and helpful message from God for mankind. Biblical theology emphasizes the whole message of Scripture.

Perhaps the most succinct definition comes from George Ladd, who wrote, “Biblical theology is that discipline which sets forth the message of the books of the Bible in their historical setting.”⁴ Like Vos, Ladd takes pains to clarify what he means by this definition, what its limitations are, and how it relates to other fields.⁵ With a definition this obscure (possibly even insufficient), it is necessary to understand what biblical theology does in addition to simply what it is.

What Does Biblical Theology Do?

Hamilton is helpful here. He contends that biblical theology aims “to understand and embrace the worldview of the biblical authors.”⁶ Practicing biblical theology in study and in preaching changes the way people think. It takes one’s focus away from the deceptions of the world and puts it on what is ultimately real and true.

This practice equips the readers to communicate that true and necessary message in a helpful way. It buttresses the sufficiency of the Bible as the authoritative

³James M. Hamilton Jr., *What Is Biblical Theology?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 16.

⁴George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 20.

⁵Ibid. For some of Ladd’s distinctions, see the later section, “Why Is Biblical Theology Necessary?”

⁶Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?* 12.

document for the world because nothing else enhances, much less replaces, the clarity that the Bible provides. Commenting on Brian Rosner's definition of biblical theology, Stephen Wellum writes,

Biblical theology is concerned with the overall message of the whole Bible. It seeks to understand the parts in relation to the whole. As an exegetical method, it is sensitive to literary, historical, and theological dimensions of various corpora, as well as to the interrelationships between earlier and later texts in Scripture. Furthermore, biblical theology is interested not merely in words and word studies but also in concepts and themes as it traces out the Bible's own story line, on the Bible's own terms, as the plot line reaches its culmination in Christ.⁷

The definition of biblical theology cannot be separated from the practice of it. It is not enough to label biblical theology and leave it alone, because the label will not do justice to what the field requires. But of course, one cannot practice something without properly understanding the terminology. Once these two are put together, one can see the need for biblical theology and can know why and how to navigate it.

Why Is Biblical Theology Necessary?

Biblical theology does more than just explain the way things are. It does not merely aid in one's comprehension of the facts of Scripture. It also enlightens the attentive reader to an interpretive method that, when properly applied, will awaken the people of God to greater obedience of his word.

The goal of biblical theology is submission to the God of the Bible. Knowing the Bible is the starting point, but not the end. Thus, biblical theology is not simply something for the academy, but also for the church; not only for the seminary, but for the Sunday school as well. Edward Klink and Darian Lockett put it this way: "If biblical theology is merely descriptive, the pastor would have little time for it, and it would likely only be of interest to the historian; but if biblical theology is prescriptive, church leaders

⁷Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 33.

would properly take it up as a churchly task.”⁸

Ladd counters,

Biblical theology is primarily a descriptive discipline. It is not initially concerned with the final meaning of the teachings of the Bible or their relevance for today. This is the task of systematic theology. Biblical theology has the task of expounding the theology found in the Bible in its own historical setting, and its own terms, categories, and thought forms. It is the obvious *intent* of the Bible to tell a story about God and his acts in history for humanity’s salvation.⁹

Ladd seems to argue that biblical theology is concerned with what the Bible says, but not so much what it means or why it matters for its readers. But to stop short of correct interpretation and application is a disservice to what biblical theology should accomplish. A biblical theologian—and if Klink and Lockett are right, every church member should be one—ought to see that the story of the Bible is the true story of the world for everyone who lives in the world, which makes understanding biblical theology among the more relevant practices for all believers.

So then, biblical theology, though elusive in how it should be explained and defined, is a discipline that should rightly be practiced by those who believe the Bible to be God’s sufficient word and desire to submit to him. Pastors can train their congregations to think in biblical-theological terms when employing the discipline and putting it on display in their own preaching. The project at hand is an attempt to prepare a series of sermons from Matthew 24-25 while doing justice to biblical theology.

Biblical Theology When Preaching Matthew 24-25

The exegesis for this project comes from the Gospel according to Matthew, specifically chapters 24-25, which contain what is commonly referred to as the Olivet Discourse.¹⁰ Many features make this section significant within the framework of the

⁸Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 20.

⁹Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 20. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰The teaching done by Jesus that is recorded in this section took place on the Mount of Olives.

biblical storyline. Matthew begins his account by emphasizing that Jesus of Nazareth “is the rightful heir to the promises of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants” (Matt 1:1) and concludes by quoting Jesus’ commission to make disciples of all peoples by baptizing them and teaching them to obey his commands (28:18-20).¹¹ His primary audience was almost certainly Jewish, as evidenced by his abundant references to Old Testament writings that display Jesus’ fulfillment of them.¹² Thus, Matthew—by trade a Jewish tax collector (9:9; 10:3)—apparently had an interest in evangelizing fellow Jews with the message that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel as well as the light of the nations.

The beauty of the Olivet Discourse is displayed in the way that it speaks to many other sections of Scripture. Jesus alludes to both past individuals and future signs in responding to the question posed by the disciples concerning the fall of the temple, the signs of Jesus’ coming, and the end of the age. Lessons from the life of Noah and the words of Daniel are combined with events that would later be elaborated upon by the apostle John, one of the intent listeners to this speech by Jesus. Additionally, Jesus also makes references to some of his own previous messages.

Since Matthew was evidently interested particularly in the evangelization of the Jews, it makes sense that he would highlight Jesus’ mentions of the Hebrew Scriptures. He expects that his audience would understand the significance of the statements that Jesus is making and how they relate to the rest of what the Bible teaches.

What does the Bible teach? What part does Matthew’s gospel account, particularly chapters 24-25, play in the grand scheme of God’s plan? What does any of it mean for people today?

God created the heavens and the earth as a stage on which he could display his

See Matt 24:3.

¹¹Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 71-72.

¹²Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message* (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 137-38.

glory to his creatures. The pinnacles of his creation were two equal but distinct image-bearers of God, which he named Man and Woman (Gen 1:26-27). He commanded these two to reproduce more image-bearers, so that his glory and knowledge could spread throughout the earth (Gen 1:28). He also tasked them with the work of subduing the rest of creation from a garden of trees and rivers. They were to expand the boundaries of the garden while avoiding the one tree that would kill rather than make alive.¹³

Rather than exercising proper dominion over the beasts, the man and the woman fell from their perfect state by following the lies of the beast who told them that they could be like God (Gen 3:1-7). With them, all their progeny now bears the weight of sin and its horrific penalty: the righteous wrath of the holy Creator. The rebellion of mankind disqualified them from ever earning their way back to God.

Even in his pronouncement of judgment on the beast, God promised that a descendent of the woman would ultimately overthrow the curse under which man now found himself (Gen 3:14-15). He later specified that this descendent would come from the seed of Abraham, belonging to the nation that God chose as his own (Gen 12:1-3). The remainder of the Hebrew Scripture tells the story of God's dealings with this nation, named Israel because of its continuous struggles with God.

Those dealings included remarkable acts of mercy and salvation, highlighted by deliverance from the beastly king of Egypt, where God had sent his children to show his glorious power to save (Exod 14:1-31). After this act of rescue, the children wandered in the wilderness (Exod 16:1), encountering snakes and being delivered by one that was lifted up (Num 21:4-9). Priests, feasts, tabernacles, judges, kings, songs, and prophets all foreshadowed what God would do and how he would eventually speak to Israel and to the world. With each passing event, Israel continued to long for and look for the

¹³See Gen 2:15-17. For a helpful treatment of this theme throughout the storyline of the Bible, see T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2008).

promised one who would provide ultimate deliverance.

After centuries of silence, Matthew's story begins. With hands that once taxed cruelly, he penned the lineage of the king and the fulfillment of angelic promises to Joseph that his virgin fiancé would bear a child literally named "Salvation" (Matt 1:1-25). Through divine deliverance from a beastly king (Matt 2:1-12), God once again sent his Son to Egypt only to bring him out again (Matt 2:13-23). When he was grown, the Son was sent into the wilderness, where an encounter with a snake proved once again that God's purposes will not be thwarted (Matt 4:1-11).

The Son personified all the priestly acts, prophetic messages, and kingly power that came before him. He talked often about a kingdom, though he never fully consummated one. Instead he gave parables about what it is like. When he taught, he did so with an authority that others lacked. His true identity was often questioned, but his closest followers became convinced that he was the promised one. Once they declared such, he told them of his intentions to go to Jerusalem, where he would suffer and be killed, but rise again.

It is in Jerusalem, specifically on the Mount of Olives, that Jesus responded to his disciples' observations about the temple. While they were fascinated by its features, he foretold of its fall. His statement sparked their question about when these things would take place, including his coming and the end of the age. Jesus' answer is his longest recorded response to any question addressed to him.¹⁴

The answer is detailed, but often misinterpreted. Jesus explains future events by showing how they would fulfill things spoken of long before. Matthew's record of this discourse likely provided the basis for later biblical writers who also highlighted these apocalyptic activities. The end of the age ushers in salvation for Israel and the nations

¹⁴John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 1.

from the beast and his armies, leading King Jesus to take the throne of David and rule eternally in a paradise reminiscent of Eden.

Familiarity with Literature

A wide variety of resources support a study such as this. Matthew's Gospel has been the subject of numerous commentaries, and the Olivet Discourse is the focus of many eschatological studies. Furthermore, books that contribute to the field of biblical theology are helpful when viewing this subject in light of the whole story of the Bible. Each of these types of works is utilized throughout this project.

Commentaries

One of the most respected contributions on the Gospel of Matthew is D. A. Carson's treatment in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*.¹⁵ Carson is also the general editor of the Pillar New Testament Commentary, which has an entry for Matthew written by Leon Morris.¹⁶ Ulrich Luz has produced a massive multi-volume commentary which has been translated from German into English.¹⁷ John Nolland provides in-depth background for Matthew's gospel before giving a well-structured examination of its Greek text.¹⁸

Of David Turner's multiple studies on Matthew, his most comprehensive work is part of the Baker Exegetical Commentary series.¹⁹ Craig Blomberg's volume of

¹⁵D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 3-599.

¹⁶Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

¹⁷Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

¹⁸John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

¹⁹David L. Turner, *Matthew, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

Matthew from the New American Commentary set has an expository arrangement, but provides scholarly depth.²⁰ Blomberg has also written the entry for Matthew in the *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*.²¹ The International Critical Commentary, widely recognized for its acute attention to detail, especially relating to grammatical and textual intricacies, has three volumes for Matthew.²²

R. T. France has multiple publications regarding Matthew, and his work for the New International Commentary series is especially insightful.²³ New Testament scholar Donald Hagner contributed profitably to the study of Matthew for the Word Biblical Commentary.²⁴ Grant Osborne has provided a recent publication on Matthew for the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary series that will provide valuable insight.²⁵

Special Studies Related to Eschatology and the Gospel of Matthew

Studies that focus specifically on eschatology are also utilized for their analysis of the Olivet Discourse. R. C. Sproul's *The Last Days according to Jesus* takes a preterist view, an interpretative method that varies from many views presented from the other listed sources.²⁶ Paul Benware's *Understanding End Times Prophecy* advocates a dispensational approach but responsibly represents various positions in regards to the

²⁰Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: B&H, 1992).

²¹Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

²²W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, International Critical Commentary (London: T. & T. Clark, 1997).

²³R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

²⁴Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1995).

²⁵Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

²⁶R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days according to Jesus*, new ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015).

timing of the rapture and features associated with the millennium.²⁷ J. Richard Middleton has attempted a newer approach in which the scope of biblical theology is examined in order to reevaluate oft-misunderstood features of eschatology.²⁸

Certain published dissertations should prove useful for the understanding of Matthew's theology. Among them is Robert Gundry's work, which examines and explains Matthew's use of quotations and allusions from the Old Testament.²⁹ Additionally, Jonathan Pennington has given attention to Matthew's emphasis upon and employment of the concept of "heaven" and how to understand such usage in light of various biblical and intertestamental manuscripts.³⁰ Finally, the research of Jeffrey Gibbs on the Olivet Discourse relates closely to the project at hand.³¹

Biblical Theologies

Many biblical theological works are utilized. Thomas Schreiner's *New Testament Theology* provides a thematic approach that traces the development of the saving promises of God throughout the biblical storyline.³² Hamilton's *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment* is a book-by-book evaluation of the whole Bible that streamlines the various parts of the Bible to argue for a central theme.³³

²⁷Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach*, rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2006).

²⁸J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

²⁹Robert Horton Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1967).

³⁰Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

³¹Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia: Jesus' Eschatological Discourse in Matthew's Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Academic, 2000).

³²Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

³³James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

Ladd's *A Theology of the New Testament* contains a chapter regarding the subject of eschatology as it is expressed throughout the three synoptic Gospels.³⁴ *Kingdom through Covenant* attempts to provide an alternative view to the common grids of covenant theology and dispensationalism, and in doing so is a pivotal text for eschatological discussions.³⁵ G. K. Beale sees the Bible's metanarrative as having a distinctively eschatological flavor permeating the entire history of progressive revelation.³⁶

The Olivet Discourse and the Local Church

The detailed exegetical exploration of this project provides the basis for sermons preached to the student ministry of Grace Baptist Church (GBC) in Chattanooga, Tennessee. This ministry consists of students from sixth through twelfth grade, in addition to college students and other young adults who serve as small group leaders. Most of the students testify of a personal relationship with Christ, are able to articulate the gospel verbally, and display genuine faith through works of service in the church and outreach to the world.

As becomes commonplace for believers of any age, tendencies to separate faith from life arise and Christianity can become compartmentalized. Students have their attention drawn to immediate gratification or modern distractions, and faith becomes something that is emphasized for only a couple of hours on Sunday and again at a Wednesday night small group meeting. They need to develop a worldview that is thoroughly biblical in order to see the necessity of the gospel for all of life.

Slightly more than half of students in the GBC youth ministry attend Grace

³⁴Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 193-211.

³⁵Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*.

³⁶G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

Baptist Academy, a Christian school ministry of GBC. The majority of the remaining students attend various public schools, and the rest are homeschooled. Almost all of them attend church with their parents, an indication that Christianity is practiced by the family unit.

This analysis indicates that biblical knowledge alone is not enough for people to avoid the temptations promoted by the world. Many GBC students are being exposed to the Bible's truths consistently in the church, at home, and even in regular Bible classes and school chapels. Yet this exposure does not shield them from the lure of the passing pleasures of sin. They need to develop a perspective in which the Bible's story becomes the grid through which the rest of life is filtered.

In order for this to happen, the relevance of the Bible must be emphasized. The ancient words do not only speak to the ancient world. Unlike anything else, the Bible explains the way things really are. Whether speaking of events from millennia gone by or of those yet to come, the Bible gives a consistent and reliable commentary on the true state of the world.

An Overview of Matthew 24-25

This study will provide the exegetical basis for a series of seven sermons from Matthew 24-25, with each chapter representing one sermon. The title for the series is reflected in the title for the project, "When will these things be?" Although the purpose of this project will not be to hypothesize regarding the exact timing of the return of Jesus, the title reflects the question proposed by the apostles to Jesus at the beginning of his discourse. The question will help to guide the audience through the response of Jesus as he instructs his followers regarding the signs of his coming and the end of the age (see Matt 24:1-3).

Matthew 24:1-14

Jesus exited the Jerusalem temple, having vented his frustrations regarding the

man-centered worship that was taking place where only God should receive attention and praise. The temple itself was an impressive structure to behold, but Jesus saw past its outward allure. During what should have been the most holy week of the Jewish calendar, Jesus saw shallow ritualism rather than sincere reverence.

Having walked away from the temple, the apostles with Jesus pointed out to him the sights at the temple (Matt 24:1). Jesus made sure they understood that what seemed strong and beautiful now would soon be trampled and overthrown (24:2). This got their collective minds wondering about what he might mean. Perhaps Jesus, who only days earlier had entered Jerusalem with attention befitting a king, would soon ascend to the throne now occupied by the Romans.

As they approached the Mount of Olives, they questioned Jesus about the timing of these things. Their questions seem to indicate that they expected the destruction of the temple to correspond with Jesus inaugurating the coming age in which Messiah would reign from Jerusalem (24:3). The rest of Jesus' discourse is his response to these questions.

Far from giving them an answer they expected, Jesus indicated that some time would pass between that day and the day of his coming. And the years that passed would not be pleasant ones for Jesus' followers (24:4-7). He spoke to them about great deception that would take place from people claiming to be him. They would also hear of wars and rumors of further violence, some probably genuine but some designed simply to rile up an audience. As bad as it might seem when all this happens, Jesus compared this stage of history to "the beginning of the birth pangs" (24:8).³⁷

The difficulty of the time will extend to Jesus' followers personally, as they are betrayed, hated, tried, and killed (24:9-10). Many who once gave only surface-level adherence to Jesus will now abandon him as it becomes increasingly more dangerous to

³⁷Unless otherwise noted, all uses of Scripture are from the English Standard Version.

follow him (24:11-12). But it will be the testimony of the faithful who endure to the end, not loving their lives, even unto death (Matt 24:13; cf. Rev 12:11), that will cause the gospel to advance “throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations” (Matt 24:14). God’s plan from the beginning—to fill the earth with the glory of his image so that he might be known by his people as he tabernacles with them—will finally be realized.³⁸ “And then the end will come” (24:14).

Matthew 24:15-28

As the end approaches, the birth pangs will increase in intensity and frequency in a manner that will be incomparable to any other point in history (24:21). The manifestation of evil at this time will come in the form of “the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel” (24:15). Three times, Daniel makes reference to this abomination (Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). The warning from Jesus is that when this abomination appears “standing in the holy place” (Matt 24:15), those who see it will need to flee from Judea to the mountains (24:16). Fleeing will take priority over gathering personal belongings for the journey, and those who experience the burdens of tending to children and fleeing during winter are to be pitied (24:17-20).

Therefore, Jesus is very accurate in describing this period as a time of “great tribulation” (24:21). This way of thinking counters any variation of a “health, wealth, and prosperity” worldview for Christ-followers. Life for disciples will not only be inconvenient, it will be endangered. “And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short” (24:22). While not specifying an exact length of time for this tribulation, this statement by Jesus identifies it as limited in scope.

A second warning by Jesus regarding this time period is to not believe the

³⁸See Gen 1:28; 12:1-3; Exod 25:8; Isa 11:9; Hab 2:14; John 1:14.

claims of those who profess to be the Christ (24:23-26). Just as he had said earlier (24:4-5), Jesus now repeats that many will attempt to take advantage of the hysteria of the times by making false prophecies and pointing people to false Messiahs. Rather than needing to be pointed to by others, the coming of the true Son of Man will be “as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west” (24:27). It will be a violent coming, noticeable to all (24:28).

Matthew 24:29-35

While the preceding section described the great tribulation, this section gives the details concerning the events that will come “after the tribulation of those days” (24:29). Many cosmic signs will signal the passing of the age, such as the darkening of the sun and moon and the shaking of the heavens (24:29; cf. Heb 12:26; Rev 6:12-14). The sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, causing all the tribes of the earth to mourn because of the inescapable judgment under which they will stand (Matt 24:30; cf. Rev 1:7). The coming of the Son of Man will be “on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” and every eye will see him (Matt 24:30; cf. Dan 7:13-14; Rev. 1:7). The Son of Man will send out his angels to gather the elect for himself (Matt. 24:31).

To illustrate the correct way to interpret and apply these signs, Jesus told his listeners to learn a lesson from the fig tree, which indicates seasons by its branches and leaves (24:32). Just as one can interpret the times by examining the tree, one should be able to identify the nearness of the coming of the Son of Man by the signs given by Jesus (24:33). Jesus validates his words with the entirety of the word of God, promising that his words will outlast heaven and earth (24:34-35).

Matthew 24:36-51

Although the signs are given to help interpret the times, there is no way to know for sure the exact time at which the Son of Man will return. Those specifics are privy only to the sovereign knowledge of God the Father (24:36). In this way, Jesus

compares his return to the flood of Noah's day. During that time, people heard warnings of coming judgment, but continued in everyday life only to be unexpectedly swept away when the flood came (24:37-39).

Jesus' command for his hearers then is that they "Stay awake" (24:42). He likens his return to the coming of a thief, and therefore it cannot be fully anticipated or expected, but must still be prepared for (24:43-44; cf. 1 Thess 5:2). One should wait with alertness and active obedience for the Son of Man to come rather than laziness or complacency.

If the master returns to find his servants faithful while he was away, he will bless those servants for their wisdom (24:45-47). But those servants who are found to be irresponsible and even doubtful regarding the return of the master will be on the receiving end of his wrath (24:48-51). These illustrations are meant to emphasize the point that the return of the Son of Man will happen at an unexpected time.

Matthew 25:1-13

The final three sermons are based on the three parables of Matthew 25. The first two parables contain comparisons to the kingdom.³⁹ The final parable is an account of the judgments of the king when he sets up the kingdom.⁴⁰

The first parable likens the kingdom to ten virgins waiting with lamps in hand for the coming bridegroom (25:1). Based on their level of preparation and readiness for the arrival of the bridegroom, the virgins are classified as either wise or foolish (25:2-4). When the bridegroom arrives suddenly, the virgins go to meet him (25:5-7).

The foolish virgins, recognizing their lack of preparedness, attempt to make

³⁹"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like . . ." (Matt 25:1) and "For it [the kingdom] will be like . . ." (Matt 25:14).

⁴⁰"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne" (Matt 25:31).

last-minute arrangements so as to present themselves ready (25:8-9). But to their horror, they return to find that they have been locked out of the wedding feast, into which the groom has already entered with those who had been wise (25:10). No amount of pleading was sufficient to gain them access, and even the bridegroom denied knowing the foolish ones (25:11-12). Again, Jesus intended that this parable raise the attentiveness of the hearer to the unexpected nature of the Lord's coming (25:13).

Matthew 25:14-30

The second parable of this chapter relates the kingdom to a man entrusting his land to three servants while he went away on a journey (25:14-15). Each of the men also received varying amounts of money from the master (25:15). Two of the men were able to double their earnings with wise investments, while the third man buried his funds (25:16-18).

The master returned from his long journey and was pleased with the two men whose wisdom had profited them (25:19-23). Each of them received a gracious commendation from the master: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master" (25:21, 23).

The third man, giving his account to the master, acknowledged the fear that drove him to hide his gift (25:24-25). The master chided the servant, even accusing him of wickedness and slothfulness because he was more afraid to take a risk than he was to honor his master (25:26-27). As a result, his portion was taken from him and given to one who proved trustworthy (25:28-29). All that was left for the "worthless servant" was to be cast "into the outer darkness" wherein consists "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (25:30). Faithfulness with entrusted resources is required for the servants who are awaiting the return of their master.

Matthew 25:31-46

This final parable is the only one whose setting is entirely concerned with the events following the return of the Son of Man to earth. It seems to assume that the king has come and set up his kingdom in the land. Before his throne, all the nations will be gathered and separated, not by physical ethnicity, but by spiritual allegiance (Matt 25:31-33).

After dividing the peoples into two groups, the king will address each group individually. He first invites the “sheep” at his right hand to “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (25:34). Their access to this kingdom was granted after they had showed hospitality and provided for the basic needs of those whom the Lord associated with himself (25:35-36). The king explained that their treatment of his “brothers” in this manner was counted as though they had done such things for him (25:37-40).

The “goats” at the left hand of the king do not receive an invitation to inherit a kingdom, but rather a command to “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41). This harsh judgment comes upon those who had neglected the very people in need that were helped by the “sheep” (25:42-43). Again, the king associates himself with “the least of these” (25:44-45), indicating that to reject them was to reject him.

The final statement by Jesus summarizes the two destinies for all persons. Everything leading up to the return of the Son of Man to earth as the king finds its culmination in this phrase: “And these [goats] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt 25:46). Thus, the ultimate aim for this discourse, and for the sermon series contained in this project, is to alert people to the blessed inheritance of eternal life that awaits those belonging to the king, and to persuade them to commit to him in order to avoid the damnation that awaits those who shun him.

Conclusion

Christians must understand and know the gospel in order to make it known. The gospel tells the whole story of the Bible. When believers communicate the gospel, they are living out the continuation of that story. Biblical theology enables readers of the Bible to understand how each of the smaller sections and accounts of the Bible contribute to that overarching metanarrative. The Olivet Discourse is just one setting in the story, but the teachings of Jesus have eternal implications. May this examination of Matthew 24-25 equip the church of Jesus to rightly practice biblical theology and proclaim the true story of the world to all the nations.

CHAPTER 2

THEN THE END WILL COME (MATT 24:1-14)

Introduction

People are naturally curious about the future, and especially about the end of the world. Nearly everyone, regardless of belief system, has a theory about how and when things will conclude. What a person thinks about the end of all things says a great deal about his worldview.

Filmmakers and storytellers have capitalized on humanity's fascination with eschatological ideas. Many adventure epics climax with an attempt to display a transition from the present age to an age to come. While many are quick to offer opinions on the future, few seem to agree. The world's inhabitants are unsettled about the world's finality.

It is not just certain categories of people that are perplexed regarding these issues. There seems to be much confusion—from Christians and non-Christians alike—about biblical terminology concerning the end. While many may be familiar with words such as Armageddon, tribulation, rapture, and many more, accurate definitions appear to be scarce. Everyone wants to know the future, yet apparently not many know what to expect. Fewer still appear ready to actually face it, whatever "it" may be.

Interest in the last days is not a new concept. The New Testament gives a great deal of insight into the heightened messianic expectations of the first century, and much of those expectations centered around eschatology. In particular, the words and works of Jesus of Nazareth caused many—casual observers to close followers—to question him about the kingdom of God. As Jesus answered their questions, he did more than satisfy their curiosity. He showed himself to be the summation both of the Bible's plot structure

and of history's timeline.

Nowhere in the gospels is Jesus more straightforward about the last days than in Matthew 24-25. His teaching in these two chapters is nothing short of a biblical theology of the end of the age. What begins as a casual observation by his disciples about the temple turns into a prophetic discourse by the one to whom the prophecies point. Throughout it, Jesus shows that the truth concerning the age to come bears remarkable weight for life in this age.

Need

Because of the confusion that exists, people need clarity about things to come. By examining the whole counsel of God, Christians need to see that clues about the end of time are not restricted to the book of Revelation and the Old Testament prophets. Jesus had much to say about his own return to earth, and believers need to know and adopt his perspective on it. They need to expect that God will work in the future in ways similar to his work in the past, because he is an unchanging God. And they need to develop an understanding of this life that is consistent with their view of the life to come, which means that they will urgently share these truths, since they bear eternal weight.

Main Point

Jesus taught about signs to keep his followers faithful to him, not to give an exact timeline for his return.

Preview

This passage can be arranged as follows.

1. The Conversation about the Temple (24:1-2)
2. The Curiosity of the Disciples (24:3)
3. The Comments from Jesus: The End is Not Yet (24:4-14)

Context

Matthew 21 records that Jesus and his disciples entered the city of Jerusalem for the week of Passover in a manner that fulfilled the statements of Zechariah (cf. Matt 21:5 with Zech 9:9). Later in the week, he would be crucified. But as Jesus rode through the streets on this day, the crowd showered him with messianic praise (cf. Matt 21:9 with Ps 118:25). Upon entering the temple, Jesus began to demonstrate—through parables, warnings, questions, answers, and curses—that he had no taste for the shallow and misguided motives that he encountered (see Matt 21-22).

Matthew 24 begins with Jesus leaving the Jerusalem temple for the last time before his death (v. 1). He had just renounced the hypocrisy of the Jewish religious leaders and had announced woes upon them (23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29). Viewing the outside of the temple, Jesus' disciples appeared to be enamored with the impressive structure of the temple building. His reply about the future fall of the temple predicated their inquisition about the end of age, which led to Jesus' discourse.

Exposition

Some commentators link the discourse of Matthew 24-25 with that of Matthew 23.¹ Others “regard chapter 23 as the conclusion of the controversies in 21 and 22, not the beginning of a discourse which extends through 25.”² I am more convinced by those who argue for the distinction of chapters 24-25.

The Conversation about the Temple (24:1-2)

“Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point

¹Blomberg identifies Matt 23-25 as one discourse with “two potentially separable segments” which should still “be viewed as a unity.” Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 339.

²W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, International Critical Commentary (London: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 258n2. They observe that the end of chap. 23 functions climactically rather than as an introduction or a continuation, and the beginning of chap. 24 identifies changes in location, audience, subject matter, and style.

out to him the buildings of the temple” (24:1). Given the significance of the temple throughout biblical history, Jesus’ permanent departure from it (as indicated in 23:38, “See, your house is left to you desolate”) marks a drastic theological shift.³ France notes that Jesus “is abandoning it, never to return, and after that it has no future except to be destroyed. What has been hitherto the earthly focus of the presence of God among his people is so no longer.”⁴

Mark is more specific than Matthew regarding the disciples’ impressions of the temple structure. He records that an unnamed disciple exclaims, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” (Mark 13:1). Thus, the conversation about the temple is initiated.

What was perhaps implicit in 23:38 Jesus now makes explicit in 24:2. “But he answered them, ‘You see all these, do you not? Truly I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.’” The absence of God would lead to destruction for the temple. The temple building was never meant to last forever.

Scripture hints that God designed the universe as a temple, or, more accurately, that the temple was patterned after the universe (Ps 78:69). God’s command for the man to work and keep the garden (Gen 2:15) foreshadow the responsibilities of the Levitical priests in the tabernacle (Num 3:7-8; 8:26). Just as God had walked with his people in the garden (Gen 3:8), so he would dwell with them through the tabernacle (Exod 25:8).

The temple built by King Solomon was intended to provide a more permanent place of worship and priestly service than the tabernacle. This temple had been destroyed by the invasion of the Babylonians (2 Chr 36:19), and the Jews who returned from exile prioritized the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 3:8-13). The prophet Haggai, who was a

³Jesus’ statement here parallels statements of OT prophets such as Isaiah (64:11), Jeremiah (12:7; 22:5), and Ezekiel (8:12; 9:9).

⁴R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 886.

contemporary of Ezra, acknowledged that the rebuilt temple lacked the glory of Solomon's temple (Hag 2:3), yet he also foretold of the greater glory of a latter temple (2:9).

The temple of the first century, of which Jesus and his disciples are now speaking, was known as Herod's Temple because of the oversight of Herod during its construction.⁵ Based on the disciples' reaction to the majesty of the temple, it is possible that they thought of Herod's Temple as the fulfillment of Haggai's prophecy. However, the glorious temple referenced by Haggai was more closely identified as the one to whom they spoke rather than the one about which they spoke. The prologue to John's gospel reveals Jesus to be the word of God who "became flesh and dwelt [as a tabernacle] among us" bearing "glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14).⁶

Jesus' words about Herod's temple aimed to correct the disciples' perspective on what truly lasts. Like those men, people of every age have often been impressed with what appears outwardly robust. For Jesus' disciples, the strength and future of the temple (and thus, their religious affiliation) was tied to the condition of the building, so the forecast looked good. But Jesus had spent enough time inside the temple to know that it was spiritually weak.

In the same way, Christians are frequently guilty of basing the health of the church on the fact that it has nice buildings and well-kept grounds. Rather than thinking that a local congregation must be right with God simply because things appear to be put together the right way, believers ought to look internally at the actual practice of the faith and not just the walls in which they meet. Every building that is currently a place of worship, no matter how elaborate or well-constructed, will eventually be overthrown. It is

⁵Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 595.

⁶Much of my thinking on the subject of the temple and related themes has been influenced by G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

much more imperative that churches evaluate themselves based on the condition of souls before the one who came as the true temple of God, instead of the condition of the meeting place.

Quarles observes, “The destruction of the temple is a sign of the demise of the holy city, Jerusalem, and the nation in general. When Solomon completes the temple, Yahweh warns that the destruction of the temple would signal God’s abandonment of Israel for abandoning him (1 Kings 9:7). The prophets of Israel likewise see the fate of the temple as an indication of the fate of Jerusalem and the nation as a whole (Isa. 64:6-11).”⁷

The Curiosity of the Disciples (24:3)

“As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’” (Matt 24:3). It would be difficult to overstate the significance of this question. On the one hand, this question is clearly informed by the words of Jesus immediately preceding it, both in 23:37-39 and 24:2. On the other hand, it is this question that provides the backdrop for the lengthy discourse that follows.

It appears that the disciples associate the destruction of the temple with the eschatological coming of Christ, and the coming of Christ with the end of the age, thereby linking all three of these ideas. It is both a “When?” question and a “What?” question. They are looking for clues so that they can decipher the events appropriately.⁸

In asking about the “coming” the disciples use a word (παρουσία) that Paul, James, Peter, and John would all use later to speak of the return of Christ.⁹ Absent from

⁷Charles L. Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), 105.

⁸“Jesus will make clear that the destruction of the temple and the end of the age are two separate events, but probably the disciples do not yet recognize this (thus Mark 13:4), scarcely imagining that one could occur without the other. Hence for them the two questions are one and the same.” Blomberg, *Matthew*, 353.

⁹For example, see 1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1, 8; Jas 5:7-8; 2 Pet

the biblical text up to this point, and used only in Matthew 24 in the gospels, this word “designated both the official arrival of a high-ranking person, especially king or emperor.”¹⁰ Additionally, “The word came into Judaism with reference to the entries of God’s eschatological coming. In Matthew it means public ‘arrival’ (not ‘return’) and refers to the eschatological coming of the Son of man (which was foreshadowed by the entry into Jerusalem).”¹¹

Verse 3 not only provides the question that is the cause of the discourse, but also the location: the Mount of Olives. France observes a link between verse 3 and Ezekiel 11:23, in which the visible manifestation of God’s glory “went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.”¹² This location “gave a panoramic view over the temple whose destruction has just been announced.”¹³ It has been noted that Jesus is teaching from “the very place where his prophecies will be fulfilled” since it is to the Mount of Olives that he will return (Acts 1:9, 12).¹⁴

The Comments from Jesus: The End Is Not Yet (24:4-14)

The disciples had asked for a sign (v. 3), and now Jesus begins his discourse by answering their request. This is the third time in Matthew’s gospel that others have asked Jesus for a sign (cf. 12:38-39; 16:1-4). The first two requests came from Jewish religious leaders who were more interested in testing Jesus than trusting him (16:1). In both of those instances, Jesus referred to those seeking a sign as an “evil and adulterous

3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28. It is also worth noting that either Peter, John, or both likely had a part in asking the question in Matt 24:3 (cf. Mark 13:3-4).

¹⁰Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 338.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 894.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 336-37.

generation” and he refused to give them any sign except that of Jonah (12:39; 16:4).

Jesus’ disciples were not asking him to perform a sign, but rather to tell them what signs would be associated with his coming. Interestingly, Jesus begins by explaining that certain signs may initially seem to indicate that his coming is very near, when in fact they are simply events that will be common throughout the course of human history. By beginning this way, Jesus emphasizes that certain things “must take place, but the end is not yet” (24:6).

The beginning of the birth pains (24:4-8). Verses 4-14 contain two sections: the beginning of the birth pains (24:4-8) and the signs preceding the end (24:9-14). The first section contains two closely related imperatives: “See that no one leads you astray” (24:4) and “See that you are not alarmed” (24:6).¹⁵ What is the source of this possible deception? Jesus says, “For many will come in my name saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray” (24:5). That is to say, many false Christs will accomplish much deception. Carson notes, “One of the greatest temptations in times of difficulty is to follow blindly any self-proclaimed savior who promises help. It is the temptation to repose confidence (v. 4) in false Christs.”¹⁶ Therefore, Jesus warns his disciples to not be led astray by them.

What is the source of the disturbance? “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet” (24:6). Jesus elaborates by saying that “nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (24:7a). These events are in no way unique to the time of the end, but are indicative of every age. Most American students living today cannot recall a time

¹⁵Matthew uses two verbs for “see,” βλέπετε (v. 4) and ὁρᾶτε (v. 6). His use of both terms in this way shows them to be synonymous and in structural parallel with each other. See John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 962.

¹⁶D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 497.

where their own country has not been at war to some extent. For them, war is not simply a historical blemish or a future alarm, but a constant (albeit mostly distant) reality.

Linked with the violence of combat is the violence of natural disasters, as “there will be famines and earthquakes in various places” (24:7b). Carson comments, “The conflict extends not only to families (10:34-37), but to nations and even nature (cf. Rom 8:20-21; Col 1:16, 20).”¹⁷ Matthew has already shown Jesus’ power over elements of weather (cf. 8:23-27), in which the fear of the disciples was turned to amazement as they saw the wind and waves obey him. The term translated as “earthquake” in 24:7 is the same word (σεισμός) typically translated “storm” in 8:24. Just as Jesus was sovereign over the storm from the boat, he will be sovereign over future devastations.

That the timing of the coming of Christ is not to be associated with these signs is evidenced by Jesus’ statement in verse 8, “All these things are but the beginning of the birth pains.” The adversative δὲ (“But”) may indicate that Jesus is drawing a conclusion that would have seemed unlikely to his hearers. He is contrasting their presuppositions with his correct and clarifying prophecies. Childbirth typically does not immediately follow the first sign of labor. Often the pain of labor comes on slowly, only to increase in frequency and duration as the delivery approaches. Likewise, these signs do not indicate the immediacy of Jesus’ return. They do, however, indicate that Jesus is sovereign over his return as well as the events leading up to it. In the Old Testament, the Day of the Lord is often said to arrive after birth pangs (see Isa 13:6-8; 26:17-18; 66:7-9; Jer 22:23; 48:41; Hos 13:13; Mic 4:9-10).¹⁸

These statements are given “not to curb enthusiasm for the Lord’s return but to warn against false claimants and an expectation of a premature return based on

¹⁷Carson, *Matthew*, 498.

¹⁸Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 341.

misconstrued signs.”¹⁹ The signs, which indicate only the beginning of labor pains and not the end of the age, are detailed in much the same way by the apostle John in Revelation 6.²⁰ Both Matthew 24 and Revelation 6 mention wars, false Messiahs, famine, tribulation, and death. Yet both chapters also conclude these difficulties will culminate in ultimate salvation for God’s people as the true Christ returns to judge his people.²¹

Signs preceding the end (24:9-14). Since Matthew 24:14 concludes with, “And then the end will come,” it seems that the signs contained in verses 9-14 are more directly connected with the end. Whereas verses 4-8 contain the beginning of birth pains, verses 9-14 contain signs that seem to more immediately precede the end of the age. That is not to say that the things mentioned in these verses only happen right before Jesus’ coming. As with the other signs, these also can be traced throughout church history. The difference is that the signs of verses 4-8 are without geographic or demographic bounds, while the signs of verses 9-14 are specifically directed toward followers of Jesus.²²

The first category of signs preceding the end is the increase of lawlessness (v. 12). Jesus tells his followers what to expect in days to come. “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake” (v. 9). These things will lead to many falling away, betraying one another, and hating one another (v. 10). “The upshot of external persecution is internal disorder. Hatred from outsiders will produce hatred among insiders.”²³

¹⁹Carson, *Matthew*, 498.

²⁰Perhaps John, as he recorded the vision of the apocalypse, remembered the words of Jesus he heard on the Mount of Olives and made these connections.

²¹James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 166-67. Hamilton charts additional parallels between the Olivet Discourse, the book of Revelation, and Dan 9:26-27.

²²See Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 965, where he also opines that the unspecified subject “they” in v. 9 “is probably intended to mean fellow members of the Jewish community.”

²³Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 342.

In other words, the influence from those who oppose Christ will then spread among those who only outwardly adhere to him. Hatred will burn intensely, and “the love of many will grow cold” (v. 12). This reality shows that “Love and lawlessness are antithetical, for love fulfills the law.”²⁴

Elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus likens these nominal disciples to “rocky ground” (13:20). An individual such as this “hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away” (13:20-21). Notice that he “endures for a while” (13:21), but he does not endure “to the end” (24:13), so that he might be saved. His lack of depth leads to him falling away in the face of tribulation.

The theme of tribulation is a prominent one throughout the New Testament, and it is key in Matthew 24. Much more will be said about it in the next chapter. For now, suffice it to say that while Matthew does describe a specific time of “great tribulation” (24:21) that appears to be yet future, believers are not exempt from varying degrees of persecution and affliction in any age.

In explaining these truths to his followers, Jesus is showing just how closely he identifies himself with his church. His followers would be betrayed and killed just as he was about to be betrayed and killed (cf. 24:9 with 17:22-23). When Saul of Tarsus was on the attack against the church in Jerusalem, Jesus intervened by asking Saul, “Why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). Because Jesus is the head of his body, which is his church (Col 1:18), harm upon the church is harm upon Jesus himself. The head cannot be separated from the body.

Jesus often means things as comfort to his followers that others would take as threats. For example, Jesus told his apostles, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18). He added, “If they persecuted me, they will

²⁴Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 343.

also persecute you” (15:20). Yet he confirms, “I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away” (16:1). It is the very same certainty of tribulation that causes true believers to stand firm and false converts to shrink back.

This can be an unnerving reality for those who call themselves Christians. But a commitment to Christ is a commitment to the one who went to the cross for his people and calls them to bear a cross as they follow him (Matt 10:38). It is no wonder, then, that those whose commitment is shallow will fall away at the prospect of such opposition. Only the certainty of the resurrection enables true followers of Jesus to endure to the end in spite of such tribulation.

Jesus foretold of his own death, but also of his own resurrection (Matt 17:23). He taught, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (10:39). Saul of Tarsus, later writing under the title “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus” (Col 1:1), called Jesus “the firstborn from the dead” (1:18), which is to say, his resurrection enables and guarantees the resurrection of his people (1 Thess 4:14).

It is the promise of the resurrection that equips true disciples of Jesus to not fall away in the face of cruel hatred. Those who put believers to death are unwittingly delivering them into life everlasting. The grave will have no more success containing the bodies of Christians than it did containing the body of Christ.

One final thing associated with the increase of lawlessness is the rising up of “many false prophets” who, like the false Christs of Matthew 24:5, will “lead many astray” (Matt 24:11). Jesus had previously warned his disciples about false prophets, describing them as wolves dressed as sheep (7:15). Later in Matthew 24, false Christs and false prophets are mentioned together as they “perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (v. 24).

Jesus’ point is that those who are deceived by the words and works of these false messengers show themselves to be non-elect. As with the other threats, those belonging to Christ will withstand the threats, while those who feign loyalty to him will

run after that which their fickle minds find more convincing. As Nolland understands, “The pressure of persecution makes an easier way look attractive.”²⁵

As in verse 8, the δὲ (“But”) adversative in verse 13 provides an unexpected conclusion based on the information given. Many will fall away, but not all will fall away. “But the one who endures until the end will be saved” (v. 13). Blomberg says, “Here is the true biblical promise of eternal security or perseverance of the saints, not that all who profess Christ persevere but that those who do persevere demonstrate that they were truly elect.”²⁶ In this way, Jesus contrasts the increase of lawlessness with godly endurance.

Godly endurance has as its aim global evangelization. Jesus concludes this opening section with the promise, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (v. 14). Proper interpretation of this verse is crucial for understanding the entire discourse, for seeing eschatology in light of biblical theology, and for planning a strategy of modern Christian missions.

The phrase τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας (“gospel of the kingdom”) is unique to Matthew in the New Testament. Matthews records that Jesus “went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people” (4:23).²⁷ The good news that Matthew emphasizes about the kingdom is that it is near (cf. 24:33). John the Baptizer came on the scene urging the crowds to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:2), a message that was later repeated by Jesus himself (4:17) and passed on for the apostles to proclaim (10:7). The kingdom was being inaugurated because the king had

²⁵Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 965.

²⁶Blomberg, *Matthew*, 356.

²⁷The wording of 9:35, which contains the only other usage of this phrase, is nearly identical.

now come.²⁸

The “kingdom” theme is prominent throughout the gospel of Matthew.²⁹ The “gospel” and the “kingdom” are not at odds with one another, but rather “different ways of describing the same reality.”³⁰ Thus, the phrase “gospel of the kingdom” is a perfectly appropriate way for Jesus to describe his message of salvation that will be preached among all nations.

Less clear, however, may be Jesus’ statement regarding the recipients of this gospel. He says, it will go out to “the whole world as a testimony to all nations” (24:14). It is worth some effort to clarify what Jesus means here by “world” and “nations” so that the church can effectively obey the mandate to “make disciples of all nations” (28:19). Quarles comments, “The inclusion of the Gentiles from far and wide in the new Israel is a prominent theme in Matthew’s gospel. This proclamation of the gospel to the nations is, of course, the means by which God includes Gentiles in his plan of redemption.”³¹

France observes that verse 14 is optimistic in spite of its “threatening context.”³² This verse sees the accomplishment of the great commission as guaranteed, though that commission will not be formally given until the very end of Matthew’s account. Previously in Matthew, ministry to the Gentiles was put on hold (see 10:5-6; 15:24), although indications had been given regarding Gentile inclusion in God’s kingdom (see 2:1-12; 8:5-13; 15:21-28). Additionally, Jesus would soon after speak again

²⁸Theologians refer to the arrival of the kingdom of God as an “already, not yet” reality. It has “already” come in that Jesus commenced his rule during his time on earth. But it is “not yet” what it will be when he comes again, namely, a globally recognized reign. For a helpful description of this tension, as well as a succinct handling of the importance of the theme of “kingdom” throughout the Bible, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 592-601.

²⁹See Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 441-51.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 445.

³¹Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew*, 129.

³²France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 908.

of the “gospel” and its global proclamation (26:13).³³

Because France takes “the end” in 24:14 as the destruction of the temple rather than “the end of the age,” he discredits interpretations that utilize this verse as a motive to hasten the return of Christ through missions. He notes that the “world” (τῇ οἰκουμένῃ) of verse 14 refers to “the inhabited world” of the first century, and cites Luke 2:1; Acts 11:28; 19:27; Romans 10:18; 15:18-24; 16:26; Colossians 1:6, 23 as evidences for this view. He argues that once the first century temple was destroyed, the new and greater temple (see Matt 12:6) began to form as believers were “gathered in from all over the world,” since the world had already been sufficiently evangelized.³⁴

This evaluation seems to limit the task of the great commission to the disciples of Jesus’ day,³⁵ when in fact the history of the Christian church has overwhelmingly emphasized the ongoing task of taking the gospel to unreached peoples.³⁶ The word for “nations” in 24:14 (ἔθνεσιν)³⁷ is better understood as referring to ethnic groups or people groups, rather than simply to geo-political countries.³⁸ France is right that τῇ οἰκουμένῃ does refer to the “inhabited world,” but it seems that Matthew uses this word to distinguish from the more general κόσμος, which in some cases can refer to the universe as a whole, or even to the naturally sinful mindset and practice of those in the world.³⁹ France appears to take Matthew’s “world” as only the inhabited area of the first century,

³³France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 908.

³⁴Ibid., 909-10.

³⁵Not necessarily only the eleven, but rather to those who would become disciples within the first generation after Christ. See *ibid.*, 1114.

³⁶Virtually all of France’s commentary regarding the phrase “make disciples of all nations” in Matthew 28:19 simply argues that “all nations” is not only meant to include non-Jews (Gentiles), but that Jews are to be reached as well. There is no discussion of global disciple-making as a priority for the modern church. See *ibid.*, 1114-15.

³⁷The same root word is used in 28:19.

³⁸Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 276-77. Hereafter BDAG.

³⁹Ibid., 561-63.

whereas it seems better to see this term as having ongoing ramifications.

The inhabited world of today contains many people groups with little or no access to the gospel message. The commission of Matthew 28:19, which will fulfill Jesus' statement in 24:14, demands the obedience of Jesus' followers to go where Christ has not yet been named. John later describes that he "saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. And he said with a loud voice, 'Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea, and the springs of water'" (Rev 14:6-7). The gospel will spread to every people group, and God has seen fit to use his angels and his people to accomplish this task. The fact that John saw this task as having been accomplished (Rev 5:9; 7:9) should drive believers confidently while on mission to those who are yet unreached with this good news.⁴⁰

"And then the end will come" (24:14). With this remarkably simple statement, Jesus provides an answer to the disciples' question from verse 3. This summation contrasts with verse 6, when the end was "not yet." Jesus seems to be giving a two-fold comfort in these words. First, an end will come to the opposition faced by his people throughout world history. Centuries of affliction will be seen as light and momentary when weighed against incomparable and eternal glory (2 Cor 4:17). Second, the work of God from the beginning of creation to sum up all things in Christ will finally be fulfilled (Eph 1:10). The glory and knowledge of God will cover the land. The head of the serpent will be crushed. The offspring of Abraham will bless all the families of the earth. The Son of David will sit on his throne, where he will reign forever and ever.

How that end is brought about becomes the subject of the next two chapters of

⁴⁰Much of my thinking in this paragraph has been shaped by "The Supremacy of God among 'All the Nations,'" in John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2nd ed., rev. and exp. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 155-200.

this study. While the end comes swiftly, Jesus teaches that much will happen. His followers will do well to discern his truth from other misleading voices.

Conclusion

Human curiosity regarding the future can be satisfied, but only if it is informed by Christ and his word. The reaction of the church to the catastrophic events of these days should not be panic or surrender, but confidence and resolve. The hope for rescue from natural disasters and for religious oppression will not come from a political party, but from the Son of Man.

It is not for people to know the specific time of the end, but rather to faithfully endure to the end, whenever that may be. Christians must not be alarmed, nor be led astray by deceivers. The true sheep of Jesus will know and follow the voice of the true shepherd (John 10:27).

Believers' understanding of the future has relevance for how they spend their time in these last days. Religious institutions will fall. False prophets will come and go. The word of the Lord will stand forever. Confidence in God's sovereign and good plan for the future is based on the reliability of God and faithfulness to his word in the past. The cost of following Christ is high, but so is the reward. The treasures in Egypt were great, yet Moses determined it was better to suffer temporary mistreatment with God's people than to pursue sin's passing pleasures, since Christ offers greater wealth than Egypt did (Heb 11:24-26). This must be the mindset of the church as well.

CHAPTER 3

THERE WILL BE GREAT TRIBULATION (MATT 24:15-28)

Introduction

In virtually all aspects of life, tribulation has a way of separating those who are truly committed from those who are only in it for personal benefits. When I first began to study Greek as a college sophomore, I remember my professor standing in front of the class and claiming, “My job is to separate those who want to learn Greek from those who think they want to learn Greek.” As intimidating as this was to hear, it was better to know in advance the struggles that awaited us than to be surprised by them later.

In the months that followed, the professor accomplished his stated mission. Daily quizzes, hours of work outside of class, reviewing charts, learning new vocabulary words while retaining old ones, parsing verbs, and translating sections tested even the most dedicated students. It was a trying time, and there were many temptations to cast it all aside, but for those of us who stuck with it, we earned the reward that we knew would be worth it: we learned Greek.

Need

Jesus promised his followers that they would experience tribulation in this world, but that they could take heart, because he has overcome the world (John 16:33). The apostles echo this sentiment when they acknowledge that the kingdom of God is entered through many tribulations (Acts 14:22), that all who desire to live a godly life will face persecution (2 Tim 3:12), and that fiery trials should not surprise the elect (1 Pet 4:12). There are no highways to heaven that are not paved with sorrow, sacrifice, and suffering.

Jesus' followers need to know that the hatred directed toward Jesus will also be directed toward them (John 15:18-21). They need to understand that tribulation carries with it various temptations to fall away, because the way to avoid such tribulation in this age is to disassociate with Christ. They need to have the perspective that it is better to endure hell in this life and heaven in the next than the other way around (Luke 6:20-26).

Main Point

Jesus taught about tribulation to illustrate the temptations to fall away and the promises for the elect who stand firm.

Preview

The main points of this section can be structured within two imperatives.

1. Flee the abomination of desolation because of the great tribulation (24:15-22).
2. Do not follow false christs because the true Christ comes like lightning (24:23-28).

Both main points contain an object, a command, and a reason for the command. The first object is the abomination of desolation which will stand in the holy place (24:15). As a result, Jesus commands his followers to flee and pray (24:16-20) because there will be unparalleled tribulation (24:21-22). The second object is a collection of deceptive signs performed by false christs and false prophets (24:23-25). Jesus' command is that his people not believe the signs or go out after those who perform them (24:26) because the coming of the Son of Man will be like lightning (24:27-28).

Context

In the preceding set of verses, Jesus' disciples were fascinated by the structure of the temple, and thus assumed that it was healthy and able to stand indefinitely. Jesus taught them that the temple would be overthrown. Interpreting this event to happen eschatologically, they asked about signs that would precede the *parousia* of the Son of Man and the end of the age.

Jesus illustrated to them that the end is not yet, and that signs do not necessarily indicate such. Rather, signs are the beginning of birth pains, and his followers must be equipped to face opposition as they proclaim the gospel of the kingdom to all nations. It is only when that is accomplished that the end will come. The next section (24:15-28) continues the theme of opposition that will be faced by Jesus' followers until his coming.

Exposition

As seen in the “preview” above, the structure of this section is marked by two parallel lines of thought. In the first half, Jesus warns about the abomination of desolation that is coming, from which his followers should flee because of the accompanying great tribulation. In the second half, Jesus warns his disciples to not believe or follow the signs and announcements about the coming of a false Christ, because the true *parousia* will be noticeable to all. Because the understanding of the abomination of desolation is crucial to proper interpretation and application of the remainder of the passage, a large amount of space is devoted to making sense of 24:15.

Flee the Abomination of Desolation Because of the Great Tribulation (24:15-22)

In Matthew 24:15 Jesus warns, “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand).” It is at this point in the discourse that Jesus gives the most direct answer to his disciples' question regarding the timing of the destruction of the temple (see 24:3).¹ Some take the imperative ὁ ἀναγινώσκων νοεῖτω (“the one who reads must consider”) as an editorial comment by Matthew, directing readers to understand the content of his

¹W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, International Critical Commentary (London: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 345.

gospel.² I prefer the view that this is “an aside by Jesus to draw the attention of his hearers who read Daniel to the importance of Daniel’s words.”³ Daniel himself is told to make sure that he knows and understands the vision given to him about these events (Dan 9:22-23, 25).

Object: The abomination of desolation will stand in the holy place (24:15).

The phrase “abomination of desolation” (τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως) is found explicitly in Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11 (LXX), and it is more veiled in Daniel 8:13.⁴ In order to determine what Jesus wanted his hearers, the readers of Daniel, to consider, we must evaluate the uses in Daniel and their likely fulfillments. To that end, let us heed Jesus’ words and consider what Daniel said about the abomination of desolation.

Daniel 8:9-14 records a vision about “a little horn” which rises to greatness by throwing down and trampling some of the “host” and “stars” of heaven, and becoming “as great as the Prince of the host” (8:9-11). The horn even takes away the regular burnt offerings from the Prince, overthrows his sanctuary, overtakes the host with the burnt offerings “because of transgression,” throws truth to the ground, and acts prosperously (8:11-12). One of the holy ones calls this “the vision concerning the regular burnt offering, the transgression that makes desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled underfoot” (8:13). Another holy one says that these events will happen for 2,300 days, after which time “the sanctuary will be restored to its rightful state” (8:14).

Daniel 9:24-27 records the response of Gabriel to Daniel’s prayer. Gabriel announces a seventy-week decree for Daniel’s people and his holy city that will

²See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 911-12n50.

³D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 500.

⁴LXX refers to the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT.

culminate in the end of transgression and sin, atonement for iniquity, everlasting righteousness, the sealing of vision and prophet, and the anointing of a most holy place (9:24). Accomplishing these things will be the Prince who is “an anointed one” (9:25) who “shall be cut off and shall have nothing” (9:26a). Opposing this Prince is another “prince who is to come”⁵ whose people “shall destroy the city and the sanctuary” (9:26b). “Desolations are decreed” and the end of this prince “shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be wars” (9:26c; cf. Matt 24:6). The second prince will make a one-week covenant, but halfway through “he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering” (9:27a). He is “the one who makes desolate” who rides “on the wings of abominations” until he meets his decreed end (9:27b).

Daniel 11:31 describes how the forces of a king from the north will “appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the regular burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate.” Only “the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action” (11:32). These who know God are called “wise” (11:33, 35), and they will be “refined, purified, and made white until the time of the end, for it still awaits the appointed time” (11:35). This king will exalt and magnify himself supremely (11:36, 37), he “shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods,” and “shall prosper till the indignation is accomplished; for what is decreed shall be done” (11:36).

Finally, Daniel 12:9 records that Daniel is told to go his way until the end (cf. 12:13). The pure will be made white and refined, and they are the wise who have understanding (12:10; cf. 11:33, 35), whereas the wicked “act wickedly” and have no understanding (12:10). Once again, “the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination of desolation is set up” (12:11).

⁵The anointed Prince is the Messiah. The second prince is a “hostile invader.” See James M. Hamilton, Jr., *With the Clouds of Heaven: The Book of Daniel in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 120.

A few things become apparent as one considers these teachings from Daniel. First, all of these events are future for Daniel. In Matthew 24:15, the “abomination of desolation” was future for Jesus as well. Second, while there are many similarities regarding these four sections of Daniel, it appears that he is not referring to the same event in all of them. This means that we can expect multiple “abominations” to appear that will resemble one another throughout history. Third, it is likely that certain abominations took place between the time of Daniel and the time of Jesus, so that those in Jesus’ audience could expect a future abomination that resembled something that had already taken place.

Because of the similarities of these sections, Jesus likely has all of them in mind to some extent as he commands the attention of his hearers (Matt 24:15). Gundry observes that “Dan 12:11 alone is grammatically correct in the MT. Despite the primary importance of Dan 9:27 for the meaning of the expression, 12:11 is contextually the more suitable reference so far as the gospels are concerned, because allusions to Dan 11:40 – 12:13 surround this reference to the abomination of desolation.”⁶ That is to say, Daniel 12:11 matches Matthew 24:15 linguistically, and Daniel 9:27 and 12:11 provide the strongest base for that which is still future to Jesus.

Hamilton suggests this as well by arguing that Daniel 8:13 and 11:31 describe a person who represents the type of abomination that will arise and that Daniel 9:27 and 12:11 describe a person who is the fulfillment of that type.⁷ Therefore, the abomination is a person who brings about desolation, and Daniel presents both the type and the antitype. Jesus is helping his audience to understand Daniel and to expect future events to correspond to the past. Nolland comments,

⁶Robert Horton Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1967), 48.

⁷Hamilton, *With the Clouds of Heaven*, 187.

In Daniel the overcoming of the effects of the sacrilege will usher in the end of the age. The original Daniel ‘sacrilege’ was the erection of a pagan altar and/or image of Olympian Zeus in the Jerusalem temple by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167 B.C. But in part because the Maccabean restoration was something less than the dramatic culmination anticipated in Daniel, there was the expectation that the whole thing was to be played out again on a grander scale. In Mk. 13:14 ‘the sacrilege’ is clearly a person, because though βδέλυγμα is neuter, Mark follows it with the masculine form ἐστηκότα (‘standing’).⁸

The future desolator is likely the same person that Paul describes in 2 Thessalonians 2. Paul assures the church that preceding the day of the Lord, “the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, the one who resists and lifts himself up against everything called ‘god’ or ‘an object of worship;’ therefore he sits in the temple of God, demonstrating to himself that he is God” (2:3-4). This man’s self-exaltation follows the example of the desolator described in Daniel 11:36-37.

Like the desolator and his abominations in Daniel 9:27, the man of lawlessness and his apostasy have a decreed end. “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will abolish with the breath of his mouth, and will bring to naught by the appearing of his coming” (2 Thess 2:8).⁹ Similarly, John saw a vision of a beast that exalted itself (Rev 13:5), blasphemed God (13:6), and made war on the saints (13:7). The end of this beast is to be conquered by the Lamb who is the King (17:17), and to be slain with the sword that proceeds from his mouth (19:15-16, 20-21).

What then is meant by “standing in the holy place” (Matt 24:15)? Certainly, for Antiochus Epiphanes, the holy place was the Jerusalem temple, where he “offered swine and other unclean animals on it [the altar to Zeus] as sacrifices (cf. 1 Macc. 1:41-61).”¹⁰ Some expect that the future desolator will set up a similar sacrilege in a future

⁸John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 970.

⁹The clause “his coming” translates τῆς παρουσίας αὐτοῦ, which is frequent in Matt 24.

¹⁰Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 603.

Jerusalem temple.¹¹ Others suggest that rather than a literal temple, the abomination is a future apostasy within the church, whose members now constitute the temple of God.¹²

My conclusion is that the man of lawlessness will desolate Jerusalem in a way similar to Antiochus Epiphanes, and also similar to the desecration accomplished during the invasions of AD 70. Ezekiel's vision of a new temple includes a description of a new holy place (Ezek 42:13). Similarly, John foresees future activities taking place in "the temple of God" (Rev 11:1) and "the holy city" (Rev 11:2). In AD 70, the Romans ransacked Herod's temple and pillaged Jerusalem, not leaving "stone upon stone" (cf. Matt 24:2).¹³ Jesus' prediction, then, seems to have a near fulfillment (the first century destruction of the Jerusalem temple), and a far fulfillment (the beast promoting the worship of his image in an eschatological temple). Both of these fulfillments seem to be based on the type of thing accomplished during the second century BC, between Daniel and Jesus.¹⁴

Command: Flee and pray (24:16-20). Matthew records Jesus' warnings regarding how to respond to seeing the abomination of desolation. "So when you see the abomination of desolation . . . then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one

¹¹John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 36.

¹²G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 272-88.

¹³Theophilus concludes that "the abomination of desolation" should be understood as "Yahweh's punishment of Jerusalem through Roman intervention" in AD 70. Michael P. Theophilus, *The Abomination of Desolation in Matthew 24.15*, Library of New Testament Studies 437, ed. Mark Goodacre (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 230. The temple destruction of AD 70 foreshadows an eschatological abomination, much like the sacrilege of Antiochus Epiphanes nearly 240 years earlier foreshadowed the Roman invasion. For an understanding of how the invasions of AD 70 affected Judeo-Christian religious activities, see the first five chapters of Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002).

¹⁴Compare the conclusions proposed by David L. Turner, *Matthew, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 579-80.

who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak” (24:15-18). The abomination of desolation will necessitate the urgent escape of Christ’s followers from what is to come.

The idea of fleeing to the mountains due to abominations has overtones of the OT prophets. Ezekiel foresaw a day in which judgment would come upon Israel because of their “abominations,”¹⁵ and through the judgments, Israel would know that Yahweh is God (Ezek 7:3, 4). He writes, “And if any survivors escape, they will be on the mountains” (Ezek 7:16).

Other prophets give similar warnings. Amos foretells of a time when Israel will flee God’s wrath upon her “transgressions” (Amos 2:6, 14-16).¹⁶ Near the beginning of his book, Zechariah portrays Yahweh as warning his people (who have been spread to the four winds of heaven; Matt 24:31) to “Flee from the land of the north” (Zech 2:6). Near the end of his book, Zechariah describes the day of the Lord like a battle and instructs his readers, “And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains . . . as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him” (14:5; cf. Matt 24:7, 16, 27; 25:31).

The OT frequently pictures God’s people as fleeing to the mountains from coming wrath. Lot and his family were warned, “Escape to the hills” (Gen 19:17) as the Lord prepared Sodom for judgment. During the time of judges, “Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds” (Judg 6:2). David fled from the pursuit of King Saul and hid in various hills and mountains (see 1 Sam 23:19-29). These escapes provide a background for the instructions of Jesus in Matthew 24:16-18, as well as an understanding of what the author of Hebrews means when he mentions those “of

¹⁵Ezekiel equates “abominations” (...תועבתם...) with “detestable things” (...שקניצייהם...) in 7:20. “Detestable things” translates the same word for “abomination” in Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. Throughout Ezekiel, “abominations” are associated with idolatry (for example, see Ezek 5:9, 11; 6:9, 11; 7:3-4, 20; 8:6, 9, 13, 15, 17; 9:4).

¹⁶See Dan 8:13 for “transgressions” (...פשיעי...).

whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” (Heb 11:38).

The apostle John picks up this imagery when he saw in his vision the effects of “a great earthquake” (Rev 6:12; cf. Matt 24:7) which demolished both mountains and islands (6:14). As a result of this calamity, those who were able fled and “hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains” (6:15), even praying that the mountains would fall on them that they might be delivered from the great and terrible wrath of the Lamb (6:16-17).

A later vision of John displays the people of God fleeing the serpent and receiving protection and nourishment during her flight (Rev 12:6-16). This vision ensures that God will not abandon his people as they flee from their enemies. God guards them against the pursuit of the dragon and his abominable beast through their prayers. Jesus continues his discourse, “And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath” (Matt 24:19-20).¹⁷

Some suggest that the abomination of desolation will bring about a siege upon Jerusalem.¹⁸ Since “the horrors of life in a city under siege are gruesomely enumerated in Deut 28:53-57,”¹⁹ Jesus warns his hearers to escape the city hurriedly after the abomination is seen. Matthew 24:17-18 elaborates more specifically on the general command given in verse 16. Now, in verses 19-20, Jesus gives even more specific details about the difficulty of the flight.

Attempting to escape such desolation will be arduous for anyone, but

¹⁷France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 914, notes that the “alas” (or “woe”) of 24:19 is a woe of sympathy, unlike the woes of condemnation spoken by Jesus against the religious leaders earlier in Matthew’s gospel.

¹⁸Turner, *Matthew*, 577.

¹⁹Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 358.

especially so for those caring for young children (24:19). Osborne comments, “Pregnant women and nursing mothers will be encumbered by their babies and will not be able to move fast, and their infants will be endangered by the flight.”²⁰ Jesus’ mention of the Sabbath (24:20) causes some to believe that he has in view the raids upon Jerusalem of the first century. For example, Carson observes, “As for fleeing on the Sabbath, travel would become more difficult because few would help, and many would try to prevent traveling farther than a Sabbath day’s journey. Jesus clearly expects these events to take place while the strict Sabbath law is in effect.”²¹

Again, I prefer a view which has both the near fulfillment of the Roman invasions and a distant fulfillment of the days leading up to the coming of the Son of Man in glory. This view agrees with Osborne, who argues that Jesus’ words here go “beyond AD 70 to the events of Rev 13” with application to both events.²² Similarly, Nolland writes,

Perhaps the language is just extremely graphic, but it is hard to avoid the suspicion that even in Matthew and Mark the urgency is being given an ultimacy that has more to do with being in place for an eschatological denouement than with a realistic response to a particular political and military development. But how can this be understood in Mt. 24? That some kind of merging horizons is involved is likely.²³

If Nolland is right, and I suspect he is, then Jesus’ imperative to pray (v. 20) becomes all the more significant. Jesus’ audience must recognize that their responsibility during this opposition is to flee prayerfully. Flee and pray. Jesus had previously demonstrated to his disciples that certain victories, especially those over demonic forces, could not be won apart from prayer (Mark 9:29; Matt 17:20). Even the OT leader Joshua

²⁰Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 885.

²¹Carson, *Matthew*, 501.

²²Osborne, *Matthew*, 884.

²³Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 973.

succumbed to deception when he failed to inquire of the Lord through prayer (see Josh 9:14-15). In Revelation, John observes that “the prayers of the saints” are instrumental in the worship of the Lamb, the glory of God, the preservation of the redeemed, and the final judgments upon the earth (Rev 5:8; 8:3-4). One could rightly conclude then that prayer during the flight from enemies is a necessary component for God’s people. It would be foolish to not flee from the evil works of the desolator. It would be more foolish not to pray while fleeing.

Reason: There will be unparalleled tribulation (24:21-22). Why should the followers of Jesus flee urgently and prayerfully from the abomination of desolation? Jesus continues, “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short” (Matt 24:21-22).

Here we see two points of emphasis: the uniqueness of the tribulation and the care of God for his chosen people. Jesus mentioned tribulation earlier in the discourse (v. 9), there indicating that his followers would be delivered up to tribulation and even death by the enemies of the gospel. Now in verse 21, with 24:15-20 in the background, the reader sees that a specific enemy will arise and intend to do harm to those who belong to Christ.

Jesus’ words in verses 21-22 bring to mind the promise to Daniel: “And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book” (Dan 12:1). Since we know that Daniel was influenced to some extent by Jeremiah’s writings (see Dan 9:2), it is possible that Daniel borrows this phraseology from Jeremiah, who wrote: “We have heard a cry of panic, of terror, and no peace. Ask now, and see, can a man bear a child? Why then do I see every man with his

hands on his stomach like a woman in labor? Why has every face turned pale? Alas! That day is so great there is none like it; it is a time of distress for Jacob; yet he shall be saved out of it” (Jer 30:5-7). As is evident from this section, Jesus’ words throughout Matthew 24, especially verses 21-22, seem to draw on Jeremiah as well. These words are a merciful reminder that God often acts favorably towards his people even in the midst of destruction (cf. Isa 65:8-9).

Once again, these ideas project forward into the book of Revelation. Regarding the uniqueness of the tribulation, John twice utilizes Matthew’s verbiage of a “great tribulation” (Rev 2:22; 7:14).²⁴ John specifically mentions that the final outpouring of God’s wrath upon the earth includes “a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake” (16:18).

Yet in spite of the judgment that will encompass the land, God will also work for the good of his elect. At least one reason for the great tribulation is to draw people to repentance (Rev 2:22). And out of the great tribulation will be the salvation of an innumerable multitude “from every nation” (Rev 7:9) who “have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14).

That the tribulation is unique “from the beginning of the world” (Matt 24:21) and that its days are cut short “for the sake of the elect” (v. 22) shows that both the tribulation upon the earth and the election of the saints were part of the plan of God from eternity past. Quarles states, “Matthew’s gospel also implies that divine election is not only personal but also eternal.”²⁵ This also fits with what Jesus will say later in 25:34 about his elect inheriting an eternal kingdom. Quarles continues, “God’s ancient plan did not merely focus on the preparation of a kingdom. Rather, if focused on the preparation

²⁴The only other occurrence of “great tribulation” (θλίψις μεγάλη) in the NT is in Acts 7:11, where Luke records Stephen speaking about the famine that took place during the days of Joseph.

²⁵Charles L. Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), 118.

of a kingdom ‘for you.’”²⁶ In eternity past, God chose his people and began preparing a kingdom for them. In the last days, he will shorten the days of the great tribulation for their sake. Such is the grace and love he displays toward his chosen ones.

Do Not Follow False Christs Because the True Christ Will Come Like Lightning (24:23-28)

The structure of this second main point follows closely with that of the first main point. In both sections, Jesus identifies a dangerous object, gives commands for how to respond to it, and explains the reason for his command. Verses 23-28 elaborate some on the teaching of Jesus up to this point, while also providing some previews for the climactic coming of the Son of Man that will follow.

Object: False christs and false prophets will perform deceptive signs

(24:23-25). “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand” (Matt 24:23-25).

This is the second time in the discourse that Jesus has given this warning (cf. 24:4-5). Here, the source of their deception is identified: “great signs and wonders.” Yahweh had promised Moses that he would “multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt” (Exod 7:3). Looking back on God’s works throughout Exodus, Moses reflects on the signs and wonders God had performed (Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 29:2). The end of Deuteronomy shows that a prophet like Moses had not yet arisen in Israel, one to whom Yahweh had sent great signs and wonders (34:11), though a prophet like Moses would come (18:15, 18). Other OT writers recognize that the Exodus was a unique sequence of signs and wonders (see Neh 9:10; Pss 78:43; 105:27; 135:9; Jer 32:20-21).

²⁶Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew*, 118.

The NT writers associate signs and wonders with Jesus (Acts 2:22; 4:30) and his apostles (Acts 2:43; 5:12; 6:8; 14:3; 15:12; Rom 15:19; 2 Cor 12:12; Heb 2:4).

Throughout Scripture then, signs and wonders were a convincing proof that God was working in the midst of his people. That would make signs and wonders very convincing, as it would not be immediately apparent to the observers that such were false. This is the point Paul makes when he continues to describe the man of lawlessness, who comes “by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception” (2 Thess 2:9-10). The deception is so powerful not only because one would expect God to be performing the works, but also because “God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false” (2 Thess 2:11).

John foresees this lawless one as a “beast” (Rev 13:1) who gets his power from the dragon (Rev 13:2; cf. 2 Thess 2:9). The beast performs false signs (Rev 13:3), causing the earth to marvel and worship the beast and the dragon (Rev 13:3-4). Along with the beast is a second beast (Rev 13:11), who is called a “false prophet” (Rev 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). The false prophet is also able to perform “great signs” (Rev 13:13) which leads many astray (Rev 13:14).

Piecing these passages together, John appears to see a lawless false Christ (the first beast), aided by a false prophet (the second beast), and empowered by Satan (the dragon), to perform deceptive false signs and wonders. This fits the descriptions given by Matthew (quoting Jesus) and Paul. Jesus acknowledges that he had forewarned them about this (Matt 24:25), because he had previously alerted them to this reality (24:4-5), and because he is preparing them in advance for when these events do take place. The goal of these false signs is “to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (24:24). Yet, as noted above, “God not only will protect these elect from the slaughter associated with the Roman war against the Jews in A.D. 68-70, but will also protect them from spiritual

deception.”²⁷

Command: Do not believe it or go out after them (24:26). “So, if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it” (Matt 24:26). Apparently, the false prophets would attempt to promote the idea of a secret Messianic *parousia*. Evidence that they were successful is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2, where Paul addresses believers who thought that they had missed the day of the Lord. Some suggest that the idea of Christ coming in the wilderness “was presumably a well-known haunt of messianic pretenders who sought to imitate the wilderness miracles of Moses.”²⁸

Reason: The coming of the Son of Man will be like lightning (24:27-28). “For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” (Matt 24:27-28). Jesus compares his own coming to lightning which brightens the entire sky. This imagery is far different than the purported secret returns propagated by the false prophets. Jesus wants his followers to be looking for something that would be obviously visible to everyone on earth.

Zechariah prophesied that Yahweh “will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning” and he “will sound the trumpet and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south” (Zech 9:14). At Mount Sinai, Yahweh appeared to Israel with “thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled” (Exod 19:16). In Psalm 18, David compared the Sinai appearance to victories in battle over his enemies, saying that Yahweh “thundered in the heavens” and “sent out his arrows and scattered them” and “flashed

²⁷Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew*, 116.

²⁸Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 353.

forth lightnings and routed them” (Ps 18:13-14). In Psalm 144, David prays that Yahweh will “come down” like lightning to scatter his enemies and deliver him from them (Ps 144:5-7).

These passages show that David expected the Lord to come in a manner consistent with prior revelation. Zechariah seems to predict that the Lord’s future coming would resemble his past appearances. Jesus confirms these statements with his words in Matthew 24:27. Davies and Allison remark, “Unlike his first advent, the Messiah’s parousia will be all of a sudden (cf. Ps 144:6), as unmistakable as a lightning flash. All doubt will vanish, and all false messiahs will be unmasked. No one will have to say, ‘Look here, look there.’”²⁹

Jesus is not telling his followers to not look for his coming. In fact, he will tell them later to watch alertly for it (Matt 24:42, 44). He is simply telling them that they need not worry about missing it. The early church applied this by “praying and worshipping while facing the east, and the habit of turning to the east while dying may derive from this verse and the belief that Jesus would come from that direction.”³⁰

In verse 28, Jesus “quotes a proverb (cf. Job 39:30; Luke 17:37)” that Carson admits “is a difficult one.”³¹ Blomberg says that this verse simply “concludes the paragraph by describing metaphorically how all people will be drawn to see Christ upon his return, just as certainly as vultures gather to devour a corpse or animal carcass.”³² Luz states similarly, “People will be able to miss the parousia no more than the vultures overlook a dead animal.”³³

²⁹Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 354.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 355.

³¹Carson, *Matthew*, 503.

³²Blomberg, *Matthew*, 361.

³³Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 199.

Conclusion

Tribulation is inevitable for the people of God, and it will only increase as the coming of Christ approaches. Jesus displays his care for the elect by warning them in advance about this time of difficulty and by enabling them to persevere through it. He also helps them to recognize the great tribulation when it comes because it will resemble other atrocities that have previously occurred.

Nothing sanctifies the church like trials, and nothing gives the church hope in those trials like the assurance that Christ will return for his own. This return, which Jesus has hinted at up to this point, is described in further detail in the next passage.

CHAPTER 4

WITH POWER AND GREAT GLORY (MATT 24:29-35)

Introduction

Many Christians have minimized the importance of the second coming of Jesus and downplayed its drama. True believers acknowledge the certainty that Christ will return, but some express very little excitement over this reality. If the incarnate Son of God has promised to return to earth and set up an eternal kingdom, then the anticipation of his appearing should elicit joyous reverence and faithful readiness from his people.

Jamie Miller, a Christian missionary, witnessed such excitement from a new believer in a South American jungle recently. There, Miller is producing written discipleship resources in the San language. He recounted his interactions with “Eli” as the two of them worked through the storyline of the Bible together.

It was a total blast to watch him come to terms with a God that had existed before everything else existed. Not only that, but this God had never himself come into existence. He had always been. That was a radically new thought for Eli. The closest thing the San have to such a God is a super-human mythological person, born of a "human" mother on an already existent earth. Eli's human mind had never, EVER entertained the possibility of an eternally pre-existent Being, independent from all things physical. The thought was both attractive and staggering; so much so that he said something like, "When I think about the fact that Yahweh existed before everything else, that he did not come into existence but has always been, it makes my insides tremble." (Note: Where the OT uses God's personal name, Yahweh, we reflect that in the San translation. So, Eli is much quicker to use that name than we would as English speakers influenced by our English Bible translations.)

At one point we were talking about Yahweh's descent on Mount Sinai and he said to me, "Jamie, when Yahweh comes back to earth, will I be afraid?" Wow! What do you tell a guy like that? Maybe his eschatology lacks a bit, but he put two and two together and was genuinely wondering if he was going to be afraid when God's visible presence returned to earth. We have heard the story of Mt. Sinai so many times that we have become numb to the awe of it. Not Eli. He could see the terrifying way Yahweh had come down on Mt. Sinai and he was rightly wondering if it might not be something like that when God returns to dwell on earth again. If it made people afraid then, it was only natural for him to wonder if he also would be

afraid on that Day.¹

Need

Too often, Christians are guilty of either over-emphasizing obscure details about the future or ignoring the future altogether. There is danger in both of these extremes. Followers of Christ will be wise to emphasize the certainty of the return of Jesus while carefully navigating the storyline of Scripture as it progresses toward that climactic event. The details of eschatology are important, but there is more in them that should unite God's people than divide them.

The second coming of Christ is one of the core tenets of Christianity. The church must give this doctrine proper attention so as to not become calloused to its richness. Against the backdrop of the great tribulation foretold in the previous section, Jesus' promise to return for his people stands as a beacon of hope for every believer. Christians need this hope as a sure foundation on which to stand in the midst of various trials. Additionally, believers need to trust that the words of Christ will outlast this age.

Main Point

The eternal words of Jesus provide the basis for the hope of his return, which will rescue his elect from the tribulations of this age, and for the practice of his people as they follow his words, which will outlast heaven and earth.

Context

Jesus now reaches the height of his discourse regarding his coming and "the end of the age" (Matt 24:3). Having taught his disciples that the times leading up to his return will be characterized by tribulation, highlighted by a desolator who stands in the place of God, Jesus now ensures his listeners that "those days will be cut short" (24:22).

Jesus had warned the apostles to not follow the false messiahs and false

¹Jamie Miller, e-mail message to author, May 8, 2017.

prophets that would come to deceive many with their “great signs and wonders” (24:24).² Instead, they should understand that his own coming will be like the lightning that “comes from the east and shines as far as the west” (24:27). It is to that coming that Jesus now directs the attention of his audience.

Preview

Two main points make up this section.

1. Promises for After the Tribulation (24:29-31)
2. Lessons from the Fig Tree (24:32-35)

Exposition

Having just explained some of the troubling events surrounding the “great tribulation” (Matt 24:21), Jesus now begins to shed light on the climactic event to follow.

Promises for After the Tribulation (24:29-31)

Three specific promises are made by Jesus regarding the events that directly follow the tribulation. The first promise is that the skies will change.³ “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Matt

²Luz uses Matt 24:29 to observe that Matthew “sets himself apart from the false prophets who in his own day here and there reckoned with the coming of Christ (vv. 23, 26) not by denying their near expectation but with his concept of a cosmic parousia and a Christ coming from heaven that made it possible for him to distinguish between the true Christ of the parousia and the false human Christs. This is an indication that apocalyptic concepts are by no means unimportant. For Matthew this ‘transcendent eschatology’ that expects a cosmic catastrophe, a Christ coming from heaven with divine glory, and universal judgment at the end of the world offers the possibility of speaking of the end brought about solely by God—or Christ—in such a way that no human participation is involved. Now when the end comes God alone has the word.” Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 200.

³Understandably, there is some debate about whether these cosmic events are to be taken literally or metaphorically. See D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 505, who thinks (as I do) that they are probably intended to be literal “because of the climactic nature of the Son of Man’s final self-disclosure.”

24:29).⁴ The darkness that characterizes these events mirrors the darkness brought by the Lord against Egypt during the time of Israel's exodus.⁵ The prophet Ezekiel describes the destruction of Egypt in ways that preview Jesus' words in Matthew 24 when he records this word of the Lord: "When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land" (Ezek 32:7-8).

In some ways, then, the latter judgment against Egypt will be patterned after earlier judgment. One significant difference, however, is that Egypt's latter judgment will be brought on by another nation. Ezekiel continues his lamentation against Egypt, "The sword of the king of Babylon shall come upon you. I will cause your multitude to fall by the swords of mighty ones, all of them most ruthless of nations. They shall bring to ruin the pride of Egypt, and all its multitude shall perish" (Ezek 32:11-12; cf. Ezek 29:19-20; Jer 46:13-28).

Interestingly, the destruction of Babylon is described in similar terms. As he describes "the day of the LORD" (Isa 13:6, 9) in an "oracle concerning Babylon" (13:1), Isaiah prophesies, "For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light" (13:10).⁶ The vision continues, "I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in the day of his fierce anger" (13:13).⁷ Egypt's destruction may come at the hand of the Babylonians, but the Babylonians will be overthrown by the Lord himself.

⁴"Here the boundaries of earthly history are burst asunder; the entire cosmos is drawn into the event." Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 200-01.

⁵See especially Exod 10:21-23.

⁶As was observed in chap. 2, Jesus also referenced Isa 13 when he described the beginning of birth pains (Matt 24:8; cf. Isa 13:6-8).

⁷The language of shaking of heaven and earth is picked up by Haggai (2:6-7), whose statement is quoted by the author of Hebrews (12:26).

Isaiah eventually shows that the Lord's judgment will extend from Babylon to encompass all nations. This judgment is again explained in terms of what will happen in the skies. On the day that "the kings of the earth" (Isa 24:21) are "gathered together as prisoners in a pit" (24:22), Isaiah states that "the moon will be confounded and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and his glory will be before his elders" (24:23). Similarly, the nations (34:1) are told, "All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree" (34:4). All these references seem to inform Matthew's quotation of Jesus' words in Matthew 24:29.

The prophet Joel makes numerous references to this kind of heavenly activity as well. In Joel 2:1-2 he warns, "Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!"⁸ He elaborates later by saying, "The sun and moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining" (Joel 2:10), causing him to conclude that "the day of the LORD is great and very awesome" (2:11).

The well-known paragraph of Joel 2:28-32 records the Lord as echoing this conclusion when he says, "The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes" (2:31).⁹ Based on the variety of ways this section is either referenced or alluded to in the NT, it seems that this paragraph has varying degrees of fulfillment in the death of Jesus (Matt 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44-45), the beginning of the church (Acts 2:17-24), the growth of the church through the global spread of the gospel (Rom 10:13), and the time immediately preceding the return of Jesus (Rev 6:12-17).

One other prophet who speaks in this manner is Amos, who laments, "Woe to

⁸Much of this statement is quoted and elaborated upon by Zephaniah (1:15).

⁹Joel 2:28-32 in English translations is 3:1-5 in the Hebrew Bible.

you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you desire the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light” (Amos 5:18). He follows up by asking rhetorically in verse 20, “Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?” He explains the cause of darkness with the declaration from the Lord, “I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight” (8:9).

John’s apocalyptic vision contains elements of these changes in the skies as well. At the sounding of the fourth angel’s trumpet he records that “a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night” (Rev 8:12). At the fifth trumpet, the opening of the bottomless pit is accompanied by smoke that darkens “the sun and the air” (9:2). Eventually, the kingdom of the beast is “plunged into darkness” (16:10).

No one will be able to escape the effects of these events when God brings them about. Everything in the physical and spiritual realm is called into account when the heavens are shaken.¹⁰ Those who ignore the signs meant to help point the way to the end will not be spared when the final sign, the Son of Man himself, appears.

The second promise for after the tribulation is that the sign of the Son of Man will appear. “Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30).¹¹ The disciples had asked about “the

¹⁰Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 157, distinguishes the physical and spiritual realms in this verse by observing, “In addition to the disturbance of the astral bodies, the spiritual elements of the world will also be shaken.”

¹¹The understanding of “the sign of the Son of Man” is greatly varied. Davies and Allison argue that it refers to an “eschatological ensign” (likely a cross) that will be raised by Jesus at his coming in order to gather his troops for battle. See W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, International Critical Commentary (London: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 359-60. I prefer the grammatical explanation that Matthew is simply employing a genitive of appositive, equating the sign with the Son of Man himself, or possibly with the event of his coming. For more on the genitive of appositive, see Richard A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 39-40.

sign of your coming and of the end of the age” in 24:3, and it is here that Jesus most straightforwardly addresses such.¹² This indeed is the key sentence of the discourse, because it describes the climactic event of human history.¹³

Jesus certainly draws from the visions of Daniel to paint the picture of his return. Daniel had written, “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him” (Dan 7:13). The “Ancient of Days” was introduced in Daniel 7:9 as one who sits on a fiery throne and is clothed in white, having hair “like pure wool.” In chapter 10, Daniel is approached by a man similarly described (see vv. 5-6, 10-11, 15-16, 18-19).

Daniel 7 and Daniel 10 preview John’s vision of Jesus in Revelation 1:12-18. John saw “one like a son of man” (Rev 1:13) whose hair was “like white wool” (1:14). Later in his vision, John beheld “a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man” (14:14). Comparing Daniel’s description with John’s helps readers to recognize that the Son of Man is both distinct from, and the same as, the Ancient of Days.¹⁴

Daniel continues, “And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed”

¹²Carson, *Matthew*, 505, defends the suggestion that “sign” (τὸ σημεῖον) “has two different meanings” in Matt 24 (vv. 3, 30), such that there is not as much of a connection between the two as I am asserting. Yet he concludes as I do, “Theologically this means that the kingdom is being consummated. The standard, the banner of the Son of Man, unfurls in the heavens, as he himself returns in splendor and power.”

¹³Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 363, is right to equate this event with that of Rev 19:11-16.

¹⁴Carson, *Matthew*, 506, describes the relationship between this encounter (the Son of Man with the Ancient of Days) and the Parousia as follows: “In the framework of NT eschatology, we may imagine Jesus the Son of Man receiving the kingdom through his resurrection and ascension, his divine vindication, so that now all authority is his (28:18). Yet it is equally possible to think of him receiving the kingdom at the consummation, when his reign or kingdom becomes direct and immediate, uncontested and universal. Unless one thinks of the location of the Ancient of Days in some physical and spatial sense, it is hard to imagine why Christ’s approaching God the Father to receive the kingdom might not be combined with his returning to earth to set up the consummated kingdom. This interpretation goes well with its vivid context.”

(Dan 7:14).¹⁵ Christ's "coming on the clouds of heaven" is taken from verse 13, and his "power and great glory" is seen in verse 14. Again, John connects these elements in Revelation 1 in his doxology of Jesus who "made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him" (Rev 1:6-7). Jesus (in Matt) and John (in Rev) are also likely taking a cue from Zechariah, to whom the Lord reveals, "I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn" (Zech 12:10).¹⁶

Elsewhere in his gospel, Matthew quotes Jesus making similar statements to the one in Matthew 24:30. For example, Jesus taught that his disciples will not flee persecution through all of Israel's towns "before the Son of Man comes" (Matt 10:23). He also announced that "the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father" (16:27), and that some of his hearers would "see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (16:28). He promised positions of authority for his apostles "when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne" (19:28). Later in the discourse, Jesus predicted, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne" (25:31). Finally, before the council who would condemn him to death, Jesus testified, "I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven" (26:64).

Every eye will see him, and when they do, repentance will no longer be an

¹⁵The giving and taking of dominion is prominent in Dan 7 (see vv. 6, 12, 14, 26, 27).

¹⁶Carson, *Matthew*, 505, states that the "mourning" is likely a cry of despair rather than repentance. If it is a repentant mourning, it is likely a referent to Israel and the mass conversion that Paul expects in Rom 9-11 (see Blomberg, *Matthew*, 362).

option. Jesus came to call sinners to repentance (Matt 9:13). Scripture urgently invites sinners to “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near” (Isa 55:6) and thus be counted among the elect when Christ returns in power and glory.

The third promise for after the tribulation is that the angels will gather the elect. “And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matt 24:31). The role of angels at the end of the age has already been mentioned by Jesus in Matthew’s gospel, yet with a different purpose. In chapter 24, Matthew is referencing the angels’ role in gathering the elect, but in a parable in chapter 13, their role in judgment is confirmed. Jesus explained, “The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace” (13:41-42).

Jesus says that the sending of angels will happen “with a loud trumpet call” so that the earth will see and hear the activities surrounding Jesus’ coming.¹⁷ In the OT, the sounding of trumpets could either signal a marching out or a gathering together of God’s people (see Num 10:1-10). Interestingly, Jesus’ usage of trumpet imagery in Matthew 24 apparently has the idea of sending out his angels for the purpose of gathering together his people who have been scattered, so that both aspects are highlighted.

God had commanded Israel to “observe a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with a blast of trumpets, a holy convocation” on the first day of the seventh month (Lev 23:24). This was apparently a method of preparation for the Day of Atonement which would fall nine days later (see Lev 16:29-34; 23:26-32). Additionally, every fiftieth year when observing the jubilee that was to accompany the year-long Sabbath of the land, trumpets were to be sounded on the Day of Atonement “throughout all your land” (Lev 25:9). These commands indicate that trumpets were also instruments

¹⁷Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 362-63.

of celebration. Isaiah connects the celebratory trumpet call with the eschaton as he foresees a day when “a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain at Jerusalem” (Isa 27:13). The trumpet helps to gather the scattered.

Later NT writers also link trumpets with the last things. In his major treatise on the resurrection, Paul tells “a mystery” (1 Cor 15:51) wherein people are instantly changed “at the last trumpet” (1 Cor 15:52a). He explains, “For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor 15:52b). Similarly, he teaches those at Thessalonica that the Lord’s descent from heaven to earth will be “with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thess 4:16). For Paul, the trumpet which gathers the scattered is a signal for the resurrection of God’s people.

John’s apocalyptic vision contains a series of seven trumpets (Rev 8:2, 6). The last of these trumpets comes with the angelic proclamation, “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15). The final trumpet is a victory song, celebrating the reality of the resurrection as the King sends out his angels to gather those who have been scattered.

The gathering of the elect “from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matt 24:31) summarizes the oft-repeated assurance of the OT that God’s people, though they are scattered among the nations, will once again be brought together under the reign of the Lord in a way that was previewed when Israel first entered the Promised Land.¹⁸ This notion is introduced by Moses in Deuteronomy with the prediction that “the LORD will scatter you among the peoples” (4:27). Yet after a time of separation, Moses

¹⁸“The ‘four winds’ represent the four points of the compass (Ezek 37:9; Dan 8:8; 11:4).” Carson, *Matthew*, 506.

suggests that Israel will “return to the LORD” (4:30). There is both a spiritual and geographical aspect to this restoration. Later in Deuteronomy, Moses reiterates that God will scatter his people (28:64), but will mercifully cause them to return to him “from all the peoples” (30:3) and from “the uttermost parts of heaven” (30:4).

An interesting connection forms at the end of Book Four of the Psalms and the beginning of Book Five regarding the gathering of the elect. Psalm 106:47, the penultimate verse in Book Four, contains the prayer, “Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the nations.” Two verses into Book Five, the Psalmist celebrates the answer to this prayer with, “Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, who he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south” (Ps 107:2-3). Near the end of the book, it is similarly acknowledged, “The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel” (Ps 147:2).

Three prophets make repeated mentions of God’s plan to gather his elect. Isaiah,¹⁹ Jeremiah,²⁰ and Ezekiel²¹ each prominently feature this concept. Regarding this reunion, the Lord tells Zechariah, “I will bring them back because I have compassion on them, and they shall be as though I had not rejected them” (Zech 10:6). The compassion of the Lord to gather his children is reflected in the words of Jesus immediately preceding the Olivet Discourse when he cries out to Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37, “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Paul equates “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” with the church’s “being gathered together to him” (2 Thess 2:1).

God’s people now are like they were during the exilic period of the OT,

¹⁹See Isa 11:12; 43:5-9; 56:8.

²⁰See Jer 3:11-18; 23:3; 29:14; 31:8-10; 32:37.

²¹See Ezek 11:17; 20:34, 41; 28:25; 34:11-16; 36:24; 37:21; 39:27-28.

scattered among the nations. While the current scattering is good in that it enables the gospel to be spread among the nations, God will not leave his people in that condition. “Although the nations of the earth will mourn, nevertheless the elect are drawn from them.”²² Those who long for the appearing of Jesus will find their every desire satisfied when he comes.

Lessons from the Fig Tree (24:32-35)

To help his audience understand their role in his predictions, Jesus begins to illustrate the urgency of being ready for his coming.²³ The first illustration involved a fig tree, which Jesus had also referenced just days prior (see Matt 21:18-22).²⁴ Two specific lessons emerge from the fig tree illustration.

The first lesson is that the coming of Christ is near. Jesus alerts his disciples, “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates” (Matt 24:32-33).

“At the very gates” translates ἐπὶ θύραις, a construction that is like James 5:9, “the Judge is standing at the door” (ὁ κριτὴς πρὸ τῶν θυρῶν ἔστηκεν) and very close to Revelation 3:20, “I stand at the door and knock” (ἔστηκα ἐπὶ τὴν θύραν καὶ κρούω). Whereas James presents the Son of Man as a judge, John is likely showing Jesus as a husband who has come for his bride. We will look at both presentations in turn.

James’ mention of the Judge at the door relates closely to Peter’s description of

²²Carson, *Matthew*, 506.

²³Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 207, highlights the change in style that takes place starting in v. 32: “After the long series of predictions in the third person, the speaker turns directly to his hearers.”

²⁴“The fig tree was the harbinger of summer. It was somewhat unusual among the trees of Palestine in that it lost its leaves when winter hit. That makes it easier to note the change in spring when the sap begins to flow and the branches become ‘soft’ or ‘tender’ and ready to sprout leaves. Since this is easy to see with the absence of leaves, fig trees were one of the primary signs of the approach of summer.” Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 899.

“him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Pet 4:5). Peter had described Jesus similarly during his message to the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius, calling Jesus “the one appointed by God to judge the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42). In a later sermon recorded in Acts, Paul too acknowledges that God “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed” (Acts 17:31).

While John does also speak about Jesus as the Judge,²⁵ his record of the Son of Man at the door in Revelation 3:20 focuses instead on Jesus as the Bridegroom. John’s wording is reminiscent of the lyrics of the woman in Song of Solomon 5:2, where she proclaims, “My beloved is knocking.”²⁶ Luke records Jesus’ imperative that his disciples should “be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks” (Luke 12:36). In like manner, John’s upper room discourse contains Jesus’ teaching, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23).

The lesson of the nearness of Christ’s coming is seen in that he stands at the door ready to enter. The question for the reader is whether Jesus will enter the door as a Judge ready to execute justice or as a Bridegroom ready to make his dwelling. Since the coming of Christ is near, the reader is urged to take Jesus as a Bridegroom rather than to face his coming judgment.

The second lesson from the fig tree is that the words of Christ are eternal. “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matt 24:34-35). In three prior passages, Matthew makes note of Jesus emphasizing some of these same points. Reviewing those will help with the understanding of Matthew 24.

²⁵See John 5:22-30; 9:39.

²⁶LXX has ἀδελφιδού μου κρούει ἐπὶ τὴν θύραν, which is “My beloved knocks at the door.”

The first occurs as Jesus was preparing to send his twelve apostles out for ministry. He instructed them, “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Matt 10:23). The second comes on the heels of Jesus’ first explicit announcement regarding his own death and resurrection, six days prior to his transfiguration. He tells his followers, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matt 16:28). The third immediately precedes the Jerusalem lament. As part of his final “woe” upon the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus explains that the judgment reserved for such hypocrites “will come upon this generation” (Matt 23:36).

The difficulty of determining the interpretation of these passages cannot be overstated. While a full survey of the spectrum of opinions on this matter exceeds the scope of this project, it is necessary to present a valid conclusion which satisfies and, if possible, harmonizes all relevant statements. One such study, done by Evald Lövestam, has shown that Jesus’ usage of “this generation” relates closely with the titles “generation of the Flood” and the “generation of the Wilderness” found in early Jewish writings.²⁷ Lövestam indicates that “the Flood was looked on as the first end of the world, which typologically foretells the last one.”²⁸ As we will see in the next section, Jesus himself draws parallels between the days of Noah and the coming of the Son of Man. For Lövestam, this connection gives evidence that “this generation” does not refer to “a special, isolated expression of time, the extent of which can be fixed in terms of years and decades. It is the salvation-historical situation that is in focus.”²⁹

²⁷Evald Lövestam, *Jesus and “This Generation”*: A New Testament Study, trans. Moira Linnarud, Coniectanea Biblica (Stockholm: Almqvist & Weksell, 1995), 84-85. I wish to thank Jim Hamilton for directing me to this resource.

²⁸Ibid., 85.

²⁹Ibid.

The distinction between the flood judgment and the wilderness judgment as opposed to the eschatological judgment is that while the former judgments encompassed the “generations” in question, life continued once these judgments were lifted. After the coming of the Son of Man, however, life will not continue as it always has, since the final judgment comes upon the generation “of the fulfillment in a salvation-historical sense, on its way towards ‘the second end’ of the world with its radical judgment.”³⁰ Thus, Jesus’ promise for judgment upon “this generation” sees the final judgment as a final fulfillment of similar types which were previously carried out.

The promise of Matthew 24:35, “Heaven and earth will pass away,” is not a new one.³¹ Many OT prophets foresaw such. Isaiah states that God “will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants” (Isa 24:1). In the same chapter he observes, “The earth is utterly broken, the earth is split apart, the earth is violently shaken” (Isa 24:19). Yet all is not hopeless, as God reveals to Isaiah, “Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth who dwell in it will die in like manner; but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed” (Isa 51:6). With these words, the reader learns that God’s saving word will outlast his creation.

God shows Ezekiel that all creation will be affected. Fish, birds, beasts, creeping things, “and all the people who are on the face of the earth, shall quake at my presence. And the mountains shall be thrown down, and the cliffs shall fall, and every wall shall tumble to the ground” (Ezek 38:20). Amos teaches that God “touches the earth and it melts” (Amos 9:5). Not only does his touch accomplish this, but his words do as

³⁰Lövestam, *Jesus and “This Generation,”* 86.

³¹Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*, 194, notes, “This use evokes the sense of an eschatological end comparable to its beginning in Gen 1:1.” However, the end is really a new beginning. Reconciling Matt 19:28 with 24:35, Pennington recognizes, “These two statements can be related together by understanding that there will be some type of purging of the earthly realm (cf. 24:29) with the goals of a new creation, *not* a non-earthly, heavenly kingdom. In this way, the current contrast between heaven and earth will cease” (210, emphasis Pennington’s).

well. God “utters his voice, the earth melts” (Ps 46:6). It is little wonder then, that the Psalmists command, “Tremble before him, all the earth!” (Ps 96:9) and “Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob” (Ps 114:7).

Jesus had previously stated the ability of the Scriptures to outlast creation (see Matt 5:18; Luke 16:17). Peter also gives repeated evidence that God’s word accomplishes creation’s end, not the other way around as is often propagated by scoffers (see 2 Peter 3). John’s vision of the end makes clear the passing away of heaven and earth (see Rev 6:12-14; 16:20; 20:11) to make way for a new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:1). The word of God is forever “fixed in the heavens” (Ps 119:89). “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isa 40:8).³²

Conclusion

Jesus did not answer the disciples’ question (Matt 24:3) the way that they were expecting, but he answered it the way that they needed. In the same way, believers are often asking the wrong questions about this life and the life to come. Jesus emphasizes patience through long periods of tribulation with the assurance that his words are more reliable than the world itself. These themes are of more concern to Jesus and the biblical writers than predicting the timing of his return.

He authoritatively taught unlike any other (Matt 7:28-29). Now Jesus masterfully illustrates the importance of being ready for his coming. With his return as the backdrop, how should his disciples prepare themselves and others for this event? That question is the emphasis of the remainder of the discourse.

³²“The authority and eternal validity of Jesus’ words are nothing less than the authority and eternal validity of God’s words.” Carson, *Matthew*, 507.

CHAPTER 5

AN HOUR YOU DO NOT EXPECT (MATT 24:36-51)

Introduction

The previous chapter explored the description of Jesus concerning the sign of his coming and the end of the age. Up to this point in the discourse, however, Jesus has not directly answered “When will these things be?” which was the original question posed by the disciples (Matt 24:3). Through his explanation of various events throughout world history and of unparalleled tribulations that will come upon humanity, he certainly implies that a long amount of time will pass before the end of the age. Yet even as the earth endures a downward spiral full of natural disasters and global violence, Jesus promises that his gospel of the kingdom will advance into every people group before the end comes (24:4-14).

The direct answer to “When will these things be?” comes in Matthew 24:36. Jesus asserts, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” No one knows, and no one can know. It cannot be solved, despite many attempts to put a date on its timing.¹

Need

Jesus helps his disciples to make sure that they are asking the right questions about the future. Their question of “When?” was not as important as understanding what would take place and why things would happen the way that they would. Knowing this,

¹A recent example of this is “Biblical prophecy claims the world will end on Sept. 23, Christian numerologists claim,” Fox News, September 15, 2017, accessed September 18, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/science/2017/09/15/biblical-prophecy-claims-world-will-end-on-sept-23-christian-numerologists-claim.html>.

Jesus focused much of his initial response on the promise of the advancement of the gospel in the face of adversity and on the assurance that he will one day come in power and great glory.

Just as the apostles needed to refocus their attention on the work of Christ rather than simply dates and signs, believers today need to be reoriented to the power and glory of Christ more than the speculation that surrounds when the world may end. This section of Scripture records Jesus describing the days of the end by comparing them with other events which cannot be predicted. By doing this, Jesus is reinforcing the statement that no one knows when the Lord will return, and he is showing that his followers need to remain continually faithful to their master, since they know not when he will come again.

Main Point

The main point brought out in this passage is that the reader does not know when the Son of Man is coming, nor will he be expecting it when the Lord does come, so he must stay alert and be ready.

Context

Jesus explained his climactic second coming in Matthew 24:29-35. His teaching on this subject answered the disciples' questions about the sign of his coming and the end of the age, an answer which began back in v. 4. He now turns his attention to answering the question of when these things will take place.

Preview

As he addresses his followers, Jesus makes a statement about the timing of the coming of the Son of Man, and then he makes three comparisons about what that coming will be like. The passage at hand can be arranged as follows:

1. The Timing of the Coming of the Son of Man (24:36)
2. The Comparisons of the Coming of the Son of Man (24:37-51)

Exposition

In many ways, verse 36 stands on its own because of the way that it so directly answers the initial question posed by the disciples. That is not to say that it should be flippantly removed from its context, or that it does not fit within it, but rather that it acts as a transitional statement between the paragraphs that precede and follow it. This verse acts as the proposition on which the comparisons of verses 37-51 are based.²

The Timing of the Coming of the Son of Man (24:36)

“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (24:36). That no person knows the hour of the Lord’s coming is not unusual among the biblical authors. Right before Jesus ascended back into heaven, his apostles asked him if it was the time that he was going to “restore the kingdom” (Acts 1:6). He responded, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). This answer confirms Matthew’s record, that only the Father knows the day and the hour, since the Father is the one who has ordered the occasion. Zechariah called it “a unique day, which is known to the LORD” (Zech 14:7).

All the signs given by Jesus in verses 4-35 have their purpose, but their purpose is not to give an exact timetable for the eschatological events discussed. As Blomberg says, “Signs can suggest the end is near (24:32-33), but they will never enable us to calculate the time of its arrival (24:36).”³ Jesus continues to emphasize this lack of knowledge about the timing of his coming throughout the remainder of this section and again in the next (24:42, 44, 50; 25:13).

²See D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 507-8.

³Craig L. Blomberg, “Matthew,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 88.

The Father knows because he has omnisciently ordained the event and he will providentially bring it about. The disciples do not know because even the signs are not exact indicators of when these things will happen. The angels do not know because the salvation and grace and glory that will be fully unveiled at Jesus' coming are "things into which angels long to look" (1 Pet 1:12).⁴ By why does the Son not know? Rather, how does the Son not know?

The deity of Jesus of Nazareth and his eternal position as the second person of the godhead is not in question as far as this project is concerned.⁵ What is in question is the relationship of the human and divine nature of Jesus regarding certain divine attributes, namely omniscience. How can the one who knew the thoughts of those who accused him (Matt 9:4; 12:25) not know when he would return in power and glory to establish his earthly reign? What effect does the incarnation have on God's immutable and transcendent qualities?

Many point to Paul's great Christological hymn in Philippians 2 as providing some insight in this regard. Paul states that Jesus "was in the form of God" (Phil 2:6) yet he "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:7). Of what did Jesus empty himself (ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν)? Davies and Allison say of Matthew 24:36, "Modern Christian theology, emphasizing with the creeds that Jesus was 'truly man,' has come to terms with our saying as an expression of *kenosis*."⁶ The *kenosis* is a reference to the Greek verb of Philippians 2:7. Blomberg occupies popular

⁴W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, International Critical Commentary (London: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 377-78.

⁵If anything, this verse and its context assumes (and perhaps even emphasizes) the deity of Jesus. Quarles observes, "The theme of Jesus' divine sonship continues in this final section with references to Jesus as 'the Son' (Matt. 24:36) and the messianic King's reference to God as 'my Father' (25:34). Then Jesus identifies himself as the messianic King and divine Son in Gethsemane by addressing God as 'my Father' (26:39, 42)." Charles L. Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), 151.

⁶Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 379.

ground when he concludes, “Christ’s words disclose his voluntary limitation of the independent exercise of his divine attributes (cf. Phil 2:6-8). Jesus was obviously not bodily omnipresent while he walked on the earth. Mark 6:5 describes some restrictions on his omnipotence. Here we have a limitation on his omniscience.”⁷

This is not to say that the Son is forfeiting his deity in any way, but only that he is submitting to the Father in a way that is consistent with his actions as recorded by multiple biblical authors.⁸ The obedient surrender of the Son to the Father is an argument for the divine qualities of Jesus so robustly portrayed in the discourse, not a case against them as though the Son were lesser. Nolland concurs, “Throughout the chapter various functions of deity clearly attach to the Son of Man, but here the Father clearly remains distinct as the ultimate fount of the divine will, and he does not reveal everything even to those most closely connected with the execution of his will.”⁹ Jesus will carry out the plan of the Father just as he always has, even if he is unaware of when this plan will come to fulfillment.

While admitting that the “trinitarian implications” of this verse are “not easily explained,” Turner chooses to highlight what this verse teaches about Christ’s humanity rather than speculate about his deity.¹⁰ He emphasizes that Jesus experienced physical needs, desires, and shortcomings, all while receiving strength for his work from both the Holy Spirit and angels. For Turner, this verse provides repercussions for the “genuine humanity” of Jesus, who is the sole mediator between God and humans (1 Tim 2:5).¹¹

⁷Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 363.

⁸Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 378, make this point from John 14:28 and 1 Cor 15:28.

⁹John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 991.

¹⁰David L. Turner, *Matthew, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 589.

¹¹Ibid.

It must be said, then, that Jesus is omniscient, but that in his submission to the Father, Jesus does not know the hour of his coming. MacArthur says of Jesus, “It was not that He lost any divine attributes but that He voluntarily laid aside the use of some of them and would not manifest those attributes except as directed by His Father.”¹² The incarnation of the Son of God did not limit or alter his divine ability. Rather, his deity enabled his continual obedience and submission to the Father throughout the incarnation, even if it meant being limited in his use of those qualities.

The Comparisons of the Coming of the Son of Man (24:37-51)

The remainder of Matthew 24 shows Jesus likening his return to three different events. The first event is from biblical history, and the last two are hypothetical parables. These events are not “signs” such as were prominent in verses 4-35 leading up to the sign of the Son of Man. Instead, they are similes used to illustrate the truth of verse 36 (that only the Father knows when the Son will come) and to prepare the reader for Christ’s imminent appearing.

It will be like the days of Noah (24:37-41). “For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left” (Matt 24:37-41)

The flood and its destruction are recorded in Genesis 6-7. The righteousness and blamelessness of Noah, who walked with God (Gen 6:8-9) is contrasted with the

¹²John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 72.

corruption and violence that otherwise filled the earth and warranted God's decision to destroy it and its inhabitants (Gen 6:11-13). God's favor upon Noah (Gen 6:8) is displayed in his command for Noah to construct an ark for the salvation of his family (Gen 6:14-22; cf. Heb 11:7).

Noah's obedience (Gen 6:22; 7:5, 16) led to him entering the ark with his family and the appropriate animals (Gen 7:11-16) so that they were saved as the rest of all flesh died and were blotted out (Gen 7:21-23). God distinguished between the righteous and the unrighteous, giving grace to the one and judgment to the other. The punishment of the rest of the world highlighted the mercy shown to Noah.

Other writers establish a connection between the flood and the future judgment at the return of Christ. Isaiah 54:7-10 records the Lord's balance of anger and compassion, claiming that it "is like the days of Noah" (Isa 54:9), highlighting God's commitment to his covenant promises. Peter cites the account of Noah as an example of God's distinction between the faithful and the unfaithful, saying that God "did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah" (2 Pet 2:5). God's actions in this way show that he "knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment" (2 Pet 2:9). Peter's next chapter indicts scoffers who overlook the fact that the flood was accomplished by the word of God which formed the water, and that God's same word will accomplish greater and more permanent judgment for those who remain in unbelief (2 Pet 3:5-7). He is making the same point as Isaiah: the flood serves as a precursor to the final judgment that the Son of Man will enact when he comes again. Jesus spoken similarly on an earlier occasion as recorded in Luke 17:26-27.¹³

¹³Little has been said up to this point about the relationship between Matthew's discourse and its parallels, but given the repetition noted here, it seems appropriate to mention those other records and show Matthew's reliance upon them. Mark 13:1-37 is the closest parallel to Matt 24, and likely came first since Mark's is regarded as the earliest canonical gospel to be written and circulated. On this, see the "New Testament Timeline," in *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 1806-7. Matthew was almost certainly informed and influenced by Mark, though Matthew had the advantage of being an eyewitness to much of what he wrote, while Mark was dependent on the testimony of Peter. Luke, relying

Interestingly, Jesus does not emphasize the wickedness that characterized Noah's day, only the normalcy of life in which they continued unwittingly. One scholar observes, "The idea rather seems to be that all things went on as usual, as if nothing were going to happen."¹⁴ They were doing normal things, such as sharing meals and getting married (Matt 24:38-39), yet they were doing them while maintaining a stance of unbelief in the Lord and his words. They lived as though judgment would never come. Jesus could have listed the debauchery and heinousness that was prevalent before the flood, yet he is apparently indicating that the greatest sin of the people was unbelief.

Could it be that people today are trusting their morality to save them on judgment day? If so, Jesus is saying to them that he does not distinguish between the well-behaved and the mischievous, but between those whose righteousness is found in Christ and those whose righteousness is their own. It is dangerous to assume that one is not in danger of judgment simply because they are compliant and kind.

The imagery of one taken and one left (Matt 24:40-41) also displays the practices of everyday life. People will be working their jobs or checking off their daily chores when some will be taken away.¹⁵ Again, Jesus does not explicitly name their sins. People will work and function as they have, totally unaware that judgment is approaching. Both examples—the two men in the field and the two women at the mill—are likely to be understood as suggesting that those who are working together belong to

on his own research skills and interview processes (cf. Luke 1:1-4), constructed a narrative which has three sections containing material that matches closely with Matt 24. Luke 17:22-37 was spoken by Jesus as a response to the Pharisees' question about the kingdom of God while he was journeying to Jerusalem (cf. Luke 17:11), yet it features material that matches much of Matt 24:17-44 with some variations. Luke 21:5-36 is his account of Jesus' speech at Olivet, and it reads similarly to Matt 24:1-42, again with some noticeable differences. A third, Luke 12:35-48, resembles Matt 24:42-51, which is examined in the next two subsections. For further explanation on the possible sources that shaped the eschatology of Jesus and the synoptic writers, see George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 196-99.

¹⁴A. B. Bruce, "The Synoptic Gospels," in vol. 1 of *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 297.

¹⁵Whether they are taken into judgment or to be gathered with the elect is not obvious, though both options have validity. See Carson, *Matthew*, 509.

the same family.¹⁶ These examples are reminders that simply belonging to a family where some are committed to Christ is not enough to merit salvation. In fact, the message of Christ often divides families (see Matt 10:35-36). Believers should seek the salvation of those within their own family by warning them of the sudden judgment that will one day come upon those who do not trust Christ.

It is like a thief in the night (24:42-44). “Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt 24:42-44).

This section begins with a command to “stay awake” and ends with the similar refrain, “be ready.” These imperatives provide the antidote to the lack of knowledge and awareness of the coming judgment that plagued Noah’s generation and will characterize the generation present at Christ’s second coming. In the middle of these two is the advice, “know this.” It is as if Jesus is saying, “You can’t know when I am coming, but you can know that if you did know you would prepare for it. The fact that you don’t know means that you should be even more prepared, because it could happen at any time.”

Jesus’ urgent plea in verse 42 for his followers to “stay awake” (γρηγορεῖτε) is the same one he would issue to those in his inner circle who were invited to pray with him at Gethsemane. At Olivet (24:43), Jesus says that the one knowing when the thief was coming “would have stayed awake” (ἐγρηγόρησεν). At Gethsemane (26:40), Jesus finds Peter and the others sleeping instead of praying and questions their ability to “watch with me one hour” (μίαν ὥραν γρηγορεῖσαι μετ’ ἐμοῦ) before commanding them (in 26:41) “Watch and pray” (γρηγορεῖτε καὶ προσεύχεσθε). These two instances show that

¹⁶Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 214.

the word suggests alertness. Jesus will repeat the same imperative to “watch” later in the discourse (25:13), while the command for readiness previews 25:10.

Luke records that those “whom the master finds awake when he comes” (οὓς ἐλθὼν ὁ κύριος εὐρήσει γρηγοροῦντας) will be blessed by him (Luke 12:37). The blessing comes because the servant was eagerly awaiting the return of his Lord, just as Paul assures Timothy of a crown of righteousness that will be given to “all who have loved his appearing” (2 Tim 4:8). Paul had previously commanded the same kind of attention for the church leaders who must be on the lookout for wolves who would attempt to devour Christ’s flock (Acts 20:26-31). He warned them to “be alert” (γρηγορεῖτε) by remembering his tearful admonitions (Acts 20:31). One of the best ways to remain alert for the return of the Son of Man is to be attentive to “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) as a guard against false teachings that creep into the church. Those who love the written Word of God are usually those who long for the appearance of the incarnate Word of God.

The imagery of Jesus’ return being like a thief is picked up by Paul. He told the Thessalonian believers that they were “fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thess 5:2).¹⁷ Since the believers are not in darkness, that day should not surprise them “like a thief” (1 Thess 5:4). As a result, Paul urges them, “So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake [γρηγορῶμεν] and be sober” (1 Thess 5:6).

Jesus’ message to the church at Sardis, as recorded by the apostle John in Revelation 3, contains the same warning and application. Jesus diagnoses them by saying that they are “dead” (Rev 3:1). He urges them to “Wake up” (γίνου γρηγορῶν)¹⁸ so that

¹⁷Paul also uses the analogy of labor pains coming upon a pregnant woman to describe the sudden return of the Lord (1 Thess 5:3), which relates closely to Jesus’ description in Matt 24:8.

¹⁸More literally, “Become awake.”

what has not yet died will be strengthened (Rev 3:2). He adds, “If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you” (Rev 3:3). Later in Revelation, John’s description of the sixth bowl judgment is seemingly interrupted by Jesus, who declares in 16:15, “Behold, I am coming like a thief!” The verse continues with Jesus once again pronouncing a blessing on those who stay awake.

Peter gives a similar caution but with a slightly different application. Because “the day of the Lord will come like a thief” (2 Pet 3:10), Peter pleads for “lives of holiness and godliness” from his readers who are “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God” (2 Pet 3:11-12). “Waiting” is repeated three times in this paragraph (vv. 12, 13, 14), and each time it is associated with purity. While verses 11-12 tie in waiting with holiness and godliness, verse 13 reminds readers that they “are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells,” and verse 14 implores believers to be “without spot or blemish” as they wait for these things to come.

Peter’s emphasis on purity while waiting is likely intended to explicitly show that the readiness and alertness emphasized by Jesus and Paul is to be a pure readiness. In other words, purity and alertness are not in contention with one another. They are to be taken together so that God’s people are waiting for the day of the Lord by living righteously in the present in anticipation of the righteousness that permeates the life on the earth to come. Any sensible person would keep himself unhindered so that he would be ready for the thief if he knew one was coming. In the same way, a prudent disciple of Jesus will keep his life unencumbered by sin so that he will be ready for the appearance of Christ, who “is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt 24:44).

It is like a master and his servants (24:45-51). “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant

says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and he will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 24:45-51).

It has been suggested that rather than contrasting two different servants, Jesus is contrasting two scenarios facing a single servant, causing each hearer to reflect personally regarding his own faithfulness.¹⁹ Others interpret Jesus as explaining two different servants.²⁰ While both possibilities have validity, this study assumes that Jesus has two different men in mind.

In this parable, one servant is wise (24:45-47) and another is wicked (24:48-51).²¹ Although only the wise servant is said to have been set over his master’s household with accompanying responsibilities (24:45), it appears best to assume that both servants fit that description. Both servants have been assigned these tasks because the master has left them in charge while he is on a journey from which he will return at an unknown and unexpected time (24:46, 50). Clearly, Jesus means for his hearers to relate this parable to the earlier examples of Noah’s day and the thief.

Matthew’s use of certain key words to describe each servant gives his readers a glimpse of how Jesus views the works of his followers as they await the return of their master. These descriptions form the basis of application even for modern readers. The positive traits of the wise servant are to be emulated, while the harmful terms attributed to the wicked servant are to be avoided.

¹⁹Blomberg, *Matthew*, 368.

²⁰Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 616-17.

²¹This contrast between wisdom/righteousness and wickedness/foolishness is also highlighted in each of the three illustrations given in Matt 25.

The first servant is called faithful, a word that would be used by Jesus later in the discourse to describe servants who, like this man, were faithful over the little with which they were entrusted and thus were set over much by their master after his return (Matt 25:21, 23). Paul articulated this idea when he stated that “it is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (1 Cor 4:2). Since the context of Paul’s letter was dealing with those, including himself, who were “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1), it is right to understand that faithful stewardship according to the Bible involves everything from finances to physical labor to spiritual accountability. In any and every task, God requires faithfulness from his servants.

Of course, the only perfectly faithful servant of God was Jesus, the Son of God. Whereas “Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant” (Heb 3:5; see Num 12:7), “Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son” (Heb 3:6). The author intends not to minimize the faithfulness of Moses but to maximize the faithfulness of Jesus, since the faithfulness of Moses was “to testify to the things that were to be spoken later” (Heb 3:5), namely, the perfect faithfulness of Jesus.

The first servant is also described as wise.²² Previously in Matthew, Jesus had likened those who hear and obey his words to “a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt 7:24). Jesus’ instructions to his disciples in Matthew 10 included the admonition to “be wise as serpents” (10:16).²³ Five of the ten virgins in Jesus’ following parable will also be identified as wise (25:2).

²²The word for “wise” in Matt 24:45 and other references in this section is φρόνιμος (or its cognates) rather than the more familiar σοφός. There does not appear to be a great deal of lexical difference between the two, although one distinction may be that σοφός is attained through more formal education while φρόνιμος is more based on personal reflection. See BDAG, 934-35 and 1065-66 for more details on the NT usages of both words.

²³Interestingly, this phraseology is reminiscent of the craftiness of the serpent regarding the fall of man (Gen 3:1). No doubt, the serpent possesses a level of wisdom that is powerful, yet harmful, which explains why Jesus emphasizes the need to also be “innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16). He is not teaching his disciples to aspire to be like the serpent or his contingency, but rather to utilize wisdom in a manner that leads to life and not to death.

The faithfulness and wisdom of the first servant result in him being blessed (24:46). This is the same blessedness reserved for those spoken of in the beatitudes (5:1-12). At the last supper, Jesus again speaks of blessedness in the context of a servant and master relationship (John 13:16-17), and the Scriptures regularly associate blessedness with obedience that springs from knowledge (Luke 11:18; Jas 1:22). There is eternal blessedness for all who remain faithful until the coming of Christ (Rev 16:15).

The specific blessing associated with the faithful and wise servant is that he is set over all the possessions of his master (Matt 24:47). The patriarch Joseph was made an overseer of all that Potiphar owned because he was found to be a faithful servant in his house (Gen 39:1-6). In the same way, all creatures are servants of God, and rely on him for food and all other care and provision (Pss 104:27; 145:15). God has the right to set others over his possessions because he owns everything. Masters are owners; servants are stewards. God is the owner even of other masters, and all his people are servants who must be found faithful. Those who are found faithful become masters in the age to come.

Those who are not faithful are like the servant of Matthew 24:48-51, who is first described as “wicked” (v. 48). Matthew uses this word (κακός) nominatively when quoting the Jewish religious leaders who unwittingly condemn themselves as “wretches” (21:41). Matthew contrasts their wickedness with the innocence of Jesus during his trial by quoting Pilate’s question to the crowd in 27:23, “What evil has he done?” In each instance, the master is righteous and the servants are wicked. The wickedness of the servant in the parable (24:49-50) is evident by his thoughts (“My master is delayed”) and his actions (beating fellow servants and dining with drunkards). Paul also associates drunkenness with those who lack alertness regarding the coming of Christ (1 Thess 5:7).

The punishment for this wicked servant is severe. Upon his return, the master “will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites” (Matt 24:51). The verb behind “cut him in pieces” is used only here and in one of the Lucan parallels (Luke 12:46) in

the NT.²⁴ The LXX contains one record of this word (Exod 29:17), which describes how one of the rams was to be killed during the consecration ceremonies for the Levitical priests. That Matthew and Luke use this word to convey the judgment of wicked servants reminds readers that the unfaithful will suffer the penalty for their own sins, while the faithful have had their sins and judgment absorbed by the sacrifice of another, indeed, by the master himself.

Of the seven occurrences of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” in the NT, six are contained in Matthew (8:12, 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). The phrase, like the act of being cut in pieces, is to be taken metaphorically as a description of the harsh realities of hell.²⁵ The faithful receive all the master’s possessions; the unfaithful possess nothing.

The authority to judge is given to the master, who returns on an unexpected day and at an unexpected hour (24:50), as has been emphasized by Jesus throughout this section. Jesus gives the same title (ὁ κύριος) to the master that he used for himself earlier in the discourse when he called himself “your Lord” (24:42). The word most often translates the divine name יהוה in the LXX, and is the title for the master in the parable of the talents in 25:14-30.²⁶ This deliberate terminology is used to underscore the parallel Jesus is drawing between the unforeseen return of the master to his servants and his own startling return in the future.

Conclusion

When will these things be? Only the Father knows. Based on his own warnings, the coming of Christ and the end of the age is imminent and soon. His return has been and will continue to be anticipated by various signs which indicate its nearness,

²⁴Luke differs from Matthew in that where Matt 24:51 shows the servant being cut up and placed with the hypocrites, Luke 12:46 records that the wicked servant was put “with the unfaithful.” Thus, the NT equates hypocrisy and unfaithfulness by contrasting them both with faithful service.

²⁵Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 617-18.

²⁶Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew*, 142.

but those signs do not point to the exact hour of the event.

The second coming is apparently associated not with signs, but with similes. The comparisons given by Jesus in this section link back to previous events and they preview what his return will be like. He means for his followers to practice alertness, readiness, and faithfulness as they are “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

And when he does appear he will set up his kingdom. What will that kingdom be like? Jesus spoke often in Matthew of the kingdom of God, but how are Christians today to think of it? And what has the kingdom to do with the appearance of Christ at end of the age? These are the questions that Matthew 25 was given to answer.

CHAPTER 6
MEETING THE BRIDEGROOM (MATT 25:1-13)

Introduction

Few feelings, if any, are worse than the feeling of being unprepared. Whether a student who has not studied for an exam, a presenter who is not ready when the time comes to give a speech, or an athlete who fails to train adequately for the competition, lack of preparation exposes all who fall prey to it. No one escapes its consequences, which can range from minimal and momentary to extreme and eternal.

The book of Proverbs gives practical advice about the need for preparedness. The reader is urged to consider the ways of the ant who “prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest” (Prov 6:8) to survive the winter, whereas the lazy man will experience poverty (6:9-11). The wise man is similarly instructed, “Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for yourself in the field, and after that build your house” (24:27).

Jesus also emphasized this practical side of preparation when he illustrated the need to “count the cost” of building a tower or of entering battle (Luke 14:28-32). Building projects and battle plans are often life-altering endeavors for many individuals and families, and thus are not to be taken lightly. Yet Jesus rightly observes that these are but menial tasks when compared to the kind of preparation required to truly be his disciple (Luke 14:26-27, 33).

Need

The decision to become a disciple of Jesus is an intentional act of faith and obedience in response to his call, “Follow me.” One does not enter this relationship by

accident. According to Jesus, one who desires to come after him must hate his own family, bear a cross, and renounce all that he has, otherwise he cannot be a disciple (Luke 14:26, 27, 33).

As believers in Jesus await his glorious return, they need to recognize what it means to be prepared for that time. All disciples from all ages must count the cost, so that at the end of the age, they will be welcomed by their Lord. According to Scripture, a decision to follow Jesus will be accompanied by a posture of patient faithfulness while awaiting the appearance of the Son of Man.

Main Point

Be prepared for the return of the Lord, just as awaiting the coming of a Bridegroom, to be welcomed into the marriage feast.

Context

In this section of Matthew's gospel, Jesus continues to emphasize the necessity of "watching" for the unpredictable coming of the King. Just as the audience at a wedding awaits the union of the bride to her groom, Jesus builds anticipation of his own return by comparing it to the coming of a Bridegroom. The comparisons at the end of Matthew 24 emphasize the need for alertness and readiness, and this opening parable of Matthew 25 emphasizes the need for preparation, so there is a natural flow of thought. No one wants to be humiliated by being left out of a wedding feast. Jesus warns those who will listen to him that being left out of the great feast in his kingdom will not only be humiliating for those who are unexpectedly left out, but it will also be eternally damning.

Preview

This passage can be analyzed within the following framework:

1. The Expectation of the Bridegroom (25:1)
2. The Preparation for the Bridegroom (25:2-4)

3. The Delay of the Bridegroom (25:5)
4. The Return of the Bridegroom (25:6-9)
5. The Marriage Feast (25:10-12)
6. The Application (25:13)

Exposition

The inability to predict the moment of the second advent was emphasized in the previous chapter (Matt 24:36, 42, 44, 50) and is featured again in this section (25:13). It affirms that only God the Father knows the timing of this event (24:36) and that no other answer can be given to the question, “When will these things be?” posed by the disciples in 24:3. The three parables of chapter 25, starting with this section, are focused on what the kingdom of heaven will be like at “the end of the age” (see 24:3). The following six points provide the structure for the parable that centers on the anticipation of meeting the Bridegroom.

The Expectation of the Bridegroom (25:1)

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom” (Matt 25:1). Each of the three main divisions in Matthew 25 has the kingdom of heaven as its focus, particularly the prominence of this kingdom at the end of the age. When Jesus begins 25:14 with, “For it will be like” to introduce the second parable, he undoubtedly means “it” to be the kingdom of heaven. The third parable of the chapter pictures the Son of Man in glory seated on a glorious throne (25:31). From the throne, the King will distinguish between those who are invited to inherit the kingdom and those who must depart from him forever (25:34, 41).

Verse 1 begins with “Then” (Τότε), which can also be translated “At that time,” and is meant to remind readers and listeners that Jesus is referring to a future moment in his kingdom. It is not uncommon for Jesus to introduce his parables by making comparisons about the kingdom of heaven. Matthew’s gospel alone records at

least eleven occurrences of “the kingdom of heaven is like” (or similar wording), causing Quarles to argue that the focus of Jesus’ parables is the kingdom of heaven.¹ The unique feature of this statement in 25:1 is that the verb is in the future passive tense (ὁμοιωθήσεται) as opposed to the more common aorist passive tense used in 13:24; 18:23; and 22:2.² Matthew uses the future tense of this word in 7:24, 26 when comparing the actions of the wise man and the foolish man in regard to the foundation on which each one builds his house. Here in 25:1, he introduces a parable with wise and foolish virgins, and seems to repeat the terminology for the sake of creating a link between these two statements of Jesus.³ To render that first phrase (Τότε ὁμοιωθήσεται ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν) most accurately one might say, “At that time the kingdom of heaven will have become like” the ten virgins expecting to meet the Bridegroom.⁴

The role of these virgins is likely comparable to the role of bridesmaids in a modern wedding. While Matthew’s only other use of παρθένος (in 1:23 referring to Mary) certainly does indicate virginity, Nolland suggests that the term here more broadly indicates that these were “young unmarried women” whose task “is to take the bridegroom to the bride.”⁵ Though they are not yet the focus of the wedding, they are the focus of the parable because of their aspirations to also be with the bridegroom.⁶

¹See Charles L. Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), 88-89.

²R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 948.

³John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1003.

⁴I am basing this translation on the suggestions from G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 430, who states, “The aorist passive verb refers to the past inaugurated kingdom, and the future passive to the not-yet-consummated kingdom.”

⁵Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1003.

⁶Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 233.

The types of lamps Matthew has in mind is of some debate.⁷ While λαμπάδας can mean “torch” or “lamp,” BDAG identifies this usage as a lamp that would have “a wick and space for oil.”⁸ Presumably this lamp was designed for outdoor use, such as a lantern. This would distinguish it from λύχνοι (Luke 12:35), which is more likely a metal or clay oil-burning lamp intended for indoor use.⁹

That Jesus identifies himself as the bridegroom of the parable shows that he is equating himself with Yahweh. At least three OT prophets picture God as a husband to Israel.¹⁰ Isaiah records the Lord telling Israel that “your Maker is your husband” (Isa 54:5), and that “the LORD has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off” (54:6). Through Ezekiel, God reveals to Israel, “I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine” (Ezek 16:8). The prophet Hosea, whose own marriage symbolizes the strenuous relationship between Yahweh and Israel, confirms that the nation will one day refer to her God as “My Husband” (Hos 2:16). Three times in 2:19-20 the Lord promises Israel, “I will betroth you to me.”¹¹

Matthew had previously recorded Jesus as referring to himself as a bridegroom in whose presence his “wedding guests” will not mourn or fast but once he “is taken away from them . . . then they will fast” (Matt 9:15). Likewise, John the Baptizer compared the prophetic transition from him to Jesus to the “friend of the bridegroom” who “rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice” (John 3:29). The end of Scripture

⁷See Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1003-4, for some of the difficulties associated with this word in the context of the entire parable.

⁸BDAG, 585.

⁹Ibid., 606.

¹⁰Craig L. Blomberg, “Matthew,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 90.

¹¹Hos 2:16-20 in English translations is 2:18-22 in the Hebrew Bible.

envisions the Lamb and his bride celebrating their marriage (Rev 19:6-9; 21:1-2, 9-11). The parable at hand, then, is given by Jesus to affirm his deity and to preview the wedding with his people at the end of the age.

Verse 1 builds the anticipation for the rest of the parable, even though it is essentially only the introduction of the story. Luz argues that Matthew “probably understands v. 1 as a title and description of the contents.”¹² In other words, the actual story involving the ten bridesmaids and their lamps as they prepare to meet the bridegroom begins in verse 2.

The Preparation for the Bridegroom (25:2-4)

“Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps” (Matt 25:2-4). Any mystery of the outcome of the virgins in the parable is alleviated from the outset as these young women are identified as wise or foolish. The designation of wise or foolish is dependent upon each women’s preparation as they wait for the time to meet the bridegroom.

The terms here for foolish (μωραὶ) and wise (φρόνιμοι) are the same terms used by Jesus in Matthew 7:24-27 as he concluded his sermon on the mount with the contrast between the “wise man who built his house on the rock” (7:24) and the “foolish man who built his house on the sand” (7:26). In that example, the distinction between the two men had to do with the way each one responded to hearing the words of Jesus. The one who lived according to Jesus’ words were wise, while the one who did not was foolish. The house of the wise man withstood the floods and winds (7:25), but the house of the foolish man collapsed beneath them (7:27). The point was clear: how one responds to Jesus’ words indicates whether one is wise or foolish.

¹²Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 233.

The point of the parable of the ten virgins seems equally apparent: how prepared one is for the coming of the bridegroom highlights one's wisdom or foolishness. Jesus had concluded Matthew 24 with his description of "the faithful and wise servant" (ὁ πιστὸς δοῦλος καὶ φρόνιμος) who was found to be trustworthy when set in charge of his master's household (24:45). Yet that servant was contrasted with one who was "wicked" (24:48) rather than one who was foolish. Jesus is thus illustrating that wickedness and foolishness are synonymous.¹³

The foolish were partially prepared to meet the bridegroom. After all, they had their lamps. But because "they took no oil with them" (25:3) their lamps were essentially useless. In their case, to be halfway ready was to be not ready at all. This reality should serve as an important lesson for believers today. Many churches are undoubtedly filled with people who assume that they are ready to meet Christ at his coming because they have made some spiritual preparations. Perhaps they nominally identify as evangelical or they have been led in a prayer or they have participated in Christian service. Jesus is warning his listeners to not bank on half-baked Christianity as a recipe for entrance into his kingdom.

On the contrary, "the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps" (25:4). Matthew is the only NT writer to employ this term for "flasks" (ἀγγείαις).¹⁴ Nolland admits that the word has assorted usages in the LXX and observes, "The wise are not doing anything out of the ordinary. They are simply taking along the oil supplies that are needed for their torches."¹⁵

¹³France's translation of μωραὶ as "silly" is too soft and kind for these women given the severity of the consequences they would endure (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 948). BDAG (663) suggests "stupid" as an adequate translation.

¹⁴The word ἄγγη from Matt 13:48 is perhaps a shortened form of this word, where it is shown to be a container for fish. Presumably, the container for fish would be larger than the vessel necessary for carrying oil, suggesting that the word(s) can be used to designate items of varying sizes. See BDAG (7, 9) for further similarities and differences.

¹⁵Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1005-6.

The Delay of the Bridegroom (25:5)

“As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept” (Matt 25:5). The real wisdom of the prepared women is that they anticipate a delay by the Bridegroom, and therefore they take precautions to remain ready even if his coming were to happen much later than they initially expect, which indeed turns out to be the case. As Osborne notes, “These prudent bridesmaids have the wisdom to think ahead. They are to meet the groom at a certain spot at a certain time, but they are aware that something could hold him up and so take enough oil to last in case he is late.”¹⁶ On the other hand, the foolish virgins are not prepared for such a delay, and therefore do not bring adequate oil.

The delay of the Bridegroom echoes the delay of the Master in 24:48 and previews the “long time” before the Master’s return in 25:19. It is also consistent with the greater point that Jesus was making at the outset of his discourse: despite the occurrence of certain “signs,” Jesus emphasized “the end is not yet” (24:6) and “these are but the beginning of the birth pains” (24:8). He is implying (if not outright stating) that there will be a significant time delay between the giving of this teaching and the fulfillments of it.

There seems to be some tension between the idea of a delay and the commands to be ready as though the coming is immanent. Yet the tension does not demand that one be true while the other is false. On the one hand, Jesus does not want his followers to be consumed with the signs to the point that they are attempting to calculate the timing of his return by them. At the same time, Jesus states that one should be able to observe certain signs and recognize the nearness of his coming by them (24:32-33). The key, once again, is that no one knows when the Son of Man will appear (24:36). While it may seem as though his coming is delayed, when it does happen, it will be unexpected, so preparations must be made to ensure readiness.

The same tension is felt by other biblical writers as well. The prophet

¹⁶Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 915.

Habakkuk (1:2) had asked, “O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?” That is, he was asking for the coming of God’s judgment upon his enemies to be swift and to happen soon. Yahweh’s answer reveals the tension at hand: “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith” (Hab 2:2-4). This response reveals both realities side-by-side. The fulfillment of God’s judgment “awaits its appointed time” while “it hastens to the end.” It may seem “slow,” but “it will not delay.”

The author of Hebrews quotes this section from Habakkuk in a context that warns of God’s judgment upon those who would fall away from him. The writer calls for “endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised” (Heb 10:36). Endurance would be necessary for the faithful because of the apparent delay of judgment upon the wicked. It is an “apparent” delay because in the sovereignty of God his timing is not late. If anything, the delay is a merciful one. Surely this is Peter’s point when he writes, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). The Son of Man “will come like a thief” (3:10), that is, he will come at an unknown, unexpected, and unpredictable time. Yet to those who are awaiting it, that coming will seem to be put off. Even scoffers will mock those who affirm the doctrine of the second coming because of the lengthy inter-advent period (3:1-4). But the fulfilled promises of God in the past give assurance to the fulfillment of his promises for the future as well (3:5-7).

During the delay, “they all became drowsy and slept” (Matt 25:5). Even the wise slept as they waited for the Bridegroom’s coming. As in 24:37-39, all were carrying on with normal human activity. This observation should be taken to understand that there was nothing sinful about the sleep. It only further serves to emphasize the delay of the

Bridegroom, which was longer than the young women could have expected. If it were wrong to sleep in this situation, one would expect that Jesus would have stated that only the foolish slept while the wise stayed awake, but that is not the case.

The Return of the Bridegroom (25:6-9)

“But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves’” (Matt 25:6-9).

The timing of midnight is reminiscent of the thief who comes in the night (24:43). According to Mark, Jesus’ reasoning for his command to “stay awake” is “for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning” (Mark 13:35). Matthew is not affirming, then, that Jesus’ return will occur precisely at midnight. He is simply using “midnight” as an appropriate illustration within this parable.¹⁷

The cry at the arrival of the Bridegroom for all to “Come out to meet him” (Matt 25:6) foreshadows John’s vision of the marriage feast in Revelation 19. Interestingly, the cry of the multitude gathered before the feast is first focused on the Bride (Rev 19:6-9). This practice is the reverse of modern weddings in North American culture, where the attention is drawn first to the groom and others with him. It is only when the back door is opened that the audience stands in unison to honor the entrance of the bride in all her beauty. John instead sees the bride first, and then the heavens are opened so that the Groom can make his glorious appearance (Rev 19:11-16).

Upon hearing the cry, the bridesmaids “rose and trimmed their lamps” in order

¹⁷Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 234, suggests that “at midnight” is better translated as “in the middle of the night.”

to meet the Bridegroom (25:7). “Trimmed” (ἐκόσμησαν) is used elsewhere in the NT as “adorned,” “put in order,” or “decorated.”¹⁸ Yet the idea of trimming a lamp is unique to this context. As was mentioned earlier, some of the mystery has already been removed, since Jesus has noted that five of the virgins were foolish. Yet at this point, all ten of them respond actively to the cry, and continue to assume their readiness.¹⁹

“Now the difference between the two groups begins to appear.”²⁰ The five foolish virgins apparently quickly recognize their deficiencies and plead with the wise virgins, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out” (25:8). Because they had taken no oil (25:3), the foolish women were now depending upon the prepared women to supply what they had not brought. The delay of the Bridegroom has indeed caught them off guard.

The wise bridesmaids are unwilling to share their supply of the oil. Their reply is an interesting one: “Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves” (25:9). Several questions immediately come to mind. Why would the wise not be able to share? What, if anything, does the oil represent? Could the five unprepared virgins really be able to acquire oil another way in the middle of the night?

Reasonable answers have been given to these questions. Regarding the reluctance of the wise to share, some have commented, “Seemingly the lamps would go out early if the oil were shared.”²¹ The wise did not want to undo the preparations that

¹⁸See BDAG, 560-61, for the assortment of meanings in various passages and for related words.

¹⁹Osborne, *Matthew*, 916: “This makes the rest of the story all the more poignant, for we know that half of them will not make it.”

²⁰Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 623.

²¹W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, International Critical Commentary (London: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 399.

they had rightly made and put themselves at risk of not participating in the feast. Instead, they send the foolish one elsewhere to acquire oil for their lamps. Blomberg points out, “On festive nights such as this, the shops stayed open as long as people might need them, so the girls should go there and purchase extra oil for themselves. Jesus apparently wants to teach that spiritual preparedness may not be transferred from one individual to another. All people are responsible for themselves.”²²

In using the imagery of lamps either going out or remaining lit, Jesus may have in mind some OT passages which speak of lights and lamps in relation to one’s own life. Job’s friend Bildad makes the case, “Indeed, the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of his fire does not shine. The light is dark in his tent, and his lamp above him is put out. His strong steps are shortened and his own schemes throw him down” (Job 18:5-7). Solomon states a similar argument when he writes, “The light of the righteous rejoices, but the lamp of the wicked will be put out” (Prov 13:9). Later proverbs also teach, “Fret not yourself because of evildoers, and be not envious of the wicked, for the evil man has no future; the lamp of the wicked will be put out” (24:20). If Jesus indeed is expounding these ideas, he is making a strong parallel between each virgin’s lamp representing her own life.

The Marriage Feast (25:10-12)

“And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly I say to you, I do not know you’” (Matt 25:10-12).²³

²²Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 370.

²³Since so much of what follows is different than what would be expected to happen in a small-town wedding, Jesus is likely drawing the attention away from the wedding of the parable and more fully emphasizing the nature of his second advent (see Osborne, *Matthew*, 917).

In desperation, the five unprepared virgins “were going to buy” when the Bridegroom finally makes his appearance, while “those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast” (25:10). Luz observes that the words “with him” are likely connected to “the Immanuel motif” which bookends the gospel of Matthew (1:23; 28:20).²⁴ Yet while the wise are enjoying the presence of the long-awaited Groom, the others “leave just as the bridegroom arrives” and their “movement in opposite directions foreshadows the tragic conclusion: the five foolish virgins will not be with the bridegroom.”²⁵ The distinction Jesus is drawing here is nearly identical to the point he made in a parable just a day or so earlier, where some presumptuous invitees were left out of a wedding feast while the prepared guests filled the wedding hall (22:1-14). The festal imagery may also remind readers of Jesus’ mention of dining in the kingdom from 8:11-12.²⁶

The finality of the phrase “and the door was shut” (25:10) echoes earlier episodes. The Lord had shut the door of the ark to keep Noah and his family inside while simultaneously closing off access for those who would be swept away in the flood (Gen 7:16; Matt 24:37-39). Luke records Jesus giving parallels to these ideas in response to one who asked him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” (Luke 13:23). His answer was direct: “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from’” (13:24-25). Jesus continues by emphasizing that no amount of good deeds or previous associations with the Lord will reverse their fate, but rather that they will be labeled as “workers of evil” while many

²⁴Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 234.

²⁵Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 399.

²⁶France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 949.

surprising people will be welcomed into God’s kingdom (13:26-30). To put it succinctly, “The closed door is a lost opportunity.”²⁷

Because the door has been closed, the unprepared bridesmaids arrive to find themselves locked out of the feast.²⁸ They plead, “Lord, lord, open to us” (Matt 25:11). The cry of “open to us” matches Luke 13:25, while the repetitive, “Lord, lord” (Κύριε κύριε) matches Matthew 7:21-23, where Jesus uses it (as in Luke 13) to demonstrate the desperation of those who assumed their good works would grant them entrance into the kingdom. Jesus warns, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (7:21). Jesus is not reprimanding the title they give to him, but he is saying that there is more to belonging to him than simply how one addresses him. He continues, “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” (7:22-23). In much the same way, the Bridegroom responds to the five virgins standing outside begging to be let in: “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you” (25:12). The sentence was likely as surprising as it was horrifying. Every indication up to this point is that these virgins fully expected to attend the wedding feast and take part in it. They had never expected to hear this word of condemnation. Yet their trust was not in their relationship with the Bridegroom, but in their own efforts. Morris emphasizes the adversative use of δὲ in both verse 10 and verse 12, showing that the action taken differed from what the reader would have expected.²⁹

The Bridegroom was just in his severity. Carson rightly proposes, “Because this parable concerns the consummation, the refusal to recognize or admit the foolish

²⁷Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 400.

²⁸Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1009, argues that Jesus’ original parable likely ended with verse 10, and that the remaining comments on this story belong to Matthew.

²⁹Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 624-25.

virgins (v. 12) must not be construed as calloused rejection of their lifelong desire to enter the kingdom. Far from it: it is the rejection of those who, despite appearances, never made preparation for the coming of the kingdom.”³⁰

Scripture consistently teaches that to genuinely know God is to be genuinely known by him. As Moses interceded with Yahweh about whether he would continue to accompany Israel on the journey to Canaan, he asked for assurance that the Lord knew him (Exod 33:12), so that Moses would appropriately know him (33:13). In response, Yahweh assured Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name” (33:17). In the prophets, the Lord spoke to Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you” (Jer 1:5), and he revealed to Nahum that he “knows those who take refuge in him” (Nah 1:7). Jesus fulfilled this Messianic role when he taught, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14-15), and “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (10:27). The apostle Paul reiterates this reality throughout his epistles. To the Corinthians he taught that loving God results in being “known by God” (1 Cor 8:3). He also equates knowing God with being “known by God” (Gal 4:9). He affirms to Timothy, “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim 2:19).

Earlier in Matthew, Jesus had instructed his disciples, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt 10:32-33). The abundance of testimony among a wide swath of Scripture indicates that the Bridegroom did not know the virgins because the virgins did not know the Bridegroom. The epitome of being unprepared to meet the Son at his coming is to

³⁰D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 514.

give service to one who is not known and therefore also does not know his servants.

The Application (25:13)

“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matt 25:13).³¹ That the timing of the King’s return to establish his kingdom cannot be known reinforces the need to truly know the King and be known by him to be fully prepared for his appearance. Those who know the Lord will remain watchful in anticipation for the one whose return they greatly desire. As in 24:42, the command is for active watchfulness rather than passive observance. As was mentioned earlier, “The problem is not so much that the virgins slept when the groom’s arrival was delayed but that the foolish virgins were not ready when he eventually did come.”³² The wise and prepared followers will “not grow weary of doing good” (Gal 6:9). Like the exiles in Babylon who carried on with daily responsibilities while awaiting their deliverance (Jer 29:1-14), pilgrims longing for the final revelation of Christ will work faithfully, knowing that the Lord has not called his followers to idleness, but to action (2 Thess 3:6-15). Osborne remarks, “Vigilance is the way believers maintain readiness, and it entails right living as well as right thinking.”³³

Conclusion

The cost of preparation for the long-awaited return of Jesus is indeed high. There is no more demanding summons than the one to follow him. Yet the cost of being found unprepared before him at his coming is far greater.

True preparedness for the eschatological marriage feast is knowing the

³¹France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 950, argues against this verse being a part of Jesus’ original speech, suggesting that it is “an editorial comment” and a generic one at that.

³²David L. Turner, *Matthew, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 597.

³³Osborne, *Matthew*, 918.

Bridegroom and being known by him. The Bridegroom is the King who has made it possible for guests to partake of the feast and enter his kingdom. Though his coming appears to be delayed, those who are wise will remain watchful for him, since it is impossible to predict the moment of that magnificent event.

Each one is responsible for his own preparedness. No amount of effort can earn admittance for another. Only the Bridegroom can grant admission, and he is just to cast out those who, by their unpreparedness, show that they do not know him.

This is the first of three parables about the future of the kingdom of heaven given by Jesus to conclude his Olivet Discourse. In the next parable, a distinction will be drawn between those who faithfully serve the Master until he comes, and those who wickedly seek only their own interests. How can one prove his readiness for the Master when entrusted with his property? That important question is pondered in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

A MAN GOING ON A JOURNEY (MATT 25:14-30)

Introduction

Fallen humanity greatly confuses the concepts of stewardship and ownership. Many examples can be given to demonstrate this statement. For the sake of illustration, consider the human body.

Most people claim ownership over their bodies. No one likes the idea of belonging to another. In fact, given the atrocious practices of slavery and human trafficking, most despise the notion that one could possess and control another person. Humanity values its independence to the point that many wars have been fought and many lives have been given to preserve the personal freedoms of individuals and cultures and nations.

While it is indeed contemptable when humans claim ownership over the body of another, it is equally appalling that one would dare to say that even he possesses his own body. A truly biblical worldview advocates that God is the only one with rights over everything and everyone. He is the true owner of all people. Humans are simply stewards of their own bodies.

Consider the ramifications of ownership and stewardship. If one is really the owner of his body, then he alone gets to decide what is right for himself. He can pursue personal satisfaction to whatever extent he desires. There are no external boundaries for sexual gratification, the intake of food and drink, or the highs of experiences and drugs. To say, "I own myself; I possess my own body," is to say that no one has the right to limit the way the body is used or abused except oneself.

Yet for one who admits that God created humans in his image and after his

likeness and for his purposes (Gen 1:26-28), the body is not designed simply for the pursuit of pleasure but for the spreading of the image, knowledge, and glory of God across the globe. As the Creator, God alone owns the body, and humans are simply stewards (1 Cor 6:12-20). Yes, the body can be shared with another joyfully in the context of God-ordained relationships (1 Cor 7:1-5), but all human activity is to be a conduit for the progress of God's plans. After all, he is the owner.

The ownership of God is not limited to the human body. It extends to the ends of the universe. The one who made all things gets to determine the purpose and activity of all things. He can disperse good gifts within his creation to his people, which he has always done. However, his people must recognize that they are simply stewards. As the owner, God is looking for faithful stewards who are trustworthy to handle the responsibility of overseeing his creation until his kingdom is once and for all established on the earth.

Need

There has only ever been one owner of everything. The Creator is the "Possessor of heaven and earth" (Gen 14:19, 22). The things of the earth do not belong to the people of the earth.

The church needs to recognize its role as stewards of the belongings of God. It needs to make use of the gifts entrusted to it by the Holy Spirit to be found faithful by its King when he returns. It needs to distinguish between ownership and stewardship for the glory of the Creator and the good of creation.

Main Point

Christ has entrusted his property to his servants, who are expected to steward his creation by faithfully multiplying their gifts until he returns to reward the righteous and punish the wicked.

Context

At creation, God established his authority over all things and all people by forming the earth, filling it with good gifts, and delegating the task of causing the earth to flourish with his knowledge and glory to his image-bearers. Those image-bearers failed to steward the creation obediently, attempting instead to take ownership of the earth. God mercifully and graciously sought to redeem the earth and fallen humanity by sending his divine Son to earth as a human for the restoration of all things.

Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, was nearing his climactic substitutionary death for humanity when he began to teach extensively about the time of the end in response to a series of questions from his disciples while on the Mount of Olives. When asked about the timing of the end of the age, Jesus made clear that no one except God the Father could know the “day and hour” (Matt 24:36). When asked for signs to preview his coming, Jesus instead talked about “the sign of the Son of Man” who will come “on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (24:30). Since none can predict when these things will happen, Jesus taught that his followers should be ready always, prepared to meet him by serving him faithfully through the ages.

In 25:14-30, Jesus continues this emphasis by telling yet another parable designed to illustrate the good stewardship that is expected of his people until his second advent. The points brought out here foreshadow the apostles’ teachings on spiritual gifts. Once again, a sharp contrast will be drawn between the rewards of the wise and the severe consequences of the foolish.

Preview

Jesus gives this parable to compare the kingdom of heaven to a man who entrusts his belongings to certain servants while he is away on a journey. Matthew structures it as follows.

1. Entrusting the Property (25:14-15)
2. Stewarding the Property (25:16-18)

3. Settling Accounts (25:19-30)
 - a. The Coming of the Master (25:19)
 - b. The Good and Faithful Servants (25:20-23)
 - c. The Wicked and Slothful Servants (25:24-30)¹

Exposition

Like most of Jesus' parables, the story of the man going on a journey is not only intended to draw attention to one truth, but to help listeners and readers view the lessons of the parable considering the work of God throughout history. Therefore, this study takes a wide-angle approach of application. This does not mean that this parable lacks a central truth, for in fact the emphasis on stewardship of gifts is rather obvious. The goal of this chapter is to examine how the details of this parable enlighten the Olivet Discourse, and how the larger themes of the parable and the discourse inform one's understanding of biblical theology.

Entrusting the Property (25:14-15)

“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away” (Matt 25:14-15).

¹This story bears likeness to another told by Jesus in Luke 19:11-27, though the two are distinct narratives. Luke begins with a word about the setting and reason for the story (19:11) and adds an aside about the citizens of the man's land who “hated him” to the point that they stated, “We do not want this man to reign over us” (19:14). Other than that, Luke explains the distribution of property (19:12-13), the return of the master (19:15), the reward of the faithful servants (19:16-19), and the judgment of the wicked servant (19:20-27). Luke does omit any explanation of the activity of the servants while the master is away, but their activity is implicit in their rewards. Other differences include Luke's description of the man as “a nobleman” who intended to “receive for himself a kingdom and then return” (19:12) and his successful reception of the kingdom (19:15). The King in Luke 19:13 commands, “Engage in business until I come,” whereas the Master in Matthew is silent until he returns. Luke records ten servants whereas Matthew lists three. In Luke, each servant started out with the same amount and then received a different reward based on their faithfulness. In Matthew, each servant started out with a different amount but was given the same reward for faithfulness. Luke's servants were each given a “mina” (“about three months' wages” according to the ESV footnote), while Matthew's servants were given varied amounts of a “talent” (“about twenty years' wages” according to the ESV footnote). Only three of Luke's ten servants are brought up again during the accounting process, whereas Matthew shows what happens to all three of his. Luke also includes an additional side conversation with bystanders about the judgment for the unfaithful one (19:24-25) and a word of punishment for the insubordinate citizens as well (19:27).

The “it” of this story refers to “the kingdom of heaven” that was also the main point of the previous illustration of the ten virgins who had waited “to meet the bridegroom” (25:1). Though at no point in this section is the journeying man called a king, the repeated description of him as a “master” alerts the reader to the authority of this individual.² That this story is sandwiched between two others that are explicitly about the kingdom also inclines the reader to see the true King and his kingdom as prominent in it.

Just a day or two before giving this lesson, Jesus had told the story of “a master of a house who planted a vineyard . . . and leased it to tenants, and went into another country” (21:33). That parable was also designed to draw attention to the failed stewardship of the tenants, in that case the religious leaders who had been entrusted with “the kingdom of God” (21:43). In the same way, this man went “on a journey” (25:14). Mark’s parallel is condensed into one verse: “It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake” (Mark 13:34).³

In preparation for his journey, the man “called his servants and entrusted to them his property” (Matt 25:14). If this man is considered a king, and the evidence suggests that he is, then one can surmise that “his property” is vast. He is the owner of much. His journey must be of considerable duration and distance, for he deems it necessary to entrust his belongings to stewards. He is not giving away his property; he is lending it.⁴ At no point does the man cease to be the owner. He does not even share ownership. He simply allows his servants to steward what he owns until his lengthy

²Throughout this parable, “master” translates ὁ κύριος, a term commonly used for deity.

³Mark emphatically prioritizes the command for wakefulness, mentioning it four times in 13:33-37, in addition to the warning, “lest he come suddenly and find you asleep” in 13:36.

⁴John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1014.

journey has ended, and he is ready to return home.

The man's wealth is indeed great, as he disperses a total of eight talents to three different servants (25:15).⁵ In teaching his disciples about forgiveness and restoration, Jesus had previously compared the kingdom of heaven to "a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants" (18:23). In that illustration, a man owed the king "ten thousand talents" (18:24), an insurmountable debt for which he was forgiven (18:25-27). Both parables exemplify the riches of the true King who generously entrusts the possessions of his kingdom with his subjects, and who offers forgiveness to those who cannot earn it.

It seems significant that the servants were given responsibility "to each according to his own ability" (25:15). This wording is found later in the NT where Paul instructs various churches about spiritual gifts. In Romans 12, it is "by the grace given to me" that Paul urges humble thinking within the congregation, "each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned" (12:3). This humility of mind is worked out within the church as each member practices his unique set of gifts among the members (12:4-5). He continues, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them" (12:6). He goes further to say that the gift of prophecy is to be used "in proportion to our faith" (12:6).⁶

Paul's instructions to the Corinthians on this topic contain similar wording. He writes, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor 12:7). Though the gifts, services, and activities will vary among believers in a local

⁵D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 516, gives extensive treatment to the understanding of "talent," stating that it is "a unit of exchange" rather than a broader set of skills or abilities. Instead of arguing for a specific amount, he says, "It may be more sensible to compare the talent with modern currency in terms of earning power," much like the "twenty years' wages" found in the ESV footnotes. W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, International Critical Commentary (London: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 405n197, state that the talent was initially "a measure of weight (see Rev 16.21)."

⁶This is consistent with Paul's teaching elsewhere that all gifts of grace are assigned by God (Rom 1:5; 15:15) and that each recipient must take care how he stewards that grace (1 Cor 3:10; 7:7, 17).

church, they are provided by the same Spirit, Lord, and God (12:4-6). Paul then lists some specific gifts (12:8-10) before concluding, “All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills” (12:11). The author of Hebrews agrees that God bears witness to salvation “by gifts of the Holy Spirit,” which are “distributed according to his will” (Heb 2:4).

In teaching the Ephesian church about spiritual gifts, Paul again explains that “grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph 4:7). This thought comes on the heels of Paul declaring that his ministry is “according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given to me by the working of his power” (3:7). In other words, Paul’s gospel agenda was in coordination with his giftedness because both are from God and for God. Paul had also described his work as a “stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you” (3:2).

Outside of Jesus’ parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:1-9), the term for stewardship (ἡ οἰκονομία) is entirely Pauline in the NT canon. Twice in Ephesians, the ESV translates the word as “plan” (1:10; 3:9), referring to the eschatological agenda of God for all creation. To the Corinthians, Paul speaks of being “entrusted with a stewardship” (1 Cor 9:17), namely, preaching the gospel. Similarly, Paul tells the Colossians that he “became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known” (Col 1:25). Paul even reminds Timothy of the need for teachers to cling to and speak only true doctrine which is “the stewardship from God that is by faith” (1 Tim 1:4).

The suggestion here is that Jesus’ parable of a man journeying into a far country and entrusting his property to servants according to their abilities (Matt 25:14-15) is meant to illustrate the stewardship of spiritual gifts that are entrusted to believers as God wills so that he is made known by these gifts.⁷ The church is to faithfully invest its

⁷Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 924, takes this interpretation as well, and Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A*

gifts for the glory of God and good of others. Believers are not owners of these gifts, as though they can produce them on their own. Rather, they are stewards of them, having received them from the Lord who knows his people best. Like the servants of the parable, God's people are not all given the same gifts. Some are given more, and some gifts have the appearance of being more valuable, yet all are immeasurably significant, just as one talent is still a large sum of money. When these gifts are applied wisely, the Master is pleased, the servant is rewarded, and many are blessed, having benefited from the proper use of the gifts. However, wasted gifts merit the displeasure of the Giver and earn his judgment upon the offender because of his selfish actions. At the coming of the Son of Man, who is the Ruler of all creation, each person will give account to the King for the stewardship of his gifts. Some will enjoy the inheritance prepared for them because of their faithfulness to the Master, while others will be exposed as frauds and have all of God's good gifts removed from them forever because of their wickedness.

Stewarding the Property (25:16-18)

“He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money” (Matt 25:16-18).

The activity of the first two servants, though spoken in general terms, is certainly intended to be positive. It is unclear who is meant by “them” in verse 16, or how they went about trading.⁸ In any case, these servants are maximizing what has been entrusted to them. If the suggestion that the talents can be understood as spiritual gifts is

Commentary, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 256, allows for its possibility. Carson, *Matthew*, 516, advises against this identification.

⁸“The point is that the good servants felt the responsibility of their assignment and went to work without delay. . . . [The phrase] does not mean the servant invested the money in some lending agency. Rather he set up some business and *worked* with the capital to make it grow” (Carson, *Matthew*, 516, emphasis Carson's).

valid, then Jesus likely means to show that these servants have invested their giftedness in such ways that their gifts are multiplied. They have fulfilled the Master's desires for his property and accomplished his will by stewarding it as the Owner intended.

On a larger scale, because the property is intended to display God's ownership over all creation, the servants have been faithful to carry out the Master's global commission by wisely stewarding their gifts within their own circles of influence. A steward does not need full ownership or authority to have great impact. The will of the Owner for all his property is accomplished when each servant faithfully invests and grows his "small" part. Luz explains, "To take God's will seriously is to orient oneself courageously to the open possibilities of his future and not in fear to the existing realities of the present. That reflects the dynamic of the kingdom of God, which is as tiny as a mustard seed and will become as large as a tree."⁹ That serious courage is what distinguishes between the first two servants and the third.

The actions of the servant who received only one talent are interesting when compared to another similarly worded passage. Jesus teaches that this man "went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money" (25:18). The closest phraseology to this is found earlier in Matthew's gospel as Jesus, speaking again in parables, announced, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (13:44). Like the servant in 25:18, the man in 13:44 also covered up riches under the ground.¹⁰ Why then is the one man applauded but the other man is condemned, since their actions appear to be similar, if not identical? The answer appears to be in the motives and long-term approaches of the two men.

⁹Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 255.

¹⁰"Burying money in the ground to hide it was reckoned good security against theft" (Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 407).

Even King Solomon referred to the words and commandments of God and the understanding that they bring as “hidden treasures” which one should earnestly seek (Prov 2:4). The search for such treasures certainly involves a cost, as it did for the man who sold all that he had so that he could attain the field he knew to contain the greater treasure. Likewise, Solomon advised, “Buy truth, and do not sell it; buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding” (Prov 23:23). The transaction for truth always benefits the one who receives it, regardless of the cost given to purchase it. Paul shared this sentiment when he wrote that he counted other gains as loss and rubbish “in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:8). Isaiah questioned his readers about why they spent their money on things that would not satisfy, and he urged them to “buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Isa 55:1). His point is that the cost for eternal treasure is not monetary, but that it does have great worth. Jesus’ counsel to the Laodiceans is similar when he recommends for them to buy gold, white garments, and eye salve (Rev 3:18), all of which metaphorically illustrate spiritual wealth.¹¹

These examples undergird the suggestion that to be a servant of Christ is to be entrusted with great wealth, the likes of which are worth losing all other supposed “treasures.” Each servant in Matthew 25:14-18 inherited vast riches. It is at this point in the parable that the reader begins to see why the third servant was entrusted with only one talent. His ability did not measure up to that of the other two. The motive of the first two servants—like the man who purchased the treasure-filled field—was to gain a greater treasure. They could have simply maintained what they had to begin with, but they recognized the desire of their Master for them to maximize what had been given to them. The third servant seemingly cared not for a greater treasure and was motivated only by his own interests to find an easy way to not lose what he had received.

¹¹Even the previous parable of the discourse showed the young women needing to buy oil for their lamps (Matt 25:9). The ones who did not purchase the oil before the Bridegroom came experienced the greater “cost” of being left out of the wedding feast.

Settling Accounts (25:19-30)

The details of Jesus' story up to this point leave little mystery about how each servant will be evaluated. Given that this story is included in the discourse that has dealt with the end of the age and how to be prepared for it, one would be right to see this parable as anticipating eschatological judgment. The Master will return and assume full ownership over his property once again. The stewards will be assessed based on their cooperation with the agenda of their Lord.

The Master returns (25:19). “Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them” (Matt 25:19). That the return of the Master happened “after a long time” is consistent with the extended delay before the final appearing of the Son of Man that Jesus has emphasized throughout the discourse (see 25:5). The attention here is not on the details of the Lord's return, but on the reckoning that will take place for his stewards upon his return.

Another connection is made here to a previous Matthean parable in which “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants” (18:23). Jesus had warned the Pharisees that “the day of judgment” will demand that people give account even for their words, causing some to be justified and others to be condemned (12:36-37).¹² This speaks to the Lord's absolute ownership of all things. Even the words of his stewards must be accounted for.

The role of God as judge over all things is prominent throughout Scripture. Abraham called Yahweh, “the Judge of all the earth” (Gen 18:25), and God's authority as a judge is celebrated throughout the Psalms (see 58:11; 67:4; 94:2). All creation is accountable to him because he is the ultimate judge. Solomon gives priority to this theme in Ecclesiastes, especially to the idea that no part of life escapes God's judgment. He

¹²This is especially significant for the third servant in Luke's account, who is told by the king, “I will condemn you with your own words” (19:22).

states, “God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work” (3:17). He tells the young man, “Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment” (11:9). The book famously concludes, “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (12:13-14).

The authority of God to judge has been delegated to the Son of God (Acts 17:30-31). Even those who do not acknowledge Christ in this life “will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Pet 4:5). Not surprisingly, Paul’s theology of judgment rests on the OT while also verifying Christ’s role as judge. He assures readers that the day will come on which “God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (Rom 2:16). The judgment of man is of no avail, because “we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (14:10), and “each of us will give an account of himself to God” (14:12). Judgment will be according to works (1 Cor 3:11-15). Because the Lord’s judgment at his coming will be final, it overrules any judgment of man. “Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God” (1 Cor 4:5). Three times in Revelation, John records songs which declare the justness of the Lord and his renderings (15:3; 16:7; 19:2).

No steward will avoid God’s judgment. Those whose faith is secure in the finished work of Christ and serve him faithfully need not fear condemnation. However, many will profess faith verbally, yet their actions will give them away. Jesus will not be fooled. His justice is right, impartial, and irrevocable.

The good and faithful servants are rewarded (25:20-23). “And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you

delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master’” (Matt 25:20-23).

The servants come before the Master in the order they were introduced at the outset. The descriptions of the first two servants, the testimonies of their actions, and the declarations of the Master toward them are nearly identical. Thus, it seems appropriate to consider them together.

Both are commended, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (25:21, 23). The title they receive (δοῦλε ἀγαθὲ καὶ πιστέ) echoes the description given to “the faithful and wise servant” (ὁ πιστὸς δοῦλος καὶ φρόνιμος) of 24:45. Their faithfulness over “a little” qualified them to be set over much (25:21, 23), just as the wise man’s faithfulness over his master’s household allowed him to be set over all his master’s possessions (24:45-47).

The principle of stewardship that is highlighted here matches Jesus’ teaching regarding the shrewd manager in Luke 16:10-12: “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?” Jesus seems to be making the point that a steward never remains a steward. He either is elevated to become an owner because of his faithfulness or he loses even his chances to have oversight of the things of others because he is not trustworthy.¹³

¹³Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 373, observes that readers “can expect eternity to be filled

For those who are found trustworthy, their reward is the joy of the Master. This promise is both personal and geographical. Scripture portrays Jesus himself as a joy-filled person, so to be in his presence is to have entered into his joy. This idea is consistent with the Psalmist's words about Yahweh, "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps 16:11). Like Yahweh, Jesus is joyful, and those in his presence experience his joy. Jesus explained that part of the goal of his teaching ministry was "that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). It was "for the joy that was set before him" that Jesus "endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb 12:2).¹⁴ These truths informed Paul's conclusion that "to depart and be with Christ . . . is far better" than "to remain in the flesh" (Phil 1:23-24). The joy of the Master that is the reward for faithful stewards is the presence of the Master himself in the place that he has prepared for them. A life of faithful stewardship now leads to ownership on the new earth in the life to come.¹⁵

The wicked and slothful servant is rebuked (25:24-30). "He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own

with meaningful activity and responsibility of some kind."

¹⁴There may be an intentional connection here between the pleasures at God's right hand (Ps 16:11) and Jesus at God's right hand (Heb 12:2), thus further establishing the joyfulness of Jesus and the satisfaction of those in his presence.

¹⁵Carson, *Matthew*, 517: "The eschatological setting, coupled with the promise that bursts the natural limits of the story, guarantees that the consummated kingdom provides glorious new responsibilities and holy delight (cf. Rom 8:17)."

with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 25:24-30).

As with the first two servants, there is first a testimony from the slave and then a response from the Lord. “Evidently the third slave expects to be commended for his caution; and perhaps Jesus’ hearers and Matthew’s readers would have thought him prudent.”¹⁶ The servant’s first words are an acknowledgement of his Master’s personality. “I knew you to be a hard man” (25:24) translates ἔγνων σε ὅτι σκληρὸς εἶ ἄνθρωπος, and the construction for “a hard man” is unique in the NT.¹⁷ Its closest parallels are in the LXX. Among them is Numbers 16:26, where Moses warns the congregation of Israel to stay away from the belongings of Korah and his company—referring to them as “these wicked men” (τῶν ἀνθρώπων τῶν σκληρῶν τούτων)—to avoid the judgment of God toward them. In 1 Samuel 25:3, it is said of Nabal that “the man was harsh” (ὁ ἄνθρωπος σκληρὸς). And Isaiah foretold that “a hard master, and a fierce king” (ἀνθρώπων κυρίων σκληρῶν καὶ βασιλεῖς σκληροὶ) will overtake Egypt (Isa 19:4), predicting the victories of Assyria (Isa 20:4) and Babylon (Jer 46:26; Ezek 29:19).

These statements certainly have negative connotations for those to whom they refer. While Jesus certainly does have high standards, his point is that the servant is not entirely fair to the character of his Lord.¹⁸ The Master is indeed stern, but he is not unjust, as the word suggests.¹⁹ The servant’s expectations of his Master in this way should have

¹⁶Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 408.

¹⁷One might notice the relationship between σκληρὸς and the medical term “sclerosis” which happens when normal body tissue is replaced by hard tissue. Thanks to my wife for this description.

¹⁸Blomberg, *Matthew*, 373-74.

¹⁹Osborne, *Matthew*, 926.

led to him make every effort to multiply the gifts entrusted to him.²⁰ Matthew is showing that it is possible to understand true things about God and the judgment that he will exercise and to still fail to prepare to face him in that moment.²¹ This serves as a warning to the church throughout the ages, that right doctrine must be actualized through faithful obedience and stewardship.

Jesus' rule will be more extensive and more permanent than the kings of Assyria and Babylon over Egypt. There is no limit to his reaping and gathering because his authority extends over all creation. His ownership is without rival. The property he generously entrusts is not to be selfishly hoarded, but wisely stewarded.

As the Master begins to speak to the servant, his first words match the reprimand from the king in the Matthew 18 parable of the unforgiving servant.²² The servant's wickedness is tied to his slothfulness. The word for slothful is found twelve times in the LXX, all in the book of Proverbs.²³ Paul uses the word twice in his letters. In Philippians 3:1, he states that it is no "trouble" for him to write certain things to them, noting that it is in fact beneficial for him to do so. In Romans 12:11, he straightforwardly commands, "Do not be slothful in zeal."²⁴

The steward's slothfulness is especially great because, as has been noted, he knew enough about the personality of his Master to expect him to have high standards. The Master's authority did indeed extend beyond where he had sown and scattered the

²⁰Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1018-19.

²¹David L. Turner, *Matthew, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 601: "His estimate of the master's harshness ironically proves to be correct."

²²The words are the same, but the order is reversed. Matt 25:26 has πονηρὲ δοῦλε καὶ ὀκνηρὲ (rigidly, "wicked servant, and slothful") while Matt 18:32 has δοῦλε πονηρὲ.

²³In the LXX, ὀκνηρὸς translates ἄσπυ which is used 14 times in Proverbs and each time is rendered as "sluggard" in the ESV.

²⁴In the same verse, Paul positively tells the Romans to "serve the Lord" (τῷ κυρίῳ δουλεύοντες) suggesting that slothfulness is not service at all. These imperatives immediately follow Paul's instructions regarding spiritual gifts (see Rom 12:3-8).

seed (Matt 25:26), yet not in a domineering way. The Owner had, in a sense, left the seed with the stewards and given them the task of continuing to spread his seed so that he could, at his coming, reap an abundant harvest where he had not directly scattered. The sowing had been done through the work of those entrusted with the seed.

Even in his indictment of the third servant, the Master never asked this steward to produce as remarkable an increase as the first two servants. As previously stated, the servant's wickedness was in his slothfulness, not necessarily the results. The reader assumes that the third servant, had he shown the same willingness to put his talent to work, would also have experienced a profit like the others. This very well may have been the case, yet the Master indicates that trusting the money with bankers would have been acceptable (25:27). It is better to entrust the gift with someone else who can maximize it than to bury it and not even allow opportunities for fruitfulness.

Since the servant proved that he could not be trusted with even a small measure of money, the Master commanded that his talent be taken from him and given to the first servant, who had already demonstrated his faithfulness (25:28). "The wicked slave is deprived not because he had little but because he did not multiply what he had."²⁵ The wording of verse 29 nearly identically matches 13:12. Both references echo the principle given earlier by Jesus, "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more" (Luke 12:48). Blomberg sees a relationship between the good man whose faithfulness increases the more he is entrusted and the wise man whose wisdom increases the more he is instructed (Prov 9:9).²⁶ Though no subject is given, God is active in the process of judgment, operating in the divine passives of Matt 25:29.²⁷

²⁵Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 410.

²⁶Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 90.

²⁷Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 411.

The final verdict is that the third steward is called a “worthless servant” and he is condemned to “the outer darkness,” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 25:30). The designation of “worthless servant” matches Jesus’ illustration of “unworthy servants” in Luke 17:10, though there it is a humble self-designation rather than a damning condemnation. Matthew’s combination of “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is unique to him, using it previously in 8:12 and 22:13.²⁸

Conclusion

To be entrusted with wealth from the Lord is a matter not to be taken lightly. Yet greater even than wealth is the abundance of good gifts that Jesus has left to his church. Christ is the Owner of vast properties, indeed, all of heaven and earth belong to him. He has delegated the authority to steward his creation wisely and faithfully to his servants, who must maximize their allotted gifts to scatter the seed of his Word until he comes to settle accounts with all men. Those found faithful will receive a glorious inheritance, while those who waste their treasures will lose all they have and be separated from the Lord and his joy forever.

There are connections between this life and the next. One’s standing in the age that is to come is determined by his loyalty to the coming King in this age. What are those connections? How can a person demonstrate his service to the Lord, gain approval, and avoid judgment? These ever-important questions are answered in the next section as Jesus brings his eschatological discourse to an end.

²⁸See chap. 5 of this project for the discussion regarding the phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” as it is used in Matt 24:51.

CHAPTER 8

HIS GLORIOUS THRONE (MATT 25:31-46)

Introduction

Rightly understood, the biblical doctrine of last things is not only for the future. There is significant overlap not only with events that are still to come and events that have already taken place, but also with eternal outcomes and their bearing on the seemingly mundane tasks of daily life. One cannot neatly separate his eschatology from his current priorities and perspectives.

Though eschatology is a proper designation for themes that are distinctly futuristic (such as the Olivet Discourse), there is a sense in which the entire Bible is eschatological. G. K. Beale has suggested, “The popular understanding that the latter days refer only to the future end of the world needs radical adjustment.”¹ Certainly there are future events that will be unique in history, but the ramifications of those events carry much weight for the activities of the church now. Much of the NT is devoted to the importance of right doctrine (including the doctrine of future things) as a basis for right living. Beale continues,

. . . the apostles understood eschatology not merely as futurology but as a mind-set for understanding the present within the climaxing context of redemptive history. That is, the apostles understood that they were already living in the end times, and that they were to understand their present salvation in Christ to be already an end-time reality. *Every aspect of their salvation was to be conceived of as eschatological in nature.* To put this another way, the major doctrines of the Christian faith are charged with eschatological electricity.²

¹G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 17.

²Ibid., 18. Emphasis is Beale’s.

This kind of overlap has crucial implications for the church that seeks to remain faithful to Christ until his coming. Most highly anticipated events do not live up to the buildup, but the return of Jesus will be more glorious and more overwhelming than can be imagined. The judgment that he will bring will be final and irreversible. There is no area of life that will go unexamined. The need for faithfulness by the church is great.

Need

People need to understand that they will one day be judged by God for their works in this life. To conclude the Olivet Discourse, Jesus assures that he will return as King and make a distinction between the faithful and the unfaithful. Those who are religious must see that they are not saved by their works, but that their works give evidence that will confirm or contradict their stated faith. The consequences for the works are eternal, as the faithful will inherit eternal life with Christ and the unfaithful will be cast into eternal judgment, separated from Christ forever. People need to anticipate the coming of Christ by surrendering to him and serving him in this life and so enter his kingdom.

Main Point

The Son of Man will return to earth as a Shepherd, Judge, and King who will give eternal rewards to the children of his Father and eternal punishment to the children of the devil.

Context

The discourse has reached its climactic conclusion. In response to the disciples' questions about the fall of the temple and the end of the age, Matthew has presented Jesus as expounding on OT teachings regarding the Day of the Lord, showing that he is the Daniel's Son of Man who will come "on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matt 24:30). The signs that accompany the destruction of the temple

preview those which will indicate the nearness of the Son of Man as he stands ready at the gates (24:32-33). Since only the Father knows exactly when these things will take place (24:36), disciples must practice faithfulness, readiness, and preparedness as good stewards of the property of the Lord of all until he returns. His coming will break in the eschaton, at which he will judge between the righteous and the unrighteous.

Preview

After an introductory statement about the power and glory of the Son of Man at his coming, Jesus then previews his evaluation of the “sheep” (his true followers) and the “goats” (false disciples) in contrasting sections. The discourse concludes with a statement about the eternal destiny of all people either in the presence of the Lord or separated from him. This section can be arranged into four main points.

1. The Son of Man will come in glory (25:31-33)
 - a. He will ascend to his throne (25:31)
 - b. He will gather and separate the nations (25:32-33)
2. The righteous will be blessed (25:34-40)
 - a. They are invited to inherit the kingdom (25:34)
 - b. Their activity confirms their belief (25:35-36)
 - c. Their questions display humility (25:37-39)
 - d. They served the King and his subjects (25:40)
3. The unrighteous will be cursed (25:41-45)
 - a. They are sent into eternal fire (25:41)
 - b. Their inactivity confirms their unbelief (25:42-43)
 - c. Their questions display ignorance (25:44)
 - d. They neglected the King and his subjects (25:45)
4. The outcomes will be eternal (25:46)

Exposition

The conclusion of Jesus' discourse highlights the way things will be at the end of the age. Biblical history has pointed to this event from the beginning, and Jesus expands on what the Biblical writers have already said. Tom Schreiner makes this connection when he says of Jesus, "As the Son of Man, he will judge the world at the final judgment (25:31-32). Then the new creation and the new exodus and the new covenant will be fulfilled in their entirety."³

The Son of Man will Come in Glory (25:31-33)

Jesus described the nature of his coming as powerful and glorious, equating himself with Daniel's Son of Man (Matt 24:30).⁴ To this point in the discourse, he has only spoken briefly about the events after his coming. Each of the previous three sections has contained a closing analysis by Jesus about how he will distinguish between the wise and the foolish. This final illustration is unique in that the entire scene is focused on post-Parousia activities.

He will ascend to his throne as a king (25:31). "When the Son of Man comes in glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne" (Matt 25:31). The beginning of the previous two parables emphasized the nature of the kingdom of heaven (25:1, 14). This final discussion, though not strictly a parable, centers on the kingdom with the mention of a throne and one who sits on it.⁵

³Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 439.

⁴R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007): "In this climactic vision, then, the OT expectation of the eschatological visitation of God in judgment and salvation finds its fulfillment in Jesus the Son of Man, who sits on *his* glorious throne and pronounces judgment." Emphasis is France's.

⁵D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 518, observes that parabolic language is used (such as sheep and goats), though the account itself is not a parable.

That the Son of Man will come in glory is likely yet another reference to Daniel 7:13. These opening words are also related to previous quotes by Matthew of Jesus, who had told his disciples that “the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father” (Matt 16:27). Matthew also shows Jesus explaining that eschatological judgment will take place “when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne” (19:28). There may also be a connection to Moses’ instructions regarding Israel’s future ruler “when he sits on the throne of his kingdom” (Deut 17:18). Jesus perfectly fulfilled the expectations of such a king (Deut 17:19-20).

Some interpret this ascent to the throne and the ensuing judgment from it as a preview of what John the Apostle saw in Revelation 20:11-15, where resurrected people are judged according to their works and destined either for the lake of fire or for life on the new earth.⁶ Others teach that this unit speaks of premillennial judgment, thus stating that the immediate reward for the sheep is an earthly millennial kingdom ruled by Christ from Jerusalem before the new earth is established.⁷ David Turner helpfully analyzes multiple viewpoints and points out that the main thrust of each argument is based on how one understands the identity of “the least of these” in Matthew 25:40, 45.⁸ Each position is well-represented by respected scholars.⁹

At his coming, Jesus will have “all the angels with him” (Matt 25:31; cf. 16:27; 24:31). This statement confirms the divine authority of Jesus, who is like Yahweh when “he came from the ten thousands of holy ones” with “all the holy ones . . . in his hand” (Deut 33:2-3). Zechariah prophesied, “Behold, a day is coming for the LORD”

⁶Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 376.

⁷John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 111.

⁸David L. Turner, *Matthew, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 604-7.

⁹Ibid. My own position is evident throughout this study.

(14:1) when “the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him” (14:5). These statements reappear in Jude’s letter (though Jude attributes the phrase to Enoch), “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all” (Jude 14-15).

He will gather and separate the nations as a judge and a shepherd (25:32-33). “Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on his left” (Matt 25:32-33).¹⁰

The significance of “nations” has already been discussed as it relates to its usage in Matthew 24:14. That “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) are gathered before the King suggests that the promise of 24:14 and the commission of 28:19 have been accomplished and all peoples have been given a chance to know and serve him alongside other followers. Matthew may be showing that Jesus sees here a fulfillment of the vision of the OT prophet Joel, who quoted Yahweh as saying, “Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations” (Joel 3:12).¹¹

The separation of the peoples is reminiscent of Jesus’ parables in Matthew 13, most directly in the teaching that “the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea” collecting all kinds of fish (Matt 13:47). Just as the good fish are sorted and the bad fish are thrown away, Jesus concludes, “So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace” (13:49-50). The imagery matches the parable of the man who sowed in a field,

¹⁰Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 276 observes that by separating the nations this way at the outset, Jesus “pronounces his verdict at the very beginning and, unlike an earthly judge, does not need to have a hearing to discover the truth. The accomplished separation underscores the sovereign authority of the World Judge.”

¹¹Joel 3:12 in English translations is 4:12 in the Hebrew Bible.

allowing weeds (the sinners) to grow up alongside the wheat (the righteous), only to separate them and burn the weeds at the end of the age, while “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (13:43).

What sets Jesus’ discourse conclusion apart is his terminology of sheep and goats.¹² Most likely, Jesus is drawing on imagery from Ezekiel 34. In that chapter, Ezekiel is told by Yahweh to “prophesy against the shepherds of Israel” (Ezek 34:2). Yahweh accuses Israel’s spiritual shepherds of neglecting to feed the sheep, leaving them to scatter and search for food on their own (34:3-6). As a result, Yahweh sets himself against his shepherds (34:7-10) and promises to seek out his own sheep as their true Shepherd (34:11-16), judging between them and setting up a Davidic ruler among them (34:17-24).¹³ The chapter finishes with Yahweh covenanting a secure dwelling place for his sheep so that they will know his Lordship over them (34:25-31).¹⁴

The location of the sheep on the right and the goats on the left carries substantial weight. To sit at the right hand of the king was honorable, such as when Bathsheba was placed at the right hand of her son, King Solomon (1 Kgs 2:19). The Psalms highlight the queen who is honored to sit to the right of the king’s throne (Ps 45:9) and the messianic Lord who is instructed by Yahweh, “Sit at my right hand” (Ps 110:1). The placement of the sheep on Jesus’ right hand anticipates that the sheep will be honored and the goats will be shunned.

¹²W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, International Critical Commentary (London: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 423: “The image is probably of a mixed flock of sheep and goats which, although herded together in the day (cf. Gen 30.32), are separated at night so that the latter can be kept warm.”

¹³Yahweh commits to be the judge for the sheep (Ezek 34:17, 20, 22), even “between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats” (v. 17). That “my servant David” will be Israel’s shepherd (v. 23) and prince (v. 24) shows that Yahweh sees this ruler as one with himself.

¹⁴John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1025, adds Ezek 37:24 to these connections as well because of its identification of David as Israel’s Servant King and Israel’s “one shepherd.”

The Righteous will be Blessed (25:34-40)

As the judgment occurs, attention is given first to the sheep (Matt 25:34-40), and then to the goats (25:41-45). The breakdown of the two sections match structurally. The tone of the first is understandably more positive, echoing the rewards given to the faithful, wise, and good stewards and servants from previous examples in the discourse.

They are invited to inherit the kingdom (25:34). “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matt 25:34).¹⁵ This is the first time in Matthew’s record of the discourse that Jesus directly refers to himself as a king, but Carson says that the linguistic transition from “Son of Man” (25:31) to “King” (25:34) “is not at all unnatural; for the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13-14 approaches the Ancient of Days to receive ‘a kingdom,’ and here that kingdom is consummated.”¹⁶

Matthew drew his readers’ attention to Jesus’ kingship from early on, tracing his lineage back to King David (Matt 1:1, 6), noting the wise men’s search for the “king of the Jews” (2:2), and highlighting John the Baptist’s proclamation that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:2), which was also declared by Jesus himself (4:17) and his disciples (10:7). Later, at Jesus’ crucifixion, he would be tried (27:11) and condemned (27:29) as the “King of the Jews.” Matthew’s emphasis on the kingship of Christ is heavily based in the OT. In 21:5 he quotes Zechariah 9:9 about the King who comes to his people riding humbly on a donkey. The people responded in 21:9 by quoting Psalm 118:26, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”¹⁷ Jesus’ self-identification as King is a designation of deity (see Isa 6:5; Zeph

¹⁵Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 935 says, “The idea of the fatherhood of God goes hand-in-hand with inheritance language, for it is as part of God’s family that believers will have an inheritance.”

¹⁶Carson, *Matthew*, 521.

¹⁷In Luke’s parallel of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (see Luke 19:38), he credits the crowd with quoting this Psalm as, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!”

3:15). In the book of Revelation, John specifically recognizes Jesus as the “King of kings” who conquers his enemies and returns for his people (Rev 17:14; 19:16).

The King extends an invitation to the sheep at his right hand, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father” (Matt 25:34). Though the word for “blessed” used here (εὐλογημένοι) differs from that of 24:46 (μακάριος), the idea is quite similar, and many of the same things could be said here that were outlined in the discussion of that verse. Blessing and inheritance (κληρονομήσατε) of land are linked several times in the LXX, such as the promise to Abraham (Gen 22:17), the blessing upon Rebekah (Gen 24:60), the instructions regarding Canaan (Deut 23:20; 30:16; Josh 17:14), and David’s proposition that “those blessed by the LORD shall inherit the land” (Ps 37:22).¹⁸ Matthew previously portrayed Jesus’ promise to his disciples that they “will inherit eternal life” because of their willingness to sacrifice (among other things) “lands” in this life (Matt 19:29). This promise is confirmed by John’s quote of Jesus in Revelation 21:7, “The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”¹⁹

The inheritance of the sheep is “the kingdom” (Matt 25:34). Luke’s Gospel also connects Jesus’ role as King to that of Shepherd (Luke 12:30-32) and Judge (22:28-30), while also emphasizing that the kingdom came from the Father and will ultimately be inherited by Christ’s followers. Jesus tells the sheep that this kingdom was “prepared for you” (Matt 25:34), just as he had previously told the mother of James and John that the places of privilege in his kingdom were not his to assign but were “prepared by my Father” (20:23). Paul’s mention of “what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9, alluding to Isa 64:4), resembles this usage, as does the promise of the author of Hebrews that God “has prepared for them a city” (Heb 11:16). This kingdom exists to be

¹⁸Deut 23:20 in English translations is 23:21 in the LXX. Ps 37:22 in English translations is 36:22 in the LXX.

¹⁹The phrase “will have this heritage” translates κληρονομήσει ταῦτα, which could be rendered, “will inherit these things” (Rev 21:7).

inherited by those who are faithful to the King.

Christ's kingdom was prepared for his people "from the foundation of the world" (Matt 25:34). This wording (καταβολῆς κόσμου) is limited in the canon to the NT, yet it signifies all of history. The statement "implies that God's purpose does not change: it will be the same at the end as in the beginning."²⁰

Their activity confirms their belief (25:35-36). "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me" (Matt 25:35-36). On the surface, it may seem that Jesus is affirming that salvation comes about through good works done to Christ and those who identify with him, something that would contradict apostolic teaching on salvation elsewhere in the NT, especially in Pauline literature. Carson clarifies the apparent contrast by noting,

The thought is antithetical to Paul only if we think this is all Matthew says and that all Paul says touches immediately on grace. Both assumptions are false: 2 Corinthians 5:10 is related to the thought of this parable, and Matthew has other things to say about the salvation of men and women (1:21; 11:25-30; 20:28). The reason for admission to the kingdom in this parable is more evidential than causative.²¹

Jesus' evaluation of the sheep in this way appears to be based on a couple of OT prophets. Isaiah had declared to Israel that the Lord distinguishes between humble fasting that is acceptable and ritualistic fasting that is forsaken (Isa 58:1-5). In defining true fasting in 58:7, Isaiah asked rhetorically, "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"²² Isaiah's concerns match Ezekiel's, who described the righteous and just man as one who "does not oppress anyone, but

²⁰Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 425.

²¹Carson, *Matthew*, 521.

²²Isaiah elaborates by proclaiming that "if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday" (58:10).

restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment” (Ezek 18:7; see also v. 16). These words inform James’ concern that believers not simply give lip-service to the poor and hungry, but actively provide for those in need, thus displaying their faith by their good works (Jas 2:14-17).

Jesus’ identification of himself as a “stranger” (ξένος) may be an indication that he rewards men like Job, who defended his righteousness by asserting that “the sojourner [ξένος in the LXX] has not lodged in the street; I have opened my door to the traveler” (Job 31:32).²³ Just as Jesus will confirm his association with his “brothers” (Matt 25:40), the Apostle John complimented the faithfulness of his disciples who worked for the good of “these brothers, strangers as they are” (3 John 5). A stranger (or foreigner) who is a brother is just as much a brother as one who is familiar, and both are to be cared for as one would care for Christ himself. The way that the sheep “visited” (ἐπεσκέψασθέ) Jesus is likely what James had in mind when he urged the truly religious “to visit [ἐπισκέπτεσθαι] orphans and widows in their affliction” (Jas 1:27).²⁴

Their questions display humility (25:37-39). “Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’” (Matt 25:37-39).

“Righteous” is the third different designation given to this group, following “sheep” (v. 32) and “blessed” (v. 34). They are surprised, not by the King’s verdict, but by his reasoning. That is, they were confident in their righteousness, but they were not relying on their works for their righteousness. Their works were motivated not by a desire to earn favor with the King, but by a desire to reciprocate to others the compassion that

²³Job had also just stated his care for the poor, the hungry, and the naked (31:16-23).

²⁴Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 427: “The list of ministries does not include miracles: the sick and imprisoned are visited, not healed and set free. The implicit injunctions are ‘easy.’”

the King had shown to them.²⁵

These acts of service also gave evidence of their humility, which is on display in their questions as well. They do not ask, “When did we do these things at all?” Instead, they wonder, “When did we do these things for you?” The actions of providing food, drink, clothing, shelter, and visitation were so commonplace among these people that they realize they may have personally seen and helped the King in this way and not even noticed him. In a way, this is exactly what happened. The King took notice of them and was ready to reward them for the way they had exalted their brothers above themselves.

The verbiage here, as well as what will be said about the goats in 25:42-44, is quite repetitive from 25:35-36. Therefore, a great deal of the textual analysis has already been done. What must be emphasized at this point is the significance these statements have for the church today. One primary point of application is the ever-present struggle of hypocrisy. Jesus makes clear that those who belong to him will serve one another as a display of love (cf. John 13:35). A works-less faith is really no faith at all (cf. Jas 2:14-17). Works apart from faith are of no eternal value either. One might be able to show outward conformity to certain Christian activities and fool onlookers about the authenticity of his beliefs. Jesus discerns motives and demands that ministry be done out of genuine gratitude for the goodness of God. One who has been blessed by the Father, given an inheritance in God’s kingdom, and counted among his righteous sheep are interested in seeing that the physical needs of their spiritual brothers are taken care of.

They served the King and his subjects (25:40). “And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me’” (Matt 25:40). This verse provides much of the interpretive difficulty for this

²⁵On this viewpoint, see Carson, *Matthew*, 521-22.

passage. To discern who Jesus means by “the least of these my brothers” is to make headway regarding a proper understanding and application of the whole parable.

As previously noted, the range of possibilities for the identification of these “brothers” is extensive and a few primary positions are well-defended within evangelical scholarship.²⁶ These positions include the wide view that the brothers are representative of all who are poor and needy, the narrow view that they are Christian missionaries, and the dispensational view that they are messianic Jews.²⁷ There is some merit to each view, yet each also has difficulties.²⁸

The most satisfying perspective is the one which sees the “brothers” as Jesus’ disciples in all ages and does not sharply distinguish between them and the “sheep” that are ministering to them. Throughout the NT, followers of Jesus are identified as his brothers, even from Jesus’ own words after his resurrection (Matt 28:10; John 20:17). Paul acknowledged Jesus as “the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29), and the writer to the Hebrews argues that since Jesus sanctifies his own “he is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Heb 2:11).

Jesus’ self-identification with “the least of these” is perhaps a roundabout way of affirming his deity yet again, since Solomon had written, “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed” (Prov 19:17). Jesus is equating service done to his disciples as service done for him, and service done for him as service done to God the Father, just as he had in Matthew 10:40 when he said to the

²⁶Turner, *Matthew*, 604-7.

²⁷Carson, *Matthew*, 519-20, elaborates on each of these views.

²⁸The dispensational view is attractive logically, but not so much linguistically or practically. Linguistically, Carson, *Matthew*, 520, observes, “Jesus never speaks of Jews as his brothers, though he does speak of his disciples in that way (12:46-50).” Practically, if the “brothers” are Jews, then the “sheep” are the Gentiles who care for the Jews during the tribulation. If that is the case, then this climactic illustration loses some of its power because it becomes not a prescriptive warning for Jesus’ immediate hearers, but a descriptive proposal for Gentile believers in a future age. It would be a drastic shift compared to the demands for active faithfulness, readiness, and stewardship emphasized by Jesus up to this point in the discourse.

twelve, “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.” To give “even a cup of cold water” to any thirsty disciple is worthy of great reward (Matt 10:42). Carson recognizes,

The fate of the nations will be determined by how they respond to Jesus’ followers, who, “missionaries” or not, are charged with spreading the gospel and do so in the face of hunger, thirst, illness, and imprisonment. Good deeds done to Jesus’ followers, even the least of them, are not only works of compassion and morality but reflect where people stand in relation to the kingdom and to Jesus himself. Jesus identifies himself with the fate of his followers and makes compassion for them equivalent to compassion for himself.²⁹

The Unrighteous will be Cursed (25:41-45)

The King now turns his attention to the goats at his left hand to reveal their fate. The tone shifts dramatically from compassionate and familial to hostile and exclusive. The structure of this section matches that of the previous section, and even much of the same vocabulary is retained. The actions that were present in the lives of the sheep are absent in the lives of the goats.

They are sent into eternal fire (25:41). “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’” (Matt 25:41). To this crowd, there is no extension of an invitation, but instead a command for departure. These are not the sons of the Father or the brothers of the King. They are the offspring of Satan (cf. Gen 3:15; John 8:44).

“Depart from me” carries the same weight as the judgment illustrated in Matthew 7:23 (“depart from me, you workers of lawlessness”), though different Greek verbs are used. Taking these two statements together, Matthew is showing that by not serving the brothers of Christ, these imposters are actively working lawlessness. “Cursed” acts as the antithesis to those who had been “blessed” in 25:34 and may be

²⁹Carson, *Matthew*, 520.

taken as a reference to the curse from God given to the devil (Gen 3:14) with whom they are about to be associated.³⁰

The destination of the goats is “eternal fire” (τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον), which is a construction used only twice else in the NT (Matt 18:8; Jude 7). Paul also characterizes “the righteous judgment of God” (2 Thess 1:5) as consisting of “flaming fire” (1:8) and “eternal destruction” (1:9). Likewise, John heard an angel warning those who worship the beast—whose power came from the dragon (Rev 13:2)—that they would “be tormented with fire and sulfur” (14:10), from which “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night” (14:11).

This place of punishment was “prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41). The apostles understand Matthew to be teaching that fallen angels are destined for “the judgment of the great day” (Jude 6; cf. 2 Pet 2:4), the reality of which at least some of these demons are apparently aware (Matt 8:29). John foresaw the devil and his angels being thrown down from heaven to the earth (Rev 12:7-9), indicating that the fate of these demons is tied to the fate of the devil himself. Matthew portrays Jesus as showing that the punishment for the unrighteous matches the punishment for the one who has opposed the Lord from the beginning.

Their inactivity confirms their unbelief (25:42-43). “For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me” (Matt 25:42-43). The repetition is ominous. Judgment is emphatically negative.³¹

³⁰The curse pronounced upon the serpent in Gen 3:14 was also attributed to Cain (Gen 4:11), who is identified as a child of the devil (1 John 3:8-12).

³¹France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 966: “The exchange between the judge and the unrighteous mirrors that with the righteous, though suitably abbreviated to avoid tedious repetition.”

The accusations against the goats resemble the criticism of Eliphaz towards Job, “You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry” (Job 22:7). Turner calls the inactions of the goats “a catastrophic sin of omission.”³² Because they avoided the King and the needs of his people in life, they now “are banished from the King’s presence” for all time.³³

Their questions display ignorance (25:44). “Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’” (Matt 25:44). As with those mentioned in 7:21-23, these outsiders address Jesus as “Lord,” but their actions give their true loyalty away. They sought not the glory of God but the glory of men.

The goats, like the sheep, appear to be surprised not by the result of their assessment but by the basis of it.³⁴ Whereas the question of the sheep was asked out of genuine humility, this question—though not a great deal different grammatically—reeks of ignorance. The unrighteous were more concerned about their own well-being than that of others. They sought to satisfy their own appetites and ensure their own provisions, thinking nothing of the needs of others or of the will of the King. Had they truly been interested in serving the King, they would have sought opportunities to do so by serving those who belong to him.

The same can be said of believers now. Those who prioritize the display of the gospel by their selflessness and sacrificial efforts show themselves to belong to the King. Those whose eyes and thoughts are only on their own satisfaction do not reflect heart of God. They see blessings from God as pleasures to be hoarded, not gifts to be shared.

³²Turner, *Matthew*, 609.

³³Carson, *Matthew*, 522.

³⁴Turner, *Matthew*, 609.

They neglected the King and his subjects (25:45). “Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me’” (Matt 25:45). Once again, Jesus identifies himself with those who are least. The unrighteous have apparently thought too highly of themselves to stoop low enough to serve such people.

Scripture seems to attest that Jesus relates most closely to his people in their times of lowliness, neglect, suffering, and weakness. Luke quotes Jesus as telling his disciples that “the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16).³⁵ Luke also records Jesus’ appearance to Saul of Tarsus, wherein Jesus equated Saul’s persecution against believers and churches with persecution against himself (Acts 9:5). That same Saul, writing as Paul the Apostle, taught the church at Corinth that to sin against a weaker brother is to “sin against Christ” (1 Cor 8:12).

One must be very careful how he treats the body of Christ, because the Head feels all that is directed towards it.³⁶ The good news for the sheep is that the Shepherd has humbled himself on their behalf to shield them from the wolves. The bad news for the goats is that the Shepherd will not permit these lookalikes to be counted in the flock at the end. The sheep know their Shepherd, hear his voice, follow him, and do not perish because they have served him and each other. The goats only seek enough association with the Shepherd to benefit from his common grace without any true commitment. The distinction, though sometimes obscured now, will be made clear by the King at his coming.

³⁵This verse relates to Matt 25:45 in terms of equating the neglect of Jesus’ followers to the neglect of Jesus himself in much the same way that Matt 10:40 relates to Matt 25:40 in equating the positive reception of Jesus’ followers to reception of Jesus himself. John 12:48 affirms that, for those who do reject Jesus, they will be judged by Jesus’ own words “on the last day.”

³⁶“The dialogue makes impressively clear that one’s relationship to Jesus cannot be divorced from the relationships to actual people, in this case the members of the church, who represent him” (Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 282).

The Outcomes will be Eternal (25:46)

“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt 25:46).³⁷ The double usage of “eternal” assures the reader that the duration of each group’s assignment is indeed forever. Both the fire for the unrighteous (25:41) and the kingdom for the righteous are permanent.

Matthew’s conclusion verifies that both groups will undergo resurrection, yet their post-resurrection experiences could not be more different. The basis of this truth is found in Daniel 12:2, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” Additionally, others in the OT exhibited hope in a future resurrection, such as Abraham (Heb 11:19), Job (Job 19:26-27), and Elijah (1 Kgs 17:17-24).

Promises for resurrection abound in the NT, again with the refrain that both the blessed and the cursed will endure forever. Jesus taught elsewhere that “an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29). Paul’s preaching was equally clear, assuring his listeners that “there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:15). His writing also confirmed the eternal rewards that await those who have done good and the eternal wrath that awaits those who have done evil (Rom 2:6-10). These statements nullify any notion of annihilation, Purgatory, or any other belief whereby one’s fate can be changed or shortened. At the final judgment of God, what’s done is done.

Conclusion

As the discourse is ended, the reader realizes that Jesus’ purposes have not merely been eschatological, but also evangelical. On the one hand, the disciples have

³⁷Davies and Allison suggest that Matt 25:46 is an editorial comment by Matthew, and that Jesus’ address ends with 25:45 (*Matthew 19-28*, 432).

been given answers to their questions that they did not expect. On the other, their perspective on the end of the age has been sharpened for the work that will be left to them following Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. Their ability to carry out the final commission that they will receive (Matt 28:18-20) will be motivated in part by the truths to which they have been exposed in this discourse. Judgment is coming, and it will be final. The rewards will be unimaginably wonderful for those who faithfully serve Jesus and his followers now, and the punishment will be horrifically severe for those who reject him and those with him.

The doctrine of the future is not so clear that Christians can assume to understand how everything will play out. Yet it is not so unclear that people must resort to living in total mystery about the end. As with other subjects, the Scriptures give their audience what is necessary for life and godliness. To quibble over obscure details would be to greatly miss the point of Jesus' teaching. Instead, the church should long for the return of Christ, and work to prepare others to meet him at his coming. If the body of Christ pursues sanctification, utilizes spiritual gifts, and is urgent in evangelism and discipleship to all peoples, then it will have appropriately applied the message of the discourse.

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ABSTRACT

“WHEN WILL THESE THINGS BE?” UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY IN THE OLIVET DISCOURSE OF MATTHEW 24-25

David Andrew Prairie, D.Min.
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington

This project is a biblical-theological treatment of Matthew’s record of the Olivet Discourse, the most extensive teaching from Jesus regarding his own second coming. Jesus answers his disciples’ questions about the destruction of the temple, the signs associated with his coming, and the close of the age. They assume that the temple’s demise accompanies the end of all things, that Jesus’ coming will be anticipated by signs, and that these events are imminent.

Jesus’ discourse emphasizes that only the Father knows when these things will be, therefore his followers must be alert, ready, and faithful in stewarding the earth until he comes. An extended age will make it seem like Christ’s coming is delayed. The signs throughout the age often link back to previous OT signs while also previewing the only sure sign, which is the glorious appearing of the Son of Man.

VITA

David Andrew Prairie

EDUCATION

B.A., Tennessee Temple University, 2006

M.Div., Temple Baptist Seminary, 2009

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Adjunct Faculty, Tennessee Temple University, Chattanooga, Tennessee,
2014-2015

MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT

Youth Pastor, Grace Baptist Church, Chattanooga, Tennessee, 2011-2018

Missionary, Association of Baptists for World Evangelism, Harrisburg,
Pennsylvania, 2017-