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Jesus, God's Prophet



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*And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the
city was moved, saying, "Who is this?"
So the multitudes said,
"This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of
Galilee."
(Matt 21:10-11)*

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CHAPTER 1

The Greatest Prophet

JESUS IS COMING AGAIN. He Himself said so. There could be no greater testimony to His return to earth than this.

In fact, the Lord Jesus Christ was the greatest prophet who ever walked on earth. There is no reason why He should not have been. He came to earth from the very bosom of the Father (John 1:18). He is the supreme Revealer (Heb 1:1-2).

Believers often recognize Jesus as a “Prophet, Priest, and King.” And He *is* all these things. But of these three roles, the one we hear about the least is His office as a Prophet of God.

Despite the greatness of Jesus as a prophet, this aspect of His earthly ministry is often neglected. It is only vaguely appreciated (if appreciated at all) by many Christians. And yet in His prophetic teaching Jesus Christ gave us a brand-new perspective on His coming and on the end of the age.

This does not mean that Jesus gave us a “revision” of OT prophecy. On the contrary, He esteemed OT prophecy highly and often appealed to it. What it does mean is that Jesus gave us *fresh revelation*. He expanded on what had been disclosed through OT prophets.

In Acts 3:22-24, Peter was referring to Jesus when he said:

For Moses truly said to the fathers, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you. And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people."

Moses was a rich source of *fresh* revelation. Among these were the creation story, the fall of man, the Tower of Babel, and the life of Abraham.

Although these accounts were most likely handed down by tradition, they could not be relied on as completely accurate. In the process of human transmission, they were easily garbled. The ancient pagan accounts of the flood story show this quite clearly. But Moses, the prophet, recorded them as they were divinely revealed to him. They were then perfect and reliable. The Mosaic Law was also revealed through him.

If Jesus was a prophet comparable to Moses, He must surely have revealed truth previously unknown or poorly understood among men.

It is not my purpose in this section to explore *everything* that was revealed by Jesus, God's Prophet. Instead, it is my intention to consider the revelation He gave about His own Second Coming to earth. The freshness—the newness—of this revelation is very impressive indeed.

To accomplish this goal we will look at Jesus' most famous prophetic discourse. It occurred on the Mount of Olives and has therefore been called the Olivet Discourse. It is reported in Matthew 24–25, Mark 13, and Luke 21. This section will consider this discourse as it is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew.

The Olivet Discourse is more than a prophetic discourse. It is *the* prophetic discourse. In fact, it is an indispensable bridge between OT and NT prophecy. Let's look at it carefully.

CHAPTER 2

The Coming of the Son of Man

IN THE OLIVET DISCOURSE, the Lord Jesus Christ taught something brand new about His own Second Coming.

Jesus on the Mount of Olives

On one occasion, Jesus was leaving the Jewish Temple. As He did so, He prophesied the Temple's utter destruction (Matt 24:1-2). He then proceeded to the Mount of Olives with His disciples. There they asked Him two questions that could only be answered by a prophet (v 3).

Jesus' response to these questions is recorded in Matt 24:4–25:46. It is the longest uninterrupted prophetic discussion found anywhere in the NT outside the book of Revelation.

It is also Christianity's most important prophetic presentation. Without it we could hardly understand the other prophetic passages in the NT, *including* the book of Revelation. The Olivet Discourse is indispensable for us. It is the key to understanding the end times as they are presented in the NT Scriptures.

The Mount of Olives was a most appropriate setting for our Lord's prophetic teaching. At the battle of Armageddon, Zech 14:3-4 tells us that "the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on *the Mount of Olives*,

which faces Jerusalem on the east” (emphasis added). As NT people know, “the Lord” in Zech 14:3 is Jesus Christ Himself.

Our Lord’s great prophetic discourse took place on the very mountain where His feet will stand again when He delivers Jerusalem from its enemies. Not surprisingly, the theme of the Olivet Discourse is His own Second Coming (or, Second Advent).

The key word for “coming” in this discourse is the Greek word *parousia*. It occurs four times in the discourse (Matt 24:3, 27, 37, 39). It is found nowhere else in the Gospel of Matthew. It is one way that Matthew emphasizes that the Olivet Discourse is *the* discourse about our Savior’s return to earth.

Of course, there is no doubt that the Second Advent is a major subject of OT prophecy. But in this discussion by our Lord, we learn truth about His future return that we could not have learned from the OT alone.

The Arrival of the Second Advent

After hearing Jesus predict the destruction of the Temple, the disciples raised two questions.

Their questions were recorded in Matt 24:3:

1. “Tell us, when will these things be?”
2. “And what will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?”.

Jesus does not get to the first question until the discourse reaches Matt 24:36. But for our purposes, we will consider question one first.

Taking the two questions together, we see that the disciples were thinking in terms of the end times. The words “coming” and “end of the age” make this quite clear. Obviously, they connected the prophecy about the destruction of the Temple with the end times as well. But their words in question number one do not refer to *that event alone*. In-

stead, the phrase “*these things*” is very broad. It is precisely this term that Jesus picks up in Matt 24:33-34.

As recorded in Matthew, the Olivet Discourse does not contain anything about when the Temple would be destroyed. But Jesus *did* address that issue in this discourse as we learn from Luke 21:12-24. Those verses in Luke are not found in Matthew. They cover events (in 66-70 AD) that are specifically said to take place *before* the end time events mentioned in Luke 21:10-11. But *how long* before is not stated.

The destruction of the Temple *could have been* part of the end times, because the kingdom of God is re-offered to Israel in Acts (see Acts 1:6-7; 3:19-26). But Matthew only reports what Jesus said about the *actual events* of the end times. The timing of these future events is addressed in Matt 24:36-42.

“Tell us when...?” the disciples ask. So to speak, Jesus replies, “No I won’t.” His actual words are, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only” (Matt 24:36).

This statement is also recorded in Mark 13:32. There the phrase “nor the Son” is included. These additional words in Mark show us that the answer to the question about “when” was not present in Jesus’ human consciousness. Of course, as God He was omniscient. However, as inadequate as it is to say it this way, Jesus had “blocked” this fact from His human mind.

Matthew 24:36 focuses on a very important point. As we shall see shortly, the question about “when” pertains to Christ’s Second Advent. The “when” of the Second Advent is unknowable to man. It is also unknowable in the angelic sphere. This knowledge properly belongs to God the Father. Since the Son only reveals what the Father wants to reveal, Jesus, God’s Prophet, leaves that knowledge in His Father’s hands.

This significant truth leads directly to *new revelation*. Jesus immediately goes on to say,

“But as the days of Noah were, *so also will the coming of the Son of Man be*. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, *so also will the coming of the Son of Man be*” (Matt 24:37-39, emphasis added).

Here we learn something never disclosed in OT prophecy. It is this: that “*the coming of the Son of man*” will be as totally unexpected as the flood that came suddenly in Noah’s day. In fact, until the arrival of the flood, normal human activity went on as it always had. That is to say, human beings ate and drank, married and gave in marriage. Mankind had no clue (“they knew not”) that they were about to be swept away in a worldwide disaster. The same thing, Jesus says (twice), will be true of “*the coming of the Son of Man*.”

Obviously, if the Father alone knows the time of this event, no angel or human being can possibly give mankind a warning that it is about to happen. The surprise is totally guaranteed.

The Worldwide Disaster

But something else is also obvious from our Lord’s words in vv 37-39. The Second Coming brings with it an *unexpected* worldwide disaster. It will be like the flood, Jesus says, that “took them all away” (Matt 24:39).

Earlier in this passage, the disciples heard Jesus discuss another time of trouble. In the opening section of the Olivet Discourse (24:4-14), Jesus had described a world filled with problems. Life on earth will be disrupted by nation

rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, and by “famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places” (vv 6-7). In v 8, Jesus calls these events “the beginning of labor pains” (NKJV = “the beginning of sorrows”).

The Greek word here for “labor pains,” or “sorrows,” is *odin* [*oh-den*]. It refers to the childbearing pains of a woman who has begun the process of giving birth. In Biblical prophecy, it is a term that describes the eschatological—or final—calamities of the present age (for example, 1 Thess 5:2-3, discussed below).

The events Jesus describes are agonies that can be compared to birth pains. A new age in human history is being born. The Kingdom of God will be visibly present on earth. The world will have a period of anguish until the birth of that wonderful age is fully realized.

But the labor pains that are mentioned in vv 6-8 are only the “beginning.” They will be followed by more severe worldwide agonies. In the following section of the discourse (Matt 24:15-31), Jesus makes this plain. The calamities of the end times will reach an intensity that is without parallel in human history. The preliminary labor pains are intense enough to show that God’s judgments have begun. Yet they are only the start.

In describing the full intensity of the final troubles, Jesus states:

“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (vv 21-22).

In these words Jesus is referring to what is often called “the Great Tribulation.” But the English word *tribulation* hides an important connection that a Greek hearer or read-

er could make. The word *tribulation* translates the Greek word *thlipsis*. That word, too, may be used to describe the anguish of childbirth. It is actually used that way by Jesus Himself in John 16:21. There Jesus says:

“A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish [*thlipsis*] for joy that a human being has been born into the world.”

Therefore, Jesus' two phrases, the “Great Tribulation” and the “beginning of labor pains,” are clearly connected. The “Great Tribulation” might also be called the “Great Travail.” The initial, intermittent birth pains of a pregnant woman signal the onset of the more prolonged, definitive *travail* pains of the actual birth. The judgments of the end times will be like that. Jesus' teaching about the “beginning of labor pains” and the “Great Travail” are two parts of the same truth. The end times contain the *birth pains* of the new age.

This whole period of time is the subject of Matt 24:4-31. Once the Great Travail is over, the world seems to be coming to an end (note 24:29). But instead, “the *sign of the Son of Man* will appear in heaven, 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” (24:30, emphasis added).

Then, too, the “elect,” that is, born-again people here on earth, will be gathered into His presence (Matt 24:31; see 24:22, 24). Their numbers will be great. This is because a worldwide evangelization has taken place during these troubled times (Matt 24:14; see Rev 7:9, 13-14). Somewhat later *all* living Gentiles will be brought before the King (Matt 25:31-32).

With the use of the word *sign* in 24:30—for the first time since the disciples used it in 24:3—Jesus indicates the conclusion of His answer to their *second* question. Their second question was, “And what will be *the sign* of your coming, and of the end of the age?” (24:3, emphasis added). The Son of Man Himself, evidently, is the *sign*. His glorious appearing heralds the end of this present age.

The appearance of Jesus to all mankind follows the period of labor pains (Matt 24:29a). Out of horrendous turmoil and trouble, a new age will be *born*. As with the birth of a child (John 16:21), this new age will produce an overflowing supply of joy (see Rev 19:6-7).

Anticipating the End of the Age

Following His powerful description of the conclusion of our age, Jesus presents a brief exhortation (24:32-35). This exhortation is based on a parable about a budding fig tree. Jesus’ point is made clear when He applies the parable, “So you also, when you see *all these things*, know that it is near, at the very doors” (Matt 24:33, emphasis added).

The disciples living at that time are to recognize the nearness of “the end of the age” by observing *all these things* (note “these things” in 24:3). As they watch the events Jesus has prophesied run their course—as they see *all these things* taking place—they will know that the “summer” of the age to come “is near” (see v 32). Furthermore, the generation that sees these events *begin* will also see them *end*.

This is stated in Matt 24:34: “Assuredly, I say to you, *this generation* will by no means pass away till *all these things* take place” (emphasis added). Of course, Jesus could not be talking here about the generation alive at the time He spoke. As is often true in prophecy, the standpoint of the prophet is in the time period of the events that are foreseen. Jesus is standing prophetically in *the very generation* that will experience these things. It is *this* generation that

will not pass away until everything He has foretold takes place.

To be sure, the disasters of this period will stir up the world's anxiety as never before. But believers living at that time can rest assured that the calamities are not going to go on without end. Instead, they will be completed within the life span of a single generation. In fact, the glorious conclusion of these troubles is guaranteed by the words of Jesus Himself. He says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away" (24:35).

If the disciples have been paying attention, they will already have learned a great deal from the Olivet Discourse. Although Jesus refers once to Daniel the prophet (24:15), by and large His treatment of this period of time has no real precedent in OT prophecy, although the OT prophets knew about the coming of the final calamities. But none of them gives us anywhere near as detailed a description of this period of time as Jesus does here.

There is one issue Jesus must still discuss. It is the issue of *when*. *When* will this unprecedented series of events begin to run its course? When, in fact, will *all these things* take place (v 34)?

As we have already seen, there is no specific answer to this question. The reason is that "*of that day and hour no one knows...but My Father only*" (v 36, emphasis added).

Clarifying the Second Coming

Up to this point in our Lord's Discourse, the disciples may have thought that Jesus' coming occurred at precisely the same time as the end of the age. The Greek form of their second question (24:3) implies that these two things are very closely related, which of course they are. But Jesus now goes on to show them that these events are not simultaneous at all.

As we saw above, Jesus flatly declares that His coming (parousia) is as sudden and unexpected as the flood was in Noah's day. The flood came at a time when nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. But this would not be true of His coming if His coming occurs *at the conclusion* of the Great Tribulation. This obvious problem is often ignored. Many readers have thought that Matt 24:29-30 places the coming *there*. But this is a mistake.

Matthew 24:29-31 definitely does not use Jesus' special word for coming (that is, the word parousia). The passage *does* say that the tribulation is immediately followed by unparalleled heavenly events involving the sun, moon, and stars. These heavenly events are followed in turn by *the sign* of the Son of Man. But the word parousia is not used.

This sign is not specified precisely, but the Greek can be read as meaning "the sign that *is* the Son of Man." If taken in this way, the sign refers to His appearance in glory. That, after all, is stated in the following words: "they will see the Son of Man coming [Gk = *erchomenon*] on the clouds of heaven" (v 30).

But to see Him "coming" like this is not the same as describing His descent from the presence of God. In fact, it *can't be* precisely that. At the time that men see Him this way He is *already* on the clouds that are found in earth's atmosphere. But when did His coming from God's presence begin? When, in fact, did the parousia really start?

The answer is plain. The coming (parousia) begins at the time when God's judgments begin, for "the coming of the Son of Man" will be like the coming of the flood in Noah's day (24:37-39). Therefore, it will occur at a time when uninterrupted human life is continuing as usual, just as it was before the flood.

This means that "the coming of the Son of Man" cannot *begin* at the time described in 24:29-31. *That time* is "immediately after the tribulation of those days." And the tribulation is a period of such severe trouble that "un-

less those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved" (24:22).

To put this another way, "the coming [parousia] of the Son of Man" starts *without a sign*. It is only *after* "the tribulation of those days" that "the *sign* of the Son of Man will appear in heaven" (24:30, emphasis added). This conclusion leads to another. The term for coming (parousia) does not simply refer to an *arrival*. It clearly covers a *span of time*.

This agrees perfectly with the general use of the word parousia in Greek. In fact, this is indicated in the standard Greek-English Lexicon of the NT (BDAG). There the first type of meaning given is, "the state of being present at a place," or more simply, "presence" (p. 780). The second type of meaning given is that of an "arrival as the first stage in presence," or more simply, "coming."

As it happens, English has a word that is roughly similar, namely the word *advent*. When we speak of the First Advent or the Second Advent of our Lord, the words suggest not merely His *arrival* but also His subsequent *presence* in the world.

We may say that the Second Advent *begins* unexpectedly when the judgments of God begin. However, it is *disclosed* by "the sign of the Son of Man"—namely, by our Lord's appearance in "the clouds of heaven" when the Great Tribulation is over.

Precision in Prophecy

Someone may object that I am being too precise in interpreting our Lord's words. But the Scriptures teach us to interpret with this level of precision. In fact, a lack of precision in interpreting His words often results in serious errors. This is clearly illustrated in a passage found in John 21:20-23.

According to John 21, our Lord predicted the death of Peter (John 21:18-19). Peter then turned to look at the be-

loved disciple (John) and asked, “But Lord, what about this man?” Jesus replied, “If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?” (21:21-22). The Apostle John then adds some significant words:

Then the saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but “If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?” (John 21:23).

Jesus’ words were misunderstood because insufficient attention was paid to the little word “if”! Close attention to our Lord’s words, therefore, is essential in order to avoid rushing to improper conclusions.

Students of Matthew’s Gospel should pay close attention to *exactly* what Jesus said in Matt 24:36-39. If they do, they will never think that His coming (parousia) begins only *after* an unprecedented period of earthly trouble. That view is impossible in Matt 24:36-39. And this impossibility is due to a new feature of Biblical prophecy that Jesus reveals. This feature is the totally unexpected arrival of Jesus from heaven while life on earth goes on as before.

This is a new revelation by God’s greatest Prophet.

But even if we misunderstand it, the apostles did not. It is Peter, for example, who writes about scoffers who will say, “Where is the promise of His coming (parousia)? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Pet 3:4). *Things go on as always*, they insist, *and the parousia hasn’t occurred!*

Strikingly, Peter attributes the ignorance of these scoffers to willful forgetfulness of the *flood* (2 Pet 3:5-6). A few verses later he states that “the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night”—that is, without warning (2 Pet 3:10, emphasis added). The suddenness of the parousia, and the

comparison with the flood, are ideas Peter got directly from our Lord. Jesus taught them in the Olivet Discourse.

In the same way, the Apostle Paul also reflects this teaching. In describing the coming of the Day of the Lord he writes, "For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes *as a thief in the night*. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, *as labor pains upon a pregnant woman*. And they shall not escape" (1 Thess 5:2-3, emphasis added). The prophetic teaching of our Lord appears here quite clearly, including a reference to "labor pains."

After urging the Thessalonians to be watchful and not allow the Day of the Lord to overtake them as a thief (1 Thess 5:4-8), Paul adds these words:

For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation [= deliverance] through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep we should *live together with Him* (1 Thess 5:9-10, emphasis added).

This important statement elaborates an earlier one by Paul. The Thessalonians, he said, were waiting for God's "Son from heaven...who *delivers* us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess 1:10, emphasis added).

Unmistakably, therefore, both Paul and Peter link together several things. These are:

1. the Day of the Lord,
2. the Second Advent, and
3. an earthly situation in which there is no expectation of calamity.

Men are saying "peace and safety," and they are insisting that "all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." The Day of the Lord will come unexpectedly like *a thief in the night*. All of this, as we have just seen, is firmly rooted in a careful reading of the Olivet Discourse.

To repeat: The beginning of the Second Advent has no *sign*. It suddenly overtakes an unsuspecting world that falsely thinks that all is well. Careful attention to *precisely* what Jesus said on the Mount of Olives compels this understanding.

One Shall Be Taken

Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians (quoted above) also focus on something else. They focus on the theme of *deliverance* from the calamities of the Day of the Lord.

In fact, Paul saw the Second Coming as the way God's Son *delivers us from the wrath to come* (1:10). Although "sudden destruction" (5:3) will overtake the world "as a thief in the night" (5:2), the Day of the Lord need not catch believers by surprise. *They* will be delivered.

Therefore Paul states, "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief" (5:4). Instead, "You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober" (5:5-6). *Stay awake*, Paul says. *Don't be caught by surprise like the world around you.*

Moreover Paul urges them to put on "as a helmet the hope of salvation [deliverance]" (5:8). Why? Because "God did not appoint us to wrath [that is, to the wrath of the Day of the Lord (5:2-3)], but to obtain salvation [deliverance] through our Lord Jesus Christ" so that "*we should live together with Him*" (5:9-10; emphasis added). Our destiny, says Paul, is not the coming wrath but living in the presence of Christ.

Where did Paul get this idea? Can it be found in our Lord's Olivet Discourse? The answer is yes, it can.

Immediately after describing His coming (*parousia*) as an unexpected event, Jesus adds these familiar words,

“Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left” (Matt 24:40-41).

We should notice first of all the word *then*. Its immediate reference is back to the preceding phrase about “the coming of the Son of Man.” The *then* refers to something that happens at the time when His coming begins.

Of particular interest also is the word Jesus chooses for *taken*. The Greek word *paralambano*, is used here in its main NT sense. The word’s first meaning as defined by the standard dictionary (BDAG, p. 767) is: “to take into close association, *take (to oneself)*, *take with/along*.” Other examples in Matthew can be found in 1:20-21 (Joseph “taking” Mary as his wife); 2:13, 14, 20, 21 (Joseph “taking” the child Jesus to Egypt and back to Israel); and 17:1 (Jesus “taking along” the three disciples to the mount of transfiguration). There are additional examples in Matthew, but these can serve as illustrations of the word’s primary use.

Therefore, the word *paralambano*, (vv 40-41) is a quite different word than the one in the statement “the flood came and *took* them all *away*” (v 39, emphasis added). The word rendered “take away” in v 39 is *airo*,. In v 39 the Lord is speaking about being swept away in judgment. But *paralambano*, in vv 40-41 does not suggest that idea in any way. In fact, the shift to a verb with a different meaning suggests just the opposite.

As I have noted, Matt 24:40-41 follows our Lord’s statement that “so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (v 39). Immediately after saying this, He declares that *then* some will be selectively “*taken along*.” Specifically, one of two men “in the field” will be *taken along*, and one of two women “grinding at the mill.” This can hardly mean anything else but that such people are “taken along” *with*

His coming. That is to say, He comes and *takes them along with Him.*

Very simply and plainly, Jesus is saying that, when He comes, He will “take along with Him” certain individuals that are on earth at that time. Paul fills in the details of this when he writes:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And then we shall always be *with the Lord* (1 Thess 4:16-17, emphasis added).

In other words, when Jesus descends from heaven, He will *take along with Himself* all the believers on earth. He will do this by catching them up into the clouds to meet Him. They will be *with Him* from then on. To put it another way, after this event they will “live together with Him” (1 Thess 5:10). The removal of believers from the earth is often referred to by a traditional term: the Rapture.

Therefore, the coming of God’s Son will *deliver us from the wrath to come* (1 Thess 1:9). It will deliver us from all the calamities that will overtake the unsaved world. This truth has its roots in the Olivet Discourse.

CHAPTER 3

Living in the Light of His Coming

AFTER REVEALING THAT THE second advent will arrive unexpectedly (Matt 24:36-41), the Lord Jesus Christ begins a new section of His discourse. In this section, He teaches His disciples how to live in the light of His coming. The new section extends all the way from Matt 24:42–25:46. The first unit of this material is found in Matt 24:42–25:13.

Matthew 24:42 begins with the words, “Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.” It concludes with similar words in Matt 25:13, “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.” In both these verses, the word “watch” is a Greek verb (*gregoreo*„) that basically means “to stay awake,” “to be alert.”

The literary technique called *inclusio* is one where the end of a section contains an idea or words that are similar to an idea or words at the beginning of the section. Matthew 25:13 forms an *inclusio* for the unit beginning in 24:42. This *inclusio* indicates that Matt 24:42–25:13 is a distinct sub-unit in the Olivet Discourse. Let’s consider this important body of material.

Staying Awake for the Thief

If the “coming of the Son of Man” is to be as unexpected as the coming of the flood, then those who belong to Christ should stay alert. Following an exhortation to stay awake (v 42), v 43 introduces the theme of the “thief.” Jesus speaks these words:

“But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched [*stayed awake*] and not allowed his house to be broken into.”

Very clearly we have here the source for a concept expressed by Peter and Paul. According to both of them, the Day of the Lord [that is, our Lord's Second Advent] will come like “a thief in the night.” Peter and Paul were good students of God's Prophet.

Jesus' analogy about the coming of a thief has implications for His disciples. The householder (“master of the house”) needed to stay awake for the obvious reason that only by doing so could he be ready for the thief. He needed to be *ready* to prevent the thief from breaking into his house and stealing from him. In our Lord's words, if the homeowner had been alert he would “*not have allowed his house to be broken into*” (24:43, emphasis added).

This parable about the thief is followed by an admonition to be *ready*. After having told His disciples to stay awake (v 42), Jesus now adds:

“Therefore you also be *ready*, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt 24:44, emphasis added).

By comparing His own coming to that of a “thief,” Jesus teaches His disciples a basic fact. If someone is not *ready* for a “thief” he will suffer loss. In other words, the

thief will “take” something away. This implies that the unprepared servant of Christ will lose something of value when His Lord returns.

To drive this point home, Jesus proceeds to tell two parables that underscore it. The first parable is about a servant whose *conduct* leaves him unready for his Lord’s return (Matt 24:45-51). The second is about five women whose *neglect* leaves them unready as well (Matt 25:1-12). Both the servant and the five women suffer significant losses. In a sense, both stories teach the same lesson—being unprepared leads to serious loss.

Let us now look at each of these stories.

The Unprepared Servant: Matthew 24:45-51

The opening words about an unprepared servant are an exhortation to avoid the trap into which he fell. Jesus begins by saying,

“Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods” (Matt 24:45-47).

“Which of you,” Jesus is saying, “wants to be a reliable servant like this? Such a servant will be blessed when His Lord comes and finds him properly engaged in his assigned activities. In fact, that servant will be promoted to a more responsible position with greater authority.” Certainly this brief exhortation should inspire every believer in Christ to keep busy serving the Lord.

But there is an alternative. The servant “whom his master made ruler over his household” (v 45) may turn out *not* to be “faithful and wise.” Jesus describes this possibility as He continues His parable:

“But if that evil servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour he is not aware of” (Matt 24:48-50).

What causes the downfall of this evil servant? Very simply put, he stops *watching* for his master.

In his heart the servant says, “My master is delaying his coming.” And if his master is not going to come anytime soon, this servant is not concerned when his own faithfulness begins to deteriorate. As a result he “begins” (v 49) to mistreat his master’s other servants—those he was assigned to feed, not to beat! He also begins to behave personally in a self-indulgent and undisciplined manner.

Suddenly his master comes as unexpectedly as a thief in the night. The end result for this servant is sobering. Jesus says:

...the master of that servant...will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 24:50-51).

The master’s judgment “cuts him in two”—a metaphor, undoubtedly, since he can still be assigned “his portion with the hypocrites.” That is to say, he is assigned to the ignominy and loss that properly belong to hypocrites. His hypocrisy was evident. While occupying a position of service to his master, he had actually served himself to the detriment of others. He will therefore deeply regret his failure and will express his remorse with “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v 51).

Some readers might think that this servant’s fate, as described by Jesus, means that he is going to hell. However,

the language does not require such an interpretation. The implication that a sword is used in the servant's judgment reminds us that the word of God will be the instrument of our Lord's judgment of believers.

In Heb 4:12-13 we are told that "the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit." In addition, His word is "a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart," since "all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him *to whom we must give an account*" (emphasis added).

No doubt when our Lord judges unfaithful servants by His penetrating *word*, such servants will feel as if they have been "cut apart." Rebuke by Christ at His Judgment Seat (often called, the Bema) will certainly be a spiritually painful experience.

The words about "weeping and gnashing of teeth" do not really suggest hell either. In the culture of the ancient Middle East such anguished displays of grief were well understood as appropriate to deep sorrow and loss. And although this first parable does not stress the fact, this unfaithful servant *has* suffered loss. He has *lost* the *promotion* to greater authority (see v 47) that would have been his had he remained "faithful and wise." Instead he suffered *demotion*. In this life he had ruled (v 45). After His Lord's return, he will not (see 2 Tim 2:12).

Instead of being faithful and wise, he had stopped expecting that his master might come at any time. On the contrary, he had decided that, "My master is delaying his coming." The result was that his *conduct* deteriorated seriously. He was not ready for His master's arrival and assessment. He is therefore judged severely and is denied elevation to a new level of service.

The Unprepared Women: Matthew 25:1-13

The second parable involves women who are also unprepared to meet their coming lord (Matt 25:1-13). In this parable, however, there is no misconduct on their part as there was with the unfaithful servant. Instead we find five women, out of a total of ten, who are unprepared because of their *neglect*. They have not made the necessary preparations. They are not *ready* for Him to arrive.

This parable complements the previous one as a servant of Christ can be unprepared for His Lord's coming either through serious *misconduct* or through simple *neglect*.

This second parable revolves around ten women who are waiting for a bridegroom to come. The opening verse (Matt 25:1) is best understood as a summary of the story that follows. In the story, ten virgin women are at the scene of the coming wedding feast. They are waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom and his party.

All ten of the women have torches with them—"torches" is a better word here than "lamps" (NKJV). In a helpful article entitled, "Lampades in Matthew 25:1-13," (in *Soli Deo Gloria* [John Knox Press, 1968], pp. 83-87), Joachim Jeremias has pointed out that the role of these women at the banquet was most likely that of entertainers. Their task was to perform the torch dance once the celebration began. To be allowed to display their skills on such an occasion was a privilege they clearly valued.

While they wait for the bridegroom, all ten of the virgins catch up on their sleep. By doing so, they will be fresh and ready to perform their role when the time arrives (v 5). There is nothing wrong with this. That is clear from the fact that the wise virgins sleep as well as the foolish ones.

When the cry comes at midnight that the bridegroom is approaching, all ten of the virgins wake up. At once they begin to light their torches (vv 6-7). If, as seems likely, these torches burned oil-soaked rags, oil had to be poured on

them frequently to keep them burning. The foolish virgins realize they have *neglected* to bring containers holding extra oil. They will need this oil if their torches are to stay lighted for the celebration.

In vain the foolish virgins ask to borrow oil from their wiser companions. But their request is denied (vv 8-9). The wise virgins know that they may need all the oil they have. So they advise their foolish companions to go off to the merchants and buy their own oil (v 9). Since it is already midnight (see v 6) it may be hard to find merchants willing to sell to them at that hour of the night. The business day is long over.

Eventually the necessary oil is obtained. But by the time the five foolish virgins return to the house, the bridegroom has already arrived and gone inside, accompanied by the five wise virgins (vv 10-11). The five women knock vigorously at the door requesting to be admitted (v 11). They shout, "Lord, Lord, open to us" (v 11). From within, their Lord denies them admission with the words, "Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you."

Again the parabolic nature of this story must be kept in mind. We are not to pour unwarranted theology into it. The five foolish virgins are not sent away to some horrible form of torment. In the parable, the words "I do not know you" are a way of denying their request to get inside. The celebration will go on without them. They will not be allowed to perform their torch dance.

Unquestionably, these foolish virgins represent believers. They believe that the bridegroom is coming and are eager to play their role when he comes. Their problem is *not* unbelief, but a failure to be prepared that is rooted in *neglect*. "Those who were foolish...took no oil with them" (v 3).

The Scriptures give us many instructions for preparing to meet our Lord. The simplest summary of these is found in the words of the Apostle John, who wrote:

And now, little children, *abide in Him*, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming [parousia] (1 John 2:28, emphasis added).

When we *abide in Christ*, the Holy Spirit keeps the flame of spiritual warmth and vitality burning in our hearts and lives. But the Spirit's work in us comes at the "cost" of time, energy, and dedication to God and His word. However, if we are willing to pay that price, the Biblical writers will "sell" us their extremely valuable "oil," God's truth. In that way we can keep our lives burning brightly for Him until He returns.

The wise virgins bought their oil ahead of time. As the foolish virgins found out, you can't get the needed oil in a hurry after a long period of neglect. If we *neglect* spiritual readiness, we will suffer loss when our Lord comes back.

Suffering Loss

A thief brings loss to those whom he robs. In both of our Lord's parables, loss is experienced when the master or bridegroom comes.

In the parable about the unfaithful servant, the servant *loses* a significant promotion. His master caught him by surprise. He came "on a day when he [was] not looking for him and at an hour that he [was] not aware of" (Matt 24:50).

In the case of the foolish virgins, they *lose* the opportunity to perform their role (the torch dance) at the wedding celebration. In their case, although they are wide awake at the proper time along with the wise virgins, the foolish virgins are *inadequately prepared*.

So Jesus concludes this unit by saying,

“Watch [= *stay alert*] therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming” (Matt 25:13).

As mentioned earlier, this verse forms an *inclusio* with 24:42. That verse, like 25:13, exhorts believers to watch. They are to stay awake and alert. But in 25:13 we also meet the combination of “day” and “hour” for the first time since 24:36. These two verses should also be compared:

“But of that *day and hour* no one knows...” (Matt 24:36, emphasis added).

“...for you know neither *the day nor the hour* in which the Son of Man is coming” (Matt 25:13, emphasis added).

Here we have a double *inclusio*. Matthew 25:13 does conclude the material about the servant and the ten virgins (24:42–25:13). But it also concludes the whole discussion about *the complete uncertainty* of “the day and the hour” when the Son of Man’s coming will begin (24:36–25:13).

In both parables, Jesus is teaching us that staying spiritually alert for His coming will prevent significant personal loss. And in turn, alertness involves watching our conduct and not neglecting proper spiritual preparations.

This is brand new prophetic truth. It is truth that was taught for the first time in Biblical history by Jesus of Nazareth in His role as God’s Prophet.

Since we live in the days *before* His coming (parousia) the truth of Matt 24:36–25:13 is all intended for *our* learning and *our* admonition. The message is clear. We should always be ready (24:44) for Him. If we are not ready, we will suffer significant *loss* at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10).

CHAPTER 4

The Prophecy and the People of God

THE TRUTH THAT JESUS taught in His discourse on the Mount of Olives is important for another reason. This is because it reveals a basic distinction that the later NT writers build on extensively.

We live in a democratic society where people assume that our government should treat all its citizens in the same way, regardless of race, gender, or religion. But God is not required to govern by democratic principles. He is fair and He is not a respecter of persons (Rom 2:11), but this does not mean that every individual, group, or nation has exactly the same relationship to Him as every other.

God's way of dealing with human beings is not dully monochrome, but is a highly variegated, multicolored picture. A thoughtful reading of 1 Corinthians 12 illustrates this clearly at the level of spiritual functions. The spiritual Body of Christ is a unity with rich variety.

The principle of *variety* also exists at the level of large groups of people. Let's look at the Olivet Discourse again with this in mind.

The People Who Live During the Second Advent

Our Lord's teaching about His Second Coming points clearly to two different groups of people. On the one hand, there are those who are "taken along with Him" when His

coming begins (Matt 24:40-41). These people will no longer be on earth once the judgments of the Second Advent have begun. On the other hand, there are those who will be on earth during the events of the Great Tribulation.

Let us consider this second group first, just as Jesus does in His discourse.

Of particular interest are the warnings Jesus gives to those who will live in this future time. As we have seen, it is a time marked out by two related terms. The first of these is the phrase “the beginning of labor pains” (Matt 24:8). The second is the “Great Travail” (= the “Great Tribulation,” 24:21).

During what Jesus describes as “the beginning of labor pains,” He counsels His followers by saying, “See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet” (Matt 24:6b).

During this initial time period His followers are not to become “troubled.” The first disturbances (24:5-6a, 7-8) do not herald the nearness of “the end.” By “the end” our Lord is obviously referring to what His disciples had called “the end of the age” (Matt 24:3).

However, after His reference to “the beginning of labor pains” (Matt 24:8), Jesus describes a period of persecution for His followers. This will also be a period of worldwide evangelization (24:9-14).

His last statement in these verses makes this clear:

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and *then the end will come*” (Matt 24:14, emphasis added).

Let us carefully note the word “then” with which 24:9 begins (“*then* they will deliver you up...”). With this word Jesus signals that when “the beginning of labor pains” has

taken place (v 8), the period during which His followers are not to be “troubled” will be over.

The following period (“then”) will bring them trouble. It will also bring the privilege of evangelizing the nations (24:9-14). His disciples will do this even though they “will be hated by all nations for [His] name’s sake” (v 9). But once this task is completed, *then the end will come* (24:14).

Clearly a new time period is under consideration in Matt 24:9-14. Yet how will the disciples of Jesus in that day know that this period has begun? The answer is given in Matt 24:15ff.

Jesus’ words there are famous. The first word (in English) is the word “therefore” (in Greek this word is the second one in the verse). In the light of the coming period of persecution and evangelization, Jesus is saying, *therefore* do as follows.

His instructions are based on an OT prophecy from the Book of Daniel. But the instructions themselves are brand new. Once again God’s Prophet is speaking newly revealed truth:

Therefore when you see the ‘*abomination of desolation*,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days. And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation [= great travail] such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s

sake those days will be shortened (Matt 24:15-22, emphasis in NKJV).

There is no mistaking the focus in this passage on the nation of Israel. One can note the reference to the Jewish prophet Daniel, to "the holy place" (i.e., the Temple), to Judea, and to the Sabbath. Absolutely no instructions are given to Gentile believers even though the Great Travail is worldwide and threatens the extinction of humanity itself. The directions are for Israelis.

Nevertheless, His directions telling Israeli believers to flee are not contained in OT prophecy. Indeed, Matt 24:16-22 is basically all new.

Furthermore, the previous paragraph (24:9-14) has prepared us for this orientation to Israel. There Jesus had said (v 9), "you will be hated by *all nations*" [Gk, 'all the Gentiles']. He had also stated (v 14) that "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to *all the nations* [Gk = 'all the Gentiles'], and then the end will come."

So Jesus speaks in Matt 24:9-21 as if, in this coming day, the evangelization of the Gentile world is once again in the hands of *Jews*. These Israeli believers are aroused to flight by the appearance of the "abomination of desolation" in the Jewish Temple. Since the Temple was destroyed in AD 70, this also obviously implies the *rebuilding* of that Temple before this event can take place. This rebuilding is exactly what many Israelis today hope will happen.

The emphasis on Israel that I have noted is not surprising in the light of the whole discourse. As we have seen, when our Lord's coming (*parousia*) begins, He will "take along" with Him certain people (24:40-41). Even if we did not have the confirmation of the Apostle Paul in 1 Thesalonians, we could easily conclude that those whom Christ "takes along" at the beginning of His "coming" must be people who belong to Him.

In this way, as Paul puts it, Jesus “*delivers*” Christians “from the wrath to come” (1 Thess 1:10). They are *saved* from the world’s “labor pains” in order to “live together with Him” (1 Thess 5:10).

This catching away of believers (that is, the Rapture) at the *start* of the *parousia* is described in more detail by Paul in 1 Thess 4:15-18. Paul certainly has this beginning point in mind as he makes clear by the words, “we who are alive and remain *until* the coming of the Lord” (Gk, *eis ten parousian*, “to [unto] the coming”).

So when the *parousia* unexpectedly begins, every believer in the world will “be caught up...in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess 4:17). Once that has happened, not a single believer will be left on earth.

However, during the “beginning of labor pains,” while the Gentile nations are in turmoil (Matt 24:6-7), there will be people in Israel who believe in Jesus. The first converts could come from simply reading the NT Scriptures. By the time referred to in Matt 24:15, there will undoubtedly be many believers (see Rev 7:1-8; 14:1-5). They will be ready to obey the Lord’s instructions given in 24:15-21.

We can see what is clearly implied in all this. Once all Christians on earth are caught up (raptured) by Jesus, God will start all over again with Israel.

In fact, God’s Prophet envisions a situation in the land of Israel in which Jewish worship has been renewed in the Jewish Temple (Matt 24:15). His followers, therefore, ought to be prayerfully concerned that their flight not occur on the Sabbath day (24:20). The Jewish law severely restricts movements on that day. Implied in this, as well, is the fact that Jesus’ disciples in Israel will be *observant* of the Mosaic Law. This contrasts with believers today who are free from the law (see Gal 2:19-20).

All of this is eye opening.

The People Who Are Delivered by the Second Advent

Matthew 24:4-22 (as well as 24:23-35) is addressed to people who will live on earth *after* the Second Advent has started. But, as we have seen, Matt 24:36-41 reveals that there are people who will be *taken off the earth* as soon as the Second Advent begins. It is not their destiny to experience any part of the “wrath to come” during the world’s labor pains.

Clearly these are people whose role in the purposes of God are not at all the same as those who will live during the Great Tribulation. God graciously rescues them when His Son descends from heaven as the Day of the Lord begins.

This rescue is not based on their own merits. On the contrary, God did not “appoint [them] to wrath, but to obtain salvation [deliverance] through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for [them].” As a result, they can “live together with Him” (1 Thess 5:9-10). This deliverance, therefore, is a gift of God’s grace based on the death of Christ.

This is the point at which we need to call to mind an earlier prophecy spoken by Jesus Christ, God’s Prophet. This too is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, a book that has providentially become the first book in our NT.

The prophecy is found in Matt 16:17-18:

Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock *I will build My church*, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (emphasis added).

Jesus does not say here that “*I am or have been building My church*,” but “*I will build My church*” This is plainly a prophecy. And as the Christian readers of Matthew would

know (as we also do from the Book of Acts), the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost created the spiritual body that we call the Christian Church (note Acts 2:47; 5:11).

The Church is not, as many have wrongly thought, simply a collective term for all regenerate Jews and Gentiles throughout the ages. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit's coming accomplished something brand new.

By His baptizing work from Pentecost on, the Holy Spirit unites believers to the Body of Christ. This union transcends racial, social, and sexual identities so that men and women of all backgrounds are *one* in that body (1 Cor 12:12-13; Gal 3:27-29). As is made clear in John 7:37-39 (where Jesus prophesied the gift of the Spirit), He was speaking of the Spirit coming *after* His own return to heaven.

Correctly, then, Paul speaks of the Christian Church as a spiritual organism unrevealed to OT prophets (Eph 3:4-10). He describes it as "one new man" (Eph 2:14-15). The Church is also called "the household of God." It is growing "into a holy temple in the Lord" and serves as "a dwelling place of God *in the Spirit*" (Eph 2:19-22, emphasis added).

The so-called Second Temple of Judaism, that existed while Jesus was on earth, was doomed to destruction (Matt 24:1-2). In its place would rise, by the work of the Holy Spirit, a new, spiritual temple composed not of physical materials, but of believing people (see 1 Pet 2:1-5). As Jesus said (Matt 16:18), He Himself would be the Builder of this new Temple of God.

Therefore, the removal of the Church from the earth at the beginning of our Lord's parousia is the removal of this *spiritual* Temple from the earth. The rebuilt *physical* Temple referred to in Matt 24:15 is duly acknowledged by Jesus when He refers to it as "the *holy* place." The validity of the Sabbath law is also implied in v 20. The Church does

not share this relationship to the Jewish system of worship, as the Book of Hebrews makes absolutely clear.

To put it simply, God will return to Israel as the focus of His program on earth. The recognition of this fact is the recognition of a fundamental NT truth by which the Church is clearly distinguished from regenerate national Israel.

Nevertheless, the Christian Church and regenerate national Israel are often thought to have exactly the same relationship to God. But this is a major error that theologians and pastors often make. The teaching of Jesus never reduces that nation's special status so that it is indistinguishable from the Church. Israel remains a distinct nation whose destiny is not submerged into the destiny of the Church.

On the contrary, Matt 24:4-22 makes clear that Israel, not the Church, will be at the center of God's concerns during the Great Travail.

So once the Second Advent begins, the Christian Church is completely absent from earth. The King of Israel is about to conquer the world.

The Two Relationships

Very simply put, national Israel and the Christian Church sustain different relationships to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. National Israel is His chosen race, the particular nation whose throne He will someday claim and from which He will rule the Gentiles as well (Luke 1:32-33; Rev 12:5). The Church is His Bride (Eph 5:31-32), and therefore His Queen (Ps 45:10-17).

This distinction has seemed to many to be an inappropriate dividing of the family of God, but human life has many built-in relational distinctions. Obviously a man's father and mother are distinct from his children, and a man's wife is quite distinct from both parents *and* children. All

these people belong to the same extended family, but each sustains a special relationship to the man in question.

The effort often made to erase the distinction between national Israel and the Christian Church is similar to saying that there is no relational difference between a man's sister and his wife. It doesn't really make sense. It is also unbiblical.

What has emerged from our study thus far is an important fact. Our Lord's prophetic teaching carries with it the clear implication of different relationships. One group of people will be "taken along" with Him at the beginning of His coming (parousia). *They* will escape this whole period of divine judgment on the earth.

However, others, who subsequently believe in Jesus for eternal life, will *live through* that same period. This difference is easily understood if we know that those who are "taken along"—delivered—are part of the King's Bride, the Church. But the people described in Matt 24:15-22 are born again Israelis living under the law of Moses.

It is these people who will see the fulfillment of God's promises to the Jewish *nation*. That *nation* reemerged as one of the nations of the world in 1948, after many centuries as a people without a homeland. Our own country was the first to formally recognize the new state of Israel.

It takes a special form of blindness not to see that God is getting ready to fulfill the words of His greatest Prophet, Jesus Christ. Jesus clearly thought of the Church and national Israel as possessing quite distinct relationships to Himself.

Strikingly, this aspect of Jesus' thinking is reinforced in the two parables we have looked at previously. These were:

1. The parable of the unprepared servant (Matt 24:45-51), and
2. The parable of the unprepared women (Matt 25:1-13).

Both parables teach lessons that we need here and now. We should stay alert and ready for our Lord's return. We should not allow misconduct or neglect to leave us unprepared to meet Him. Yet despite these obvious lessons, these parables also reflect the differing situations of the Church and Israel.

In the parable of the unfaithful servant (Matt 24:45-51), the fundamental error of that servant is a simple one. In his heart he says, "My master is delaying His coming" (24:48). From this error of *heart* flow all his errors of *conduct*. This servant is still engaged in serious misconduct right up to the unexpected coming of his master.

Clearly this man represents those who will be living when the "coming of the Son of Man" occurs suddenly and without warning. Nothing interrupts this servant's misbehavior except his master's return. In other words, he does not pass through the earthshaking events of the Great Travail. In short, this servant is a representative of the Christian Church.

But things are different for the ten virgins of the second parable (Matt 25:1-12). The very thing that the servant in the first parable wrongly thinks about his master's coming is an actual reality for these women.

This fact is made extremely clear in the original Greek. In the first parable the servant thinks, "My master is delaying [Gk, *chronizein*] his coming" (24:48). But in the second parable we are told by Jesus Himself, "But while the bridegroom *delayed* [author's translation; Gk, *chronizontos*] they all slumbered and slept" (25:5).

Since the English of these two verses (in the NKJV) partially conceals this contrast, it may help to set out that contrast in English like this:

"My master *delays* his coming" (Matt 24:48, emphasis added).

“While the bridegroom *delayed*” (Matt 25:5, emphasis added).

What the servant *wrongly* thinks his master is doing in parable one, the bridegroom *actually does* in parable two. In parable two, he *does* delay. Furthermore, the wise virgins as well as the foolish ones take advantage of this delay to catch up on their sleep. They only wake up when the “midnight” cry is heard: “Behold, the bridegroom is coming.” In the circumstances described in this parable, *sleeping is sensible!* For the servant in parable one, it would not have been sensible at all.

This fits the earliest section of the Olivet Discourse perfectly. Jesus gives His very *first* admonition in the discourse in Matt 24:6. His disciples are to see to it that they “are not troubled.” This untroubled attitude is symbolized in parable two by *all* the virgins (including the wise ones) sleeping.

But then comes the “midnight” cry. This corresponds in parable two to Jesus’ *second* admonition, given in Matt 24:15-18. The “abomination of desolation” must arouse His disciples to flee. This need to flee is symbolized in parable two by the words “go out to meet Him” (25:6; see 25:1). So when Jesus’ faithful followers flee from Judea, in a spiritual sense they will be *going forth* to meet the Bridegroom.

But the Great Travail will be hard indeed. His disciples will be persecuted (Matt 24:9) and even betrayed (24:10). The times will be extremely trying. As stated in 24:12, “the love of many [believers] will grow cold [like a dying torch! (25:8)].”

Therefore during the Great Travail the disciples of Jesus will need *all of their spiritual resources*. They must be prepared to use these resources. In parable two, the wise virgins *are* prepared but the foolish ones *are not*.

One might think here of the need for diligent and prayerful attention to God’s word during “the beginning of labor pains.” In this way the disciples of Jesus in those days

can procure true spiritual energy (the oil). That energy will be urgently needed to keep their testimony to Christ (their torches) burning brightly during the Great Travail.

There *will be* a testimony to Christ during the Great Travail (24:14), but this period will be the darkest night in all of human history. Those who keep their torches burning for Jesus Christ during such a period will have an honored role when the Bridegroom arrives on earth. But the ten virgins are *not* the Bride.

Therefore, when the two parables are closely considered, they reflect the differing positions of two bodies of believers. One of these is the Christian Church; the other is the believing portion of national Israel.

Parable one reflects the situation of the Church as the Lord begins His coming [parousia] suddenly and without warning. Parable two reflects the situation of believing Israel once the period of the world's birth pangs has begun to run its course. These disciples, especially, will understand that the labor pains are a prelude to the "birth" of a new age. They herald the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

There are two further points that support the observations just made. First, there is a "then" introducing parable two in Matt 25:1 (Gk = "then," "at that time" "thereupon." See BDAG, p. 1012). But to what does the expression "at that time" refer? Most naturally it refers back to the conclusion of the immediately preceding parable in Matt 24:45-51. The master of the slothful servant comes and deals with him (24:50-51). It is then that the situation of the *second* parable exists.

This agrees completely with our Lord's teaching in the Olivet Discourse as we have already seen it. The "coming of the Son of Man" (the parousia) introduces a new state of affairs, like the flood did in Noah's time. So the parable of the ten virgins awaits its fulfillment *after* Christ comes for the Church. It will take place *during* the Great Travail.

The second point is this. When the midnight cry is raised in parable two, the announcement is, “Behold, the bridegroom *is coming*” (25:6, emphasis added; the Greek verb here, in this context, expresses action in progress). In the setting of parable two, this statement clearly means that the bridegroom is now on his way and *getting close* to the banquet hall where the wedding celebration will take place.

So the time has arrived for the virgins to go out and meet him as he approaches. They will welcome him and go with him into the banquet hall.

For the ten virgins the bridegroom does *not* arrive without warning. Instead, there is a signal given when he is getting close. So, too, during the period of the world’s “labor pains,” there is a signal that time is running out. That signal is “the abomination of desolation...standing in the holy place.” This desecration of God’s Temple will be followed at once by the Great Travail. After that, “the Son of Man” will immediately appear (Matt 24:29-30).

The two parables in Matt 24:45–25:13 are a marvelous example of the teaching skill of God’s Prophet, Jesus Christ. On one level both parables can be read as relevant to believers awaiting the beginning of our Lord’s coming. Jesus applies them that way in 25:13.

But at a deeper level, the parables reveal subtle differences. At this deeper level, they distinguish between two groups of people: (1) those for whom His coming is *without warning* and (2) those who will be *looking for the warning* of the abomination of desolation. In short, the parables distinguish between the experience of the Church and the experience of Jewish believers after the Church is gone.

Needless to say, Jesus did not necessarily expect all these details to be obvious when the disciples first heard the parables. The general truth was obvious. They should not allow misconduct or spiritual neglect to leave them unprepared for His coming. But our Lord also knew that the parables would become part of Matthew’s inspired Gospel.

When that happened, they could be prayerfully studied and more deeply understood.

The words of our Lord Jesus Christ always reward deeper study. Like all inspired truth, His words always have unanticipated depth. That is emphatically true here.

The Manifestation of His Presence

As we have now seen, “the coming of the Son of Man” covers an extended period. His coming begins with the Rapture just as God’s judgments start to fall on a world unprepared for them. The process of that coming continues through the period of “travail” on earth.

When the abomination of desolation stands in the rebuilt Jewish Temple, Jesus’ Israeli disciples will know (like the ten virgins) that the Bridegroom is *on His way and getting close!*

Therefore, the Lord’s descent from the clouds to rapture the Christian Church (see 1 Thess 4:16-17) is only the *first phase* of His return from heaven to earth. From a human perspective, after catching up the Church (His bride!) to Himself, He *slows down*. But no doubt this is *only* from a human perspective.

It would be foolish to try to literally measure “speed” in these circumstances. I admit I know no more than the Scriptures tell us.

However, according to the modern scientific concept of relativity (both special and general), the speed with which time passes is actually relative to the speed of the observer. If someone or something moves at the speed of light, no time passes at all. It is likely that from our Lord’s perspective, and from ours once we are transformed, events on earth will move with enormous rapidity. Our time with Him in the clouds will probably seem very short indeed.

Nevertheless, it is *in the clouds* that He is revealed to all men on earth at the end of the Great Travail. As Jesus

said, “immediately after the tribulation of those days” there will be heavenly phenomena (Matt 24:29). And it is “*then*” that “the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven.” It is “*then*” that “all the tribes of the earth will mourn” and “see the Son of Man coming *on the clouds of heaven* with power and great glory” (24:30, emphasis added).

In other words, mankind sees Him *already* on the clouds where His Church has *already* met Him. The “coming” which began quite some time before (humanly speaking) is now manifest to all humanity.

Jesus’ words clearly suggest that “the coming of the Son of Man” will have a “manifestation” at the conclusion of the Great Travail. Jesus’ statements in 24:23-28 underline this conclusion. In those verses, our Lord teaches that during the Great Travail He will not be *secretly* revealed to men (24:23-26). Instead, He will be made known *openly* just like lightning flashes across the entire sky (24:27).

Following Matt 24:23-28, Jesus proceeds to describe this manifestation in 24:29-30. Paul also evidently understood Jesus’ words in this way. He writes:

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with *the brightness of His coming* (2 Thess 2:8, emphasis added).

The Greek words translated by “the brightness of His coming” can be rendered “the *appearance* of His coming.” Of special interest here is a technical use of the Greek noun for “appearance” (epiphaneia). This use is given in the latest edition of the standard NT Greek-English dictionary in this way:

As a technical term relating to transcendence it refers to a visible and frequently sudden manifestation of a hidden divinity, either in the form of a

personal appearance, or by some deed of power or oracular communication by which its presence is made known (BDAG, p. 385).

In addition to this, the word *parousia* ("coming") also has technical senses that are equally appropriate here. Quoting BDAG again (pp. 780-81):

The use of *parousia* as a technical term has developed in two directions. On the one hand the word served as a sacred expression for the coming of a *hidden divinity*, who makes his presence felt by a revelation of his power, or whose presence is celebrated in the cult... On the other hand, *parousia* became the official term for a visit of a person of high rank, esp. of kings and emperors visiting a province (emphasis added).

So Paul's words ("the brightness of His coming") can refer to the sudden *manifestation* of the previously *concealed* arrival of the King of kings! In other words, His hidden arrival is suddenly revealed to the doom of "the lawless one" (that is, the first "Beast" of Revelation 13). The "coming of the Son of Man," that began when earthly life was proceeding as normal, is abruptly manifested.

We could therefore translate the words of 2 Thess 2:8 as follows:

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with *the manifestation of His presence* (emphasis added).

This perspective is underscored also by Paul's words in 2 Thess 1:7-8 where he writes:

...when the Lord Jesus *is revealed from heaven* with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God (emphasis added).

The sudden appearance of the Son of Man in the clouds of heaven is nothing less than a “revelation from heaven” of His hidden “coming” or “presence” (*parousia*). The *manifestation of His coming* “on the clouds of heaven” will be visible to everyone on earth (Matt 24:30).

When this glorious revelation of His coming takes place, the Church will already be with her Bridegroom in the clouds (1 Thess 4:17). But His believing people, who were saved during the birth pangs of the new age, will be here on earth to see Him coming on those very clouds (Matt 24:30). They will welcome Him back to earth as their King.

The Olivet Discourse is a rich and effective exposition of prophecy. It is fundamental and indispensable to NT prophetic discussions. All the other NT writers who speak at any length of the end times (Paul, Peter and John) are indebted to this discourse. They owe their fundamental understanding of prophecy to the words of Jesus Christ, the greatest of all the prophets of God.

The Olivet Discourse is profitable for God’s people in this age, before His coming begins, and for His Jewish people during earth’s time of great distress after His coming is underway. Both groups can learn vital lessons from this discourse in their own different situations.

Gentile believers during the Great Travail can also learn much from this discourse. They can learn the truth about the days in which they will be living. In fact, the final section of the Olivet Discourse (25:31-46) is designed especially for Gentiles!

CHAPTER 5

Jesus' Words in the Contemporary Context

IN OUR OWN DAY and time the Olivet Discourse has been increasingly relegated to the margins of Christian consciousness. Many Christians who have read it have never studied it carefully. The result is that we are in danger of being suddenly overtaken by the very events Jesus has described.

This is the coming surprise that will catch our world off-guard. If it catches us by surprise, we will have only ourselves to blame.

Looking at the world we live in right now, it is hard to miss how preoccupied it is with the problem of Israel. Of course, we Americans are worried about the hostility of the Muslim world and the resulting terrorism. But at the same time, we know that much of this hostility arises from our support of the Jewish nation.

The Arab world would dearly love to expunge the state of Israel from the Middle East. The president of Iran has called for exactly that. But the Muslim states know this will be impossible as long as the United States continues to support that nation.

We may already be moving toward a treaty arrangement of the type prophesied in Dan 9:27. The terrorist group Hamas, which now controls the Palestinian parlia-

ment, has been reported to be open to a truce with Israel for a specified period of time. Perhaps the seven-year covenant of Dan 9:27 will be called a "truce."

This is hardly the time to be forgetting about prophetic truth, even though many evangelical Christians are doing just that. It is hardly the time either to be making a theological case for the error of the unfaithful servant who said, "My master is delaying his coming" (Matt 24:48).

In effect, that is precisely what some theologians are doing when they argue that Jesus cannot come immediately because the Great Tribulation must come first. Such doctrine is not only wrong, it is spiritually dangerous.

As we have seen, the judgments begin when His coming begins. The doctrine that they must *precede* it is a grave error. Such a doctrine encourages us *not to expect* that our Lord might come at any time. It makes people think that He will "delay" His coming until *after* the events of the Tribulation.

Simply put, it is an unwitting theological articulation of the *error* of the unfaithful servant.

Now is the time to listen carefully to the words of Jesus, God's Prophet. Our Lord *will* take the Christian Church "along with" Him some day. And He *will* then turn His attention fully to Israel and to its role in this world. It doesn't really matter how many people don't think so. Reality is not determined by popular opinion. It is determined by the purposes of God.

Our Savior's words *will be fulfilled!* Perhaps that will happen very soon indeed.

At the very beginning of these future events, our Lord will catch up to Himself every person on earth who belongs to Him. That is, He will take with Him everyone who has believed in Him for the free gift of everlasting life (see John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47). In the twinkling of an eye, we will be in His glorious presence.

As Paul said, Jesus “died for us, that...we should live together with Him” (1 Thess 5:10). It is only the sacrificial death of Christ, in payment for our sins, that makes this possible. It is the death of Christ that allows a holy God to give eternal life to sinners like us. We receive that gift when we believe in His Son for it.

Unless we have that life, we cannot live together with Him when He comes. If we do not have that kind of life, He will not take us along with Him at His coming.

Will He take you with Him when He comes?

If not, or if you are not sure, you can be sure right now. Jesus said, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life*” (John 6:47, emphasis added). Believe these words and you *are* ready to live with Him forever.

And if you *have* believed, then stay awake and be fully alert. Don't allow sinful conduct or spiritual neglect to rob you of your readiness to meet Him face to face. You have a splendid promotion ahead of you if you are faithful. Jesus said,

“And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron...’ as I also have received from My Father” (Rev 2:26-27).

And since Revelation was written to Christian churches (Rev 22:16), near its climax Jesus gives them a powerful exhortation. As the Apostle John is about to describe the “end of the age,” his words are suddenly *interrupted*. God's greatest Prophet, Jesus, then gives one last warning to the churches about *the coming surprise*.

Rooted in the Olivet Discourse, His words are these:

“Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches [gre,,goro,,n], and keeps his garments,

lest he walk naked and they see his shame” (Rev 16:15).

The unfaithful servant of Matthew 24 was stripped of his role as a servant, and experienced shame for his hypocrisy (24:51). But the servant who serves well, because he is watching, will be truly “blessed”—both here and hereafter.

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Grace Evangelical Society (GES) was founded in 1986 to promote the free gift of everlasting life through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, apart from works done before or after the new birth (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35, 47; 11:26).

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