

by New Testament illustrations and warnings: 7:15ff.; Acts 20:29f.; Rom. 3:8; 16:17f.; I Cor. 15:12; II Cor. 11:1—13:10; Gal. 1:6-9 etc., I Tim. 1:3-7, 19f.; II Tim. 2:17f.; 3:8f.; Tit. 1:10-16; II Peter 2:1; I John 2:18-26; 4:1, 3; II John 7; all of Jude. *False prophets* and teachers would be harder to deal with than overt persecution from outside the Church, because these arose within the ranks of the believers. Motivated by personal animosities, selfish ambition and erroneous convictions, these schismatics would allure earnest disciples to swerve from truth in order to follow their teachers.

History of the Christian Church, Schaff (*ibid.*, I, 564ff.) distinguishes three types of heretical perversions of the Christian message in the first century: the Judaizing tendency, the paganizing tendency of the Gnostics, and the syncretistic tendency to blend Christianity with pagan thought. Each arose as a caricature, respectively, of Jewish Christianity, Gentile Christianity and of the truly universal Christianity that reconciled the genius and truth of both these conceptions.

In every age we must beware of even one, single false notion that distorts Christ's teaching. Every heresy has a grain of truth that renders its error palatable to the uncritical. Do not think that a *false prophet* is exclusively someone who twists the entire body of Christian doctrine or who never says something true.

6. **WIDESPREAD FAITHLESSNESS.** 24:12 **And because iniquity shall be multiplied, the love of the many shall wax cold.** *Iniquity* (*anomia*; lit. "lawlessness") expresses itself in rebellion against restraints of any kind whether inside the Church or without. The first step in Gospel proclamation is the often painful awakening of man's consciousness of his guilt. Preaching this unwelcome truth invites rejection by the majority that refuses it, dampening enthusiasm for righteousness. Further, when the hypocrisy of some insincere Christians is discovered, the sincerity of the honest ones becomes suspect. Disciples become mutually suspicious and dare no longer believe in each other. The unfortunate, natural consequence is the cooling in the intensity of their love for one another. The custom of abandoning the common Christian assembly was already growing in the first century, making mutual encouragement vital even then (Heb. 10:25).

Although He means essentially the same thing, Jesus did not say, "The *faith* of the many shall grow cold," but *The love*. . .

Here is the real distinction between a shallow, formalistic faith and one that is deeply felt, real and living. Is your faith a love that siezes the imagination, warms the heart, informs the intellect, reinforces the conscience, empowers the will, causing you to love God and people as Jesus did? The kind of love Jesus has in mind is the true definition of "spirituality," not, as some hold, the abstinence from a certain list of "worldly" pleasures. This fervor will show itself in earnest, active, brotherly concern for one's fellows (25:34-40; I Peter 1:22; 2:17; 4:8; 5:14).

Does this *lawlessness (anomia)* forepicture that libertinism or antinomianism that began cropping up in early Christianity by "turning the grace of God into lasciviousness"? (Cf. Jude 4; Rom. 3:7f.; 6:1—7:6; II Peter 2:1ff.) Further, laxity in doctrine cannot help but involve moral laxity. What one believes does affect how he acts, since the same authority governs both doctrinal correctness and moral practice.

c. Individual perseverance one's only hope (24:13)

7. INDIVIDUAL PERSEVERANCE. 24:13 **But he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.** Potentially, Jesus' subtle proverb embraces an (perhaps deliberate?) ambiguity: two ends and two salvations: (1) the salvation of the individual's soul at the conclusion of his life of faithfulness, either at his death or at the world's end, whichever comes first, and (2) the preservation of the Christian's physical life at *the end* of Jerusalem.

It may be objected that Jesus cannot have three separate ends in view contemporaneously: (1) life; (2) Jerusalem; (3) the world. Further, could the salvation promised be so ambiguous as potentially to involve both physical liberation from the destiny of Jerusalem and spiritual salvation from sin and death contemporaneously? What, too, of those disciples who died a natural death or were martyred for Christ before Jerusalem's fall? Surely, early martyrs would not be lost merely because they died before 70 A.D. Would it not also be a senseless truism to argue that the life would be spared of him who endured to the end of his life? So, it is argued that He means, not Jerusalem's end, but only the believer's death, hence the salvation involved is entirely spiritual.

However, since the believer's salvation at the conclusion of his life of obedience and the early Jewish Christian's physical preservation beyond the death of Jerusalem are both true to the context,

must we choose between them? In the near context (24:9), Jesus had predicted martyrdom for some of His people. (Cf. Luke 21:16.) In this case, those who died would have *endured to the end* of their life testimony for Christ and so would *be saved* spiritually. Earlier, Jesus linked fearless testimony during persecution with spiritual salvation and with being acknowledged before the Father (10:32f.). Those who, under fire, denied their faith in Him would not be recognized as His and they would be lost spiritually, even though they live to a ripe old age and die in bed.

Nonetheless, because the Lord proceeds immediately to describe how Christians could avoid the holocaust destined for Jerusalem, it is also conceivable that, for a large sector of the early Church, *the end* and the *being saved* would vitally concern their own earth-life quite as really as that to come. *The end* is the same referred to by the expression, "these things" (24:3, 34 and parallels) and "those days" (24:19, 22 and par.), i.e. the period when Israel would be ruined nationally. It is the same *end* heralded by the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the whole world for a testimony (24:14). Accordingly, the salvation intended refers also to physical escape by precipitate flight to the mountains when Jerusalem would have been surrounded by enemy troops (Luke 21:20f.). By believing Jesus to the very last, the believer would escape the doom of the city. Even if some individuals would be martyred, the Church as a whole would elude the bloody end scheduled for the unbelieving Jewish people.

Here, then, is His justification for deliberately speaking ambiguously: "The person who believes that I know what I am talking about and trusts me right on past the complete fulfilment of these predictions, is the person who will really save his life. Life—both temporal and eternal—will not be the conquest of the wayward doubter who casts in his lot with the unbelieving and the fearful of this nation for whom God has prepared the furious punishment I describe." So, to learn to trust Jesus in the midst of fire and cruel tests of endurance would provide a double benefit for those Christians yet living in Palestine during the last hours of Israel's national existence. Their lives would be spared and their souls saved. In those crude, brutal days when human flesh was cheap and the skin of a Christian was worth nothing, many believers would doubt that they could endure. In fact, *he that endures to the end* is really what will be left of the Church after the defections, the

betrayals and apostacies, no less than the staunch believer who outlives the Palestinian tribulation! Hence, the Lord holds out concrete hope for those embattled saints, motivating them to hold firm in holding off false teachers, enduring taunts and keeping enthusiastic for Jesus, even while their entire country was flying apart.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. Quote the various expressions Jesus used to indicate that disturbing world and local events were not to be considered signals of the approaching end.
2. List the various events that are not to be interpreted as signalling anything special in God's plan, but must be considered as merely the beginning of sufferings.
3. Does history record the appearance of pretenders who claimed, "I am Christ?" What would "Christ" have meant to the Jew who did not believe in Jesus?
4. List some of the "wars and rumors of wars" that characterized the period prior to 70 A.D.
5. What must the disciples' attitude be toward the world-shaking events surrounding them?
6. Explain how Jesus means the expression, "this must take place": has the purpose of God foreseen or planned wars and tumults? In what sense *must* they take place?
7. According to Mark and Luke, what is the tribulation into which men would deliver Jesus' disciples? In what chapter of Matthew has Jesus already described these troubles before?
8. What other characteristics of the period are listed exclusively in Matthew?
9. According to Jesus, what is the beginning point of this period and what the end point?

DOES 24:4-14 SURVEY CHRISTIAN HISTORY TO THE WORLD'S END?

Some would not confine their interpretation of 24:4-14 to a specially Jewish situation or era limited to the decline and fall of the Jewish state. Rather, say they, these verses depict the chief features of the Christian era down to its end. Even if they involve the nearer history of the great catastrophe of 66-70 A.D., they project a decisive, prophetic

shadow on the farther future end, as a sign or foretaste of that chain of events from the time of the Church to the final event that summarizes them all in Christ's Return. What happens to Jerusalem is seen as typical of general human conduct. Hence, the events preceding the Jerusalem debacle are to be conceived of as signs typical of the final world disaster. Is this analysis correct? Farrar (*Life of Christ*, 544) argues,

As we learn from many other passages of Scripture, these signs, as they did usher in the destruction of Jerusalem, so shall re-appear on a larger scale before the end of all things is at hand. (See I Thess. 5:3; II Thess. 2:2, etc.)

However, the conviction that the end is at hand on the basis of other texts which mention world conditions similar to those mentioned in 24:4-14 does not require us to consider this paragraph as general or capable of referring both to Jerusalem's end and to that of the world as well. Similarity suggests, but does not prove, identity.

Further, while it is true that spiritual decline, international war, political intrigue and world catastrophes may characterize the Christian dispensation with increasing intensity right down to the end, this does not permit us to dismiss lightly the four decades between Jesus' prophecy and its fulfillment in that period.

The disciples' expression, "the sign of your coming and of the end of the world," (24:3) does not justify the unfounded conclusions drawn from this chapter, since their question was wrongly framed and needed correction before it could be properly answered. What many interpreters mistake for *signs* of the end in 24:4-14, Jesus flatly terms a mistaken clue about which nothing at all should be made. Rather, *the painful commonness of such phenomena proves they could never constitute a sign in the normal, specialized sense of the word.*

B. Specific, True Information About Jerusalem's Destruction (24:14-28)

TEXT: 24:14-28

(Parallels: Mark 13:14-20; Luke 21:20-24)

14 And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations and then shall the end come.

15 When therefore ye see the abomination of desolation, which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let him that readeth understand), 16 then let them that are in Judaea flee unto the mountains: 17 let him that is on the housetop not go down to take out the things that are in his house: 18 and let him that is in the field not return back to take his cloak. 19 But woe unto them that are with child and to them that give suck in those days! 20 And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on a sabbath: 21 for then shall be great tribulation, such as hath not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, nor ever shall be. 22 And except those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened. 23 Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is the Christ, or, Here; believe *it* not. 24 For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. 25 Behold, I have told you beforehand. 26 If therefore they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the wilderness; go not forth: Behold, he is in the inner chambers; believe *it* not. 27 For as the lightning cometh forth from the east, and is seen even unto the west; so shall be the coming of the Son of man. 28 Wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. On what basis can a great Teacher, who is about to be brutalized and crucified by His religious competitors, assert so confidently that "this gospel that I teach you shall be preached in the whole world"? Wishful thinking and ungrounded optimism?
- b. Did Jesus assert that the entire earth would have been evangelized, i.e. every single human being would have heard the gospel before the end should come? Further, shall all be converted?
- c. How could the proclamation of the Kingdom Gospel to every nation become a signal of the near approach of the end of the period in question? Could every Christian in first-century Palestine, without the benefit of mass communications, have known about the world-wide outreach of the Gospel, and recognized therein the proof that the end was nearing? What evidences does the New Testament give to prove that Christians everywhere indeed COULD have known this?
- d. Why do you think Matthew (or Jesus) resorted to a form of code to render the specific, true signal that Jerusalem was about to fall,

warning believers to flee from it? What would this Jewish double-talk tell us about the date of the final form of Matthew's manuscript? After all, Luke (21:20) decodifies the "desolating sacrilege" phrase to mean, "when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies." If Matthew wrote long after the fall of Jerusalem, would he have needed to point out to the reader ("let the reader understand") that there is something about "the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel" that is not to be understood literally, but to be taken symbolically?

- e. What is so important about the detailed escape instructions Jesus gave? What would the people concerned have been tempted to do, had He not given precisely this information?
- f. How does the detailed escape information help us to determine the historic period to which Jesus refers? That is, when Jesus shall come again to take His own with Him, would it be essential, for example, for those who are in Judea to flee to the mountains? Why not just go with Jesus in heaven instead? And what about pregnant women or nursing mothers: do they need flight certification to be "caught up in the air"? (I Thess. 4:17). Or is He even talking about the Second Coming?
- g. Why does Jesus direct His disciples to flee "to the mountains"? Would not escape to the desert accomplish the same thing? If not, why not?
- h. Why do you think Jesus delayed the judgment of Israel until the Kingdom Gospel could be proclaimed everywhere? Who would benefit from this delay?
- i. What must have been the force of the evidence, which this chapter furnishes of Jesus' divine foreknowledge, upon the minds of those who stood in the midst of the earth-shaking events themselves with Matthew's Gospel open before them?

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

"Further, this good news about God's Kingdom will be proclaimed all over the entire inhabited earth as a witness to all nations. THEN shall the end come. So, when you see 'the desolating sacrilege' (spoken of by the prophet Daniel) standing 'in the holy place' where it does not belong,—let the reader understand that this means 'when you see Jerusalem surrounded by camps of enemy armies'—then recognize that its devastation is about to take place.

“At that time those who live in Judea must take refuge in the mountains. Those who are inside the city of Jerusalem must get out. Anyone who is up on the rooftop terrace must not take time to go down into his house to get things out of it. Those who are in the country districts or out in the fields must not enter the city or return back to pick up even an overcoat! Those will be ‘days of vengeance’ that make all that the Scriptures said come true. How dreadful for expectant mothers and for those nursing a baby during that time! Pray that you do not have to escape in the wintertime or on a Sabbath, because there will be such great ‘tribulation’ and such severe misery in the land and such fury unleashed on this people ‘that it has been unequalled since God created the world until now,’ and is never to be repeated again. Further, if the Lord had not abbreviated those days, nobody could survive. However, for the sake of God’s special people, He will put a limit on those days. People will either be killed outright with the sword or deported as prisoners of war into other countries. ‘Jerusalem will be trampled on by the pagans’ until ‘the times of the pagans’ be completed.

“At that time, if someone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or ‘Look, there he is!’ you must not believe it. This is because false christs and false prophets will make their appearance, performing great confirmatory signs and wonderful deeds so that, wherever possible, even God’s special people could be deceived by them. So, be on your guard, because I am warning you about everything in advance. So, if anyone tells you, ‘Look, he is out in the wilds,’ do not go out there. Or, if they say, ‘Look, he is hiding in some secret place,’ you dare not believe it. The Second Coming of the Messiah will be as obvious as lightning when it lights up the whole sky from east to west! Wherever the carcass is, there the vultures will flock!”

SUMMARY

The true signal of Jerusalem’s impending doom is the appearance of an enemy army at its gates. The only safety is in undelayed escape because of the greatness of the disaster that is to occur shortly thereafter. False hopes of the Messiah’s personal coming during the siege must be unswervingly ignored, because Jerusalem must be destroyed. On the other hand, when Christ really returns, He will need no prophets to herald His coming, because it will be so evident to everyone that none could ever miss it.

NOTES

1. The true signals of the nearness of Jerusalem's fall (24:14ff.)

- a. Worldwide Gospel proclamation signals the approximate approach of the end (24:14)

24:14 **And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come.** *Shall be preached:* this simple future quietly but confidently predicts the triumph of the Crucified in that His message would enjoy a world-wide hearing. Note how deliberately our Lord turns His disciples' attention away from the soul-crippling dangers to occur during what would appear to them to be the climax of a great eschatological event. In the midst of a world coming apart, the Christians' main concern was to be their dedication to proclaiming Christ's Gospel throughout the whole world. Persecution could not defeat the Gospel. Irrepressibly vocal witnesses of Christ would flee from one city or country to another, reaching otherwise inaccessible audiences. Victory is assured: nothing can stop the program of God. In fact, *the end shall not come until His testimony is given to all nations!* It is entirely appropriate that Jerusalem and its Temple, the heart and home of the Mosaic era, not be eliminated until the Church, the new Israel of God, had been well established throughout the Roman Empire. When the Gospel shall have triumphed, the curtain can fall: what soul-stirring encouragement!

This highly significant verse interprets truly the mission of the early disciples. Rather than sit around idly waiting for Jerusalem to fall, as if their life could be lived in a vacuum, they were to accept the meaningful challenge to evangelize the world. Out of this we too may understand that our participation in Christian eschatology is not a question of merely gazing at heaven and waiting for Jesus to return. This moment is the hour to commit ourselves wholly, not to an obsession with prophecies of the end, but to the world mission of the Church and to our present opportunities to preach the Gospel to every creature!

The end in question is still "the end of the age" concerning which the Apostles had asked on the basis of Jesus' prediction of the Temple's destruction (24:2f.). Further indication of the specific period in which *the end* in question *shall come* is derived from the Marcan parallel which more precisely delimits the era in which *this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached*. As noted at Matthew 10:17-22 which contains

material identical to Mark and Luke's parallel paragraphs (Mark 13:9-13 = Luke 21:12-19), the period in question is to be characterized by the special, divine guidance and miraculous power of the Holy Spirit (Mark 13:11). This is not the usual indwelling of the Spirit promised every Christian, but that special inspiration to speak infallibly for God, granted to those on whom the Spirit's power was poured out. Hence, this occurred within the lifetime of the Apostles to whom Jesus was talking, i.e. during the period between Pentecost and the death of the last of those on whom they laid their hands. (Cf. Acts 8:17ff.) Jesus is not discussing some future *end* to occur some 2000 years or more after the first century. Further, the immediate context discusses escape from Jerusalem, hence is related to that event.

Logically, however, this verse belongs to the paragraph which follows it, as it furnishes the sign of the approximate approach of the end of the time in question. While some pronounce it impossible to know when this worldwide Gospel testimony would be complete, the New Testament writers speak otherwise:

1. The first Gospel proclamation ever given was sounded forth to "God-fearing Jews from *every nation under heaven*" (Acts 2:5). This laid appropriate groundwork for the potential fulfilment of Jesus' prediction.
2. The very existence of our New Testament Epistles, addressed to widely separated congregations, attest the presence of important Christian centers around the Mediterranean world. Further, there lived a generation of non-Apostolic men, who lived in widely scattered parts of the Roman Empire shortly after, if not contemporary with, the Apostles, who also testify to the existence and wide-acceptance of our Apostolic Epistles.
3. Romans 10:18. Although the words cited from Psalm 19:4 referred originally to God's revelations in nature, Paul legitimately borrowed the poetic expression to picture the wide diffusion of the Gospel among the Diaspora. In fact, he had already affirmed that the faith believed by the Roman Christians "is proclaimed in all the world" (Rom. 1:8).
4. In a letter dated between 59 and 63 A.D. Paul announced that the Gospel had already been "proclaimed to every creature under heaven" and that "all over the world this gospel is producing fruit and growing" (Col. 1:6, 23). Paul does not say "it IS BEING proclaimed" (*toû kêrûssoménou*), but "it HAS BEEN preached (*toû kêruchthéntos en pàsē ktisei hupò tôn ouranòn*). His wording is too clear for misconception: Jesus' goal has been reached in

Paul's day. (Cf. "Preach the Gospel to every creature" *kêrûxate tò euangélion pásê tê ktîsei*, Mark 16:15, with Paul's above-cited language in Colossians. The obedience matches the order!)

Care must be exercised in defining the extent of Jesus' meaning here. While, to us, *in the whole world* and *unto all the nations*, as phrases, have a ring of absolute universality about them, this would not necessarily have been so for Jesus nor for His first century hearers. *The whole world* (*hòlê tê oikouménē*) need not include much more than *all the nations* involved in the Roman empire. (Cf. *oikouménē* in Luke 2:1.) Josephus (*Ant.* XV,11,1; XIX,2,4; 3, 1), quoting Romans and Herod the Great, asserts that *all the inhabitable world* is subject to Rome.

Just as God had not left Himself without a providential witness of all His goodness and care for all the nations (cf. Acts 14:15-17), a witness which many misinterpreted or rejected (cf. Rom. 1:18-32; 2:4), so now the Gospel witness is to be offered *to all the nations* on the same "take-it-or-leave-it" basis. Nothing is here affirmed of the mass conversion of any nation, much less, of all. Just as the healed leper's presenting himself to the priests must serve *for a testimony to them*, whether they were ever convinced of Jesus' authority or not (8:4), just so would the persecuted Christians stand before governors and kings *for a testimony to them* and *to the nations* (10:18) with no guarantee that these would be converted. The Greek phrase (*eis martûrion autoîs*) is the same in both texts as here (24:14). This witness aims to furnish everyone a solid basis for believing the Gospel and acting on it with confidence. However, where its well-grounded evidence is scorned, the Gospel becomes a *witness* before God and man against anyone who turns it down. Sooner or later, everyone must deal with it. When they resist it, deny it, doubt it and finally refuse it as false or insignificant, they sentence themselves and stand self-judged.

Nevertheless, laden with far-reaching implications, Paul's victorious shout (Col. 1:6, 23) rippled the grim silence of the persecuted Christian world of A.D. 60-62. Although his own ministry had been harrassed by perils and endless anxieties, Paul could affirm that Jesus' Great Commission was being accomplished. What Paul mentioned in passing to one congregation at Colossae, the whole Judean Christian community could also sense, as reports of the Church's worldwide progress filtered back to Jerusalem on the lips of worshipers from the Diaspora who filed into the Holy City for the yearly festivals. Peter, too, urged the brethren to steadfast resistance in the confidence that "your

brothers *throughout the world* are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (I Peter 5:9). So, the time is almost right. Whereas, before, all had seemed to be a jumble of unrelated pieces, the puzzle is beginning to fit together. Christians could begin to steel themselves for the final crisis. While the worldwide proclamation of the Gospel, as a clue to the death-day of Jerusalem, is not very precise, nevertheless, before Jesus concluded His message, He would clearly limit the extent of the period in question to His own contemporary generation. (See on 24:34; cf. 23:36-39.)

Then shall the end come for what? Certainly, it was not the end of the Jewish race nor even of their national existence *per se*, because, though they lost the latter for 1900 years, they are today beginning to re-establish this in the modern state of Israel. What they really lost and, to date, have not regained, is their sole possession of the Kingdom of God, their unique hope of the Messiah, the most significant and real symbols of God's reconciliation of man with Himself in the Levitical priesthood, the sacrificial system, the wonderful typology of the Tabernacle and Temple plan. These were all brought to final completion once for all in our Lord Jesus Christ. These were theologically lost to Israel at the cross. (Cf. *Romans*, *Galatians* and *Hebrews*.) What followed until 70 A.D. was merely the foredoomed struggle between the Judaism of Jesus' day and death.

If only *then shall the end come* after the completion of all the aforementioned events, if Jewish history must grind on until that date, before which the tragic end could not occur, then certainly the Second Coming must wait no less time. So, how can it be so confidently affirmed that well-informed first-century Christians held to the unsupported belief that Jesus must soon return? If so, they deduced this on some basis other than Jesus' exchatological discourse, because in it He leaves every clue to indicate the groundlessness of such a hope (24:48; 25:5, 19).

b. The precise, decisive signal of the end (24:15)

24:15 When therefore ye see the abomination of desolation, which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let him that readeth understand). . . . Here is the crucial signal, but its formulation is most remarkable. For, if Matthew intended to prepare first century readers for an event so critical as this, an event which would require attentiveness and instant flight at the appearance of

the first signal, he could scarcely have expressed himself more ambiguously, unless, in the very nature of this vital clue is a truth of tremendous significance that would require its expression in precisely these words. What does the codification of the decisive key have to say about the date of Matthew's quotation of Jesus' words? In fact, Luke, presumably writing for a non-Jewish readership, simply deciphers the coded part into literal language: "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near" (Luke 21:20). What factors could have induced Matthew not to decodify Jesus' expression, leaving it unintelligible for readers unfamiliar with Daniel's prophecy?

1. Presumably only Jewish readers would know the meaning of *abomination of desolation*, since the fulfilment of Daniel's prophecy was a sad chapter in their own history (Dan. 11:31; 12:11; cf. 1 Macc. 1:10-64; 6:7). This gave the expression its particular usefulness for describing a future event similar in import to the past one.
2. Presumably only Jesus' disciples, among all Hebrew readers of this text, would trust Him to know that this cryptic reference to Daniel has anything to do with life and freedom in the later national emergency. But even if unbelievers learned this password, making the code-word an open secret among Hebrews generally, it is less likely that Jewish unbelievers would reveal to Romans a secret so potentially useful to themselves. (Study Josephus' intriguing note: *Wars*, II,20,1: were those fugitives only Christians, only unbelievers, or both?)
3. Presumably, then, this code-word for Jerusalem's H-hour would remain unintelligible for heathen readers. But why should Jesus, or Matthew, wish to hide vital truth from Gentiles, if this could mean their physical safety? Simply because these instructions are not needed by non-Christian Gentiles living anywhere in the world, but by those Christian Jews yet dwelling in Jerusalem during the critical period in question. Any pagans antagonistic to Jews generally or who would sympathize with Roman policy, if aware of a fantastic plan whereby many eminent Jews (Christians) could escape the Roman grip on Jerusalem, could have hindered Christians' flight and thwarted Jesus' warning, by simply reporting His plan to Roman authorities. These, in turn, could have taken counter-measures to expose and capture even Christian Jews along with their unbelieving brethren. Unquestionably, any Gentile Christians resident in Judea would receive explanations from their Jewish Christian brethren.

If these considerations have worth, then not only Jesus' original statement, but also Matthew's record thereof antedate the fall of Jerusalem. Matthew penned his document at a time when the critical code-word still had practical usefulness in its undecodified form, i.e. before 70 A.D. Composition after this date would more likely have eliminated this vagueness and not called attention to critical signs which, because documented after the fact, would be outrageous hypocrisy and more highly suspect as a forgery. As it stands, however, the cryptic word is evidence of an early date.

(*Let him that readeth understand.*) This parenthetical remark is either Jesus' words or Matthew's urgent note:

1. If Jesus said it, He meant, "When you read Daniel, grasp what he meant by this cryptic phrase, *abomination of desolation*." Even Daniel was told to "know and understand," since the revelation was not easy to understand. One needs a mind experienced in dealing with God's past revelations. However, Mark does not even mention *Daniel*, so the primary emphasis is on the critical clue itself, more than on its literary origin. Even without reference to Daniel, any patriotic Jew who ever attended the Dedication Feast knows what Daniel meant by *desolating sacrilege* (1 Macc. 4:36-59; 2 Macc. 10:1-8; Josephus' *Ant.* XII,7,7; John 10:22ff.).
2. Rather, this parenthetical exhortation is addressed by the Evangelists to their readers: "Dear reader, fix this unique, final signal firmly in mind, so that you will remember it and escape at the time indicated." This warning argues that the Gospel was written prior to the first march of the Romans on Jerusalem under Cestius Gallus, A.D. 66.

So, why affirm that *the abomination of desolation* was spoken of by the prophet Daniel? Does Jesus intend to identify the fulfillment of Daniel's famous prophecy of the Seventy Weeks (Dan. 9:20-27)? Opinion is greatly varied on this point, simply because it is difficult to give a conclusive beginning or ending date satisfactory to all, without ignoring some important data. Unfortunately, Daniel 9:24-27 is not the only possible source of the expression quoted by Jesus, since *abomination of desolation* appears also in Daniel 11:31 and 12:11 in undoubted reference to Antiochus Epiphanes. Because this pagan brute had taken Jerusalem and in 168 B.C. outraged Jewish religious feeling by erecting an altar to Zeus in the Temple thus profaning it, the Jews since that time feared that an analogous

sacrilege could be repeated. What happens once can happen again. This realization loaded the expression with the tremendous emotional force it possessed as a sign of an approaching disaster for Jerusalem and its Temple. Clearly understood by the Jews of the Greek period, this stereotyped phrase was already applied by the author of 1 Maccabees 1:54 to the outrage perpetrated by Antiochus IV. (Cf. also 1 Macc. 6:7.) Thus, without intending to indicate the fulfilment of a specific prophecy, Jesus could still have utilized this historico-literary allusion, since this unforgettable point of reference evoked a horrifying image and created an emotional impact something like "Remember Pearl Harbor!" to the Americans after December 7, 1941.

It is unquestionably tempting to believe, with Kik (*Matthew* XXIV, 26) that "our Lord quotes from the prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27." But while it may be sure that "the prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27 finds its fulfillment in the atoning sacrifice of Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem" (*ibid.*, 51), is it likely that Jesus would have risked the clarity of the all-important signal whereby Christians could escape the impending wrath upon Jerusalem, by basing it on a prophecy which itself depends upon critical calculations for the clarity of its undoubted fulfillment? Consider these questions:

1. Are the seventy "sevens" to be considered 490 literal years or symbolic periods?
2. Are these solar or lunar years?
3. Is the "decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" from which calculations are to begin:
 - a. The decree of CYRUS (B.C. 536; Ezra 1:1ff.)? If so, 483 (= 7 + 62 heptads) years end in 53 B.C. in no apparent connection with Christ.
 - b. The decree of DARIUS I (B.C. 519; Ezra 4:24; 6:1)? If so, 483 years end in 36 B.C.
 - c. The decree of ARTAXERXES I (B.C. 457; Ezra 7:7-28)? If so, 483 years end in 26 A.D. and the 490 years (70 heptads) end in 33 A.D.
4. Thus, while it is conceivable that Jesus could point to Daniel 9:24ff. which would be completely fulfilled in His generation, the above-mentioned uncertainties render it less likely that He would pinpoint the critical signal by linking it with the interpretation of a prophecy like that of

Daniel's Seventy Weeks, because it was too complicated for the common people.

5. If we presuppose that Jesus is thinking in terms of the LXX and no other version, the expression, *desolating sacrilege* (*tò bdélugma tês erēmòseōs*), appears as such only at 12:11 in the LXX, a reference to 11:31, but not to 9:26 where a plural form is used. This distinction is important beyond simple linguistics. Daniel makes three uses of expression, *abomination of desolation* or its equivalent, but they do not refer to the same object. In fact, in Daniel 9:26 he speaks of events leading up to and contemporaneous with the Messiah, but in 11:31 and 12:1 he forepictures events during the Maccabean era. This makes the *abomination of desolation* in 9:26 ROMAN, and that referred to in 11:31 and 12:11 GREEK. Taken together, these literary allusions furnish a grisly foreshadowing of the final *desolating sacrilege* accomplished by the Zealots, Idumeans, Assassins and other terrorists and finally by the Roman army in 66-70 A.D. But, to establish the literal fulfillment on Daniel 9:24-27, one must begin from the correct starting point in order correctly to calculate the events down to the coming of Christ and the establishing of the Church. However, because the definite date for the conclusion of the Seventy Weeks of Daniel is not specified in the prophecy itself, readers from 33 A.D. onward would still need to trust Jesus to know when the *abomination of desolation* predicted in Daniel 9:24-27 must occur. Thus, the Christians' comprehension of the complete fulfillment of Daniel 9:24-27 would have to await the events themselves. For this, Jesus provided a signal based on a historico-literary allusion too painfully clear for misconception, based not on Daniel 9:27, but on Daniel 11:31 and 12:1.

So, because Jesus' warning would be perfectly valid without it, it is unnecessary to affirm that He intended hereby to interpret Daniel's prophecy as an ancient prediction of the Roman invasion of His own times. Rather, for His own purpose He apparently borrows Daniel's expression because of its vivid historical connotations. He intimates that what Antiochus Epiphanes did against Jerusalem would find tragic repetition in what the Romans would do, even though not literally predicted by Daniel in Daniel 11:31 or 12:11. He means, then,

"When you see the slightest suggestion that the agonizing history of Jerusalem's pollution and desolation by Antiochus Epiphanes is about to be repeated, escape before you are trapped in the doomed city." One of the incredible sidelights of the final siege was the presence of a Greek general who, with Titus' ungrudging permission, led his Macedonian troops in an unspectacular assault on Jerusalem's wall. His name? Antiochus Epiphanes! (*Wars*, V,11,3).

Another important conclusion may be drawn from Jesus' wording: our Lord considers the author of the wording in question to be *Daniel the prophet* himself, not some unknown understudy or later disciple who supposedly edited Daniel's work. Nor is he some unknown Jew of Maccabean times who foisted off his own reading of history down to his own times, as if it were actually a prophecy by the ancient Jewish hero of Babylonian and Persian times. (Cf. critical introductions to the book of *Daniel*.)

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE FULFILLMENT OF DANIEL'S WORDS

If *the abomination of desolation* is to be a precise, decisive signal to warn believers of Jerusalem's imminent downfall, the following conditions must be met:

1. The signal must involve an *abomination*, i.e. an outrage of Jewish religious sentiments. The sacrilege can be accomplished by anything God has taught His people to regard as idolatrous. (Cf. the bronze serpent, II Kings 18:4; Jer. 4:1; 7:30; Ezek. 5:9, 11, esp. v. 14; also Molech the *abomination* of Moab, Chemosh the *abomination* of Ammon" I Kings 11:5ff.; II Kings 23:13.) Josephus terms the Roman ensigns "images" because of Caesar's image thereon and because of the worship offered them (*Ant.* XVIII,3,1; *War*, VI,6,1). Various near-sacrileges occurred before 70 A.D. When Pilate stubbornly insisted on introducing Roman standards bearing Caesar's effigy into Jerusalem, he faced so resolute a resistance he was compelled to concede and remove them (*Ant.* XVIII,3,1). Vitellius, Pilate's contemporary and president of Syria, was persuaded by Jewish leaders not to march his armies across Jewish territory, because of the idolatrous insignias on Roman banners (*Ant.* XVIII,5,3). While these *abominations* brought no desolation, because each respective crisis was averted, yet they reveal the depth

and intensity of Jewish aversion to the Roman banners, due to the *abomination* involved.

2. The *sacrilege* must also threaten *desolation*, i.e. it must be a religious outrage that brings desolation in its wake. This codeword is no merely stereotyped phrase, since the event portended was life-menacing. When in 168 B.C. Antiochus Epiphanes took Jerusalem by treachery and committed sacrilege by building an idol altar dedicated to Olympian Zeus upon God's altar, slew swine upon it and compelled Hebrews upon pain of death to forsake God's worship, he desolated the religious basis of Israel's national existence (*Ant.* XII,5,4; 1 Macc. 1:41ff.; 6:7; 2 Macc. 6:1-5). So, the original *abomination of desolation* was instigated by a foreign conqueror, the result of a disastrous war in which the City and Sanctuary were desecrated, ending sacrifice and offering. (Cf. Dan. 11:31; 12:11.) This suggests that pagan armies would perpetuate the sacrilege. (Cf. Luke 21:20.)
3. The signal must be *standing in the holy place* "where it ought not to be set up" (Mark 13:14). Where, however, or what is this *holy place*? The Temple? Jerusalem? the Holy Land itself? To be an effective signal, it must be visible, obvious to all, unmistakable: *when you see*. Hence, it cannot be half-hidden in the interior of the Temple house where presumably no eyes, but those of a few priests or the desecrators of *the holy place*, could penetrate. So, *the holy place* need not mean even the Temple's grounds, consecrated to God but desecrated in some way by pagan armies. Rather, because He had made it His dwelling place, the entire Holy City belonged to God, and even to threaten its holiness by idolatrous banners is to desecrate it. (Cf. 5:35.) So reasoned the Jews (*Ant.* XVIII,3,1).
4. The signal must occur at a time when Christians would be in a condition of real liberty to flee from Jerusalem despite the City's encirclement by foreign troops (24:16; Luke 21:21). This could occur under the following conditions:
 - a. Roman armies could flood across Palestine, taking city after city, moving ever closer to the capital. However, their troop movements and the establishment of Roman garrisons of occupation do not close up all escape routes whereby Christians could escape, although Jerusalem is virtually surrounded, even if not totally besieged. (Cf. *Wars*, IV,9,1.)
 - b. Jerusalem itself is totally surrounded by Roman troops in siege positions, rendering escape virtually impossible, but, for some

incredible and unexplained reason, the siege is suddenly lifted and the Roman legions unexpectedly retreat, granting a moment for Christians to evacuate the City. Thus, the sign cannot occur during or after the *final* Roman siege has begun.

- c. But it must also occur before Jerusalem's sectarian defenders render all escape impossible by considering it a desertion of their cause to abandon the City and tantamount to joining the Romans. Hence, it cannot have occurred after the Zealots locked Jerusalem's gates against the possibility of escape or desertion by its inhabitants.

Any reference to events that do not meet these requirements must be judged mistaken, because Jesus intended this critical signal to function successfully and be of practical help to His people. If, for example, *the abomination of desolation* must be thought of as (1) the desecration of the Temple by the outrages committed in the Temple by Jewish terrorists themselves (*Wars*, IV,6,3) or (2) the erection of the Roman standards within the Temple (*Wars*, VI,6,1), then, where is the Christians' freedom to escape the City?

"One thing this sign cannot mean," knowledgeable sources might confidently assert, "is an army besieging Jerusalem, since escape from the city would be impossible once the siege began!" Who but Jesus could be trusted to know that, even though Jerusalem were surrounded by a formidable military power, escape would still be incredibly possible by a totally improbable lifting of that siege? Who but a true Prophet could foresee with unerring certainty that a well-armed, well-disciplined army would inexplicably lift a successful siege from a desperate city and simply march away "without any reason in the world" (*Wars*, II,19,4-7). Who could predict this with such confidence as to make this obviously improbable event the very sign which would permit His followers to discern the critical moment to escape? And yet, this is the interpretation given by Luke (21:20). *The abomination of desolation*, then, is to be a pagan army planting its idolatrous banners on soil that belongs to God's people within His Holy City.

The fact that vile abominations were imported by the Roman conquerors AFTER the city's desolation is no argument against this interpretation. Rather, the appearance of these outrages against God occurred too late to save any lives. The common sense of Jesus implies that the critical signal be given in time

for Christians to escape BEFORE the final siege began, whereas both in the case of Antiochus Epiphanes (*Wars*, I,1,1-2; *Ant.* XII,5,3f.) and in that of Titus' conquest, the abomination connected with its permanent desecration occurred AFTER the city was taken.

THE FULFILLMENT OF JESUS' PROPHECY

Although the Jews were not by any means united in their attitude toward Rome, they still longed for a political Messiah as a solution to their national situation increasingly infected with the disease of creeping revolt. Many vindictive blood baths and retaliatory measures took place in which hundreds of Romans, Samaritans and Jews were slain or severely wounded. The most significant took place in November of 66 A.D., convincing a vast group of eminent Jews to flee the City. Other Jews, "when they saw the war approaching to their metropolis [i.e. Jerusalem], left the feast, and betook themselves to their arms . . ." (*Wars*, II,19,2). In concept, this closely parallels Jesus' warning: "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, know that its desolation has come near." The unbelieving Jews saw it and armed themselves to fight Cestius Gallus and the Romans; the Christians saw it and abandoned the city. Josephus describes the daring escape mechanism thus (§§4-7):

Cestius, observing that the disturbances that were begun among the Jews afforded him a proper opportunity to attack them, took his whole army along with him, and put the Jews to flight, and pursued them to Jerusalem. He then pitched his camp upon the elevation called Scopus. . . . But when *Cestius was come into the city*, he set the part called Bezetha . . . on fire; as he did also to the timber-market; after which *he came into the upper city*, and pitched his camp over against the royal palace; and *had he but at this very time attempted to get within the walls by force, he had won the city presently, and the war had been put an end to at once*; but Tyrannius Priscus, the muster-master of the army, and a great number of the officers of the horse had been corrupted by Florus, and diverted him from that his attempt; and that was the occasion that this war lasted so very long. . . . Thus did the Romans make their attack against the wall for five days but to no purpose. And now it was that a horrid fear seized upon the seditious, insomuch that many of them ran out of the

city, as though it were to be taken immediately; but the people upon this took courage, and where the wicked part of the city gave ground, thither did they come, *in order to set open the gates, and to admit Cestius as their benefactor, who had he but continued the siege a little longer, had certainly taken the city*; but it was, I suppose, owing to the aversion God had already at the city and the sanctuary, that *he was hindered from putting an end to the war that very day*. It then happened that Cestius was not conscious either how the besieged despaired of success, nor how courageous the people were for him; and so he recalled his soldiers from the place, and by despairing of any expectation of taking it, without having received any disgrace, *he retired from the city, without any reason in the world*.

Cestius' mode of retreating practically invited the Jewish insurrectionists in Jerusalem to follow him away from the City in hope of galling him at every opportunity. Rather than take decisive action by marching to Antipatris directly, he kept stalling his departure at each encampment until so many Jews surrounded him that the Roman troops were outnumbered (*Wars*, II,19,9).

So the Jews went on pursuing the Romans as far as Antipatris; after which, seeing they could not overtake them, they came back and took the engines [of war, i.e., catapults, etc.], and spoiled the dead bodies; and gathered the prey together which the Romans had left behind them, and came back running and singing to their metropolis; when they had themselves lost a few only, but had slain of the Romans five thousand and three hundred footmen and three hundred and eighty horsemen.

It was at this critical moment, while the terrorists pursued the retreating Romans, Josephus (*Wars*, II,20,1) remembers, "After this calamity had befallen Cestius, many of the most eminent Jews swam away from the city, as from a ship when it was going to sink." Who were these people? While the Jewish historian names a few, were there no Christians in that mass exodus?

Further, that the time factor was critically limited is evident in a further note by Josephus (*Wars*, II,20,3): "But as to those who had pursued after Cestius, when they were returned back to Jerusalem, *they overbore some of those that favoured the Romans by violence, and some they persuaded by entreaties to join with them*." Later, even the slightest intimation that someone was making plans to leave

Jerusalem was justification for the insurrectionists to slit his throat (*Wars*, V,10,1)! How important it was to believe Jesus and abandon the City on time! The opportunity for escape was fearfully limited. The door was left open when the terrorists and others rushed out of Jerusalem in pursuit of the Romans, but the door slammed shut as they returned. The time to go had come—and GONE. Those who saw that Cestius Gallus had entered an important suburb of Jerusalem, Bezetha, and visibly pitched his camp opposite the royal palace just outside the inner wall, proudly displaying his idolatrous Roman standards in his camp, recognized the sign of which Jesus had spoken years before. So while the pagan army retreated, the Christians fled.

Unquestionably Cestius Gallus had planted Roman insignias within the city of Jerusalem in 66 A.D. Although his camp was situated outside an older wall, the site on which he chose to erect his camp was the "New Town," or Bezetha suburb. This addition to Jerusalem was surrounded by a wall that linked it to the capital proper. So, a *desolating sacrilege* had appeared at Jerusalem and gone, leaving an escape route open for God's people. (See *Wars*, V,7,2.)

It should be noticed that Cestius' retreat was not the only opportunity for Christians to flee the City. It was merely the best one. There was temporary respite from the Roman advance on Jerusalem, when Vespasian suspended operations against it due to the death of Nero in A.D. 68-70 (*Wars*, IV,9,2). During the short reigns of Galba, Otho and Vitellius (A.D. 68, 69), Vespasian and Titus simply waited due to the tension mounting in the Roman Empire. This afforded little opportunity for many to escape from Jerusalem, however, since the Zealots in Jerusalem and the Romans encompassing the city on all sides practically deprived them of this liberty (*ibid.*, §1). Some even managed to escape the City's fate after the Zealot-Idumean pollution of the Temple (*ibid.*, 7,1; see also on 24:24).

2. Urgent, practical instructions for rapid escape (24:16-20)

24:16 Then let them that are in Judea flee unto the mountains. Up to this point the Lord was advising disciples not to panic in the presence of misleading signs by acting hastily on the basis of superficial judgments about the times. Now He must protect them against the ill-advised fanaticism of the rebels who would hope that God would miraculously deliver Jerusalem from its assigned destiny. (Cf. *Wars*, V,11,2.) This error compounded their confusion and funnelled them

all right into the Roman meat grinder. Here, too, the ancient observation would find another appropriate application: "Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will" (Dan. 12:10).

Those that are in Judaea are those who believe Jesus enough to act on the signal He gives. *Judea* may or may not include all of Jewish-controlled Palestine. Luke often uses this geographic term in this sense, but Matthew seems to use it here in the more limited, provincial sense, i.e. only the area south of Samaria, not all of Jewish territory. Certainly, *Judea* involves Jerusalem directly, as Luke adds: "Let those who are inside the city depart and let not those who are out in the country enter it" (Luke 21:21). Christians who would actually be dwelling in the target area at the moment by the warning, who would see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, would otherwise think to take refuge in the City as a place of perfect security. There would have been no reason whatever to urge believers to attempt a physical escape, if Jesus had in mind His own Second Coming when we will no longer need to escape, but shall finally rise to meet Him in the air. The key-word is *flee* from the would-be disaster zone, *Judea*.

Flee unto the mountains. Is it not most singular that anyone should advise leaving a city as well-fortified as Jerusalem which could withstand a long siege and enjoyed a superior military advantage over its attackers? To the common-sense observer of the day, the question was, "Why should these otherwise sensible people become fools for sake of their Christ?" But the true wisdom of the Christians was amply justified by its results. In fact, if God Almighty is planning to rain down judgment on a city and warns His people to abandon that locality, it is the height of folly NOT to leave! (Cf. Jer. 51:45f.; Gen. 19:14-22.)

Part of the cause of the magnitude of the tragedy surrounding Jerusalem's death lay in the fact that, shortly before the final siege-works closed the city, "on the feast of unleavened bread, which was not come . . . Eleazar and his party opened the gates of this . . . temple, and admitted such of the people as were desirous to worship God into it" (*Wars*, V,3,1). Vast multitudes of Jews and proselytes poured into Jerusalem despite the war-time conditions, to worship at the Passover (*Wars*, VI,9,3). Confident of God's protection, they crowded into what, ironically, would prove to be their grave, sealed in by their own people (*Wars*, V,1,5). Jesus ordered His people, "*Flee!*" (See also Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III,5.)

To the mountains. Because Jerusalem itself is located on a ridge in the hill country of Judah, hills surround it both on the north and south. Even though these hills themselves are not high, still, in contrast to the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea far below them, they would seem mountains by contrast. So, where are *the mountains* to which Christians must flee? Eusebius (*Eccl. Hist.*, III,5) reports:

The whole body, however, of the church at Jerusalem, having been commanded by a divine revelation, given to men of approved piety there before the war, removed from the city, and dwelt at a certain town beyond the Jordan, called Pella.

Pella is located east of the Jordan River in the edge of the hill country of Perea between the Jabbok and Jarmuk Rivers, south of Gadara, southeast of Scythopolis (Bethshean) northwest of Gerasa. This city of the Decapolis lies about 4 km (2.5 mi.) from the Jordan. This location so near the river is not yet well into the higher hills of Perea farther east. So, in what sense would an escape to Pella be tantamount to flight *to the mountains*? Josephus (*Wars*, IV,8,2) contrasts the hill country of Cisjordan with that of Transjordan thus:

[Jericho] is situated in a plain; but a naked and barren mountain of a great length, hangs over it, which extends itself to the land about Scythopolis [Bethshean] northward, but as far as the country of Sodom and the utmost limits of the lake Asphaltitis [Dead Sea] southward. . . . There is an opposite mountain that is situated over against it, on the other side of the Jordan; this last begins at Julias [Bethsaida Julias, see Luke 9:10; Mark 8:22; John 6:1] and the northern quarters, and extends itself southward as far as Somorrhon, which is the bounds of Petra in Arabia.

So, Jesus could speak of *the mountains* and be understood by others as referring to what we might call "hills" in contrast to the Alps or the Rockies. In fact, at some point in their eastward rush, Christian refugees must cross the Jordan River. Were they to cross opposite Pella from the valley of Bethshean, they must descend to the river's level at -259 m (-850 ft.) below sea level. Coming out on the other side, they must climb out of the inner Jordan Valley (*Zôr*) onto the wider Jordan plateau only -137 m (-450 ft.) below sea level. Then they would begin the real climb to the 874 m (2868 ft.) above sea level in the first 10 km (6.2 mi.). This represents a total gain of over 1134 m

(300 ft.). Although such tall hills, of course, do not compare with Mount Hermon to the north, anyone walking that particular stretch of country would be ready to call those hills *mountains*. Regardless of which route Christians took to arrive at Pella, they would be moving from the level of the Jordan River at whatever crossing they chose, toward the Gilead mountain range that arises to an average height of 1220 m (4000 ft.) above the Jordan Valley, or to about 915 m (3000 ft.) above sea level.

Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 858) offers four arguments for rejecting the fourth century assertion that the Christians went to Pella: "Scholars who have made a special study of the early history of the Jerusalem church doubt this fourth century A.D. report. They tell us that *a.* in order at this time to get to Pella, believers would have had to break their way through lines of Roman soldiers; *b.* the people left in Pella were filled with bitter hatred against all Jews, including Christian Jews; *c.* Pella could not have provided housing for all the refugees; and *d.* if the escape had been attempted at a slightly earlier date, the Christians would have fallen into the hostile hands of the fanatical Jewish freedom-fighters."

Unhappily, these arguments ignore several important points and contain several false assumptions involving both the geography of Palestine and the chronology of the Roman occupation of Palestine.

1. Certainly, if the fleeing Christians took the Jericho road and either of the two roads flanking the Jordan River for easier travel north to Pella, they might have encountered Romans. The same could be affirmed of travel straight north to Bethel, Shechem, Scythopolis and Pella. However, if they entered the hilly country northeast of Jerusalem, bypassing any towns garrisoned by the Romans or occupied by Zealot sympathizers, it is far less likely that they would have encountered enemy troops. Engines of war could not be hauled over those hills with ease, and the infantry would be worn out by the constant climbing and descents. The same is also true for the refugees themselves, but they have at least gained the advantage of staying away from the main-travelled routes leading to Jerusalem.
2. What inhabitants of Pella would not receive the fleeing Jewish Christians? Pella was one of the cities whose population has been

DESTROYED by Jews in retaliation for the anti-Jewish massacres in Caesarea (*Wars*, II,18,1). Thus, along with other abandoned cities of the Decapolis, Pella could well have been settled by Jewish Christians fleeing from Jerusalem. Josephus specifically states: "some cities they destroyed there and some they set on fire . . . some they burned to the ground entirely demolished." But he is silent about the fate of Pella and other Decapolis cities, limiting himself to say "they laid waste the villages of the Syrians and their neighboring cities," which perhaps refers only to their inhabitants. It was shortly after the above-mentioned massacres that Cestius Gallus encircled Jerusalem (*Wars*, II,19,1,8). Then he retreated, leaving the way for Christians to flee from the capital to these *abandoned* cities of Decapolis.

3. Although we may presume that, despite persecutions, the Jerusalem Church remained of significant size even to the times of Paul's great, final visit (cf. Acts 21:17-22), for how many refugees must lodging be found in Pella? Because of the earlier massacre of its inhabitants, the Christians would become *the majority*, if not *the exclusive* population, to take possession of the property of the former inhabitants of the now practically empty city.
4. While it is true that after Vespasian swarmed into Palestine, there were Roman garrisons in Bethel and Ephraim, blocking that route (*Wars*, IV,9,9), earlier, however, immediately after the disastrous retreat of Cestius Gallus (*Wars* II,19,1-8; 20,1), that route would have been relatively open. In fact, both Jewish insurgents and Roman troops together were moving northwest *away* from Jerusalem toward Antipatris. The fanatics, thus, were led *AWAY* from the Christians' escape route by the retreating Romans, leaving even the critical well-travelled highways to the northeast quite free.

EASE OF ESCAPE DEPENDS ON TIMING. If the signal came before Vespasian arrived in Palestine after the debacle of Cestius Gallus at Jerusalem, then Christians would have been quite free to desert the capital and travel to Pella and other cities.

The Hindrances of Possessions (24:17f.)

24:17 Let him that is on the housetop not go down to take out the things that are in his house. *On the housetop* pictures the flat-roofed constructions so common around the Mediterranean. The

limited, and in some areas almost non-existent, snowfall permits builders to create a roof terrace to gain further living space and storage. In Scripture, the paved, flat roof was a place for drying flax (Josh. 2:6), for privacy and rest (I Sam. 9:25f.), for prayer (Acts 10:9), as an observation post (Isa. 22:1) or a place from which to make public announcements (Matt. 10:27). Jesus does not order His followers to escape by jumping from rooftop to rooftop until they could reach the city wall and let themselves down nor does He order them not to descend from their own rooftop in an orderly manner. Rather, they are not *to go down to take out the things that are in the house*. Life preserved is more than possessions conserved. Anyone who has ever moved his possessions from one town to another and must decide which items were absolutely essential and which things might be abandoned without loss, understands the time-consuming, decision-making process that would hinder the instant flight of the householder. Further, transporting cumbersome household goods would require further precious time to secure the necessary transport. Speedy removal of a house full of goods collected over a lifetime was out of the question, but the temptation would arise to try it anyway. Therefore, Jesus enjoins instant, unencumbered escape while there was still time.

24:18 And let him that is in the field not return back to take his cloak. Here is a Christian farmer working his ground near Juersalem, lightly dressed only for sweaty field work. The warning signal to flee catches him at work, without his long robe that serves as an overcoat and, in the case of the poor, also doubles as a blanket at night (Deut. 24:12f.; Exod. 22:26f.). But even this vital item of clothing is to be abandoned in favor of departure without delay. Jesus is emphasizing an exodus so hasty that people would be evacuated with just the shirt on their back!

Unavoidable Personal Hindrances (24:19)

24:19 But woe unto them that are with child and to them that give suck in those days! This *woe* depicts the plight of both believing and unbelieving mothers alike in those fateful days (Luke 23:28f.). Any mother would suffer. Due to excruciating hunger during the famine of the siege of Jerusalem, Jewish mothers devoured their own children, just as God said they would (Deut. 28:49-57; cf. Wars V, 10,3; VI, 3,4f.). Contextually, however, Jesus' reference is to the Christian mothers

who, because pregnant, or because nursing children, would not be able to travel rapidly for long, forced marches plunging through rough country without provisions or adequate shelter.

Hindrances Beyond Christians' Control

(24:20)

24:20 And pray ye that your flight be not in winter, neither on a sabbath. *Pray* means that God is not unaware of your plight nor unconcerned about you in those terrible uncertainties nor are those trials an evidence He had abandoned His people. Rather, even though your escape cannot be avoided, your suffering may be alleviated. You should continue to beseech Him for what might seem to be trivial blessings, but which could make all the difference between succumbing and survival.

Your flight: what is contemplated is the believers' escape, hopefully not during certain periods. Obviously, none of these directions concern Christ's Second Coming, because under what conditions may the believer's rising to meet the Lord in the air be considered an escape from dangers of earth, a *flight* not to be conditioned by *winters* or *sabbaths*? Must God be besought to send Jesus back to earth on the off-season, but not on the weekend?

Travel in civil-war conditions would not be safe in the best of weather. (Cf. II Chron. 15:5f.) But *in the winter*, cold, rainy weather, shorter daylight hours, bad or non-existent roads and unfordable, swollen rivers would all contribute to limit freedom of travel. Worse, camping out in such weather would be prohibitive, except for the most desperate fugitives. *Winter* might even bring snowfall (1 Macc. 13:22). Further, the fields through which the Christians must pass would not furnish any but the crudest emergency food.

The total rout of Cestius Gallus occurred on the eighth day of the month of Dios, or Marchesvan, in the twelfth year of Nero (A.D. 54-68). This would be late October or early November of A.D. 66. So, these prayers were essential, because, although their *flight* occurred about three weeks after the Feast of Tabernacles in which people had been camping out in and around Jerusalem (*Wars*, II, 19, 1ff.), the early rains would normally begin in that period (Deut. 11:14). Their prayers should be addressed therefore to Him who controls the rain.

Neither on a sabbath. Never would this warning have any world-wide significance, except in that country where strict, superstitious

reverence for the Sabbath would have prohibited long-distance travel on Saturday, i.e. in Palestine. (Cf. *Ant.* XVIII,8,4; XIV,4,2f.) That Mark does not mention *the sabbath* is not so much out of regard for his Gentile readers, as that this detail would not affect them outside of Palestine, whereas Matthew's inclusion of this detail would be extremely pertinent in Israel. There a centuries-old tradition, coupled with proud patriotism, had taken root, which refused to take offensive action against one's national enemies on the Sabbath. Even if Christians themselves might with justification describe their fleeing from the Roman horror as *defensive action*, zealous bigots might quarrel with their interpretation and impede their escape. Further, if city gates were locked (cf. Neh. 13:19ff.) or Sabbath closing of stores made the purchase of food for the journey or the hiring of lodging impossible among the orthodox (cf. Neh. 13:15ff.), dangerous delays would mount up.

And what of those Jewish Christians whose ingrained habit continued to hold "one day above another" (Rom. 14:5f.)? Their cultural orientation might still cause them to think of the Sabbath as a day on which no work might be done. (Study Acts 21:20b-26.) Because Jewish believers still observed many cultural mores, perhaps many in Jerusalem still acted on Saturday as they always had, even though they knew it had been surpassed by Christ. Nevertheless, even though Jesus' sabbath doctrine (cf. 12:8-11) was elastic enough to permit life-saving escape, yet those who would not travel more than a "sabbath-day's journey" would travel no more than a kilometer away from the danger zone.

3. Motivation: great, unprecedented tribulation (24:21)

24:21 for then shall be great tribulation. *For* connects this *great tribulation* with the hasty escape just mentioned to avoid the punishment of Jerusalem (v. 20). That this cannot be the "great tribulation" of Revelation 7 is evident because the sufferings of Matthew 24 are punitive justice poured out by God on an unbelieving Israel and from which the Christians could escape alive on earth by following Jesus' instructions. They would actually avoid this *great tribulation* meant here, whereas those who must suffer it and die in it were the wicked of Israel who had crucified their Messiah, persecuted His Church and filled up the measure of their fathers (23:23ff.). Contrarily, those who come out of "great tribulation" in Revelation 7 are the victorious

from every nation, tribe, people and tongue who have been purified by the blood of Christ (Rev. 7:14ff.). There are simply TWO "great tribulations," one through which the unbelieving in Israel passed, and the other which Christians must endure. The fact that they were sometimes contemporaneous must not confuse us regarding their perpetrators, their intentions nor their victims. The Jewish *great tribulation* of 66-70 A.D. must not be confused for the trials suffered by Christians during the present age down to Christ's coming (Rev. 7:14).

Great tribulation such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no and never will be. This language appears to depict an event so horrible that Jerusalem's demolition must be sought by relating the prophecy to some later, even future temple. But three motives induce us to conclude otherwise:

1. God had already used this kind of language before: "How awful that day will be! None will be like it. It will be a time of trouble for Jacob, but he will be saved out of it" (Jer. 30:7). Uniquely grand and terrible would be that later day intended, but Jeremiah proceeds to explain that its occurrence would be completely earthly as the events in world politics would permit God's people to return to their homeland. (See Jeremiah's context.) Further, Daniel too wrote: "There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then" (Dan. 12:1). And yet, despite the horrors of that distress, the deliverance of God's people was guaranteed, because "at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered."
2. This same thought form was considered appropriate by Jesus' contemporary, the Pharisean(?) author of *Assumption of Moses* 8:1, to describe the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes:

And there shall come upon them a second visitation and wrath, such as has not befallen them from the beginning until that time, in which He will stir up against them the king of the kings of the earth and one that ruleth with great power who shall crucify those who confess to their circumcision. . . .

3. Josephus (*Wars*, Preface, 4) lamented:

Accordingly it appears to me, that the misfortunes of all men, from the beginning of the world, if they be compared to these of the Jews, are not so considerable as they were.

Josephus (*Wars*, V,10,5) further noted:

Neither did any other city ever suffer such miseries, nor did any age ever breed a generation more fruitful in wickedness than this was, *from the beginning of the world*.

After tallying the number of captives of 97,000 and those who perished during the entire siege at 1,100,000, whether by pestilence, famine or murder, Josephus then concludes in highly wrought, emotional language: "The multitude of those that therein perished exceeded all the destructions that either men or God ever brought upon the world." While it is fashionable to dismiss Josephus for exaggeration, one must consider his lament in the light of its theological and spiritual significance, evident even to this Jewish observer.

Now, if it be thought that Jews are given to hyperbole when describing monstrously horrible facts, should not Jesus prepare His disciples to face this particular disaster by using language appropriate to the terrible grandeur and spiritual significance of the events portrayed? If it be argued that the fall of Jerusalem, however indescribable its horrors, is nevertheless beggared by comparison with the Nazi holocaust that wiped out a greater number of Hebrews, let it be recalled that the magnitude of what Jesus predicts is not to be evaluated merely in terms of the number of lives or the value of the property lost. Rather, its meaning lies in the *kind* or *quality* of the catastrophe.

This *great tribulation* must be adjudged such in light of the sentence Jesus had just pronounced upon Israel (23:29-36, esp. v. 35). If the punishment of that nation was to be the proper judicial climax to a process of rejecting God's witnesses *from the beginning of the world until now*, "from the blood of the righteous Abel to the death of Zachariah," consummating in the crucifixion of Israel's Messiah, then it should not be surprising that unparalleled privations, torture and slaughter should accompany this terrible visitation of God's wrath so horrible as to defy description. (Cf. Luke 21:23 and similar language used by the author of 1 Macc. 1:64 to describe the original "abomination of desolation." See also 1 Macc. 9:27.)

One of the significant differences between the "great tribulation" suffered by the Christians (Rev. 7:14) and that endured by the Jews (Matt. 24:21) is that to a significant degree the latter was self-inflicted. Without diminishing the seriousness of the heartless slaughters of Jewish people by Syrians and others (*Wars*, II,18), the most damage

to Hebrew people during the final hours of their Holy City came from their own countrymen, not so much from the Romans (*Wars*, IV,5,3-5). In fact, Vespasian astutely refused to seek military advantage in the civil war raging inside the city, lest he thereby instantly unite the Jews against the Romans. So he determined to let his enemies destroy each other with their own hands (*Wars*, IV,6,2). The degree of barbarity rose to such heights that Jews considered the dead most happy (*ibid.*, 6,3). Josephus (*Wars*, V,6,1) chronicled:

For they never suffered anything that was worse from the Romans than they made each other suffer; nor was there any misery endured by the city after these men's actions that could be esteemed new. But it was most of all unhappy before it was overthrown, while those that took it did it a greater kindness; for I venture to affirm, that *the sedition destroyed the city, and the Romans destroyed the sedition*, which was a much harder thing to do than to destroy the walls; so that we may justly ascribe our misfortunes to our own people and the just vengeance taken on them by the Romans.

Not least among the miseries was the entire absence of any mercy shown fellow Jews who happened by the evil destiny of war to be on the wrong side, or in possession of food or valuables sought by Jewish plunderers who went from house to house, assaulting, robbing and killing. No moral law, no honor, no mercy! Where was that superior righteousness that Israel had flaunted before the benighted pagans?

Not least among the agonies was the soul-wrenching anguish of doubt, "Why does not God save us, His people, racked and wretched as we are?" To be abandoned by God must be the most heart-rending tragedy imaginable for anyone, and it was theirs in that dark hour. This was literally the end of an era (*suntélia toû aiônos*, 24:3).

So, this *great tribulation* is, for us, now past, because the destruction of Jerusalem was the gruesome climax of that period. This is not to say, unfortunately, that all, or even any, tribulation is over for the Christians, since, in fact, Jesus was not even discussing this latter issue. After 70 A.D. John still considered himself a sharer in the Christian tribulation (*thlipsis*, Rev. 1:9). Temptations and crises of every kind will plague us down to the last minute before our Lord's return, simply because evil shall be left in the world until that time. (See notes on 13:24-30, 36-43; cf. Acts 14:22; I Thess. 3:3f.; II Thess. 1:4f.; Rev. 7:14.) However, the horror-filled death-throes of Jerusalem and its Temple are past.

But what is there to fear, then, if this all be over? What encouragement to righteousness is there, if modern man must contemplate this event as all but forgotten in the dust of history? Much every way! Jesus has been proved true as an authentic spokesman for God. All that He foretold about OUR future may be studied with far more serious reflection, and all that He commands must be obeyed with greater promptness and eagerness. We may trust Him for leadership during our trials.

4. Duration: short but terrible (24:22)

24:22 And except those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened. *Those days* are the ruthless bloodbath just described (v. 21), identified as *those days* in which Christians must flee from Judea (v. 19) at the time of the "desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place" (v. 15). See also Mark 13:17, 19 and Luke 21:23 which use "in those days" to identify this period. *No flesh*: Jesus is discussing only Hebrew *flesh*, i.e. the entire Jewish people, not all of humanity. Everyone in Israel would have been wiped out in the Roman malestrom that would take the nation and all its people with it. Jesus uses *saved* here, not of spiritual salvation, but in the sense of avoidance of death. (Cf. 8:25; 27:40, 42, 49.)

A remarkable series of events contributed to the abbreviation of the sufferings:

1. The earlier emperor Claudius had forbidden Agrippa to complete significant fortifications that would have rendered Jerusalem's northern flank virtually unimpregnable (*Ant.* XIX,7,2). Consequently, both Cestius Gallus (*Wars*, II,19,4) and Titus (*Wars*, V,6, 2; 7:3) found the wall around the New City ("Bezetha") easier to demolish. This tightened his vice-like grip on the capital sooner.
2. Shortly before Titus arrived at Jerusalem, the three-way civil war within the city *shortened those days* in a surprising manner (*Wars*, V,1,4). One of the terrorists

. . . set on fire those houses that were full of corn, and of all other provisions . . . as if they had, on purpose, done it to serve the Romans, by destroying what the city had laid up against the siege, and by thus cutting off the nerves of their own power . . . almost all of the corn was burnt, which would

have been sufficient for a siege of many years. So they were taken by the means of famine, which it was impossible they should have been, unless they had thus prepared the way for it by this procedure.

3. Internal dissension divided and seriously undermined Israel's defenders.
4. Due to battle fatigue and fear compounded by emotional stress caused by desertions and their own physical distress, the Jewish terrorists' nerve was broken to the point they even abandoned unassailable bulwarks. Josephus (*Wars*, VI,8,4f.) reflects,

Here one may chiefly reflect on the power of God exercised upon those wicked wretches, and on the good fortune of the Romans; for these tyrants did now wholly deprive themselves of the security they had in their own power, and came down from those very towers of their own accord, wherein they could have never been taken by force, nor indeed by any other way than by famine. And thus did the Romans, when they had taken such great pains about weaker walls, get by good fortune what they could never have gotten by their engines; for three of these towers were too strong for all mechanical engines whatsoever. . . . *So they now left these towers of themselves, or rather they were ejected out of them by God himself, and fled.* . . . So the Romans being now become masters of the walls, they both placed their ensigns upon the towers, and made joyful acclamations for the victory they had gained, as having found the end of the war much lighter than its beginning; for when they had gotten upon the last wall without any bloodshed, they could hardly believe what they found to be true. . . .

After inspecting this fortification, the Roman general himself could not but confess, "We have certainly had God for our assistant in this war, and it was no other than God that ejected the Jews out of those fortifications; for what could the hands of men, or any machines, do towards overthrowing those towers" (*ibid.*, 9,1)!

5. Crowded conditions were created by the Paschal crowds that had poured into the Holy City just prior to its encirclement by the Romans. Because of the scanty provisions, the pestilence created by festering corpses and the hideous brutality, survival of anyone became a debatable question.

These factors, taken together, facilitated the Roman victory, took off the pressure against Rome and essentially *shortened those days*. The Roman siege of Jerusalem lasted from shortly before the Passover on the fourteenth of Nisan until the eighth of Elul in Vespasian's second year (*Wars*, V,3,1; 13,7; VI,10,1). Thus, from April to September, Jerusalem's capture was completed in the relatively brief span of five months. By contrast, it had taken Nebuchadnezzar over a year and five months to bring the city to its knees (Jer. 52:4-7, 12).

But for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened. Even the abbreviation of the time allotted for the troubling of God's people was a concept in vogue in Jewish apocalyptic literature. (Cf. 2 Baruch 20:1f.; 83:1.) There, however, *the elect* are the righteous in Israel and the days of judgment would punish the Gentiles, the apostates and glorify the proselytes to Judaism. But here, according to Jesus, who are *the elect*?

The elect, in Scripture, is a term always to be understood from God's point of view, ideally referring to those whom He chooses to be His people. But His election is not unconditional, for His choice presupposes their free choice to be His by loving, obedient faith. Hence, here, *the elect* are those Jewish Christians who as "the remnant" of visible, national Israel, formed the nucleus of the new Israel of God (Rom. 11:5-7; Gal. 3:7-9, 26-29; 6:16; Eph. 1:4; Phil. 3:3) as well as converted Gentiles (Rom. 11:11-32). To affirm that *the elect* must refer exclusively to God's former people, national Israel, is to forget that Matthew, though himself a Jew, has already taught that true participation in God's program is not a question of parentage (3:8-10) personal power (7:22f.), pampering and past privileges (8:10ff.; 11:20-24; 21:33—22:14), or perspiration (20:1-16), but a question of proper priorities and appropriate openness with God. No unbelieving Hebrew could be described as *elect* in this definitive sense.

So, because it is exegetically impossible that Jesus could have spoken so ambiguously as to embrace both the converted and the unconvertable of Israel under the term, *the elect*, He refers here, as also in 24:31, to the people of the Messiah, the free citizens of the Kingdom (17:26), who lived to see and hear the very things for which the fathers had long waited (13:17) and enjoyed the personal knowledge of "the secrets of the kingdom" (13:11). In short, *the elect* are those fortunate (from the Jewish standpoint: Luke 14:15) people who lived in the days of the Messiah and served Him, the

Christians. For them the critical *days shall be shortened*, for although they fled from Jerusalem in time and were relatively safe from immediate danger, they could not avoid other privations elsewhere in Palestine spawned by the war: famine, pestilences, shortages and other break-downs in every area of civil life wrecked by the war.

To know that *those days shall be shortened* brings comforting assurance and hope. This affirmation fairly sings its confidence, infusing its certainty into believing hearts:

1. God's true Prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, knows that the terrible days just described will not go on forever. They will end. This fact convinces believers that it is worth it to hold on patiently till the end.
2. Neither Satan, nor Rome nor the evil men in the land are either final or omnipotent. The duration of the suffering has already been established by the determinate planning of Almighty God who is in full control, notwithstanding the soul-crushing terror stalking the land.
3. This shortening is even a decree of mercy for Jerusalem, for if it blesses Christians, it also gives respite to the tormented survivors of Jerusalem's siege because the terrors would be over for them too, since even Roman treatment of captives would be merciful by comparison to the barbarities suffered from their own people.

This hope confirms another conclusion by evidencing how misguided is any rapture theory that imagines God's people to be caught up out of this world before the great terrible tribulation. If our text is thought to be evidence of the final "great tribulation" (Rev. 7:14), and not merely of the Jewish sufferings at Jerusalem in 70 A.D., then what are *the elect* doing present in the tribulation? If they were all previously "caught up" to heaven, according to the rapture theory, then why must *the days of the tribulation be shortened for the elect's sake*?

Ultior confirmation of the correctness of the view that the "great tribulation" here pictured by Matthew refers to the shocking debacle of 70 A.D. comes from Luke 21:23f. where this same period is thus summarized: "For great distress shall be upon the earth (land?) and wrath upon this people. 24 They will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among the nations; and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." Avoiding all the Jewish rhetoric of Matthew and Mark to describe these dramatic events, Luke furnishes important interpretative details:

1. *Great distress upon the earth* (*anàgkē megālē epì tēs gēs*). *Gē*, here rendered *earth*, can also refer to "a land, a district, a region or country." (Cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 156.) So, Jesus may be discussing merely "the land par excellence highest in the Hebrew mind, Palestine." His parallel phrase, *wrath upon this people*, confirms this view, because *this people*, contextually, refers to Jerusalem and the dwellers of Judea (Luke 21:20f.; cf. v. 24).
2. What would happen to Israel could only be termed *wrath*, probably of both God and men. Although Titus himself was mild and conciliatory to the end (*Wars*, VI,2,1-4; 4:3-7; esp. 6:2; 8,2), the Roman legions were the appropriate rod of God's wrath. (Cf. *Wars*, V,1,3; 8,2; 9,3f.; 13,5; VI,1,5; 9,1.) Roman vengeance simply punished Israel's violations of the Old Covenant (Deut. 32:35; 28:15-68; cf. Hosea 9:7; Jer. 5:29), not to mention their refusal of God's Son and His messengers (Matt. 23:34-39). Jerusalem well deserved both the Roman and the Divine *wrath*.
3. *Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles*. (Cf. 24:2; *Wars*, VII,1,1.) This city has literally gone under the heel of Gentiles from A.D. 70 onward, as Romans and a host of other Gentiles dominated it down to the time of the Arabs. Rather than promise the fondly hoped-for restoration of God's kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6), the Lord revealed that Israel's fate would be dispersion and disintegration and the City's destiny is desolation.
4. The effect of this disaster would be lasting, but not necessarily eternal; simply *until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled*.
 - a. The simplest interpretation of this key time-limitation is that the desolation would last until the Gentiles, as instruments of God's government of the world, had completed this punitive judgment on the City and its people, the Jewish nation itself.
 - b. However, because the expression, *the times of the Gentiles* (*kairoi ethnôn*), may correctly speak of the *opportunity* which God grants the Gentiles, not merely to punish Israel, but primarily to enjoy His grace, Jesus means that the aforementioned disaster would continue during the period when the gracious offer of salvation is granted the Gentiles through the Gospel. (Cf. Mark 13:10; Rom. 11:25; Matt. 21:43.) Bruce (*Training*, 327) sees this special period of Gentile opportunity as "corresponding to the time of gracious visitation enjoyed by the Jews, referred to by Jesus in His lament over Jerusalem. Then he concludes:

It is incredible that Jesus should speak of a time of the Gentiles analogous to the time of merciful visitation enjoyed by the Jews, and imagine that the time of the Gentiles was to last only some thirty years. The Jewish *kairòs* lasted thousands of years: it would be only mocking the poor Gentiles to dignify the period of a single generation with the name of a season of gracious visitation.

Alford (I,637) is probably correct to notice that *the times (kairoi)* is plural because *the gentiles* is plural: "each Gentile people having in turn its *kairòs*."

- c. NOTE, however, that nothing is affirmed here about what will occur once *the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled*. Jesus does not affirm that the Jews will return to Jerusalem under the same terms they always enjoyed prior to their loss of the Holy City. That Jews have returned to the City is a fact of modern history, but their conversion either to the complete message of the Old Testament or to the Christ of the New Testament is not. Rather, the period in question may end when the Gentile world *per se* rejects Christ, just as the Jewish dispensation ended when the Hebrews as a people turned Him down. In fact, after *the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled*, God could bring world history to a complete halt, judge everyone and start eternity rolling for us, without so much as one backward glance at Jerusalem, Palestine or Jews.
- d. Another important observation: contrary to many views of Matthew 24:29-31 based on the expression, *until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled*, it may be correctly inferred that an indefinite period of time would follow Jerusalem's fall, so that Christ's return to earth could not be expected shortly after the Judean crisis. As will be seen, "immediately after the tribulation of those days" (24:29) may be interpreted in its natural sense, because it is not the Second Coming of Christ that is being announced for the period directly following Jerusalem's destruction. (See on 24:29.)

5. Warning: no hope of Christ's personal coming during the siege (24:23-28)

- a. Despite apparently miraculous signs, all false hopes of deliverance raised by false prophets must unswervingly be disregarded (24:23-26)

24:23 Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is the Christ, or, Here; believe it or not. *Then (tôte)*, i.e. during the same general period referred to before ("in those days," "then," vv. 19-22), thus, in the last, distress-filled days prior to the overthrow of Jerusalem. Although the appearance of false hope can plague Christians of any era, the peculiar uncertainties of a war-torn, first-century Palestine could stimulate unwarranted trust in rumors that Christ had returned to earth. This would tempt Jewish believers living in the Diaspora to flock to Palestine because of their love for Jesus and for their religious homeland. But it would also draw them right into the Roman trap just before it would spring shut. Jesus would not have His people lay down their lives unnecessarily for a wrong-headed nationalistic movement with which they should have no true, spiritual affinity or association.

If any man shall say unto you. . . . Contrary to false rumors, Jesus' true appearance will be so obvious and convincing (24:27) that there will be no need for false intelligence reports by charlatans! *Believe it not:* this command is repeated in v. 26 to make its force emphatically clear. Here is a severe test of one's discipleship: whom shall I believe when my world is falling apart? Jesus would guard His followers from losing Christ while believing themselves about to find Him!

The fact that Jesus reiterates this warning (24:4) is thought by some to be a change of subject from the perils surrounding the Jewish War to the Second Coming, for, say they, He could not have desired merely to repeat information already given, unless it related to another subject as, in this case, the Second Coming. On the contrary, the breakdown in communications between Christian groups that could occur in the chaos of the crumbling nation might well entice those congregations to rally behind anyone who held out a glimmer of hope for the doomed nation. This explains why our Lord must make His point emphatically clear by repeating it, especially in connection with the great tribulation of A.D. 66-70.

24:24 For there shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; so as to lead astray, if possible,

even the elect. *For:* this verse and those following reinforce verse 23 by way of parenthetical explanation. Jesus will not leave this point until verse 27. The excited cry, "Here is the Christ!" or "There!" (v. 23) is not to be believed because it involves false claims put forward by imposters, backed by deceptive credentials. Here the Lord returns to an earlier theme (v. 5) to clarify a particular point. But the fact that He is doing this helps to determine to what time period the information most specifically refers. The contention that "history knows little if anything of such false Christs prior to the Destruction of Jerusalem" has no validity, because it does not ask the right question. We must ask WHAT KIND of messianic concept moved the masses, and even Jesus' disciples, in the first century. Only thus will become clear WHAT KIND of *great signs and wonders* would have been so appealing as to tempt God's precious nucleus, the remnant that believed Jesus, into abandoning the true Christ for *false christs*. (Examine texts like the allurements and challenges Jesus was offered to become a Jewish Messiah: Matt. 4:9; 11:2; 16:21f.; 27:39-43; Luke 22:49; John 6:14f.; 7:3, 4; Acts 1:6.) These texts reveal the basely materialistic, nationalistic messianism of Jesus' contemporaries and explain the power of the temptation to all who held such notions. (See notes on 18:1; 20:20-28.)

So, a *false Christ* was not an Antichrist in the Johannine sense (I John 2:18ff.; II John 7) or even one who would necessarily perform lying wonders by Satanic power, in the Pauline sense (II Thess. 2:9), but a demagogue in Israel who pretended to be everything Jesus was not, but who would give Israel the kind of Christ Israel longed for but which Jesus refused even to offer. *False prophets*, in the Old Testament sense, are men who offered false hopes to a doomed, unrepentant Israel. (Cf. Jer. 8:10f.; 14:14-16; 20:1-6; chap. 23; 27:9-21; chaps. 28, 29; 37:19; Ezek. 13; 14:9-11; 22:28; chap. 34.)

Josephus' history documents the appearance of a number of politico-military messiahs who cruelly deceived themselves and the people with unfounded schemes for re-establishing the ancient independence of the theocracy as they conceived it (*Wars*, II,13,4; VI,5,2f.). Although the Lord had predicted the appearance of false prophets before the end (24:5), there would also be impostors during the Roman siege of Jerusalem too. Josephus (*Wars*, VI,5,2f.) recounts:

A false prophet was the occasion of these people's destruction, who had made a public proclamation in the city that very day, that God commanded them to get up upon the temple, and there

they should receive *miraculous signs of their deliverance*. Now there was then *a great number of false prophets* suborned by the tyrants to impose upon the people, who denounced this to them, that *they should wait for deliverance from God*; and this was in order to keep them from deserting, and that they might be buoyed up above fear and care by such hopes. Now, a man that is in adversity does easily comply with such promises; for when such a seducer makes him believe that he shall be delivered from those miseries which oppress him, then it is that the patient is full of hopes of such deliverance. . . . Thus were the miserable people persuaded by these deceivers, and such as belied God himself; while they did not attend, nor give credit, to the signs that were so evident, and did so plainly foretell their future desolation; but, like men infatuated, without either eyes to see the minds to consider, did not regard the denunciations that God made to them.

Surprisingly, despite guards set to prevent their escape (*Wars*, V,1,5), many succeeded in leaving Jerusalem by one means or another, even after its encirclement by the Romans (*Wars*, IV,6,3; 7,1; V,10,1; 13,7; VI,2,3). Even after that horrible carnage had begun within the city, people could yet be duped by false claims to speak for God and promise Israel's deliverance, and not even think of abandoning the doomed city. Because eventually 40,000 people were "saved, whom Caesar let go whither everyone of them pleased" (*Wars*, VI,8,2), even during the worst fighting and with the greatest menace from fiercely suspicious Zealots inside the City, the temptation would still be high to remain in the "fortress protected by God." So, Jesus' warning is also His attempt to save even beyond the last minute anyone who would believe Him in those horrifying circumstances and flee the City.

McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 621) caught the spirit of the times:

Nothing is more natural, however, than that the excitement attendant upon the ministry of Jesus should encourage many to attempt to become such a Christ as the people wanted. The Gospels show so widespread a desire for a political Christ that the law of demand and supply would be sure to make many such.

These all, the false deliverers and those taken in by them, fell for the temptation which Jesus resisted firmly to the end. His polestar was the program of God. Troubled times tempt men to embrace anything

that promises relief, and, without anchors, they welcome deceptions, instead of clinging to the help promised by God through the Scripture.

So as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. That ominous condition, *if possible*, must stir each believer to the core, "What kind of Christ-concept do I have, that would expose me to being led astray? What signs would function so effectively as finally to deceive me?" The possibility of fatal deception by imposters, in fact, is in direct proportion to the degree each believer uncritically and perhaps unwittingly already accepts the basic presuppositions on which the imposter's claims are based: desire for national independence from Rome, greed for gold, lust for power, blind commitment to the proposition that God is inextricably bound to bless the nation's political and economic future. Here is the choice: do we follow the popular theories, or do we trust Jesus instead?

24:25 Behold, I have told you beforehand. Why foretell these events? (Cf. John 16:1-4.) Three reasons suggest themselves:

1. "Despite the frightening prospects that are enough to paralyze decisive action, remember: you are thoroughly prepared to face this future with information and courage. You are not among the unbelievers who must wring their hands in despair over the dark unknown that looms over them. Rather, you know both the extent and the God-ordained limitations of that period (24:34). Further, you now possess directives for your conduct and for Gospel proclamation during the intervening years, and specific instructions about what to do when the final crisis of Jerusalem arrives at last. It is a stabilizing force and comfort to know that I have already clearly foreseen and foretold it forty years before the storm finally breaks, and have given you sound advice."
2. So, forewarned is forearmed. "The very appearance of impostors, since I, the true Christ, have warned you, will actually save you from being deceived. Their coming will prove I was right, justify your faith in me and save you." With these advance warnings that every rumor that Jesus had returned are false, Christians could calmly and without hesitation refute them as they arose. Because signs and wonders could be produced by false prophets (Deut. 13:1ff.; Acts 8:9ff.; II Thess. 2:9f.; Rev. 13:13f.), such wonders alone were not a final, definitive test of one's divine authority. The context of God's well-authenticated revelations were to serve as a check. (Cf. Isa. 8:20.) In this case, Jesus offers His own word as that framework with which to test others' claims.
3. Although He does not use the emphatic pronoun, "I" (*egō*), in

which case His point would be more emphatic, nevertheless, by calling attention to the prediction, He obtains the same result: "Notice, I have made you a prediction" (*idou proeirēka humîn*). Jesus has just placed His own prophetic ministry to the supreme test. If things do not take place as He predicted, HE TOO IS A FALSE PROPHET. This challenge is but one more way for Him to present His prophetic credentials. (See my notes on "prophetic credentials," Vol. III, 377f.) By so doing, He puts everyone's discipleship to the test: does each believe He knows what He is talking about? Do I trust Jesus that much?

24:26 If, therefore, they shall say unto you. (See notes on v. 23.) After furnishing the background for His order not to be duped by anyone who pretends to announce Christ's return, He amplifies it by listing other situations wherein the deceptive announcement could come.

Behold, he is in the wilderness. Not only would the deserted wastes of Palestine furnish an excellent base camp and mustering area for revolutionaries, but also a tempting quiet solitude for monastic contemplation under the leadership of imposters masquerading as ascetics of "the old school." For those who rejected John the Baptist (cf. 11:2-19), a text like Isa. 40:3-5 could be distorted and pressed into service for sectarian ends. The Qumran sect, for example, chose the wilderness to await the Messiah. Consider the case of Theudas. (See on 24:5.) Jesus' warning against going out into the wilderness is intensely practical, for it happened again under Felix (*Ant.* XX, 8, 6; cf. Acts 21:38) and again under Festus (*ibid.*, §10).

Behold, he is in the inner chambers. The presumably secret return of Christ linked with the claim He was in hiding until the moment of public revelation would entice the ignorant who claimed not to know where Christ should come from. (Cf. John 7:27.) Such secrecy, enforced by the charlatans and accepted by the gullible, would furnish maneuvering room for the pretenders to foment revolt and develop in their followers the psychological dependence essential to create a cohesive movement.

Go no farther . . . believing it not. So saying, Jesus pushes the disciples' confidence in His prophetic announcement to its logical conclusion: whose word will you follow? that of these false christs, however attractive, or this order given by me, your Master and Lord? What you do about either will decide your true loyalty. *Believe it not* means, BELIEVE ME!

b. Christ's true coming will be too obvious to require prophetic announcement (24:27)

24:27 **For:** what follows explains why none of the above-mentioned false announcements of Christ's return are to be believed. *As the lightning cometh forth from the east, and is seen even unto the west; so shall be the coming of the Son of man.* (Cf. Luke 17:23f.) In contrast to a localized coming marked by gradualism and the concealment and secrecy of the false christs who promise a revelation to a select few, the Second Coming will be so obviously visible as to need absolutely no advance publicity. By calling it *the coming* (*he parousia*), Jesus implies that there would be only one such appearance and no prior secret raptures about which any prophets on earth could make the aforementioned predictions.

There cannot be a supposed double reference in this verse (1) to His coming in providence to destroy Jerusalem, and (2) to His return on the Final Day. His coming in judgment on Jerusalem would be attended by clear signs indicating the approach of the critical hour, permitting Christians to escape the worst. But His final return will give no forewarning, but will strike like lightning, unexpectedly; not locally, but obvious to the entire world; not hidden temporarily only to be revealed by degrees, but everywhere, instantaneously and unmistakably visible; not in shoddy secrecy, but in brilliant, heavenly glory beyond all possibility of imitation.

Although the disciples first asked about *the coming of the Son of man* (24:3), this is the first time in this discourse Jesus mentioned His coming (*parousia toû huioû toû anthrôpou*). By using the word which became one of the usual technical terms for the Second Coming (*parousia*), He meant no other than His personal return at the end of the present world age. (Cf. I Cor. 15:23; I Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; II Thess. 2:1; James 5:7f.; II Peter 1:16.) How, then, is it possible for Him to insert information about His final return into a context that unquestionably involves problems connected with the final years of the Jewish state and the fall of Jerusalem? It is because the disciples had wrongly connected Jesus' Second Coming with the fall of Jerusalem. Hence, they too would be easily deceived by false announcements in that fateful era (v. 3). So, He must inform them that the Second Coming shall not require private prophetic preannouncements.

However, just because He has now mentioned His Second Coming does not mean He will continue to elaborate on it at this point. Many

have assumed that this is His procedure in vv. 29-31. Instead, it was sufficient for His purpose to assure the disciples that His coming, WHEN IT EVENTUALLY TOOK PLACE, would not be concealed, as preached by imposters, but perfectly evident to everyone. This first glance at His glorious return is inserted here only to illustrate how completely it contrasts with the views thereof preached by the ignorant. Hence, there is no need at this point to ask where Jesus changed over from discussing Jerusalem's fall to begin answering the disciples' question about the Second Coming. This is rather an insertion to clear up a misconception, not evidence of a complete change of subject.

c. Israel's hopeless deadness cannot but
attract scavengers (24:28)

24:28 Wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together. *Eagles (aetoi)* would be better translated "vultures," because the birds pictured here are carrion-eaters, whereas eagles, for the most part, kill their own food. (Cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 19; *I.S.B.E.*, 885f.; however, see Job 39:30b.) Further, the figure Jesus uses is not so much that of a swift flight of eagles that plummet on their yet-living prey (cf. Deut. 28:49; Jer. 4:13; 48:40; 49:22; Lam. 4:19; Hosea 8:1; Hab. 1:8), as that of the congregation (*ekéi sunachthésontai*) of vultures around *the carcass*. While for us, eagles and vultures are two distinct birds, the ancients classified the vulture among the eagles. (Aristotle, *Animal History* 9,32; Pliny, *Natural History* 10,3; Hebrew uses *nesher* indiscriminately for eagle [see the above passages], or vulture, Mic. 1:16; Prov. 30:17.)

Earlier (Luke 17:37), when questioned about WHERE these events would occur, He responded with this proverbial expression. To determine the sense and application of this striking aphorism we must recognize it for what it is, a proverb. Not to be taken literally, it stands symbolically for some other, literal reality. Expanded, Jesus' observation, would be, "See, you can recognize that the decaying remains of a corpse is lying on the ground, because of the vultures hovering over it. These make it evident to the observer that there is little or no life in what was once alive, only death and corruption." But what, in Jesus' allusion, is the *carcass* and what the *vultures*?

1. Because He had just spoken of His Second Coming, some apply His proverb to this event, believing that *wheresoever* cannot limit

His reference exclusively to one place like Jerusalem. Rather, wherever the condition of spiritual deadness is found, the sudden, punitive vengeance of the coming Christ will plummet, like the eagle to seize its prey. Granted, Jesus' words have the generalized ring of a proverb with multiple applications. However, to what specific case did He refer it this time? Further, the aforementioned objections to *eagle* are applicable here.

2. Contextually, Jesus is returning to His warning about false christs and false prophets whose excited pronouncements about a returned Christ could attract and destroy God's elect. In this case, *the carcass* would be the general moral corruption that invested the Jewish nation, while *the vultures* picture the imposters who profit from this spiritual confusion to serve their own interests.
3. However, since Jesus' larger context includes the destruction of Jerusalem, *the carcass* could be Jerusalem while the vultures would be the Roman army. Precisely because of the deteriorated political situation in Palestine, Rome had to intervene to bring order out of chaos. (Study Josephus' diagnosis of Palestinian politics from 60-70 A.D., *Ant.* XX,8,5; cf. chaps. 5-11, also his *Wars*, Preface, 2.) There is no necessity to notice the use of eagle symbols on Roman banners, for two reasons: (1) Jesus' meaning would be the same without any direct reference to them, and (2) to take *eagles* literally of the Roman standards but interpret *the carcass* symbolically is illegitimate hermeneutics. Further, this interpretation is less direct and obvious, since, in this paragraph, Jesus was not discussing Jerusalem's being surrounded by armies with their eagle banners, His immediate concern being the appearance of imposters raucously gathering around Israel like vultures to fatten themselves on Israel's moral putrefaction.

Either way, whether He means false prophets or Roman soldiers, Jesus argues that no hope of deliverance from God could be expected, just destruction and elimination of Jerusalem's glory. There would be no angels to liberate Israel, just vultures to devour the carcass.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. Cite the New Testament texts that indicate that the Gospel could have been universally proclaimed throughout the entire world in the first century.
2. What did Jesus mean by the "abomination of desolation"? Prove

- your answer by indicating from what source He quoted that phrase or where the reader must go to get an explanation for it.
3. The words "let the reader understand," are inserted in parentheses. Who said them and why?
 4. Explain how believers were to react to the one, clear, final signal that the desolation of Jerusalem was about to occur. What evidence is there that they reacted correctly?
 5. Explain why people in Judea, an already hilly country, are told to "flee to the mountains." What "mountains" are meant? How did the early Christians carry out Jesus' directions?
 6. Explain why Jesus thought there would be so many people "on the housetop."
 7. Explain why someone out in the country would want to enter Jerusalem to "take his mantle." What is this article and why is it important?
 8. Explain why people should not "take anything that is in (their) house."
 9. Explain why pregnant women and nursing mothers are singled out for special notice in the escape instructions.
 10. What hindrances to escape are peculiar to winter or to the sabbath in Palestine?
 11. If the "great tribulation" was to be totally unprecedented since "the beginning of the creation of the world" (Mark 13:19), how can Luke with propriety summarize Jesus' words that identify the particular sufferers as "this people will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles"? In what sense is the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the Jewish state rightly described as "great tribulation"?
 12. Who are "the elect" for whose sake the Lord would shorten the days of tribulation: the Jewish people per se, or Jewish Christians alone? Defend your answer.
 13. What are some of the historical factors in the crack of the Jewish commonwealth that not only precipitated its fall but also shortened the length of its tribulation?
 14. How could false christs and false prophets show signs and wonders? Reveal the source(s) of their persuasive power.
 15. Explain the allusion to the "carcass" and the "eagles" in context.

C. The Theological Results of Jerusalem's Fall (24:29-31)

TEXT: 24:29-31

(Parallels: Mark 13:24-27; Luke 21:25-28)

29 But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heaven shall be shaken: 30 and then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 31 And he shall send forth his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Many people who read this paragraph understand it to picture the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the world. But, if "the tribulation of those days" mentioned in the previous sections concerns the destruction of Jerusalem, with what right can Jesus state that His coming would occur *immediately after the tribulation*? Or, is He mistaken, since He did not return shortly after 70 A.D.? Or does this paragraph have anything to do with His Second Coming?
- b. Why do you suppose Jesus used this weird imagery to teach us: to make His meaning difficult or to simplify it? For whom would this imagery be particularly clear and communicate thrilling news in majestic concepts? Do you think that we too could understand Him, if we too could become like those who truly understood Him? What would it take to become like them?
- c. Do you seriously believe that "stars shall fall from heaven"? After all, if stars are heavenly bodies like our sun, even larger and grander, how or where could they "fall"?
- d. Jesus already talked about "earthquakes in various places" (v. 7) as well as "terrors and great signs from heaven" (Luke 21:11) in connection with the period prior to Jerusalem's fall. Once again He names what appear to be upheavals in nature (sun, moon, stars and powers of the heavens) in connection with "the

sign of the Son of man.” (1) Is there any connection? If not, why not? (2) If these latter upheavals in nature are not to be considered literal, then, of what are they symbolic?

- e. Did Jesus say that “the sign of the Son of man (would) appear in heaven,” or that the sign which would appear would be “the Son of man in heaven”? Is it the sign which is in heaven, or the Son of man? If you decide it is the latter, then, where is the sign located? In what would it consist?
- f. Why do you think all the tribes would mourn when this great sign appears? What will the sign mean to them? What would it mean to the Christians?
- g. Where do you suppose Jesus got all these unusual expressions, such as “the sun darkened, the moon not give light, stars fall,” or “tribes of the earth mourn,” or “Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven,” or “with a great trumpet,” or “gather together from the four winds”? Did Hebrews in Jesus’ time talk that way every day? If not, under what special circumstances did they use such phrases? Where did they get this language?
- h. If someone argued that this paragraph has nothing to do with a literal Second Coming of Jesus, what arguments would you collect right out of the text itself to show his conclusion mistaken? What data would you expect him to use to establish his case?
- i. If someone denies that this paragraph refers to Christ’s Second Coming, has anything been lost for the doctrine of the literal Second Coming? Are there any other New Testament texts that teach this grand truth? If so, what are they?
- j. If there are other New Testament texts that teach the Second Coming, are we free to consider this text in another sense, if this latter interpretation should turn out to be its true meaning rather than the Second Coming?
- k. How could believers of Jesus’ generation be caused to rejoice when what He meant by His highly figurative language actually began to occur? (Cf. 24:34; Luke 21:28.)
- l. If Jesus is not talking about the Second Coming at all, but about some quite earthly events in which His believers would be involved, what is to be gained by His using this prophetic jargon?
- m. If the Messiah’s victory is to occur *immediately after the tribulation of those days*, what kind of Messianic triumph actually took place following the destruction of Jerusalem?
- n. Why do you suppose Luke greatly simplified this section for his

readers? Would not they have understood these expressions taken from Jewish literature? What does this tell you about Matthew's production?

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

“Nevertheless, IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE TRIBULATION THAT WILL TAKE PLACE IN THE PERIOD JUST DESCRIBED, there shall be portents involving the sun, moon and stars: ‘the sun shall be darkened. The moon will not give its light. Stars will be falling from the sky. The celestial forces will be shaken.’ On earth nations will be in anguish, bewildered by the roar of the raging sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive about the events threatening the inhabited earth. At that time you will be able to see what is meant by ‘the Son of man in heaven.’ It is then that ‘all the tribes of the land will mourn.’ They too will experience what is meant by ‘the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory. He will then send forth His messengers ‘with a great trumpet.’ These will ‘gather’ His chosen people ‘from the four points of the compass, from the farthest horizon where heaven and earth meet.’ Now when THESE THINGS begin to occur, straighten up and lift your heads, because your emancipation is about to take place!”

SUMMARY

In close chronological connection with the fall of Jerusalem, disciples would observe the removal of the old, established luminaries in human (esp. Jewish?) affairs. Christ's reign would be clearly evident. Worldwide gospel proclamation would successfully save those who accepted to be chosen by God. These events would all be clues of the final emancipation of Christianity from Judaism, establishing the disciples of Christ as an independent people of God.

INTRODUCTION: HOW SHOULD WE INTERPRET THIS LANGUAGE?

Some conclude that Jesus' language in this section is too grand to depict an incident so limited as the fall of Jerusalem, or too broad to concern only one of earth's peoples, the Jews alive in 70 A.D. But before proceeding, we must ask, not modern questions, but ancient

ones: what would the original listeners have understood Jesus to mean by the language He used? In fact, as a thorough concordance study of this paragraph will demonstrate, almost every phrase is rich in literary history, having already been utilized by some Old Testament prophet to communicate awe-inspiring messages of both hope and doom to their contemporaries. What, then, would the first-century Hebrew readers of the Gospels have comprehended when Jesus made these statements?

1. THE PROPHETS' USE OF SIMILAR LANGUAGE, to predict the tremendous consequences surrounding the fall of pagan empires, may be thought useful language to describe one of history's greatest watershed events, the collapse and termination of Israel's exclusive privilege. If carnal Judaism is finally and publicly to be repudiated by God so that His precious elect remnant in Israel and among the nations can stand free and independent to carry out its world mission, then this event qualifies as one of the world's most momentous theological events, and should not appropriate language be adopted to portray it?

In the entire paragraph (24:29-31) the point to be solved is whether a personal appearance of the Lord is intended. The assumption of many is that the coming is literal, as also every other detail in this passage. However, were they literal when originally coined by the prophets from whom they are borrowed? If not, then by what exegetical rule do they become so in Jesus' discourse? If the prophets smoothly blended the literal and the poetic in the same prophecy, why cannot Jesus?

The sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken. What appears to be a universe gone wild is familiar talk for Hebrews saturated with Old Testament prophets like Isaiah (13:9-13) where similar apocalyptic language was coined to depict quite mundane events such as the destruction of Babylon by the Medes. Now, when an author clearly defines the meaning of his own jargon in the same context, we are not at liberty to require that he mean something else, even though his words seem to communicate much more to us because of the meanings WE associate with his expressions. (Cf. Isa. 24:18b-23 on the rise and fall of human government without God.) Later, Isaiah (34:4f.) employed similar poetic language to illustrate the earth-shaking magnitude of divine judgment on the Edomites. Ezekiel (32:7f.)

does not hesitate to borrow this eloquent speech to threaten Pharaoh and Egypt with heavenly chastisement, not by supernatural miracles, but by the quite earthly'' sword of the king of Babylon (Ezek. 32:11ff.). Joel presses this kind of speech into service to represent a locust invasion (Joel 2:10f.), the blessing to God's people (2:30f.) and His judgment on their foes (3:14ff.). The Apostle Peter gave the inspired interpretation of Joel's apocalyptic language, by pointing to the events that began on Pentecost as fulfilling Joel's words: "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel." (Acts 2:16-21; cf. Joel 2:28-32; see my notes, Vol. II, 452f.) Haggai uses the shaking of heavens, earth, the sea and the dry land, to unfold images of international war that would turn out to the blessing of God's people. (Cf. Hab. 3:11; Amos 8:9.)

Do the sciences of astronomy, geology or ancient history confirm a literal interpretation on the terrifying cosmic disorder this Old Testament language seems to convey? On the other hand, does ancient history record the actual fulfillment of what these poetic pictures conveyed, by the overthrow of the particular nations indicated? So, what this phraseology sounds like to us does not matter. For if, by the vivid images the prophets wove, God referred to earth-shaking events whereby pyramids of power would be overturned and shattered, **THIS IS THE MEANING**. The only question now remaining is to what great overthrow or high-level transformation in human affairs resulting from Jerusalem's fall and the Gospel's spread does Jesus allude here?

Was this highly symbolic language thought literal by intertestamental apocalyptists? (Cf. Assumption of Moses 10:4-7; IV Ezra 5:4-13.) And the Apostle John, like Isaiah, Ezekiel and Joel, employed these same apocalyptic concepts to describe God's judgment on men of earth who seek to escape God's final punishment (Rev. 6:12-17). His language, as defined by his book's title is to be understood as highly figurative, not literal: "The *apocalypse* of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:1). Cannot Jesus Christ Himself use the commonly accepted apocalyptic jargon of His day to convey His meaning to people who were accustomed to it? Milton Terry (*Hermeneutics*, 466) justly lamented:

We might fill volumes with extracts showing how exegetes and writers on New Testament doctrine assume as a principle not to be questioned that such highly wrought language as Matthew 24:29-31 . . . taken almost verbatim from Old Testament prophecies of judgment on nations and kingdoms which long

ago perished, must be literally understood. Too little study of Old Testament ideas of judgment, and apocalyptic language and style, would seem to be the main reason for this one-sided exegesis. It will require more than assertion to convince thoughtful men that the figurative language of Isaiah and Daniel, admitted on all hands to be such in those ancient prophets, is to be literally interpreted when used by Jesus or Paul.

The vocabulary was common to the Hebrew culture and gleaned from the Old Testament literature itself. The *people brought up in that culture understood the terms*. This explains why this apparently unconventional vocabulary would, in a sense, come to be thought of as the conventional expression for certain types of predictions. This vocabulary consists of vivid images that endeavor to describe the indescribable in human language. The power of such visions lies, not in the details, but in their ability to communicate the inconceivable in word-pictures that men can conceive.

To this some would object that to welcome the "spiritual" significance of the prophet's words is to reject the "true" meaning. But more often than not, in apocalyptic literature, the "true" meaning is not the literal one at all, but the "spiritual" one, the "actual" one, the "real" one, because for God, **WHATEVER IS SPIRITUAL IS REAL TOO**, perhaps far more so than what is material, and should not we have the same attitude?

2. **THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVENTS REQUIRES SUCH LANGUAGE.** Because God was planning to bring about deep-running changes in the religion and political life of that people which for millennia had been His chosen people, the language used to paint this revolution must be adequate to portray the transformation. The Jewish loss of their exclusive glory, unique privileges and national prerogatives cannot but represent the cruelest blow imaginable to this people. What kind of speech could be thought sufficiently appropriate to articulate such a catastrophe? Kik (*Matthew XXIV*, 79) asked, "If the use of such figurative judgment language against pagan nations was justified, how much more fitting would it be to the passing away of Judaism?" Bruce (*Exp. Gr. Test.*, 287) saw this:

An old world is going down and a new world is coming into being. Here surely is an occasion to provoke the prophetic mood! At such supreme crises prophetic utterances, apocalyptic forecasts, are inevitable.

Should such awe-inspiring language be thought too terrible or too broad for the final vanquishing of Israel by the Romans, let its larger context be recalled. God had threatened that the doom of unrepentant Israel was sealed (Deut. 28:15-68; 29:19-28; 30:18; 31:16-21, 27ff.; 32:1-43; Mal. 3:2-5; 4:1f.; Matt. 3:7-10; 8:11f.; 21:31, 41, 43; 22:7; 23:29-39). Even as early as His conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus affirmed that Jerusalem would not be the center of worship in the Messianic age (John 4:21). So, Jerusalem's elimination was to be God's signal to the Judeo-Christian world that the old Mosaic era, with its exclusively Jewish Kingdom of God and its capital at Jerusalem, was terminated. (Cf. Gal. 4:25-31.) The bondage is over, not merely ideally, as when Christ's death ended the Law theologically, but also practically, in concretely evident fact (Heb. 12:11; 13:14).

NOTES

1. The time connection: Immediately after Jerusalem's great tribulation (24:29a)

24:29 But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun shall be darkened . . . Unquestionably *the tribulation of those days* is the same sufferings (24:8) described earlier as "great tribulation . . . in those days" (24:19-22), a period that Luke (21:23f.) characterizes as "great distress upon the earth and wrath upon this people. They shall fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles." Therefore, what is meant by the phraseology of our paragraph (24:29-31) must take place *immediately after* that period of *tribulation* surrounding the appalling desolation of the Jewish State. (Cf. Mark 13:24.) What is about to be pictured would have a certain immediacy of connection, even if the event itself is not an integral part of that tribulation or its culmination per se. It would express the same sort of relationship that exists between cause and effect, antecedents and consequences.

It is mistaken to affirm, with some, that the glorious signs and predictions here listed hardly appear suited to Jerusalem's fall.

Granted, but these signs and predictions here listed a different, more glorious event portrayed in vv. 30, 31. However, the intended event would be not at all distant in time. This is excluded by Jesus' insistence that it be *immediately after the* foregoing catastrophe.

Further, verses 32-34 speak unquestionably of Jerusalem's destruction after the great tribulation and other successive events, because all these are scheduled to occur during the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries. (See on 24:32-34.) Therefore, to think of verses 29-31 as depicting the Second Coming is not only to insert this subject out of place, creating a confused chronological order, but also it makes Christ assert that His own coming was scheduled for a moment *immediately after* the fall of Jerusalem, although He later denied any definite knowledge of the Father's scheduling for the Second Coming (v. 36) and clearly hinted that a long, indefinite period must elapse first (24:48; 25:5, 19). The expression, *immediately after*, is wrongly taken figuratively while all else is taken literally.

How should we deal with the contention that Luke's version (Luke 21:23-27) extends the tribulation in question from the fall of Jerusalem and the worldwide Jewish dispersion, "until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled," i.e. the entire period of Gentile dominance from the end of Israel as a nation until Jesus returns again? According to this view, Jesus' return, pictured by Matthew 24:29-31, occurs *immediately after* the Gentile persecution of the Jews. On the contrary,

1. Jesus did not imply that the crisis of the "great distress" itself would last this long, but only that the RESULT of that disaster, the ruin of Jerusalem, would be long-lasting (Luke 21:24).
2. Further, He is not describing the "great (Christian) tribulation," which indeed must last until His Return, but only the Jewish one, from which the early Christians could escape by obeying Jesus. From their own sufferings Christians could not flee without faithlessness to Him. (Cf. Rev. 1:9; 7:14.)

Some, because they view the Second Coming as scheduled *immediately after the tribulation of those days* of Jerusalem's deathblow, assert that *the tribulation* He means merely COMMENCED with the collapse of the Jewish nation. Further harassment, persecution and dispersion began hard on the heels of that debacle, i.e. *immediately after*, and have continued down to the present day in which Israel, as a nation, is still subjected

to an uncertain future at best and to continual war-time emergencies at worst. However, the Lord divulged that "the days are to be shortened," NOT LENGTHENED NEARLY 2000 YEARS (Matt. 24:22).

Further, how should we deal with the contention that Luke's version (Luke 21:24-28) merely declares what would occur after the Gentiles had had their day, i.e. the signs that would prefigure Christ's coming? At least two rebuttals are possible:

1. His Return is not an event subject to prior warning signals, hence whatever is intended cannot be the Second Coming.
2. Luke is merely returning to the point in Jesus' discourse where He left off discussing the fall of Israel to indicate how long its suffering would endure. There is no time connection indicated in Luke's text, only an "and," so who can prove he must be understood to indicate facts to occur at least two millennia later, if not longer? (Cf. Luke 21:24f.)

So, *immediately after* cannot be interpreted in some figurative sense that attempts to avoid its normal, obvious sense, while interpreting literally such contextual phenomena as the sun's darkening and the fall of the stars, etc., language which, in the prophets, had acquired a conventional, hence well-understood, symbolic sense. To affirm the non-literal character of the symbols used in this paragraph detracts nothing from the admittedly literal character of the final world conflagration described elsewhere (II Peter 3:7-13; II Thess. 1:7-9).

What about PROPHETIC PERSPECTIVE? Some affirm that *immediately after* expresses the prophet's perspective in the sense that the Seer conceives of the events as mountain peaks in the distance without being able to discern or reveal the precise distance or relationship of one peak to the other. He can describe them as one in the foreground and the other *immediately after*, or behind it. The consecutive order of the two key events prophesied is indicated, but not the time intervening between them. However, while "prophetic perspective" is at times undoubtedly a characteristic of true prophecy, this explanation must be resorted to when the events predicted cannot be considered to be connected directly in time. However, as will be shown, this impossibility does not exist in the relationship between the fall of Jerusalem and the events Jesus proceeds to portray.

If it be asked why *immediately after* should be understood literally, when everything following it should be considered "apocalyptic jargon," hence figuratively, it is because the realities expressed in figurative language actually take place in time sequences and so require time indicators to express these chronological relationships. Hence, Jesus rightly indicated the temporal connection between the foregoing prophecies and what follows.

From the point of view of Jewish nationalism, Jesus' expression, *immediately after*, is both incredible and shocking. For, how could a true, competent Christ appear *immediately after* His own Temple and capital City were demolished and His own people were dragged into captivity? Nothing Jesus promised in the following section (24:29-31) established Israel's priority or justified strictly nationalistic chimeras. Rather, He says much to dash such hopes. For, *immediately after* means He would come too late to be of any use to the Zealots and all who ultimately subscribed to their understanding of the Messianic Kingdom. It is this very feature, His *immediately after*, that marks Him as a truly God-sent Christ whose program would shake the earth, rearrange previously well-established powers on earth and accomplish what Judaism never could. From God's point of view, therefore, Jesus' timing, *immediately after*, would be perfect!

2. The collapse and removal of the old, established luminaries (24:29b)

The sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken. If these phenomena are figurative, as argued earlier, to what, then, do they refer? That heavenly bodies are used in Scripture to signify quite earthly people and events is well-established. Joseph's dream of the sun, moon and eleven stars referred only to his own family (Gen. 37:9f.). Nebuchadnezzar is addressed as "fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn . . . cast down to earth," because of his self-exaltation to heaven to raise his throne above the stars of God and make himself like the Most High (Isa. 14:12ff.). Compare Daniel's description of another earthly king (Dan. 8:10, 23ff.; 11:36f.). The logic of this literary phenomenon is understandable because *sun, moon, stars and the power of the heavens*

for the ancient peoples signified everything that speaks to mankind of permanence and stability. Man measured his days by *the sun*; his seasons by *the moon*; his trackless path by *the stars*. Many assumed that life is influenced by *the powers of the heavens*. Consequently, as Luke puts it (21:25f.), a universe running amok terrifies earth's people who know nothing of God's loving dominion. Worlds in chaos is highly suitable metaphorical language to depict the downfall of potentates, the eclipse of nations and the tumult of peoples.

In harmony with the symbolism created by the Old Testament writers, Jesus means that what occurs at the highest levels of government and the international level deeply affects the well-being and tranquility of the people involved. (Cf. I Tim. 2:2.) In apocalyptic language *the sea* (cf. Luke 21:25) symbolizes the world's peoples. (Cf. Dan. 7:2f., 17; Rev. 13:1, 11; 17:1, 15.) Thus, the little people of the world are profoundly shaken as top-level revolutions shake everything loose thought securely nailed down and on which society's emotional stability depends. So, Jesus is declaring that, *immediately after the tribulation of those days* surrounding Jerusalem's fall, believers would witness the breakup of all that had seemed most permanent and durable before. This great Day of the Lord would signal the end of the existing dispensation. But to which specific "heaven" did Jesus allude?

1. THE CHRISTIAN FIRMAMENT? What if this language, once used to depict deep-running convulsions in world politics, is now utilized by Jesus to depict the apostasy in the Church's life history, as some suggest? These see *the sun* as God's Son of righteousness, His Son, Jesus. (Cf. Mal. 4:2.) *The moon*, because it shines by light reflected from the sun, becomes dark when the sun is darkened. If it is the Church that reflects the light of Christ in this dark world, than her influence is eclipsed when men lose respect for the Lordship of Christ, even in the Church. Accordingly, *the stars*, looked at from the point of view of popular astronomy, are lesser lights in God's firmament of luminaries. These would symbolize those messengers in the Church whose ability to give men guidance is dimmed by a growing apathy toward God's Word. (Cf. Rev. 1:16, 20; 2:5.) In this sense, then, roots of apostasy, already manifest in the apostolic period, would produce a general defection from God's revelations, faithfulness to the Lord would wane and the Church would truly undergo the "Dark Ages." This dimming of the Greater Light and the Lesser Lights actually occurred reasonably

immediately after the tribulation of those days in 70 A.D. The farther the Church moved from the revealed truth after the death of the Apostles and early witnesses, the dimmer grew its witness, leaving a distressed world without confident leadership that would preach only God's Word. But from the standpoint of His Jewish audience, it would seem more probable that Jesus referred to something more in line with the Old Testament revelations to Israel.

2. THE JEWISH HEAVENS. He meant the Jewish heavens of His own era, the religious and civil powers of that condemned nation. Because the religious authority was of such crucial importance for the supreme uniqueness of Judaism, the tottering and collapse of the Temple, its priesthood and sacrificial system could be considered by the orthodox and reflective among the people as nothing less than the end of an era (*sunteleias tou aiōnos*; 24:3). During the first fifty years of the first century, for example, who could have foreseen with certainty that Herod Antipas, Annas, Caiaphas and all they stood for in the world would all be rudely snatched from their Jewish heaven and hurled into political oblivion? And yet those stars fell, that sun and moon shone no more! If these cataclysmic events are correctly interpreted as applying to Israel's defeat, then it is clear that *immediately after* their national disaster of 70 A.D., the once-exalted, unique theocracy of Israel went into permanent eclipse as God's light-bearers before the nations. (Study Heb. 12:25-29 as commentary on this transition.) Now the Church of Christ occupies this glorious position (Phil. 2:15f.; John 8:12; Matt. 5:14ff.; I Peter 2:9f.). Although Christianity would be established at a time when kingdoms, thrones and religious systems would be thoroughly shaken, it would be a Kingdom that shall never be shaken or replaced by anything better this side of glory (Dan. 2:44; 7:14; Heb. 12:28). From the viewpoint of Jesus' contemporaries, the loss of Judaism's glory would be a world-shaking tragedy indeed, an eclipse. From God's point of view, however, the removal of things that can be shaken in order to establish a Kingdom that cannot be shaken is but to treat the former as obsolete. What, for Him, was already growing old was ready to vanish away even in the first century (Heb. 8:13; 12:27f.).

3. The Messiah's victorious, heavenly reign vindicated (24:30)

24:30 **Then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven.** *Then*, as in v. 9, may mean (1) "during that time just alluded to";

or (2) "thereafter, after the events just mentioned, next in order." As will be seen, either meaning is applicable here, because in the light of the conflagration that destroyed Jerusalem's Temple the Jews could see Jesus' every warning and prophecy fully justified, and His authority vindicated more and more with the passing of the old order.

Then shall appear the sign, but Jesus does not indicate where it would be seen. He certainly did not affirm that a sign would appear in heaven, because *in heaven* does not modify *sign*, but *the Son of man*. It is not, as many believe, "the sign in heaven," but *the Son of man in heaven*. What does appear will indicate (= signify) the presence of *the Son of man in heaven*.

But is this a genitive of apposition or a genitive of source?

1. Genitive of Apposition: *the sign* which is *the Son of man in heaven*. Some argue that Christ is His own self-evidencing sign. But, if the appearance of the Son of God in the sky were the sign, then Jesus would be using the word *sign* in a way foreign to every other normal meaning of this term. Normally, a *sign* substitutes for the object to which it points, so how could He Himself be the "sign," when His own personal appearance is supposedly the reality to be pointed out?
2. Genitive of Source: *the sign* comes from, or is given by, *the Son of man in heaven*, sent by Him to indicate something to men. This is the conventional use of this term and the preferable interpretation.

Jesus furnished His people a sign that would be plainly evident on earth, that would convince thoughtful, informed men that He had indeed been exalted to heavenly power, i.e. that He is truly *the Son of man* and is *in heaven*, and that His divine authority, supernatural power and providential influence is at work in all these earthly events. At this point He passes over in silence all the great miracles that He would have been doing for more than forty years previous to this last, great demonstration. Thus, just as He passed over the multiplicity of miracles He was doing during His earthly ministry and pointed to His resurrection as the grand proof of His identity and authority (cf. John 2:19-22; Matt. 12:38-40), Jesus does not mention all the powerful evidences of the Holy Spirit's activity from Pentecost until 70 A.D., opting to give men as final proof an evidential sign which consisted in the wrecking of the old institutions of Judaism.

So, *the sign of the Son of man in heaven* has nothing to do with the Second Coming, because, though the disciples had requested

“the sign of your coming (*parousia*)” (24:3), Jesus declared that His Second Coming would occur with no prior indication of its near approach. No forewarning *sign* could or would be given (24:36, 42ff., 50; 25:13). Therefore, what is meant by verse 30, where a *sign* is clearly promised, cannot refer to an event which, by divine decree, can have no early warning signal. *The sign* in question will be further amplified shortly.

And then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn. The translation, *earth*, (*gê*) is misleading since the Greek *gê* also means “a land, region or country.” In the Hebrew mind *the land* par excellence is the Promised Land, Palestine. Conclusive confirmation of this interpretation comes from Zechariah 12:10ff., the source of Jesus’ language. That prophet predicted that, following an unusual out-pouring of grace and supplication on the royal Davidic house and on Jerusalem’s inhabitants, God’s people would look on Him, the One whom they pierced and *mourn* bitterly as for a firstborn son. The weeping in Jerusalem would be so great as to be reminiscent of the nation’s grief when the good king Josiah fell in battle in the area of Megiddo (II Chron. 35:20-25). Rightly did they mourn, for with Josiah’s untimely death religious reform ended and Israel’s final decline accelerated as the nation plunged toward disaster and captivity. The national mourning involved the entire *land* of Israel (Heb. *ha eretz*; Gr. *he gê*). Each *tribe* of Israel would *mourn*, tribe by tribe (LXX: *katà fulàs fulàs*). Then he names the royal and religious authorities of Israel, the house of David and the family of Levi, whose loss is selected for special notice in that their lineal descendants stand for the Messianic line and the Priesthood respectively. Finally, Zechariah affirms that *all the tribes* remaining would also join in the national grief. Jerusalem particularly but also all of Israel would weep over her King who came to save His people (Zech. 9:9) but was valued at thirty pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12). Although He was Himself deity, He would be pierced (Zech. 12:11) and His flock scattered (Zech. 13:7).

Jesus’ allusion, then, cannot be to pagan clans scattered throughout the inhabited earth, but specifically to the stricken tribes of the ancient people of God, the Jews who inhabited *the land* of Israel. Now, while this prophecy would find immediate fulfillment during Jesus’ own suffering (John 19:37; Luke 23:27ff., 48), He affirms that the time would come when the Jews would once again grieve bitterly.

NOTE: their mourning is not even primarily connected with Jesus’ Second Coming, as some interpret Revelation 1:7, but must find

direct connection with His suffering during His first coming (John 19:37). If John rightly applies Zechariah 12:10 to Christ's crucifixion, he proves that reference to the Second Coming is not the only appropriate fulfillment and one's interpretation of Revelation 1:7 must take this fact into account.

While some assume that the mourning arises out of all sinners' recognition that Jesus has personally returned to be their implacable Judge, this conclusion is less likely than two more probable alternatives, both of which express Zechariah's full concept:

1. Godly sorrow leads to genuine repentance (II Cor. 7:8-11; Consider Luke 23:48 and John 19:37 in the light of Acts 2:37-41). In the fulfillment, those who were deeply convicted of their guilt of rejecting their long-awaited Messiah, turned to the great Sin-bearer, Jesus, mourning their sinfulness and were graciously saved by His Gospel in time. (Cf. Zech. 12:10; 13:1.)
2. Hopeless mourning is that wordly grief that merely regrets wasted opportunities and bad results but leads to no moral decision to submit to Jesus and ends only in death (II Cor. 7:10). In the fulfillment, those Jews who continue obstinately in their unbelief and rejection of Jesus, would shriek with despair, because unwilling to change their past and unable to alter the consequences of their unbelief. It is striking that, in 70 A.D., Israel permanently lost all hope for her royal house (DAVID) and her entire sacrificial system of purification before God (LEVI) in one blow.

Jesus' time connection is highly revealing: when *the sign of the Son of man in heaven appears*, then will Israel mourn, as if the cause of their desperation and sorrow were the appearing of the sign. The connection is clear: those who assassinated God's Son would live to see the day when He would be gloriously vindicated and the resultant heinousness of their crime against Him appropriately exposed and punished. Further, in Jesus' context, their grief may also be occasioned by the "shaking of the powers of the heavens" (24:29). If by that phrase He meant the collapse of their once glorious system whereby Israel bore the light of God in pagan darkness, then the definitive loss of this exalted, unique institution must provoke deep mourning in all those who profoundly felt this grave loss. But Jesus does not leave them in ignorance about the true motive of their grief. This is revealed in further fulfillment of prophecy.

And they shall see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Because Jesus indicated no time sequence between this declaration and the preceding, as if the event involved followed it, we are free to consider this sentence as an expansion of His earlier phrase, *the sign of the Son of man in heaven*, which, when seen, caused *the tribes of the land to mourn*. The words, *Son of man* and *heaven*, naturally suggest this connection.

When Mark and Luke report only this phrase without mentioning *the sign*, they are only being less explicit than Matthew. They correctly quoted Jesus' words which summarize Daniel 7:13f., and must not be understood as promising a personal appearance in the skies. Matthew is more precise in that he first indicates that men would behold the appearance of a sign that Jesus Christ now reigns in heaven. Then, in harmony with Mark and Luke, our author quotes the prophetic words that define the content of that sign. So, we interpret the less explicit statements of Mark and Luke in light of the fuller citations of Jesus' words by Matthew, not vice versa.

Because *the tribes of the earth* indicated in the citation from Zechariah are the Jewish people, it is principally, although not exclusively, *they* who *shall see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven*. So, if the primary focus is on carnal Israel's seeing this reality and mourning because of it, what more significant realization could be imagined in all history than when all of unbelieving Israel gathered together in the land as a nation for one last fatal assembly before its final, millennial dispersion, i.e. at the Passover of 70 A.D.? This restriction of time and place would exclude the Second Coming as its primary fulfillment.

Once again Jesus adopted well-known Old Testament phraseology to express His own concepts (Dan. 7:9-14). Daniel dreamed he saw God as a great, venerable Old Man seated on a throne of judgment. This tribunal was to be held in the era of the fourth great world empire (Dan. 7:15-27). Even though the full implications of what occurred then would not be fully realized until Final Judgment, something began that would transform world history. In fact, onto the stage before the throne there came "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence." Observe: *the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven* WAS NOT APPROACHING EARTH, BUT THE

THRONE OF THE ALMIGHTY. In Daniel's vision, *coming on the clouds* means that the Son of man was coming onstage, into the scene. It is not a *coming* toward Daniel or toward earth, but a *coming* seen from the standpoint of God, since Daniel uses three verbs that all indicate this: "coming . . . approached . . . was led to" the Ancient One. This is no picture of the Second Coming, because *the Son of man* is going the wrong way for that. His face is turned, not toward earth, but toward God. His goal is not to receive His saints, but to receive His Kingdom. (Cf. I Peter 3:22; Luke 19:12; Acts 2:32-36; 3:22; 5:31; Col. 3:1; Rev. 3:21.) Daniel continued (7:14),

He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Jesus summarized this verse by describing the coming of the Son of man *with power and great glory*.

The TIME indicated by Daniel for this transfer of imperial power from the domain of world monarchs to that of the Kingdom of the Son of man and of the saints of God, was after the rise of the fourth great world empire, Rome. (Cf. Dan. 2:44; 7:17f.) This coincides with Jesus' other time notices, as His disciples must expect to "see the Son of man coming in His kingdom" during their lifetime, an appearance which would unquestionably prove "the kingdom of God come with power" (Matt. 16:28; Mark 9:1). This time-frame is repeated in this discourse too (24:34; cf. 23:36).

So, Jesus' use of Daniel's imagery implies that Israel would see the day when Daniel's words must apply most clearly and meaningfully to Himself, i.e. when His own divine authority would be vindicated beyond all doubt. But there arises a natural question: how would skeptical Jews be convinced of this conclusion? How could anyone trace a cause/effect relationship between Christ's invisible, heavenly sentences (cause) and earthly events (effect)? Further, the expression, *they shall see*, would seem fatal to any INVISIBLE "coming of the Son of man on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory"! However, three facts must be reckoned with:

1. Christ's Kingdom and rule is not some future aspiration, but a present reality.
2. Christ need not be visible to manifest His authority on earth.
3. Christians, too, will see and comprehend Christ's triumph.

CHRIST REIGNS NOW

Indisputably, our participation in "the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" is yet future (Acts 14:22; II Tim. 4:18; II Peter 1:11). Nevertheless, His rule is not merely future aspiration, but a present reality. (See my Special Study on the Kingdom, Vol. III, 160ff.) That His rule has already begun and does not await some distant date is fact.

1. He possessed universal authority even before His ascension (11:27; 12:28; 28:19; John 5:21-29; 17:2). Was this merely nominal, unsubstantial, fictitious or true authority?
2. His coming in His Kingdom occurred in the lifetime of the Apostles (16:28; Mark 9:1). On Pentecost men submitted to His Lordship (Acts 2:33-36) and were transferred out of Satan's realm into "the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Col. 1:13). Believers preached (Acts 20:25) and suffered for His Kingdom in the first century (Rev. 1:9).
3. Christ's rule is carried on from God's heavenly throne (Eph. 1:20ff.; Heb. 1:3).
4. Christ's Kingdom was given to humble, teachable disciples (18:3f.; 19:14; 21:31f.; Luke 12:32; 22:29f.). Being not of this world, His Kingdom is no threat to the proper exercise of civil authority (John 18:36).
5. His Kingdom must continue until every enemy is destroyed (Heb. 2:14f.; 10:12f.; I John 3:8; I Cor. 15:24-28).
6. His sovereignty is partially expressed in the earthly warfare of His saints against spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places, but with spiritual, not material, weapons (Eph. 6:10ff.; II Cor. 10:3-6) and with spiritual results (I John 5:4, 5; John 16:33).

That Christ's Kingdom will become undeniably evident at the Final Judgment is unquestioned and is probably the splendid climax and final fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. What is here affirmed, rather, is that even now the Son of God rules, judges, raises up and casts down whomever He will, and that this Kingdom, however invisible or intangible, is not unreal, impractical, insignificant or powerless.

CHRIST'S REIGN NEED NOT BE VISIBLE TO BE REAL

Some assume that *they shall see . . .*, means that for Jesus to come on the clouds or to reign on earth, He must be visible. If such an

invisible Kingdom seem impractical, unreasonable or unworthy of divine government, let God's mighty, historical judgments on the world's nations, empire and kings testify. They are not uninformative (Rom. 15:4; I Cor. 10:11; II Tim. 3:14-17).

1. How has God manifested His presence to men to make His reality recognizable to them? He presented Himself visibly in physical form to Abraham (Gen. 18) or to Moses as "the angel of the Lord" (Exod. 3:2-5) or to others in vision (Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 1:25ff.; 3:23; 10:18f.; 11:23). These unquestionably real self-revelations, however, do not exclude another mode whereby God manifested Himself to men. Is a visible presence essential to fulfill the requirements of the following texts: Genesis 11:5f.; I Samuel 3:10; 5:1-12; 6:5? Did the burning bush experience of Moses or the pillar of fire exhaust the meaning of God's affirmation: "I am come down to deliver" (Exod. 3:8)? Was He not raining down plagues on Egypt, defeating the cream of Pharaoh's army and working mighty miracles for Israel, even without a visible, physical presence? The complaining Israelites could still snarl, "Is the Lord among us or not" (Exod. 17:7)? His was not a material apparition but a nevertheless real leadership by His Holy Spirit (Isa. 63:10-14). Was His fellowship less real to believers merely because it was spiritual and invisible? (Contrast Isa. 42:19f.)
2. How did God manifest His presence at the national and international level to convict men of His sovereignty? What did man see?
 - a. One major prophetic emphasis of Ezekiel's message is to communicate God's self-revelation by means of a series of events undeniably evident in world history, whereby all who ever heard of these facts could recognize that these incidents were no mere chance occurrences, but nothing less than the carefully planned activity of a sovereign, living God.
 - (1) 34 times God concludes a threatened punishment upon Israel, affirming, "I will stretch out my hand against them and make the land a desolate waste . . . *Then they will know that I am the Lord . . . then you will know that it is I the Lord who strikes the blow*" (Ezek. 2:5; 5:13ff.; 6:7, 10, 13f.; 7:4, 9, 27; 11:10, 12; 12:15f., 20; 13:9, 14, 21, 23; 14:8; 15:7; 17:21, 24; 20:38, 44, 48; 21:5; 22:16, 22; 23:49; 24:24, 27; 33:29, 33).
 - (2) 26 times God threatens foreign powers with punishment so that they too "will know that I am the Lord" (Ezek. 25:5,

- 7, 11, 14, 17; 26:6; 28:22ff.; 29:6, 9, 16; 30:8, 19, 25f.; 32:15; 35:4, 9, 12, 15; 38:16, 23; 39:6f., 21).
- (3) 12 times God concluded a promised blessing of Israel whereby they could easily discern God's hand in earthly events and "*know that I am the Lord*" (Ezek. 16:62; 17:24; 28:26; 29:21; 34:27, 30; 36:11, 38; 37:6, 13f.; 39:28).
 - (4) God described the Gentile nations' punishment so that its realization would convince Israel to "*know that I the Lord have spoken*" (Ezek. 35:11; 39:21f.).
 - (5) God's restoration of Israel must convince Gentiles that Jahweh is the true God of heaven and Israel's God (Ezek. 36:23, 36, 38).
- b. GOD'S CLEARLY-DEFINED PATTERN OF SELF-REVELATION IN HISTORY'S EVENTS:
- (1) GOD ANNOUNCED HIS PLANS BEFOREHAND as adequate forewarning, so men could look forward to the realization of what was beyond human power to foresee or forestall (Isa. 14:26f.; 19:12; 37:20-37; 41:20-29; 42:9; 45:19ff.; 48:14f.).
 - (2) THEN GOD DID WHAT HE SAID HE WOULD (Isa. 30:30ff.; 42:23ff.; 44:7f.; 48:3; 64:1-4).
 - (3) Because the news was also to be announced to all nations (Isa. 48:20), men could draw the correct conclusion: what God says, He will do. His rule is real and His will must be obeyed in other areas too (Isa. 17:7f.; 19:19-25; 24:14; 43:12f.; 45:1-6, 14; 48:3-7, 16; 49:23, 26; 52:6; 54:15ff.).
- c. Thus, God's mighty acts in history were not merely to punish or bless either Israel or the nations, but to lead all men, Jews and Gentiles alike, to confess that Israel's God is the only truly self-existent, eternal, living God, who alone is worthy of adoration and service. Israel was to learn that it was Jahweh who struck them, not merely some pagan foreign power, so they would return to Him (Isa. 9:13; Jer. 5:3). There was no supernatural exhibition of God's person in the skies over Israel or Jerusalem when He poured out His wrath on them. Nevertheless, from the outcome of the events, His people were to draw the necessary conclusion that the LORD HIMSELF directed those remedial chastisements (cf. Joel 2:11). They were to conclude that punishments like the sacking of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple furnish irrefutable evidence that "a great day of the

Lord has come." (Cf. Isa. 2:12-22; Amos 5:18ff.; Zeph. 1:7ff., 14f.; 2:2f.) THIS WAS A CONCLUSION THEY WERE TO DRAW, foreannounced indeed by prophets, but not an affirmation written in flaming letters across the sky nor thundered from heaven. This they could DEDUCE as the Babylonian war machine, for example, rolled into the beleaguered Holy City to pillage, slaughter and burn. But this was a CONCLUSION well-grounded in many prophecies that guided Israel to read their destiny aright, even if in the light of the flames that consumed their last hope of reprieve from divine justice. (Cf. Jer. 5:19.)

3. Merely because one cannot discern God's Kingdom materially visible does not constitute proof that it does not exist or has somehow failed. The above-cited references often allude to God's hand stretched out over a given people to punish it. But who seriously believes that a gigantic fist appeared in the sky over them to smash them for their sins? To the contrary, the prophets sometimes indicate which specific, quite earthly enemy power would be God's appointed instrument, be they some great empire or the marauding desert tribes, or even Israel herself (Ezek. 25:4, 14; 26:7; 30:24f.; 32:11f.; 29:19f.; cf. Jer. 51:11; I Chron. 5:26; 21:16). In the colossal shifts in imperial power in the ancient Near East God established His sovereignty as Lord of history (Dan. 2:21, 44). This lesson was so clear that even a Nebuchadnezzar could understand it (Dan. 4:3, 34ff.). On some occasions, because of a direct revelation, earth's monarchs were brought to their knees before God's universal dominion (Dan. 2:47; 3:28f.; 4:28-37; 5:18-21; 6:25ff.). At other times God overthrew thrones and established justice despite the evil intentions of the human agents He used. (Cf. Isa. 10:5-19, 24ff.; 13:5; 14:24-29; 30:30ff.; 31:8f.; 38:6; Jer. 51:20ff., 27ff.; Mic. 4:11f.). These acts of God were to convince Israel that God's servant, Nebuchadnezzar, for example, was nothing more nor less than God's tool operating at the level of empire (Isa. 44:28; Jer. 25:9-14; 46:10). In Israel or elsewhere only the crass unbeliever could pout, "But I expected something different, something more psychologically convincing, some more spectacular evidence of God's reality and sovereignty!"
4. Just as God ruled men from heaven without personally and visibly directing history's traffic from some mountain top, overthrowing thrones and shattering the power of kingdoms (cf. I Chron. 29:11f.; Hag. 2:2f.), so everything Jesus was doing was intended to produce

the conviction in the dispassionate observer that Jesus Christ is Lord. Jesus followed the same model established by God: He forewarned of Jerusalem's fall. Then He brought it to pass. Thus, men could conclude that the Crucified One sits on the Throne at the center of the universe, that He has indeed *come on the clouds of heaven*, and shall come again, as He said.

Must His reign seem less real, just because it too is invisible? Can we believe it to function effectively, even if He is not seated on a golden, Davidic throne in Jerusalem (John 18:36)? Merely because we cannot observe His reigning, must we repeat the ancient slander: "Is the Lord among us or not" (Exod. 17:7)? Proponents of millennial theories that require a messianic throne of David in Jerusalem appear to be dissatisfied with a spiritual kingdom, as if its spiritual character somehow compromises its reality and power. All must learn to live with Jesus' promise: "I will be with you always, to the very close of the age" (28:20). Rather than confirm His word by appearing bodily after His departure, He sent His Spirit to be with us and in us. Significantly, it was in a context such as Ezekiel's five apologetic defenses mentioned above, that God's promise to send His Spirit arises. So, if God approaches earth to re-organize its inhabitants any way He chooses but needs no visible, material body to accomplish this, why must it be thought strange that Jesus Christ need not appear in the sky before earthly judgments can be wrought on the earth by Him?

NOTE: it is not argued here that Jesus' vindication at the fall of Jerusalem is the final or exclusive fulfillment of Daniel's great prophecy. Rather, that any time Christ intervenes, either on behalf of His Church or to punish His enemies, He gives proof of His heavenly reign, vindicates His claims and justifies the faith of His people. Every such intervention may be considered evidence of "*the coming of the Son of man on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory*" to the Ancient of Days to rule from His throne until that final Day when, what Christians have believed all along, shall finally break in upon the consciousness of all men, and Daniel's prophecy shall have its final, most glorious fulfillment. (Cf. notes on 10:23 and 16:28.)

WHO SHALL SEE *THE SON OF MAN COMING*, AND HOW?

It would seem that, according to Matthew, *they will see*, must refer exclusively and contextually, *to all the tribes (who) mourn*, i.e. those

of Israel who rejected God's offer of grace through Jesus. But would those who repudiated Jesus' interpretation of Judaism's fall be psychologically able to admit the Nazarene's complete vindication in the holocaust of 70 A.D.? Although they probably would not grasp this connection, Jesus' expression admits two possible explanations.

1. JEWS WOULD SEE WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING. A child watches two expert chess players move their pieces on the board, without its seeing what the moves mean, while the players themselves not only witness but also experience, recognize and understand what each play means in terms of the past, present and possible future of the game. Similarly, Jews would see Jerusalem, the Temple and its millennial glory going up in flames and the demolition of the entire Mosaic institution for access to God through priesthood, sacrifices and cleansing from sin. But what they could see with their mind, or comprehend, must depend on what they were willing to recognize as the meaning of what they saw. (Cf. Isa. 29:9-12, 14; Acts 3:17; 13:27.) The extent to which they repented and trusted God to judge righteously measured their openness to His revelations (Isa. 32:3). Otherwise, they would see without understanding (cf. 13:11-16; Isa. 6:9f.; 42:18ff.; 53:1; contrast 52:15; Rom. 10:16-19; Heb. 3:7—4:2). Their centuries-old "Wailing Wall mentality" documents their continued incomprehension.
2. CHRISTIANS WOULD SEE AND UNDERSTAND. *They will see*, in Matthew, seems to refer contextually to Israel alone. This phrase, however, is used also by both Mark and Luke who make no specific allusion to anyone in particular, since they omitted all mention of the Jews. Further, the third person plural verb in Greek can be used, as in English, for the indefinite subject: "one will see, anyone in general will see, you will see, etc." (Cf. Blass-Deburnner, *Grammar*, §130.) So, Jesus leaves the door open for not only Jews to see, but also Christians. These latter not only witness the awe-inspiring end of Israel's Temple, but also the dramatic conclusion of the Mosaic dispensation and the historical vindication of Jesus of Nazareth. So, what the Jews witnessed uncomprehendingly, the Christians, looking at the same objects, could see in it what Daniel's images portrayed, *the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven*. Comprehension and true insight were possible only for those who accepted the true meaning of the event as this is perceived on the basis of Jesus' prediction and the empirically observable occurrence of what He had foretold, interpreting everything in the light of Daniel 7:13f. Christians could

grasp the true significance of the decline and fall of Judaism, because they possess the interpretative key to history, handed them by the Lord of History Himself.

CONCLUSION

The end of the pre-Messianic age and the commencement of the Kingdom of the Messiah coincided theoretically at the Passion, Victory, Ascension and Coronation of the Christ which culminated in Pentecost, 30 A.D. But only a few believers—no more than 300 at first—embraced this change of administration for nearly a generation. Business continued as usual in Judaism. This would lead to the falsely secure notion that all was well. But the sudden, definitive removal of Judaism's commonwealth and its Levitical system and Temple became the signal proof that only Jesus of Nazareth had correctly revealed the mind of God (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). Thus, the very crumbling of the Jewish commonwealth, their religious center and its aftermath, just as He prophesied, would attest to Jesus' heavenly reign by His superintending the punitive justice meted out on those who rejected His messiahship and crucified Him, and by His justifying the faith of those who proclaimed Him Lord of all. Both acts of this divine King prove He sits enthroned and rules *with power and great glory*. They prove that He has truly begun to do, concretely and historically, what Daniel's expressions meant: He has already ascended to heaven and come to God on the clouds of heaven to take His place rightfully on God's throne. Jewish silence that finds inexplicable their Temple's 2000-year desolation is tantamount to a confession that God has incomprehensibly abandoned His people and that Israel today has no solid refutation against the claim that the Crucified One has triumphed and is their true Master, despite the fact that they repudiate His Lordship. No longer may fleshly Israel claim unique or exclusive access to God, because Israel's Bible, in the absence of its Messiah, points uncompromisingly to its Levitical sacrifices by which alone this access may be enjoyed. But now that access is denied by the Temple's millennial absence.

No wonder, then, that in 70 A.D. Christians could lift up their heads in hope (Luke 21:28). Christ's people were freed from the ungodly, oppressive sovereignty of Judaism by the execution of the Lord's sentence on it, because in that event it became evident on earth that Jesus' kingship is real. *The Son of man* was really *in heaven* and He had actually *come on the clouds of heaven* to the Ancient of

Days and was gloriously crowned with honor and sovereign power, just as Daniel had foretold and Jesus Himself had confirmed! Christ in heaven administers His Kingdom, while His people conquer and reign on earth (Rev. 5:10; cf. 1:6; Rom. 8:37; II Cor. 2:14; I Peter 2:9).

NOTE: None of the above conclusions are intended to detract from the perfect, final realization of Daniel's prophecy, whereby what is now discerned only by believers shall become indisputably evident to everyone at Christ's coming. Nor does this interpretation deny the clearly literal expectations of many other texts that speak of His return on the Final Day (I Thess. 4:16; II Thess. 1:7-10; I Cor. 15; II Peter 3, etc.). Jesus' Kingdom became *de jure* effective at Pentecost (Acts 2), but it was and is only gradually realized *de facto* as His influence spreads throughout the world and more of His enemies are put under His feet. Even so, there remains a sense in which it is still largely a Kingdom *de jure* and shall not be manifest to all of earth's inhabitants in all its glory until the Last Day. Christ's present reign is not inconsistent with the continued presence of evil in the world. (See notes on Matt. 13.) *Revelation* dramatizes the final outcome of this conflict and warns that all present appearances are deceiving that seem to put Christ and Christians' victory in doubt. He really reigns and His people are victors, even though all earthly observation would deny it. What is even now true shall simply be manifest at the Last Day.

4. Worldwide proclamation of the Gospel and its results: the beginning of the Lord's Year of Jubilee (24:31)

24:31 **And he shall send forth his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.** This *sending forth of angels* closely resembles Jesus' interpretation of His own parables of the Tares and of the Dragnet (13:41, 49). Further, *the great sound of a trumpet* seems associated with the last trumpet call of God at the resurrection (I Cor. 15:52; I Thess. 4:16). Notwithstanding these similarities, two considerations suggest that these expressions be otherwise interpreted:

1. Jesus' explicit indications of schedule require a fulfillment within the time-frame of His own contemporary generation (23:35f.; 24:21, 29, 34).

2. Jesus' language utilized symbols already well developed in the Old Testament prophets and in the Law, and, as indicated above, although some of the same symbols may also be used in connection with the Second Coming, nevertheless, it is entirely appropriate that He be thought free to adopt this same language in a sense governed by the time limitations He indicated.

His angels (Greek: *àngeloi* = "messengers" generally). Whether such messengers are supernatural or completely human must be decided from the context. Besides the many texts which speak of supernatural agents of God, the following texts illustrate the appropriateness of using *àngeloi* for men: In Matthew 11:10 *àngelos* refers to John the Baptist (= Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27) whereas in Luke 7:24 *àngeloi* refers to some of John's disciples. In Luke 9:52 *àngeloi* refers to emissaries of Jesus. In James 2:25 *àngeloi* describes two spies sent to Jericho. This evidence indicates that the translators' choice to render *àngeloi* with "angels" in our text unnecessarily attributes supernatural nature to these messengers, and this conclusion may safely be re-examined, since our Lord may well have meant His human messengers of which He had spoken earlier in unliteral language (23:34).

With a great sound of a trumpet, as texts like Revelation 8, 9 illustrate may have other functions in God's economy besides giving the blast that signals the world's end. The question must ever be asked: what image would Jesus' Jewish audience have received from this expression? In Israel's millennial history, the trumpet was used to give signals to Israel and call the community together (Exod. 19:13, 16, 19; Num. 10:1-7). At the New Moon and on other occasions trumpets were used to signal great national celebrations and feasts (Ps. 81:3). Alarms were sounded to warn of approaching danger (Joel 2:1). However, the trumpet's use at Sinai may not have been merely a signal, but part of the very expression of God's presence and glory, and susceptible of being associated with the new covenant announcement of the Law of Christ, not from Sinai, but from Jerusalem. From its many literal uses its symbolic use is drawn, but which one is intended here?

Among its other uses, the trumpet, as a symbol, would bring to the Jewish Jubilee a trumpet song of the emancipation of Hebrew slaves and of the restoration of alienated property to its true owners, and of a year's vacation from life's toil. In this same vein, Jesus established the keynote of His own ministry, citing Isa. 61:1f. (Luke 4:18f.).

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then He claimed, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." So doing, He initiated the great spiritual era of freedom, rest and restoration. With His own trumpet blast He announced that the time of deliverance had come. Then, as He sent forth His heralds to proclaim this same dispensation of God's grace now available to all in the Gospel, these messengers (*àngeloi*) but echoed the Jubilee trumpet's function to "proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants."

However, it would appear that Jesus selected *a great sound of a trumpet* from a figure used by Isaiah 27:13, where God promised to gather His exiled people who were perishing in captivity. Note the comparisons:

JESUS

The Son of man shall send forth his
angels
with a great sound of a trumpet
they shall gather his elect
from the four winds, from one end
of heaven to the other

ISAIAH

The Lord will thresh
In that day a great trumpet will sound
You, O Israelites, will be gathered one
by one
Those who were perishing in Assyria
and those who were exiled in Egypt
will come and worship the Lord on
the holy mountain in Jerusalem.

The only element not mentioned in both texts is *his angels*, although the passive ("you will be gathered" in Isaiah) suggests an agent of some kind.

Several points should be noted:

1. This was no literal trumpet. Rather, because it was already a well-known symbol of Israel's jubilee release, Isaiah seems to have spiritualized the Jubilee trumpet to signal a new epoch of glorious release from bondage to pagan powers.
2. Even in Isaiah, this trumpet is no merely human signal, but the summons symbolically sounded by God or by His agents (Cf. Isa. 18:3; 11:12), to call penitent exiles back to Jerusalem to resume their worship and service to Him. (Cf. Joel 2:15f.; Ps. 81:3.)

3. The trumpet-call would produce a restoration to their original sanctification as the people would thresh out grain and collect the kernels individually in the most careful manner possible into a container, so God would separate the grain, the penitent, from the husks, their ungodly brethren yet living among pagan nations.

Jesus apparently reworked Isaiah's literary image to project the vision of an even more glorious trumpet to publish the year of release, not limited to the Jews or to the land of Palestine, but good tidings of great joy for all peoples. He would inaugurate a Jubilee of return and redemption for all nations, which is His next point.

They shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. Again His language strikingly resembles His own mode of describing the Final Judgment (13:41-43, 48-50; II Thess. 1:7ff.). Nevertheless, this prophetic language appears to have been borrowed from Moses and Zechariah. Surprisingly, nothing actually celestial is alluded to in *one end of heaven to the other*. In fact, Zechariah (2:6) quotes the Lord as calling, "Come! Come! Flee from the land of the north, for I have scattered you *to the four winds of heaven*." This idiom is only natural, since God had promised compassion on the exiles thus:

If any of thine outcasts be in the uttermost parts of heaven, from thence will Jehovah thy God gather thee and from thence will he fetch thee (Deut. 30:4, ASV).

What is meant less figuratively is their restoration from banishment "to the most distant land under the heavens" (Deut. 30:4, NIV). It is everywhere assumed that these would be flesh-and-blood exiles walking on earth, not disembodied spirits floating in from some distant point in space. (Cf. Neh. 1:9.)

Borrowing this prophetic terminology, Jesus could depict the sounding of the Gospel proclamation which would "gather the true Israel of God from the far reaches of the world and unite them in the worship of Jehovah in . . . the real and abiding Zion (the church), not the earthly and passing Jerusalem" (Butler, *Isaiah*, II, 54). The messengers (*àngeloi*) of Christ are commissioned to "go into all the world, making disciples of all the nations" (28:19f.), a process which proposes to gather God's Elect, His Church, *from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other*. (Cf. 8:11; Luke 13:29.) Our Gospel proclaims deliverance and redemption from the oppressive slavery to sin, available to every creature. (Mark 16:15). This liberation encapsules the profoundest meaning of Jubilee. God's elect are no longer drawn from

one small nation, but are composed of people from every tribe, nation, people and tongue. This text, then, points to the grand, non-national, worldwide character of the New Israel and how it came to be.

So, when did the trumpet actually sound: during the ministry of Christ (Luke 4:17ff.)? with the Gospel proclamation of the acceptable year of the Lord, as Jesus' messengers went through the land sounding the Gospel trumpet of release from bondage to Satan? or with the destruction of Jerusalem which formally and finally announced the final end of the Old Dispensation? Ideally, all three, because what occurred in the Gospel preaching by the early Christians and what took place at Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was nothing but the extension of the royal authority and ministry of Jesus Himself. To the world these mighty acts announced Gospel redemption. Also our slavery to Judaistic legalism was now surpassed by a Gospel for every man and people which proclaims liberation to everyone. This fact became concretely obvious when the last vestiges of the Old Dispensation indisputably crumbled to the ground in flames. But it is not impossible that the final Trumpet (I Thess. 4:16), while presumably literal, may be but the last, most glorious expression of God's merciful trumpet to publish eternal release, restoration and redemption. (Study Lev. 25; Zech. 14, esp. vv. 16ff.)

WHEN TRAGIC EVENTS ARE ACTUALLY REASSURING

Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:28). Jesus introduces these words to conclude this section and yet their meaning is echoed in the parable of the trees which follows, and to which this verse serves as introduction. This verse, then, looks both ways:

1. It prepares the mind to hear Jesus say, "When you see all these things taking place, you can tell that the kingdom of God is near." You will live to see it.
2. It summarizes what the believing observer is to decide about the tremendous, earth-shaking events Jesus has just described in the previous verses, which must mean exclusively the destruction of Jerusalem. That Jesus is not here alluding to the Second Coming is clear
 - a. Because *when these things begin to take place* implies a certain gradualness that permits time for reflection on the world events

just described (Luke 21:25f.). But the Second Coming will be marked by an unexpected, unpredictable suddenness (Matt. 24:39, 42, 44; 25:13).

- b. Because *Look up and raise your heads*, when referred to the Second Coming, is also meaningless, for Christ's return will be announced by heavenly shouting, trumpet music and Jesus' own glorious, personal appearance (I Thess. 4:16). It will all be so obvious as to require no special announcements (Matt. 24:23ff.) or hopeful searching the skies. His appearance will be instantly visible to all; His voice audible to all (II Thess. 1:7-10; John 5:28).
- c. Because the expression, *your redemption is drawing near*, cannot allude to eternal redemption, since this would give time for last-minute preparation. But such convenient, last-minute repentance is absolutely excluded by Jesus' warnings (Matt. 25:1-13). Universal repentance and consequent salvation is inconceivable (Luke 18:8; Matt. 7:13, 14; I Peter 4:12-19). That eternal redemption from sin and all its consequences (I Peter 1:5-9; Rom. 8:23) is not here envisioned is evident from the contextual consideration that Jesus is merely discussing the post-Jewish dispensation when the Gospel would be proclaimed among the Gentiles and the universal Church vindicated as the earthly expression of God's Kingdom. So, *redemption*, here, refers to the near approach to the Church's liberation by those earthly events which would signal the arrival of Christ's Kingdom (Luke 21:31 = Matt. 24:33).

Jesus' meaning, then, is, *When these things*, the earth-shaking events leading up to my heavenly vindication, *begin to take place*, you, my dear disciples, may then *look up and raise your heads* bowed down by the severe troubles you suffer at that time, because *your redemption* from the limitations imposed by the Jewish period of the Church and your liberation from persecution by Jewish authorities *is drawing near*.

HOW JUSTIFY THIS POSITION TAKEN?

While we may be satisfied that this passage makes primary reference to the vindication of Jesus as God's Messiah when the Father furnished convincing proof of Jesus' Lordship and of the justice of His cause during the period immediately successive to the fall of Jerusalem and as a necessary result of this judgment, nevertheless it would be irresponsible to ignore the many striking similarities which other

commentators notice between Jesus' language here and what, in my view, are genuinely end-of-the-world events.

1. The astronomical panorama of changes in our universe (II Peter 3:7, 10, 12). The creation of new heavens and earth (II Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1-5; cf. 6:12f.).
2. The appearance of Jesus Christ in the sky (I Thess. 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; II Thess. 2:8; II Tim. 4:1; Titus 2:13).
3. The mourning of those who rejected the truth, the terror of those shaken by the glory of our returning Lord, terrified by the prospect of their damnation (Rev. 6:12-17; cf. 1:7?).
4. The loud trumpet signalling the end, Christ's return and the resurrection (I Cor. 15:52; I Thess. 4:16; cf. Rev. 11:15).
5. The angels sent forth to gather Christ's elect from all over the earth (Matt. 13:41-43, 48-50; II Thess. 1:7ff.).

How explain these remarkable similarities? Does similarity argue identification or that this entire paragraph (Matt. 24:29-31) should be understood exclusively with reference to the Second Coming? While the parallels are many and remarkable, their origin in Old Testament prophetic language warns against strict literalism. On the other hand, we may be perfectly content if our marvelous Lord chooses to bring every one of these prophecies to a surprising, literal fulfillment. However, on what basis can prophecies that refer primarily to events immediately following Jerusalem's fall, be thought to point also to the world's Last Day?

1. One answer is to see in the definitive judgment upon Judaism a symbol foreshadowing the sentencing of the entire world. Thus, while others are mistaken to see only end-of-the-world events in the foreground of Jesus' picture before v. 34, nevertheless it is thought that there may be principles involved here that have a wider application that would extend to Christians living on earth after that event until Jesus comes again. The major objection to this view is the repeated warning of our Lord that, whereas the fall of Jerusalem would be preceded by unmistakable signs of its impending disaster, the coming of Christ and the world's end will not. The nearness of that Day will be undiscernible in every respect (24:36, 42ff., 50; 25:13; Mark 13:33, 35; Luke 21:34). Therefore, what is the purpose of searching for parallels and similarities? At this critical point the two events are not at all similar.
2. Another approach is to recognize in Matthew 24:29-31 a symbolic

panorama of earthly events depicted in typical apocalyptic language coined by and borrowed from the prophets, but which, while having undoubted fulfillment in Jerusalem's demise, may yet occur in all their cosmic literalness at the Lord's return. These cosmic disturbances are characteristic of the theophanies of both history and prophecy of the Old Testament, so why should they not also serve in New Testament history and prophecy as well? Although these suggestions cannot be ruled out categorically, enough evidence has been offered in the verse comments to indicate that Jesus spoke in a meaningful language to people familiar with His terminology. Correct exegesis, therefore, must proceed from the standpoint of what the prophets meant by language which Jesus utilized to communicate His own revelations to minds saturated with His Bible.

Because nothing is lost for the Second Coming, it is simply better to consider Matthew 24:29-31 as expressing the theological results of the end of the Jewish era, leaving the above-mentioned texts free to teach us about Christ's real coming, without our seeking some clue in Matthew 24 to the date of the Parousia when the Lord flatly denied any possible hope of success.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. Define "the tribulation of those days." To what days does Jesus refer by "those days"? How had He defined "those days" earlier? (vv. 19-22). Identify "the tribulation" itself: what is a "tribulation"?
2. In what sense is the Coming of the Son of man to be "immediately after the tribulation of those days"? How could all the majestic events Jesus included in this paragraph (24:29ff.) really occur "immediately after" the crises of the tribulation?
3. Locate the Old Testament passages where the following expressions are used and give the interpretation intended by the Old Testament author in each case:
 - a. "The sun shall be darkened, the moon shall not give her light, the stars shall fall from heaven, the powers of the heavens shall be shaken."
 - b. "All the tribes of the earth shall mourn." To what tribes does the prophet refer? To what "earth"? What occasioned their mourning?
 - c. "The Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory": to what or whom was this Son of man "coming"?

when He approached “on the clouds of heaven” in the original reference?

- d. “gather . . . a great trumpet”: what was this trumpet used for in the original reference(s)?
 - e. “the four winds of heaven.”
4. Now, rewrite Jesus’ paragraph using the literal meaning of each phrase as you have gleaned it from the Old Testament prophets. That is, take His figurative language borrowed from the Prophets, and, as if you were writing for people unfamiliar with the Old Testament, express His literal meaning which would have been communicated to His original Jewish hearers familiar with the Old Testament.
 5. Establish with good reasons to what coming of the Son of man Jesus alludes.
 6. True or false? The better translation is “All the tribes of *the land* (not “earth”) shall mourn.” Defend your answer.
 7. What additional information does Luke add that helps to interpret this section?

D. Encouragement to Believe Jesus (24:32-35) (Parallels: Mark 13:28-31; Luke 21:29-33)

32 Now from the fig tree learn her parable: when her branch is now become tender, and putteth forth its leaves, ye know that the summer is nigh; 33 even so ye also, when ye see all these things, know ye that he (footnote: “it”) is nigh, *even* at the doors. 34 Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished. 35 Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Some interpreters hold that the fig tree is a symbol of the Jewish people, and that the revising of their nation, as symbolized by the renewal of the fig tree, signals the near approach of Christ’s Second Coming. Does the fact that Luke’s version of this parable speaks not only of the fig tree, but also of “all the trees,” modify this view in any way?
- b. In what sense is it correct to affirm that “all these things” that Jesus had described earlier (24:4-31) must be considered as signalling

the near approach of the Kingdom of God within the lifetime of His contemporaries?

- c. Some people hold that verses 29-31 are referring to Christ's Second Coming. Now, however, Jesus asserts that "all these things" must be accomplished during the lifetime of His own generation. But He did not return in that generation. Who is mistaken: Jesus or His interpreters? How do you know?
- d. What kind of person is it who thinks that it would be easier for the inexorable natural laws of heaven and earth to fail than for his own affirmations to be proven wrong? What does this tell you about Jesus who made precisely this claim?
- e. How does Jesus' assertion, that His words shall not pass away, furnish a good reason for believing Him? Do you believe Him?
- f. Do you believe that His generation lived to see the realization of "all these things," just as He said? If so, why? If not, why not?
- g. Jesus expects that His disciples would see certain phenomena and be able to decide correctly that the kingdom of God is near. Further, He will teach that the Second Coming will not be heralded by any forewarning, but will come abruptly and unexpectedly for everyone. How do these facts clarify Jesus' meaning about the phenomena and modify our understanding of it?

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Then Jesus told them a story: "Think of the fig tree—in fact, look at any tree and learn its lesson. As soon as its branches become tender and its leaves come out, you can see without being told that summer is not very far away. Similarly, when you see **ALL THESE THINGS** taking place, you can recognize that the Kingdom of God is near and ready to make its triumphal entry. I can tell you for sure that this present generation will live to see it all take place. Heaven and earth will come to an end, but what I have said . . . never!"

SUMMARY

In the same way that leaves signal the approach of summer, clues already mentioned signal the arrival of God's Kingdom, an event which must occur during the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries. The universe could fall apart sooner than Jesus' words fail to be fulfilled.

NOTES

1. Leaves are a signal of summer's approach (24:32)

24:32 Learn from the fig tree her parable. Even as He spoke, Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives. Back of them, as they faced Jerusalem, lay a small village called "Fig-Town," or Bethphage. (Cf. 21:1; Mark 11:1; Luke 19:29.) Not unlikely it drew its name from the abundance of its fig trees. Because Jesus pronounced these words just before Passover, the fig trees would even then be leafing out. (See notes on 21:19.) Because Jesus said, "and all the trees" (Luke 21:29), this parable is not essentially about *fig trees* exclusively, but, rather, about how trees in general function and about what this function tells the nature observer about the seasons. By showing His disciples something with which they were already familiar, something which also involved their ability to predict the approach of summer with reasonable certainty, Jesus facilitated their understanding of something less familiar.

When her branch is now become tender, and putteth forth its leaves, ye know that the summer is nigh. This shows His disciples that to predict the near approach of whatever phase of God's Kingdom Jesus has in mind would not be nearly so difficult or problematic as it might seem in theory. (This is the same approach Jesus had already used with others who could determine the short-term weather forecast from the appearance of the sky. Matt. 16:1-3)

No objective reading of this paragraph (24:32-34) will justify the creation of an allegory of the rebirth of the Jewish state ("Fig tree = Jewish people") without reading into Jesus' words what is not there, to favor a preconceived theory of eschatology. To do so, one must forget that Jesus also said, "and all the trees" (Luke 21:29), since the supposed symbolism would extend to all other races, if each tree stood for a race, as the fig, in theory, stands for the Hebrews. So, the theory topples of its own weight, felled by solid information from Luke.

2. Similarly, the foregoing clues signal H-hour
for God's Kingdom (24:33)

24:33 Even so ye also, when ye see all these things, know ye that he is nigh, even at the doors. Just as surely as budding and leaves were a sure indication of the nearness of the warm season, so the disciple of Jesus could discern the approach of some great event by

the clear signs just listed. The great controversy turns on what is intended by *all these things*, since the decision about WHAT *is nigh* depends largely upon *these things* that indicate its near approach. The problem began with the Greek used by Matthew and Mark, since neither indicated a subject for the verb, *is nigh* (*engūs estin*). This leaves translators torn between “he” and “it,” because grammatically both renderings are possible. Luke’s specific statement, however, furnished the missing key by informing us that Jesus meant; “the Kingdom of God is near.” Because Jesus said it, therefore, this concept should be read into Matthew’s narrative as the subject *it*, as found in the ASV margin and in other translations. But, even so, because Jesus’ Kingdom is a Messianic Kingdom on earth, wherever His Kingdom is, there is He in the midst of it (18:20; 28:20; Luke 17:21). Now, the riddle becomes: to what phase of the Kingdom of God does Jesus refer?

1. Some point to 24:4-28 and suppose He means just the fall of Jerusalem. It is assumed that He temporarily overlooks what appears to be the Second Coming in 24:29-31 and points back to the events mentioned earlier, i.e. Jerusalem’s destruction. But this involves two exegetical weaknesses:
 - a. This view must apply “all these things” to events in a more distant context while shutting an eye to the Second Coming supposedly mentioned in the nearer context.
 - b. Consequently, this view must deny that Jesus’ allusions in 24:29-31 perfectly mirror the classic style of Old Testament prophets before Him, and contrary to these prophets’ own interpretations, consider their words literal when used by Jesus.
2. Others suppose He means the state of affairs commencing at the Second Coming when Christ’s rule shall be universally acknowledged. This view is supported by these suppositions:
 - a. *All these things* is thought to refer only to the signs mentioned in 24:29-31, taken to mean Christ’s coming in glory at the end of the world. However, see our notes on these verses which treat them as expressing the spiritual significance of the period immediately following Jerusalem’s fall and directly resulting from it.
 - b. Some suppose the fig tree parable is to be connected with Jesus’ cursing of the fruitless fig tree (21:18f.), bespeaking the punishment of the unfruitful Jewish race. Hence, they see its resurrection from national and spiritual dormancy just before the world’s end,

symbolized by the flowering of the fig tree. However, there is no evidence that Jesus created such a symbol as "fig tree = Israel."

- c. "This generation" (v. 34) is supposed to embrace only the Jewish race. Hence, what is affirmed about "this generation," becomes a prediction of Israel's continuance as a race until the Second Coming. However, see our objections at 24:34.
- d. Consequently, it is concluded that Jesus could not have included literally *all these things*, from the disciples' question, "Tell us when will *these things* be," down to "when you see *all these things*" (24:3-33). Accordingly, He omitted all reference here to the overthrow of Jerusalem. Ironically, this view's proponents often take everything in 24:29-31 literally, but balk at treating *all these things* and *this generation*, with the same measure of literalness. Worse, because *all these things* are thought to be the signs that precede the Second Coming and signal its approach, these commentators make Jesus party to two errors:
 - (1) He is pictured as predicting His return "immediately after" the fall of Jerusalem. (Cf. 24:29). To avoid this gaffe one must eviscerate "immediately" of its usual meaning, assigning it a "modified sense," defended by reference to II Peter 3:4-9. However, Peter clearly refers to the *parousia* of Christ, where Jesus does not use this word in our immediate text. (See on 24:29-31.)
 - (2) Jesus is caused to contradict Himself, being made to speak of signs foreshadowing an event for which He specifically revealed there would be no advance warning.
- e. This viewpoint ignores the main point of Jesus' affirmation. The very appearance of all the signs He mentioned intend to forewarn of the nearing of the great event. If a sign is truly functional, it is to alert the observer for the near advent of that great event as surely as the budding of the trees announces the arrival of summer. But if these events which supposedly signal the nearness of Christ's return have come and gone century after century from the days of the disciples to our own, and yet the Second Coming has never occurred, then Christ's return is simply not the event heralded by the supposed signs in question. When Jesus gave true signs, He referred to something else, the fall of Jerusalem (24:14-28). Further, what was commonly mistaken for signs (4:4-13), He flatly ruled out as indicative of anything precisely because of their very ordinary commonness.

3. The more appropriate view is that which permits Jesus to say anything He wants to, regardless of what this does to our theories. On the surface, as all commentators who have struggled with the apparent incongruities in Jesus' expression, admit, He seems to include in His phrase, *all these things*, everything He has been saying since He started answering the disciples' question, i.e. in 24:4-33. So be it! To the question whether *all these things* really did occur within the time-span of one generation, may be given a hearty, positive answer.

- a. The Gospel of the Kingdom was preached in all the world (Col. 1:6, 23; see on 24:14).
- b. Jerusalem was surrounded by armies, but the Christians fled anyway (Luke 21:20; see on 24:15).
- c. National Israel was demolished in a disastrous war that desolated the Temple, the priesthood and the royal Davidic house (24:19-22). Israel could not but wail bitterly thereat.
- d. Jesus' rightful claims to divine authority were completely vindicated (Dan. 7:13f.; Eph. 1:20ff.; see on Matt. 24:30f.). He transferred the Kingdom from Israel to another people who would bring forth the fruits thereof (21:43). When the barren Jewish institution was finally crushed, believers could discern in it that the mighty "stone the builders rejected" had now become the Capstone (21:42, 44; Luke 20:18). It also crushed its opponents.
- e. God's elect were really gathered from the four winds by His messengers. (See on 23:34; 24:31.)
- f. All of this gives evidence that the Sovereign God who revealed Himself in Jesus of Nazareth rules supreme. This is the expression of the Kingdom of God alluded to here. (See the Special Study on "the Coming of the Son of Man," my Vol. II, 430ff.; and on "The Kingdom of God," my Vol. III, 160ff.)

3. All these events must occur in Jesus' generation (24:34)

24:34 Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished. *Generation*, in Scripture, refers to:

1. The successive elements in a genealogy (Matt. 1:17).
2. The people living at the same time (Matt. 23:36; 24:34; Luke 17:25).
3. A people or class distinguished by shared qualities, usually in a bad sense in the New Testament (Matt. 17:17; Mark 8:38).

4. The average lifetime of a person, an age. (Cf. Col. 1:26.)
5. Figuratively, a measurement of eternity (Eph. 3:21).

In these usages the shared root meaning is the concept of contemporaries of the people involved in a *generation*. Were it not for prior commitments to a particular eschatological view, the common reader would understand Jesus to mean that His own contemporaries would live to witness the great events He predicted. This is the correct view, because it is sustained by the following considerations:

1. THE PROPHETIC FULFILLMENT ITSELF. A *generation* is usually considered to cover a period of roughly forty years. If the surest interpretation of a prophecy is to be sought in its undoubted fulfillment, then the fact that every event that Jesus predicted took place roughly forty years after He prophesied it, i.e. from 30-70 A.D., is corroborative evidence that He spoke literally here. (See notes on 24:29-31.)
2. THE APOLOGETIC AIM. McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 351) saw that this discourse, known and preached by Jewish Christians, had special, evidential importance for that *generation*, as it

contained in itself a challenge to that generation of Jews to watch the course of events in their own national history, and to say whether its predictions proved true or false. No generation has lived that was so competent to expose a failure had it occurred, or that would have done so more eagerly. But the events, as they transpired, turned the prophecy into history, and demonstrated the foreknowledge of Jesus.

Through His own apostles and prophets (23:34; Luke 11:49f.), He addressed this crucial message, not just to any then-future generation, but to *this generation*. The Apostles themselves and those of their own generation who would see the beginning of these things (24:33), would also be part of the generation that would witness the end (24:34; cf. 16:28; Mark 9:1 with Luke 21:31f.).

3. THE LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATION. Matthew's own use of *generation* (*geneà*) outside of 24:24 indicates how our author normally understood the word in question:
 - a. Four times in Jesus' genealogy, he uses *geneà* to mean "the people composing successive steps in a family lineage (1:17).
 - b. In 11:16 Jesus not only spoke of an obtuse attitude, but was addressing the fickle, unreasonable people living in His own time who showed it.

- c. In 12:39, 41, 42, 45 and 16:4 Jesus reacted to His contemporaries' unjust demands for further miraculous proof of His authority, despite the abundance of evidence already granted, terming them "an evil, adulterous generation." But it was to *this generation* that He personally gave the crowning credential, the sign of Jonah. His contemporaries must answer in the Judgment for their rejection of Him who by His resurrection was fully authenticated as God's Spokesman.
 - d. In 17:17 Jesus bemoaned the perversity of unbelief shown by the very people with whom He must continue to live, tolerating their bad attitude, i.e. His contemporaries.
 - e. In 23:36 His context conclusively clarifies His reference. He points not merely to a wicked attitude, but primarily to THE PEOPLE THEN LIVING as opposed to all preceding generations. "The sons," as distinguished from "your fathers," are those to whom He would send His messengers and upon whom would come His threatened judgment. While *this generation* did not personally slay Zechariah, it does not follow that the whole Jewish race is alluded to. Rather, Jesus affirmed that His own contemporaries shared the spirit of those who murdered that prophet in their own era, but He was not hereby re-defining *generation* so as to include their predecessors.
 - f. Nowhere does Matthew utilize *generation (geneà)* to refer exclusively to the entire Jewish race in a bloc, as a race.
4. THE NEAR CONTEXT. *All these things* that must occur in Jesus' generation (24:34) refer to *all these things* that indicate the arrival of God's Kingdom (24:33; Luke 21:31). His reference, then, is broader, reaching back to sum up everything discussed earlier. He had threatened the desolation of Israel's great "house" by divine retribution of His generation (23:34-39). Pointing to the Temple, He reworded this menace, "You see *all these things* . . . ? There will not be left one stone upon another . . ." (24:2). His men questioned Him, "Tell us, when will *these things* be?" (24:3). Then, Jesus sketched a panorama of general world conditions and specific Church problems characteristic of that period. Expressing Himself both literally and figuratively, He listed salient features of the last days of the Jewish State, and concluded, "Now when *these things* begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:28). Summarizing with His fig tree parable, He uses this cumulative argument:

- “When you see *all these things* (worldwide Gospel proclamation, 24:14, 31; Jerusalem surrounded by armies, 24:15; Luke 21:20; the destruction of the Temple, 24:2; the devastation of the Jewish State and its institutions, 24:15-28; during an era troubled by trials, turbulence and tragedy, 24:4-13, 29; and the glorious vindication of the Son of man, 24:30f.), then know that the Kingdom of God is near.” So, *all these things* embraces everything in 24:2-34.
5. THE LARGER CONTEXT. According to Luke 17:25, the suffering and rejection of Jesus by *this generation* must precede the long-awaited unveiling of the Messiah in His true glory. This clearly refers to the Jewish nation then living whose leadership and majority following would finally repudiate Jesus as their Christ. That *this generation* must point to His era, but not to His race, is evident. Otherwise the rejection of Jesus would involve ALL JEWS down to His Coming and the hypothesis of any final conversion of all Israel must be abandoned by its proponents.
6. THE QUESTION OF CONSISTENCY. Does Jesus contradict Himself? If He were promising His Second Coming during His contemporary generation, verses 34 and 36 would be mutually contradictory. It does not follow that, because the early Christians “could not possibly have continued to wait for Him, when Israel was not converted and Christ did not come, therefore they cannot have so understood the words in the sense merely of the generation then living” (Biederwolf, 348). On the contrary, the trouble lies in wrongly assuming that Jesus was discussing His Return, when He really contemplated the earthly events that manifested His heavenly reign during the first century. So, those early disciples, because they were culturally prepared to interpret His words more accurately than most moderns, could have well understood His words in the sense of “the generation then living.” What is mistaken, rather, is the expectation that *this generation* must last until the Second Coming or that all Israel must be converted *en masse*. (See on 23:39.)
7. JESUS’ GENERAL TIME-TABLE. That *this generation* corresponds to Jesus’ contemporaries is corroborated by 16:28 where He promised the majestic manifestation of His Kingdom during the lifetime of His disciples. Similarly, Luke places that same appearance during the lifetime of *this generation* (Luke 21:31, 32; cf. Luke 9:27). Jesus warned that the final crisis of Jerusalem would occur during the lifetime of men, women and children who even then inhabited

that city, (Luke 19:41-44; 23:27-31). Can it be seriously doubted that He had in mind the invasion and siege by the Romans in 70 A.D.?

CAN GENERATION MEAN "RACE" HERE?

Because Jesus often gave a negatively loaded flavor to the expression, *this generation*, it is thought to refer exclusively to that entire sector of the Jews that rejected Him. Ignoring the Jewish Christians, such interpreters extend the meaning potential of this phrase to embrace all unconverted Jews generally, then affirm that Jesus wanted to promise the non-extinction of the Jewish race until the Second Coming.

1. Lenski's contention (*Matthew*, 952) is substantially correct that *generation* depicts a certain kind of people whose characteristics are deducible from a given context. (Cf. Ps. 12:7 [LXX 11:8]; 78:8 [LXX 77:8]; but see 78:4, 6! 24:6 [LXX 23:6]; 73:15 [LXX 72:15]; etc.) However, it is also true that such people can also be *living at the same time* as those who do not share those same characteristics at all and from whom they are distinguished. Thus, contemporaneity is not excluded by Lenski's argument.
2. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 869) astutely defends the need for a solemn declaration from Jesus that the Jewish race would continue on earth until the Lord comes. In fact, this people might be supposed to deserve extermination since it turned down and murdered its own Christ, despite its particular privileges. Contrary to all historical probability, the Jews would remain a distinct people. However, the context speaks of SIGNS which would point unmistakably to the near approach of a great event, SIGNS as easily recognizable as the greening of the trees that indicate spring's arrival, SIGNS that would not appear until the appointed time. *The very continuance of the Jewish race down to the Judgment could never be a sign of its approach, because this supposed sign loses its value as a particular indication at the appropriate time, being the common experience of EVERY AGE!*
3. Granted for sake of argument that *genea* could mean both "generation" and "race," thus permitting the prophecy to have a potentially double fulfillment, first that the Jewish race would not pass away until the destruction of Jerusalem, and, second, that the Hebrews would not disappear from the earth until Judgment, on what basis could it be proven that Jesus intended

BOTH MEANINGS AT ONCE IN THE SAME SENTENCE? But that the latter meaning is not in Jesus' mind is indicated by the fact that the Apostles listening to Him would "see all these things" which must take place before that generation would pass away (24:33).

4. Study other texts where *generation* (*geneà*) is used in its usual literal sense: 1:17; Luke 1:48, 50; Acts 13:36; 14:16; 15:21; Eph. 3:5, 21; Col. 1:26; Heb. 3:10 (= Ps. 95:7ff.). While Luke 16:8 certainly linked *geneà* with both the sons of this age and the sons of light, it correctly places them in the same generation, not scattered over many centuries. While Acts 2:40 and Phil. 2:15 speak of a type of people, yet nothing contextually prohibits their being contemporaries of the very people who are exhorted to distinguish themselves from such a crooked, depraved generation.

CONCLUSION

This verse, then, is truly what Kik (*Matthew XXIV*) styled it, "the pivotal time text." It reveals Jesus' true prophetic perspective in that it furnishes the first, clearest SIGN of the time limitation within all the aforementioned events were to occur. Because in the first section (24:4-14) Jesus denied that world-shaking tragedies were a sign of the end, He cannot now be stirring together events connected with both Jerusalem's destruction and the world's end. Because in the second section (24:15-28) He prospected events geographically slated for Palestine and ethnically restricted to the Jewish people, these are not to be mistaken for the world's end either. Because in the third section (24:29-31) He adopted apocalyptic language to envision the immediate theological results of His victory and vindication, it is unnecessary that any of its images refer to Judgment Day either. So, when Jesus formed the time-frame that confined His prophetic perspective to the era of His own contemporaries, that settles the question as to His subject. Up to this verse He predicted God's sentence only upon the unbelieving of Judaism. From this point on He will proceed to describe a universal judgment that involves not one but all nations.

4. The certainty of the predicted events (24:35)

24:35 Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. In this context there are two things that *will not pass away*:

“this generation” (24:34) and the words of Jesus and durability of His words is more lasting than the universe itself! Earlier (5:18), Jesus had affirmed the permanent validity of the Mosaic Law until its complete fulfillment. Now He places His own word on that same level! How dare this thirty-year-old Galilean invite comparison between His own words with the apparently permanent forces of the universe? Yet, if *heaven and earth* are upheld by the word of God and by that same means *shall pass away* (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3, 10ff.; II Peter 3:5-7, 10-13), this bold assertion of Jesus demands that we admit that His own statements possess all the omnipotence and eternity of God. Because this declaration concludes Jesus’ prophecy, it constitutes His personal signature to the certainty of its fulfillment. For His words to *pass away*, the prophetic predictions filling this chapter must fail to be fulfilled as foretold.

While we are right to recognize that *my words* mean anything Jesus says, here He points specifically to everything He had just predicted. The Jerusalem Temple, that sun around which Judaism’s solar system revolved, had seemed to Jesus’ followers as durable as heaven and earth, and so much an integral part of God’s program that it could never perish. Now they must learn that only what Jesus says is truly imperishable and more dependable than any spiritual or material universe they had known before (See notes on 24:29.)

His claim, *My words shall not pass away*, is the more striking in light of His subsequent confession not to know the date of His Second Coming (24:36). However, Jesus’ well-established foreknowledge of the Jewish wars and Jerusalem’s fall have established beyond all doubt His claim to be God’s Son and to know what He is talking about when He reveals what He DOES know. (See on 24:36.) He knows about the future Judgment too. Let all who hear Christ’s sure word take it into account in shaping their lives!

FACT QUESTIONS

1. What, according to Jesus, is the point of the comparison in the fig tree parable?
2. What information does Luke alone furnish that assists our interpretation of the fig tree story?
3. What is the thing which Jesus compares the appearance of leaves on the trees? How do you know?
4. What does the expression “at the very gates (or: doors)” mean?

5. What are some of the Biblical definitions of the word "generation" as these may be ascertained from the uses the Bible makes of the word?
6. Which of these definitions is appropriate here in 24:32-35? How do you know?
7. What does Jesus include in the expression: "all these things" in the sentence, "This generation shall not pass away, till *all these things* be accomplished"? Defend your answer, explaining how you decide this.
8. Jesus, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away." Explain how the first expression serves to clarify the second. In what sense shall heaven and earth pass away: literally? figuratively? Or is this only a relative comparison? In what sense will Jesus' word not pass away?
9. Luke quotes Jesus as affirming that "the Kingdom of God" is what is approaching. To what phase of God's rule does Jesus allude, if all of the foregoing detailed prophecies are to be considered harbingers of it?

III. CHRIST'S SECOND COMING (24:36—25:46)

A. The Date Known but to God (24:36)

(Parallel: Mark 13:32)

36 But of that day and hour knoweth no one, not even the angels of heaven, neither the Son, but the Father only.

B. Stories Illustrating Important Characteristics of the Final End-Times

1. Illustration From Life Before the Flood (24:37-42)

(Parallel: Mark 13:33; Luke 21:34-36)

37 And as *were* the days of Noah, so shall be the coming of the Son of man. 38 For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, 39 and they knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall be the coming of the Son of man. 40 Then shall two men be in the field; one is taken and one is left: 41 two women *shall be* grinding at

the mill; one is taken and one is left. 42 Watch therefore; for ye know not on what day your Lord cometh.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Jesus seems to believe in angels. Do you? What does their existence mean to you?
- b. Do you think it is safe for the Son of God, the revealer of truth and the way back to God, to admit that He does not know the time of His return? Does not this admission compromise our total confidence in His other revelations? In what sense can He affirm His ignorance on this point without compromising His authority?
- c. Do you see anything significant about the order of Jesus' words: "no one (man) . . . the angels . . . the Son . . . the Father"? If so, what is the significance?
- d. Some think that Jesus has now changed the subject from events connected with His own generation to the Second Coming. Others believe He changed the subject back in verse 29. Which of these two views is more nearly correct? On what basis do you decide as you do?
- e. Some notice that Jesus denied that any human being knows *the day and hour* of His coming, but said nothing about their knowing the year, month or week. Accordingly, say they, we may discover these latter with reasonable certainty. Do Jesus' words refer to the exact *day and hour* in the sense of the hour or minute? Or is His meaning more general? What other texts or information would clarify His intended meaning?
- f. Why is the time of Jesus' return known only to God? Of what advantage to us is this?
- g. How does the fact that Matthew and Mark cited Jesus' ignorance of the final date actually comfort us by assuring us that all else they relate about Jesus is true?
- h. How does Jesus' admission of ignorance about the date of His return actually build and confirm our faith in Him rather than weaken or destroy it?
- i. Some consider the story of Noah and the flood to be a fable grossly exaggerated and not to be taken seriously as sober history. On the basis of His reference to Noah and company, do you think Jesus agrees that Noah's flood is purely legendary? How certain

do you think Jesus was that the information in Genesis 6-9 really occurred as written? What does this say about Genesis as a book? about Noah? about the flood? about Jesus? about you?

- j. Do you see anything wrong with what people were doing in Noah's day? After all, they were eating and drinking, marrying and given in marriage. Do not these activities characterize our normal everyday life? What could be so wrong about this? Further, Jesus' application pictures people at work in the field or at the mill. Surely this is not wrong too? How could these ordinary activities have anything to do with man's unpreparedness for (1) Noah's flood or (2) Christ's Second Coming?
- k. What is the psychological problem of people who try desperately to learn the date of Christ's return? How, according to the Scriptures, can such people be helped?
- l. What should we think of people who, by explanations of prophecy or other methods, try to discover what even God's Son did not know? What should we think about their explanations?
- m. Jesus said, "Watch therefore, for you know not. . . ." In what way(s) should our daily activities be permeated with a sense of watchfulness? How should we organize our daily affairs, so as to be able to do this? By neither eating nor drinking, marrying nor being given in marriage? Should we not work in the field or grind at the mill?
- n. What major Bible doctrine is reaffirmed by the expression: "one is taken and one is left"?

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

"However, as to the precise date or when that hour will strike, NOBODY knows, not even the heavenly messengers nor the Son. Only the Father knows. In fact, the second coming of the Messiah will be just like it was in Noah's time. In those days just before the flood they went right on eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, right up to the very day when Noah entered the ark. Those people were unaware of the impending danger until the flood actually came and swept them all away. This is the way the Messiah's coming will take place. At that time two men will be working together in the field. One will be swept away and one will remain. Two women will be grinding at a handmill. One will be swept away and the other will remain.

“But be on your guard, lest your minds be coarsened by self-indulgent carousing and drunkenness and by the worries of this life, so that that Day suddenly overtake you. It will go off like a trap, catching all the inhabitants of the entire earth. Be constantly on the alert and pray, since you have no idea when your Lord is coming. Pray that you may have the ability to survive all these things that are about to take place, and to stand with confidence in the presence of Christ Himself!”

SUMMARY

The time of Christ's Second Coming is known only to the Father. Life on earth at that time will continue right up to the last minute as if nothing were going to happen. This very ordinariness and normalcy could lull the believer into complacency. Therefore, to avoid this trap, prayer is required for strength to survive and to stand victoriously before the tribunal of Christ Himself!

NOTES

A. The Date Known but to God (24:36)

24:36 But of that day and hour. Kik (*Matthew XXIV*) correctly entitled this verse “the transition text,” because Jesus has abruptly but clearly changed the subject, a fact made evident in various ways:

1. Note the triumphant finality with which verse 35 closes the predictions concerning the fall of the Jewish state in the lifetime of Jesus' generation.
2. Jesus then introduces the following material with *but (de)*. Granted, this is not a strong adversative conjunction in Greek, but it implies some kind of contrast between the foregoing material and what comes next.
3. The subject introduced next is *that day* (singular), whereas in the foregoing section (24:4-35) He treated “those days” (plural). (24:19, 22 = Mark 13:17, 19 = Luke 21:23) In 24:36 Jesus speaks of a specific *day and hour*. This distinction between singular, *day*, and plural, “days,” is neither accidental nor insignificant. Kik (*Matthew XXIV*, 102) observed:

Nowhere in the New Testament is the plural—*the days, days of vengeance, those days*—used in reference to the second.

coming of Christ or to the final judgment. . . . A general impression prevails that the term, "last days," has reference to a short period just before the second coming of Christ, but that term is not so defined in Scriptures. The "last days" began with the first advent of Christ and will continue until his second advent. This is indicated in a number of scriptural passages (Heb. 1:1f.; Acts 2:16f.; I John 2:18; I Peter 1:20). . . . The plural does not refer either to the second coming or the final judgment.

That day is decidedly unique, since there could not be many, truly final "last Days," but only one definitive Last Day. In this light, then, *that day and hour* became a practically fixed, well-defined technical term reinforced by Jesus' further instruction. (Cf. 24:42, 44, 50; 25:13; Mark 13:32f.; Luke 21:34.) Earlier, our Lord spoke of the Judgment as *that day* (7:22) and revealed much about *the day* of Judgment (11:22, 24; 12:36). This usage is reflected in the Apostles' language. (Cf. I Thess. 5:2, 4; II Thess. 1:10; II Tim. 1:12, 18; 4:8; I Cor. 3:13; Jude 6, etc.)

4. This verse unequivocally changes the subject from Jerusalem's last days to the Final Day of the world. When Jesus affirmed that *no one knows that day and hour*, He clearly distinguished this particular Day from ALL the days for which He had earlier furnished some clear, definite signs of their near approach. Contrarily, concerning this one Day He denies that anyone can discern the time of its arrival, because there shall be no forewarning evidence given. For this latter Day only constant readiness would suffice due to its absolutely unknowable arrival date (24:42—25:46). The approximate time of Jerusalem's fall could be estimated with reasonable accuracy, but the moment of the world's Last Day remains a state secret of the Almighty.

But of that day and hour knoweth no one. Some argue that Jesus did not deny we can calculate the month, year or century, since He only indicated as secret *the day and hour*. Nevertheless, that He intends to declare absolutely unknown and unknowable the general period of His return is explicitly declared by Mark (13:33): "Watch and pray, for you do not know when THE TIME will come." Further, *hour* need not mean "the specific schedule," but "time" generally. (Cf. John 2:4; 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 16:2; 17:1.) In this sense, *day and hour* are but two ways of referring to the same

time period in question, technically a hendiadys. Either way, as Bruce (*Training*, 328) noted,

This statement, that the time of the end is known alone to God, excludes the idea that it can be calculated, or that data are given in Scripture for that purpose. If such data be given, then the secret is virtually disclosed. We therefore regard the calculations of students of prophecy respecting the times and seasons as random guesses unworthy of serious attention.

If the Son of God Himself does not know, how could any dumb disciple expect to guess it right?! This inescapably real human ignorance will be underlined no less than six times in His message (24:42, 44, 50; 25:13; Mark 13:33, 35; Luke 21:34).

Not even the angels of heaven. Study Jesus' doctrine of *angels* in Matthew (13:39-42, 49f.; 16:27; 18:10; 22:30; 25:31, 41; 26:53). *Angels* are possibly inserted here because, despite their specially privileged relationship and access to God (18:10) and despite their own participation in particular phases of the world's Last Day (13:41; cf. Rev. 14:19), they have not been informed of God's eschatological timetable. This automatically disarms in advance any false prophet who tries to claim inside information on this critical date on the basis of claimed angelic revelations.

Neither the Son. Before puzzling over Jesus' admission to ignorance, we must note in what order He named each protagonist:

1. Created beings: man (*no one, oudeis*, masculine) and *the angels of heaven*.
2. Uncreated Beings: *the Son* and *the Father*.

Further, starting with man, He traced an ascending scale from the purely human to the purely Divine, inserting between them, first, created spirits, *the angels*, then the uncreated *Son*, the eternal Word made flesh. Jesus expresses His true identity openly. He is simply not an ignorant human like anyone else, because He writes His own name with the heavenly beings, between God and the angels. Mackenzie (*P.H.C.*, XXIII,478) stated the appropriateness of this order beautifully:

Let the name of any of the prophets or apostles be substituted for the designation of Christ, and a sentence is produced at which even a Socinian (anti-trinitarian denier of Christ's divinity, HEF) might stagger. "But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, *neither Moses*, but the Father."

It matters little what particular name is selected for the experiment. Isaiah, Daniel, Paul or John, in such a collocation, would be alike incongruous with the whole phraseology and spirit of the Bible. Why, then, would such an announcement have revolted us, when the name of the Son, in this identical connexion, awakens no surprise? Manifestly because the human soul of Christ, from its conjunction with "the brightness of the Father's glory, and the express image of His person," was admitted to a knowledge of the counsel of God which is never ascribed to any other creature; manifestly because "in Him dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.

Neither Matthew nor Mark hesitate to report this confessed ignorance of His return date. Were they attempting to foist off on the world a false Messiah, they could not have afforded to risk inclusion of such an embarrassing admission. But the marvel is that our Evangelists think they run no risk to report this astonishing admission. Why? Because they are absolutely certain that nothing is so convincing as truth and they tell this about Jesus, perfectly confident that this confession of ignorance really detracts nothing from His glory.

Our faith in Jesus Himself is not undermined by His frank confession of limitations. Rather, does not Jesus' rigorous honesty actually undergird our confidence in Him? We would have had far less faith in Him, had He faked an answer to this crucial question. Nevertheless, He had the moral courage to risk the loss of every disciple by stating, "I do not know." Further, He said it in the face of all the withering criticism of future generations of scoffers whether erudite or not. But, all risks notwithstanding, we may stand with Him who could unflinchingly tell us the truth, however apparently embarrassing it be to His position, however gratifying to His critics and however astonishing to His followers. This unswerving honesty marks Him a true ambassador and credible spokesman for God. (Cf. John 7:18.)

Why did not Jesus know this date? Following Biederwolf (348), we may summarize three attempts to resolve this quandary thus:

1. This ignorance is referred to Christ's human nature and is consistent with the statement that He emptied Himself (Phil. 2:5ff.) and increased in wisdom (Luke 2:52) and learned obedience (Heb. 5:8f.). The unique combination of complete humanness and true deity in one Person remains beyond our human comprehension,

but not beyond our belief, given the sufficiency of the evidence. If He, as man, did not know this date, so what? This is a characteristic of man.

2. "He knew personally, but not officially, i.e. Christ was using hyperbolical language to show that the great event was to be kept a profound secret, the knowledge not having been given Him *as regards us*, i.e. for the purpose of being communicated to us. . . . But this seems something of an attempt to evade the plain meaning of the expression, the ignorance referred to being the same as that of man and angels with which it is connected." Further, had Jesus known the date, but refused to reveal it, we would be irresistibly tempted to dissect His words for some hint hidden there. Contrarily, what He does imply about His return date is that its delay would be so indefinite and the interval preceding it so impossible to calculate that numerous disciples would surrender their alertness, cease their preparations and return to sinfulness and debunk the doctrine as mere hero legend.
3. Schaff, who does not like this dualistic separation between Christ's two natures, suggests a voluntary self-limitation of knowledge on the part of Christ, i.e. a sacred unwillingness to know. He who could have requested twelve legions of angels, but opted to undergo the shame and submitted to separation from the Father, could He not also surrender to the indignity of now knowing this date? Even if this perfect Judge alone knows the Father and what was in man, might He not for our sakes decide not to be above mankind by knowing that day and hour?

Whichever view is taken, a clear distinction must be made between His ignorance of this one item and the possibility of error when, as a true prophet, He revealed the mind of God. For, had He been only a man, He would have rendered Himself ridiculous in the extreme to entitle Himself "*the Son*," placing Himself alongside *the Father* and superior to angels. Further, were He but a common, ignorant mortal, to describe Himself as "the Son of man," a title true in that sense of anyone else, becomes no title at all. But because He was the GOD-MAN, His appropriation of the title, "Son of man," becomes a highly relevant revelation of His true nature. To the question whether His knowledge were limited in other ways, we may respond that this is the only recorded subject on which He had to answer, "I do not know."

So, why is the time not known to *the Son, but to the Father only*? Earlier, Jesus had taught that the Father has sovereign right to establish certain priorities (20:23; cf. Deut. 29:29; Acts 1:7). The motive for God's secreting this information may not lie in some weakness of Jesus' nature, but in the nature of OUR weakness. Every human being must live with the uncertainty of the date of judgment. Consequently, when we realize that any day could be our last, to please God, we orient all our priorities in view of His judgment (II Cor. 5:9f.; II Peter 3:8-13). This aims to motivate each generation to live in a state of expectancy that God's Judgment Day could arrive in its own lifetime, and so make the required preparation. So, it may be that Jesus, the Son of man, chose to live as any other human being, motivated by this same uncertainty. Hence, His thorough-going identification with us, His brethren, cost Him this knowledge.

Two implications are evident in the fact that only the Father knows the date:

1. If Jesus does not know the date of His return, then nothing revealed in this entire discourse may be interpreted as offering certain signs of that event, because this would imply that He DID know.
2. Everything else Jesus will say next grows out of this complete human ignorance of the world's Last Day and urges practical preparation for it in light of this limitation. To suppose that clever calculations of the signs on our part could discover that date is to eviscerate the following lessons on all meaning. (See notes on 24:42, 44, 50; 25:13; cf. Luke 21:34f.; Mark 13:35.)

Plummer (*Matthew*, 340) sees the following illustrations as Jesus' treatment of mankind's having to live with the tension between the certainty of judgment and the uncertainty of the date on which all must face that judgment. He asks, "What effect will this combination of certainty and uncertainty have upon mankind?" Jesus answers by indicating what effect this tension SHOULD have on each disciple. Analyze how each story illustrates this.

B. Stories Illustrating Important Features of the Final End-Times

1. Illustration From Life Before the Flood: "Business As Usual" (24:37-42)

24:37 And as were the days of Noah, so shall be the coming of the Son of man. "That day and hour" (v. 36) are now identified as the

long-awaited *coming of the Son of man (parousia)*. By using this technical term for His Second Coming, He does not mean a spiritual, invisible coming in temporal providential blessing or judgment, but that great final event alone (24:27). This illustration was used more than once (cf. Luke 17:26f.). *The days of Noah* are described in Gen. 6-9; Heb. 11:7; I Peter 3:20; II Peter 2:5. Jesus stated His conclusion first, filling in details next.

As . . . so. The situation before the flood serves as a basis for Jesus' comparison, but does He thereby intend to validate the historicity of the Noachic epoch? How could a dubious fable wield the convincing power to drive men to act, if it is objectively untrue? Obvious fictions do not transform character. So, it is psychologically improbable that our Lord would resort to religious fiction to support the comparison He drew. Consider the illogic of those who would demythologize Genesis: "Christ's return will be like the days of Noah. But the days of Noah never were. So, Christ's return is founded on a literary allusion of dubious worth, but still teaches the moral lesson." No pious fraud has the fearful power to move the conscience and will like the true execution of divine justice on guilty mankind. Jesus assumed His comparison is grounded in facts that actually occurred.

24:38 For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark. Jesus does not point to any gross iniquity in Noah's contemporaries, since the activities to which they are here pictured as giving themselves, are neutral per se. Similarly, in Lot's day, people were buying and selling, planting and building (Luke 17:28). Rather, their grave miscalculation arose from their careless indifference to God's solemn calls to repentance. They conducted their daily routine as if no judgment would strike, as if there would always be a tomorrow just like today in which to dash off a quick prayer of contrition and rush for the ark, should that unlikely event ever really become necessary. They married and settled down comfortably in the common activities of life and turned off Noah's preaching as alarmist extremism. It would be mistaken to suppose that the great tribulation of Revelation 7:14 could not be in full swing before Jesus comes, merely because He describes the world as engaged in its ordinary pursuits, because these relatively untroubled people may not be identified with those who undergo the Christian tribulation referred to. In fact, these happy-go-lucky folk conducting their normal life may actually be contributing to the tribulation of the godly.

24:39 And they knew not. WHAT did they not know? Had not Noah preached righteousness and judgment to come (Heb. 11:7; II Peter 2:5)? Did they not know that God meant business when He threatened them with annihilation? *They knew not* that they could not get away with their godless lives until God brought them irrefutable evidence that He meant what He said, that Noah was His servant, that "the soul that sins shall die," and that there are no exceptions. Although they had indeed been informed, they did not fully perceive the danger they were in until disaster struck.

WHY *did they not know*? Because they did not want to. The demands of God and of conscience were, then as today, postponed or relegated to the realm of the irrelevant, "explained away 'naturally,' 'reasonably,' even 'scientifically,' until the fatal day arrives" (Lenski, *Matthew*, 956). Gross immorality is not the big problem because of the magnitude of God's forgiving grace. The real issue is this willful, therefore culpable, indifference to warnings, this gross ignorance caused by turning their mind off to God.

Many hold that the great astronomical cataclisms and signs in the sky (24:29-31; Luke 21:11, 25f.) are literal warnings that sound the alarm of the world's end. Were that true, on what basis could Jesus affirm here that the world shall continue to operate on a "business-as-usual" basis right up to moment of His return, blithely unaware that its eternal destiny is about to break in upon them? How could the world of tomorrow be taken by surprise as was Noah's world if there were spatial fireworks warning men to get right with God? The fact is that *they knew not* because there were no suns refusing to shine, no moons not giving their light, no stars falling from heaven to alarm them. Consequently, because no such astronomical credentials of God's impending judgment scared those of Noah's day into making a last-minute frantic dash for the ark, we are not at liberty to interpret 24:29-31 as if it meant that the Day of Jesus' Return shall be preceded by literal, heavenly clues that permit men to foresee its dawning. The absolute security of Noah's generation, which serves as the basis of Jesus' comparison totally excludes the appearance of millennial harbingers when He returns. Contrary to Alford (I, 246), the security here spoken of is totally inconsistent with the anguish and fear prophesied in Luke 21:25f., because two different events are described: there, the end of the Jewish era in God's economy; here, the end of the world.

Until the flood came and took them all away. Jesus' second point of comparison concerns the abruptness, finality and inescapability with which judgment comes to an unexpected, unprepared world.

24:40 Then shall two men be in the field; one is taken, and one is left. 41 Two women shall be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left. These two vignettes carry forward Jesus' earlier point: life will proceed as usual right down to the last second before the Second Coming. Simply because the schedule of Jesus' return cannot be known, His saints will not be climbing some mountain peak or crowding into church buildings to await His arrival. Rather, like anyone else, they will be involved in typical daily occupations, such as field-work done by men or food preparation by women. (Cf. Exod. 11:5.) To grind grain into flour for bread, these *two women* are seated on the floor. Between them are the two grind-stones that constitute *the mill*, one stone mounted atop the other. Depending on the weight of the upper mill-stone, the strength of both women would be needed to turn it. Seated opposite each other, one turns the upper mill-stone a half turn; the other, the remaining half turn, while grain is dropped through a hole in the center of the upper stone.

But Jesus' point is not simply to repeat the lesson of ordinary human activity, as in Noah's day, but also to focus on the rigorous individuality of the final separation: *one is taken and one is left*. Christ's return to judge the world will produce a complete, permanent separation between people who, in other exterior respects, are alike and are even toiling side by side at the same occupations. (See on 13:24-30, 37-43.) The critical factor is each individual's preparation to meet God. However physically near two people may be while working at a common task, they may be worlds apart on the question of Jesus Christ and their love for God's Kingdom.

Who is to be *taken* and who *left*? Some hold that this language teaches that believers are to be taken away from the earth prior to the consummation of all things specifically before a great period of tribulation which, say they, shall be brought on the wicked. Our verses are cited to establish this massive secret rapture. Others hold that this mysterious exodus of the believers is scheduled during, or even after, the great tribulation, but not necessarily in conjunction with Jesus' return. Still others see those *taken* as "received up in glory" by the returning Christ, by supposed cross-reference to 24:31 thought to harmonize with I Thessalonians 4:16f.

Contextually, however, Jesus' total illustration focuses on a different perspective. He now enters into the particulars to explain how people will be *taken away*, not merely en masse, as by a flood, but

individually and personally, while each is engaged in life's common occupations, and yet as thoroughly separated as Noah was from his contemporaries. But who was actually *taken*: Noah or his wicked contemporaries? In his day it was THE UNGODLY, because "the flood came and *took them all away*; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." The wicked are the intruders who have invaded and polluted a world that belongs to God and His people. So, for the happiness and tranquility of the righteous, the ungodly must be removed. This is in "the style of God" to remove the unrighteous by His punitive justice and leave His people in possession of the earth as their inheritance (Ps. 1; 37:9-15, 21f., 27-29, 34; Matt. 5:5; cf. Rom. 4:13).

The ancient world was *taken away*, but Noah was *left*. At the Red Sea the Egyptians were *taken away*, but Israel was *left* alive and free. Sodom and Gomorrah were *taken* by fire and brimstone, but Lot was *left* to go away. Daniel's accusers were *taken away* by lions, but Daniel was *left* completely vindicated. The tares will be *taken away* and burned, but the wheat shall be *left* to be gathered into God's granary. The bad fish shall be *taken away*, but the good alone will be *left*. The wicked shall not stand in the judgment, but those who do the will of God will abide forever. (I John 2:17; cf. Zech. 13:8f. in the context of 12:1—14:21.)

So, it is not at all certain that the *taken* are God's raptured saints, gathered more or less secretly out of this present evil age. Rather, both in Matthew and Luke (17:22-37), Jesus pictures sudden destruction that thundered down on complacently wicked people. Far clearer is the supposition that Jesus proposes to take the unprepared by surprise to their destruction and leave the godly in possession of their inheritance. This only apparently conflicts with our being caught up to meet Him in the air (John 14:3; I Thess. 4:13ff.), since the saved expect to inherit a new universe in which righteousness feels at home (II Peter 3:13; Isa. 65:17; 66:22). So, Jesus' prophecy teaches simply that, after the dust settles, the only ones left standing victorious in possession of the land will be the Christians! (See on 5:5.) In fact, sudden angelic harvesting will first gather the wicked from among the righteous (Matt. 13:41ff., 49f. interprets 13:30: "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.") Once the weeds are harvested, all that remains is the Owner's good

grain, i.e. the righteous, God's people. Are the following texts appropos? Ps. 37:9-11; 55:22f.; 58:9-11; 64:1-10; Isa. 26:20f.; Rev. 3:9f.; 18:4; 19:1-9.

24:42 Watch therefore: for ye know not on what day your Lord cometh. This, Jesus thinks, is the appropriate conclusion to His first illustration. So saying, He settled three points:

1. **THE CERTAINTY OF THE DAY:** *Your Lord is coming.*
 - a. He who comes is *your Lord*, "so glorious, powerful and clothed with authority and majesty is he; also, and who are loyal to him. Cf. Isa. 57:15" (Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 871).
 - b. *Your Lord is coming:* His return is certain. The sufferings of human existence are not eternal, because human history itself is not endless. Rather, the date for the final vanquishing of evil is now in the hands of Christ Jesus, the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. Our certainty of His reign does not rest in knowing the date of His coming, but in our confidence in His Lordship; in the complete sovereignty of His reign and in the absolute certainty of His coming to draw history to a decisive close.
2. **THE CONCEALMENT OF THE DELAY:** *You know not on what day.* No time has been revealed, so signs given to enable anyone to forecast the dawning of the final Day of the Lord (I Thess. 5:1ff.). No sectarian time-setting or sign-watching could be more perverse or futile, since it arises out of curiosity to know what Jesus says cannot be known and ignores this unequivocal declaration of the Lord Himself that the time or season cannot be computed (cf. Mark 13:33). Jesus next reinforced this point with three illustrations that undergird this basic truth.
3. **THE CONSEQUENT DUTY:** *Watch therefore.* In the tension resulting from the certainty of Jesus' return and from the lack of any clue to the date, the correct Christian attitude is that mental and moral alertness that is ever the price of freedom and one of the sources of our true happiness (Rev. 16:15). In Greek, *watch* (*grēgoreîte*) does not involve simply looking at something so much as being awake and alert intellectually and spiritually, as illustrated in Jesus' stories that follow. Although everyone in these parables had his own specific duties, this constant sense of expectancy is to be their common responsibility and the spirit in which each is to work. For the Church to abstain from daily work and normal human activities in order to search the skies ("watching") for the first inkling of His return, would be to misinterpret His meaning entirely.

What, then, is the mainspring that activates the watching spirit?

1. Contextually, it is primarily the absolute impossibility to ascertain the time of Jesus' return.
2. Is it not more especially a loving eagerness to please Him who has entrusted such gifts to us, a warm affection for our returning Lord that invigorates our sense of responsibility and stimulates us to diligent, almost inspired, activity?
3. Is it not also an alert, hopeful anticipation of His pleasure upon returning to find our work in progress, and a longing for His warm, hearty praise?

So, watchfulness has its alert eye on the Lord's purposes, program and methods. Jesus' antithesis to watchfulness is reported by Luke 21:34-36: "Take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare." It is not merely the gluttons and drunkards who are suddenly trapped, but also those everyday worriers whose concern for food, raiment and creature comforts takes their attention from the unseen spiritual concerns of man's true destiny and from the one object of man's existence, judgment before the returned Christ. This distraction permits the great judgment morning to dawn as unwelcome and unprepared for as a surprise attack. When terrified sinners are horrified by their unpreparedness in the presence of the overpowering majesty of the returned Christ, His prepared people confidently stand on their feet cheering in the presence of their Savior, Lord and King. (Consider Ps. 1:5; Mal. 3:2; Isa. 33:13-16; Phil. 2:10; I Cor. 16:22; Jude 24!)

FACT QUESTIONS

1. On what basis may it be affirmed that the expression "that day and hour" refers to the Second Coming and the end of the world? Had Jesus been discussing this in the immediate context?
2. On what other occasion(s) did Jesus affirm that only the Father decides the sequence of events in human history and established His own priorities?
3. Where had Jesus used the illustration of Noah and the flood earlier? (book and chapter) What was He illustrating in that context?
4. State the main point of the illustration taken from the days of Noah.
5. What Greek technical word did Jesus use to indicate that He refers

only to His Second Coming, not to a spiritual, invisible coming either in temporal judgment on His enemies nor in temporal blessing on His people?

6. List the various activities of everyday life going on in Noah's day and at Jesus' return.
7. What is meant by the phrase: "one is taken and one is left"? *Taken* where? *Left* where?
8. What touch of realism is pictured in the fact that "two women shall be grinding at the mill"? What kind of a mill is involved?

2. Illustration of the Burglar (24:43f.)

43 But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what watch the thief was coming, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken through. 44 Therefore be ye also ready; for in an hour that ye think not the Son of man cometh.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. How does this story differ in emphasis from the previous one?
- b. Why do you think Jesus told several different stories centering around His principle topic? What effect would such repetition produce on the reader or hearer?
- c. Do you think it is wise for Jesus to compare Himself to a burglar?
- d. What is this "hour that you think not"? Is it an hour when you think Jesus will not come?
- e. If the New Testament instructs us to expect Jesus' return at any moment and to prepare adequately for it, how can Jesus affirm that He will return when we do not expect Him? That is, how can we expect Him and not expect Him at the same time?
- f. Despite the uncertainty about God's scheduling of the Second Coming, what grand truth is not at all uncertain, according to Jesus?
- g. If you are so sure about Jesus' return, did you actually look up this morning and pray, "Lord, will this be the day?" How would a prayer in this spirit help you to be ready?

PARAPHRASE

"You can be sure that if the head of the house had known in what part of the night the burglar was coming, he would have kept awake

and not allowed his house to be broken into. So, you too must be ready, because the Messiah's second coming will take place at a time when you do not expect Him."

SUMMARY

Although Christ's return will occur at some unknowable moment, you can know to be prepared.

NOTES

2. Illustration of the Burglar:
"The Time is Unpredictable, So
Be Always Ready."

24:43 But know this: the following all-too-common experience is your fair warning that your situation parallels that of someone personally responsible for protecting his house and its contents against theft (Luke 12:39f.). *If the master of the house had known . . . he would not have suffered.* This is a hypothesis contrary to fact, because he could not have known the exact time of the thief's coming, because thieves give no advance warning to their victims. Worse, the owner could not even know for certain whether the thief were even coming, much less *in what watch*. *Watch* refers to the division of the night into guard-duty of 3-4 hours for each *watch* which is marked by a change of the guard. (Note on 14:25; cf. Judg. 7:19; I Sam. 11:11; Lam. 2:19; Luke 12:38.) For people living in houses constructed even out of stone, to have their walls *broken through* is a grimly real possibility. (Cf. 6:19, "thieves dig through and steal." The householder's only hope lay in constant vigilance.)

24:44 Therefore be ye also ready; for in an hour that ye think not the Son of man cometh. So Jesus compared Himself to a thief only in one point: the absolutely unknowable time of His coming. Elsewhere this same "thief in the night" motif is caught up and developed as psychological motivation for repentance and service (I Thess. 5:2ff.; II Peter 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15). *Be ye also ready.* It is everywhere assumed that the Christian need not be caught unawares, because, while many certainties surround the Second Coming, one thing is totally certain: *the Son of man is coming!* No uncertainty about the schedule or manner of His return can justify any relaxing

of our readiness. *Be ready*: no cost or effort must be thought too great to be adequately prepared. This readiness involves alertness and sobriety (Rom. 13:11-14). Physical rest in sleep is not condemned. Rather, He rejects that moral indifference to God that shows itself in a lack of concern to ready oneself appropriately for the Final Day (22:11ff.).

For in an hour that ye think not, the Son of man cometh. Now the disciples are compared to the master of the house in two ways: (1) there would be no forewarning of the coming; and (2) they would need constant vigilance. This truth has several ramifications:

1. The Lord will send no special "last days" signs to warn Christians in that last fateful generation of His near approach. This parable stands in direct contrast to the lesson of the fig tree (24:32f.). The fig tree furnishes clear indication of the arrival of summer, whereas the burglar gives absolutely no advance notice of his arrival. Therefore, the events indicated by the story of the thief in the night cannot be identified with those forepictured by the parable of the fig tree. The fig tree speaks of the death-throes of Israel's institutions, whereas the thief in the night speaks only of Christ's Second Coming.
2. This inability to know harmonizes with the character of our dispensation. Our era is one of walking by faith, not by sight or full information on every event in God's timing (II Cor. 4:18; 5:7). The very nature of the Christian epoch would be drastically warped, were it possible for us to ascertain our future infallibly. We could delay our obedience and dally until shortly before the fated hour and finally repent at leisure after a life of self-indulgence. As it is, however, the very uncertainty of every moment of our lives argues convincingly for godliness in every minute, for it could be our last.
3. God is running this program! There is no room for presumption on our part. Whether we die and go to be with the Lord, or whether He returns first, the result is the same: prepared or not, we must appear before Him who is our Judge. Every day of opportunity is His gracious gift to welcome and to live joyously, thankfully and responsibly. What our Lord intends to do at any future point, He can well set in motion today. Therefore, every second is potentially history's last.
4. Lenski (*Matthew*, 957) exclaimed, "That is the astonishing feature about the uncertainty regarding the time. Even those who are

constantly on the watch will be completely surprised.” Note: not unprepared; just surprised by its sudden arrival.

At the same time, the unexpected coming of the thief must not be misunderstood to mean “stealth” or “impossibility of discovery,” as if Jesus were teaching a “secret rapture.” Rather, Peter underlines the great noise involved in Jesus’ coming “as a thief” (II Peter 3:10). The greater marvel would be if nobody noticed His arrival, despite the earth-shaking calamities he described (II Peter 3:4)!

FACT QUESTIONS

1. Define a “watch in the night.” To what does it refer in Jesus’ story?
2. What is meant by the expression, “broken through,” with reference to a house?
3. In what way is Jesus like the thief in the night? How is He different?
4. In what way is the believer like the householder? How is he different?
5. What precautions should the believer make under the circumstances Jesus described?
6. Despite the uncertainties involved, what event is absolutely certain?
7. What is the principal topic of which this parable is illustration?

LET’S PREVIEW THE FOLLOWING PARABLES

Note how closely each of the following parables shares certain common qualities with the others and develops Jesus’ general theme:

1. Each story is addressed to Jesus’ disciples, hence does not speak about the world particularly. Rather, each addresses problems that concern Christians intimately, by speaking to the issue of Christian responsibility during the period between Pentecost and the Second Coming.
2. Each parable concerns an important figure who is absent, but returns. The point of each illustration turns on what would transpire upon his return. This aspect emphasizes the responsibility of those who await him during his absence. In its own way each story emphasizes (1) the uncertainty of the time of the Lord’s return; (2) the necessity for appropriate preparation for that event during his absence; and (3) the rewards or punishments for success or failure to do this.

- a. The parable of the conscientious and the hypocritical servant sees stewards left in charge of the household of an absent master (24:45-51).
 - (1) THE UNCERTAINTY OF THE TIME: "My master is delayed" (24:48).
 - (2) THE RESPONSIBILITY: "to give them their food at the proper time" (24:45).
 - (3) THE REWARDS: "He will set him over all his possessions" or punish him and put him with the hypocrites (24:47, 51).
 - b. The parable of the ten virgins depicts ten girls awaiting the coming of an absent bridegroom (25:1-13).
 - (1) THE UNCERTAINTY OF THE TIME: "The bridegroom was delayed" (25:5).
 - (2) THE RESPONSIBILITY: "Go rather to the dealers and buy (oil) for yourselves" (25:9).
 - (3) THE REWARDS: "Those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast"; others remained excluded outside (25:10-12).
 - c. The parable of the talents pictures three servants who were responsible for their Lord's money during his absence (25:14-30).
 - (1) THE UNCERTAINTY OF THE TIME: "After a long time the master . . . came" (25:9).
 - (2) THE RESPONSIBILITY: "You ought to have invested my money" (25:27).
 - (3) THE REWARDS: "Well done, good and faithful servant" or "Cast out the worthless servant" (25:21, 23, 30).
3. Each parable illustrates some phase of Christian responsibility, but the cumulative instruction of their lessons affords us a grander picture of our service until Jesus comes.
 - a. The parable of the conscientious and the hypocritical stewards teaches loyal concern for everyone else in the Master's household as the prime expression of loyalty to our coming Lord. The emphasis is on our responsibility for OTHERS.
 - b. The ten virgins parable inculcates a conscientiousness that insures our own personal preparation. The emphasis is on our responsibility for SELF-preparation for His coming.
 - c. The talents parable spurs us to make profitable use of everything God has placed at our disposal for His glory. The emphasis is on our responsibility for our Master's BUSINESS to bring Him a profit.

3. Illustration of the conscientious and the hypocritical servant (24:45-51)

45 Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath set over his household, to give them their food in due season? 46 Blessed is that servant, whom his lord, when he cometh, shall find so doing. 47 Verily I say unto you, that he will set him over that he hath. 48 But if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord tarrieth; 49 and shall begin to beat his fellow-servants, and shall eat and drink with the drunken; 50 the lord of the servant shall come in a day when he expecteth not, and in an hour when he knoweth not, 51 and shall cut him asunder, and appoint his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. How does this illustration differ from the preceding story about the burglar?
- b. In what sense is it true that this parable is really as much about stewardship as it is instruction on what will happen on the Last Day?
- c. In the illustration the conscientious administrator is assigned one kind of work before his master left and another upon his return. How do you explain the difference?
- d. If the Lord Jesus called the administrator "faithful and wise," how can He later term him, "*that evil servant*"? Or, is He talking about the same person? If so, how is this language possible? If not, why say "*that evil servant*"?
- e. On what basis could the evil servant truly say, "My lord tarries"? What would this element of Jesus' story reveal about His Second Coming?
- f. When the lord returned, he found the faithful and wise servant doing what? What does this detail tell us about what we should be doing when Jesus returns?
- g. When the lord returned, what did he find the evil servant doing?
- h. What is the psychological motivation of the evil servant, that caused him to choose the course that he did? Does this ever tempt you?
- i. In what sense is it true that everyone in God's world really has been "set over his household to give them their food at the proper time"?

- j. Explain how a person could be “cut asunder” and yet later be assigned his “portion with the hypocrites.” Would not being chopped in two have ended his miserable existence? How could he feel any further shame by being assigned the hypocrite’s reward? Did he not die, or is this a post-mortem vilification? What do you think happened?
- k. Why bring in “the hypocrites” here, when the story is really about the evil administration of one particular servant? How does this almost passing allusion to the insincere strengthen the impact of Jesus’ story for you?

PARAPHRASE

“Who then will be the conscientious, sensible slave whom his lord has put in charge over his household to dispense to them their sustenance at the proper time? What happiness will be his when his master comes home and finds him doing what he is supposed to! I can tell you for sure, he will put him in charge of all his property.

“On the other hand, suppose this same servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is taking his time.’ Suppose, too, that he begins to bully his fellow servants, and dines and drinks with his drunken friends. That servant’s master will arrive someday when he least expects him and at an hour that catches him unawares. The lord will cut him in two with a scourge and send him to his fate among those who try to fake it. There people cry and clench their teeth in impotent rage.”

SUMMARY

Christ’s absence may be prolonged. Nonetheless, the responsibility for others assigned to each of us must be carried out with conscientiousness, because presumption and indifference will be severely punished.

NOTES

3. Illustration of the conscientious and the hypocritical servant (24:45-51)

24:45 **Who then is the faithful and wise servant?** *Then (àra)* links this parable logically with the foregoing story where Jesus demanded

a state of constant readiness which, in turn, requires a certain type of character: wisdom and loyalty. (Cf. Luke 12:39-42.) The present parable primarily illustrates these qualities and their contrary, the folly of disloyalty. *Who then is?* This question, rather than send us looking for someone else qualified, nudges us to ask it of ourselves.

1. *Faithful (pistòs)* reveals two connected qualities:
 - a. It involves believing that his lord's word is good, his service worthy of one's most earnest, generous service and trusts him to know what is ultimately best for all.
 - b. It is also a trustworthiness and conscientiousness in doing what is expected, fidelity to duty. (Cf. I Cor. 4:1-5; Titus 1:7.)
2. *Wise (frónimos, "considerate, thoughtful, prudent, sagacious, sensible")*.
 - a. The wise servant makes proper use of his stewardship for the profit and benefit of his lord.
 - b. He is also aware that the lord will require an accounting at the proper time.

Whom his lord hath set over his household, to give them their food in due season. This description appears to refer only to stewards with responsibility greater than those of the *household* itself. But Jesus obviously intends each disciple to take this warning to heart as if each one is already, or could become, *the faithful and wise servant*. (Cf. Luke 12:41ff.; Mark 13:34-37.) Further, this description of the situation is so psychologically and sociologically true to life, because literally EVERYONE, no matter how humble his station, has really been set *over* others in the wide *household* of humanity. This parable, then, lays stress on proper behavior toward our common fellow-servants in God's household, by depicting this steward's responsibility simply to take care of all the other members of the lord's household during his absence. No concept of our preparation for the Second Coming can be adequate that does not conceive of our duty as one of mutual ministry to our brethren (I Peter 4:10). In the Lord's absence His people cannot serve Him directly. Nevertheless, each proves his sense of responsibility to Jesus by the degree to which he serves the other fellow-servants over whom the Lord has placed him (25:40).

24:46 Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Rather than answer His own question, "Who then is the faithful and wise servant?" by saying, "It is the one who . . . ,"

Jesus underscores the special happiness of such a person. By so doing, He induces everyone to want to be conscientious and loyal. Happiness, according to Jesus, is to be found, not in fruitless speculation about the signs of the End-time, spending precious time to pin down the date, or in idle sky-gazing to detect some early signal of His return, but in *doing* what the Lord requested. Without anxiety about the date, we simply utilize every day responsibly by working at our appointed task to do honor to our master.

24:47 Verily I say unto you, that he will set him over all that he hath. This statement is not to be applied absolutely, as if Jesus would establish only one loyal steward over all His vast Kingdom as his reward for faithful administration, when, as is likely, He actually intends to reward millions of faithful stewards in a similar manner. In fact, what each receives will be far greater than here pictured (25:21, 23; cf. Luke 19:17, 19). Rather, this reward nicely completes Jesus' story, implying a recompense like that of Joseph who, because of his fidelity and wisdom, was elevated from slave to Prime Minister of Egypt (Gen. 39:3ff.; 41:33-44). Christ's rewards are not material, so that to give them to one would impoverish all others, but spiritual, like His own love, so that the more everyone possesses, the more is made available for others! Faithfulness and responsible service will be repaid with opportunities for infinitely greater responsibility. (Cf. Rev. 2:26; 3:21; cf. Matt. 25:21; I Tim. 3:13.) Because this means more work, those self-seeking people who side-step responsibility or loath labor may well ask themselves whether they really long for Christ's rewards after all. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 872) sees implied here

the assignment of certain specific tasks in the life hereafter, each task a matter of pure delight and satisfaction, and each in harmony with the individuality of the person for whom it is marked out.

24:48 But if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord tarrieth. . . . Who is this fellow? Is he identical with the former wise and faithful steward? Though previously unmentioned, he is the very man. When Jesus told this story earlier, He clearly referred to just one steward; however, He did not term the steward "evil" as here (Luke 12:45). So, Jesus described him here as *evil* by prolepsis, i.e. described him in terms of what his later conduct proved him to have been. However, by this sudden switch, Jesus prospects the two

alternatives open to the SAME servant of God: he may be a wise, faithful steward, or he may elect the route of the self-satisfying, and so prove to be an *evil servant*. Within the same disciple lies this dual potentiality. How does this happen?

Say in his heart. Mulling over his changed circumstances brought about by his master's absence, he toys with his options. Outwardly he had welcomed his lord's confidence, apparently vowing loyal, earnest assistance. Inwardly, however, his true desires and secret motives are strikingly diverse. No wonder he will be treated as a hypocrite (24:51).

My lord tarries. Although this observation explains his subsequent actions which are condemned, nothing in the text indicates that the observation itself is mistaken. In fact, some lengthy delay explains to a no small degree the false confidence that permitted this steward to get up the courage to act the tyrant and indulge himself excessively. This treacherous manager attempted to pin-point the date of his master's return, but badly miscalculated, because he did not know for HOW LONG his *lord tarries*. To all appearances, the Lord Jesus too is taking His time (*chronizeî*). This harmonizes nicely with similar statements elsewhere (24:4, 19; cf. Luke 12:45). This intimates that Jesus knew that the real date of His Second Coming was scheduled for much later than any suggestion of its nearness might seem to affirm. There is no ground for believing that He expected it in the first century. Peter, too, warned against our growing impatient and slipping into frivolousness and complacent indifference, merely because the years seem to roll uniformly by without any sign of Jesus' coming. Rather, any delay is prompted by His patient mercy and must not be mistaken for ineptness or slowness, because the Day will come suddenly and certainly (II Peter 3:5-12).

24:49 and shall begin to beat his fellow-servants, and shall eat and drink with the drunken. Not only are the thoughts of this hypocrite alien to his apparently sincere promises made openly to his departing master, but now his conduct exposes lusts he dared not reveal to his lord's face. *Fellow-servants* emphasizes two things:

1. Although this administrator is in some sense over them, he too is really a *servant* and their *fellow*, hence equally responsible to their common lord to treat them with consideration for sake of the work they rendered the master (cf. I Peter 5:3).
2. If *fellow-servants*, then also the property of his master. Hence, his abusing them constituted an abuse of his lord's possessions,

as truly as if he had been his master's enemy. The crooked steward's bad example and possible misappropriation of what was intended for others, compounded his wickedness, because it hindered them from serving their lord properly.

This supervisor mistook responsibility for the privilege of power, so he exercised the latter and abandoned the former in two ways:

1. *To beat his fellow-servants* is typical of self-assertive people who abuse the trust of power delegated to them, trampling on those under them, but for whose care they are really answerable.
2. *To eat and drink with the drunken* naturally follows for those self-indulgent little bosses who suppose that material enjoyments and bodily pleasures are the natural right of those in power.

Note the fairness with which Jesus, even in passing, treated the use of alcohol among a people accustomed to using fermented wine and strong drink (Deut. 14:26; Isa. 25:6). Although He Himself lived a normal life and ate normal food and drank wine, as opposed to John the Baptist who did neither (Luke 7:33f.), He can still condemn its abuse in no uncertain terms. This, because its abuse leaves men insensitive to their fellows, irresponsible toward their duty, and, consequently, unprepared to meet God. (See "Should Jesus Drink Wine?" my Vol. II, 526ff.)

24:50 The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he expecteth not, and in an hour when he knoweth not. This is no correction of the servant's conclusion, "My lord tarries," but, rather, its confirmation, since the delay continued long enough to lull this steward into complete complacency. Carrying on his shameful conduct, he grew confident he would not be surprised. He basked in careless indifference until he no longer worried about his master's return. *He expected not:* his stupidity is the greater because he knew to expect him. Yet his continual self-indulgence further desensitized his moral alertness and proportionately increased his spiritual dullness. *In an hour when he knoweth not:* this emphatically reiterates the fact that absolutely no warning signs will announce the near approach of Jesus' coming. At no time may we safely assume that His Second Coming is not imminent merely because we see no indications warning of His approach. We may not assume that we can stop sinning just in time to be found good and faithful at His return.

24:51 **He shall cut him asunder, and appoint his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** *To cut asunder* (*dichotoméō*) is "to cut into two parts." True, horrible butchery was not an unknown punishment in the ancient world. (Cf. Dan. 2:5; 3:29; Heb. 11:37; the apocryphal *Susanna*, vv. 55, 59.) Nevertheless, Jesus' expression may also point elsewhere.

1. Literally, to severe scourging which cuts the skin, or perhaps to mutilation, from which the punished could survive to face the supreme humiliation of being shamed as a hypocrite. (Cf. Sirach 33:26-28; 42:5.) Some societies still mutilate those convicted of certain crimes.
2. Figuratively, to inflict a punishment of extreme severity, his lord not only sliced through the apparent consistency between his pretences and his deeds to unmask his real hypocrisy, but also summarily dismissed him from his position and severed him from his service.

He must be punished *with the hypocrites*, because he was humble and helpful before his master, but turned tyrant when he left. He planned to play the role of conscientious supervisor at his lord's return.

Whether in the parable or in the reality, *the weeping and gnashing of teeth* is the endless punishment of inconsolable grief and helplessness, that self-accusing anger suffered by anyone who sees his true happiness so frivolously and so irretrievably tossed aside by his own foolish choices. (See notes on 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 25:30.)

LESSONS

The Lord warns that the true criterion is not how people might act, were they certain Christ is coming back today, but how they actually conduct themselves in His absence. Accordingly, we demonstrate our fidelity or lack of dedication to our absent Lord, by the degree to which we nurture or abuse our fellow-servants, by the degree to which we utilize for His glory the wealth, ability and opportunities entrusted to us or turn these into authority to oppress others and amass wealth and prestige for ourselves. The crime against Christ is not simply a question of misusing great sums of money (as in the parable of the talents) or of failing to make adequate, appropriate and timely preparation (as in the parable of the ten virgins). Nor is it simply the misappropriation of what belongs to our Lord,

but, rather, the combination of all of these that affects how we treat our brethren. No wonder Jesus included this facet of the terrible eternal punishment in His sentence of 25:46, because He is talking to people who confidently expect to be welcomed by Jesus, but shall discover themselves rejected at the final sentencing.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. What are the duties of the "faithful and wise servant" assigned him during his lord's absence?
2. What are the new duties assigned to this servant upon his lord's return?
3. Quote the beatitude Jesus coined to describe the happiness of the faithful and wise servant.
4. Describe the conduct of the "evil servant."
5. Contrast the final fate of the evil servant with that of the wise and faithful one.
6. What does it mean to be "cut asunder"?
7. What is "the portion of the hypocrites"? Who are they and why bring them into this picture? Explain why the evil servant should share their "portion."
8. Define "gnashing of teeth" as Jesus used this expression here.

4. Illustration of the ten wise and foolish bridesmaids (25:1-13)

1 Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. 2 And five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 For the foolish, when they took their lamps, took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. 5 Now while the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. 6 But at midnight there is a cry, Behold, the bridegroom! Come ye forth to meet him. 7 Then all the virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. 8 And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are going out. 9 But the wise answered, saying, Peradventure there will not be enough for us and you: go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. 10 And while they went away to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage feast: and the door was shut. 11 Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.

- 12 But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not.
13 Watch therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. In what way is this story of the five wise and five foolish virgins similar to the preceding one about the faithful, wise servant and the evil servant? In what way is it different?
- b. To what phase of the kingdom of heaven does Jesus refer in this story?
- c. In what way is the having oil or not part of the main point of this story?
- d. Do you see anything significant about the fact that the bridegroom made his appearance at midnight? If so, what does that fact suggest about the reality Jesus is illustrating?
- e. Christ has taught us to share what we have. Yet He pictures with apparent approval the so-called "wise" virgins as refusing to share their oil! How do you explain or justify this surprising selfishness? Or, is that what it is?
- f. The so-called "wise" virgins suggested that the others try to buy lamp-oil at midnight! Is not this a rather foolish suggestion for supposedly "wise" ones? What stores would be open at that time of night? In the reality represented by this illustration, would such a "purchase" even be possible?
- g. Do you not think that it was heartless on the part of the bridegroom to refuse recognition to a few hapless girls whose only mistake was failure to provide a little oil for lamps to lighten the atmosphere of HIS marriage banquet? On what basis can such cold indifference be justified? Who does this bridegroom symbolize anyway?
- h. From the details in the story, what may be assumed to be involved in Jesus' concluding admonition: "Watch therefore"?
- i. Since Jesus concluded this story with "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour," a point reiterated many times in these concluding illustrations, why do you suppose He felt He needed to repeat this concept? Did He think that we would misunderstand Him and act otherwise, if He had stated His view but once?

PARAPHRASE

“The time when Christ’s coming is awaited will be a time when the government of God may be compared to ten maidens who took their oil lamps to a wedding party. They were to await the arrival of the bridegroom. Five of them were thoughtless and five were sensible. The foolish took their lamps, but brought no reserve oil with them, whereas the wise girls took containers of oil along with their lamps. Because the bridegroom was a long time in coming, the girls all became drowsy and began to sleep. However, in the middle of the night someone shouted, ‘Here comes the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ At this all those girls rose and trimmed their lamp-wicks. The foolish girls said to the prudent ones, ‘Loan us some of your oil, because our lamps are going out!’ But the wise ones replied, ‘There may not be enough for both us and you. You had better go to the store and buy some for yourselves.’ While they were on their way to make the purchase, the bridegroom came. Those girls who were prepared went in with him to the wedding banquet, and the door was locked.

“Later, the other maidens also arrived. ‘Sir . . . Mister! Open the door for us!’ But he replied, ‘I tell you solemnly, I really do not know you.’

“So, be on the alert, for you do not know either the day nor the hour when the Christ will come.”

SUMMARY

The fate of the unprepared admonishes us that adequate preparation must be made in time. Real wisdom, according to Jesus, makes its preparation ahead of time and is not caught unawares.

NOTES

Chapter 25 must be treated as part of the great Eschatological Discourse of Jesus, begun in chapter 24. A deep, internal unity holds these parables together and binds them to the preceding parts of the sermon. (See “Let’s Preview the Following Parables” after 24:44.) The internal cohesiveness of these illustrations undermines the theory that Jesus could not have used these stories to illuminate His prophecies, or that Matthew is to be blamed for pasting together a collage of

disconnected vignettes. Rather, they are precisely the sort of imaginative explanations that Jesus Himself could be expected to use to shed new light on His fundamental statement: "Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. . . . You must be ready" (24:36, 42, 44).

25:1 Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened. *The kingdom of heaven*, here as everywhere, is the rule of God. Jesus' parables provide thumb-nail sketches that illustrate the typical style of God's administration, by holding up various phases of His government to be seen from different points of view. Departing from His usual formula, "the kingdom of God IS like . . .," Jesus said, *Then*, at the time we have been discussing, *the kingdom shall be likened*. The future tense points to that future time when God's rule will manifest the characteristics evident in the following story. Jesus singled out that phase of God's program which He will bring to fruition at the world's conclusion and whereby He will manifest His rule over everything. But to clarify why God shall judge as He does, Jesus must show that final issues have root causes that begin long before the final crisis. *The virgins* represent Christians who have been admitted to that phase of *the kingdom* that can be experienced in this life. Jesus shows by what principles all are being tested for their fitness to participate in the fully realized Kingdom to be revealed at His coming.

The point of comparison is *ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom*. Of all Jesus' illustrations this one sounds most contrived to the modern ear, because of the cultural difference between Middle East marriage customs and ours. Nonetheless, this story is a true-to-life slice of ordinary small-town life in Palestine. Allowing for local variations, the custom generally called for the groom to station girls at some convenient location, sometimes at his own house, while he went to his bride's house to bring her back. Upon his return, the girls were to meet the returning wedding party, lighting their way and honoring them with an enthusiastic reception, accompanying them to where the banquet would take place. Jesus begins His tale after the departure of the bridegroom. The girls are expected to be ready and waiting for his return.

The interpretation of the story is greatly assisted, because its Author stated the principle point (25:13). He is continuing to explain in what watchfulness consists in light of every disciple's ignorance of the Last Day's date (24:36, 42, 44, 50; Mark 13:35-37). If so, the disciples are to identify themselves in the *ten virgins*, while Christ

Himself is illustrated by *the bridegroom*. Because *they took their lamps and went forth to meet him*, in this respect the girls are all alike, a fact that underscores their shared awareness of his coming and their common opportunity to prepare. These girls stand for Christian believers in the sense that they had accepted the invitation to the wedding by being intimately involved in the wedding party. They believed the bridegroom was coming and committed themselves to share in his joy.

They took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom. These *lamps* were small, flat containers for fuel with a wick protruding from a spout opposite the handle. Mounted on a long stick, these lamps could cast light from their lofty position. Being small, however, the fuel supply must be replenished often. That all the girls *took their lamps and went forth* indicates that they intended to participate in the wedding joy. Their going forth *to meet the bridegroom* is expressed proleptically and interprets their original intention, since the moment of this actual coming and their subsequent going forth is not yet come and would not until vv. 6-10. But their expression of purpose symbolizes the public commitment to take part in Christianity's hope. That all ten girls began their watch prepared at least to this extent, then, alludes to Christendom in general. That they had *their lamps* pictures the possession of those external expressions of Christian faith such as baptism, deeds of mercy, congregational worship, benevolent giving, personal testimonies and prayers in the Name of Jesus, rites usually thought to be characteristic of those who intend to pursue the Christian life. This story brilliantly contrasts true disciples, who possess vital faith, with those churchgoers who only apparently enjoy Christ's inner life, even though they formally share all the outward characteristics.

No interpretation of this parable can give importance to the total Bride of Christ, the Church triumphant, as affecting the general sense of this parable's meaning, because not one word of Jesus actually brings the Bride into this story. In fact, in their manuscripts, some scribes mistakenly wrote in "and the bride" after *to meet the bridegroom*, apparently supposing that the bridegroom would be bringing the bride to his own home (or that of his parents) where the marriage would occur. This apparently was the custom more common in the ancient world. (Cf. *Textual Commentary*, 62) But the logic of Jesus' story does not directly concern His going to take His Bride, the Church, but simply His absence and what His people were to do

in preparation for His return. Rather than lose us in complicated details, Jesus simply directs all attention to one subject: preparation (or lack of it) *to meet the bridegroom*.

25:2 And five of them were foolish, and five were wise. This subdivision of the group precisely in half is not indicative of the proportion of the saved and lost among God's people. Rather, this division may only intend to stress that people will be divided into two classes: the prepared and the unprepared.

Jesus had launched the theme of wisdom required to prepare for His coming, in His original problem: "Who then is the faithful and wise servant" (25:45)? By terming these girls *wise* and *foolish*. He proceeds to develop that theme. Whereas in the foregoing illustration He amplified the aspect of individual responsibility *in relation to the group*, this time He shows how individual responsibility expresses itself *despite the presence of the group*. Because this division of the girls into *wise* and *foolish* is the essential point of the story, it becomes clearer why the bride could not accurately represent the Church on earth awaiting Christ's return. The one figure of the finally perfected Bride of Christ cannot be composed of both wise and foolish, of godly and self-seeking, or of conscientious and indifferent people.

25:3 For the foolish, when they took their lamps, took no oil with them. Two views of their carelessness are possible:

1. They took no extra supply of oil, hence only brought the diminutive amount of oil actually contained in the lamps themselves. It would seem that everyone's lamps were lit from the beginning of their wait and continued for an unspecified period of time until the bridegroom came (25:8). If not lit from the first, then the girls had brought only that oil which remained in their lamps from earlier use which proved insufficient and, once lit, the lamps soon went out. This view is suggested by the observation that "the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps" (25:4). In this case, Jesus' emphasis is on their sad lack of ADEQUATE preparation.
2. They took no oil at all, even in their small lamps. This view emphasizes their complete disregard for ANY preparation. Yet their taking their lamps and going forth argues that they intended to make some preparation.

The Lord's judgment that these girls were foolish is grounded on the premise that they thoughtlessly left for their appointment without making the sufficient preparation foreseeably demanded by the usual

requirements of such appointments. That they could have so completely ignored their need of oil needs only one explanation: *they were foolish*. There can be no valid justification for a senseless deed. But this sad lack of essential foresight best explains everything that follows. McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 216) identified these virgins best:

The foolish virgins are not the unconverted, for they make no preparation; they are not apostates, for they, after waiting at their posts for a time, abandon it and go their way; but they evidently represent those who enter the Church and stand at their post until the bridegroom comes, and are found without sufficient preparation to meet him.

What, then, is the *oil*? In the story the oil was an easily obtainable item which was all-essential to their function in the wedding and an integral part of the purpose for which these girls had been invited to participate. Because Jesus' major point is preparation or lack of it, the procuring of the oil is itself a true expression of the girls themselves, the concrete evidence of their zeal or of their indolence. Because nothing we do is purely our own, but is done by the grace and Spirit of God (cf. Eph. 3:20; Phil. 2:12f.; Isa. 26:12; I Cor. 15:10), the *oil* may well stand for the total work of God's Spirit in us to reproduce the character of Christ in us, outfitting us for that joyous Wedding Supper of the Lamb. (See notes on 25:9; Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:27f.; Gal. 4:19.)

Even if their foolishly taking no oil defies logic, it is not without a possible explanation. Their folly could be the logical extension of several psychological premises, any of which could be devastating to the Christian:

1. Lack of foresight? Could they not foresee their need to prepare for a long wait, despite the vague possibility that he might return earlier than he did? But the bridegroom tarried, their lamps died out and they had no oil. They failed to consider the possibility of delay and the consequent need for an enduring supply of oil to meet the need.
2. Indifference to the character and significance of the occasion? The neglectful girls took the responsibility too lightly to remedy their lack of foresight in time. Churchgoers' sense of the importance and urgency of God's Kingdom becomes dull with time. While they confess His coming in judgment, they simply relegate His return to some undefined future day of no immediate concern.

3. Lack of loving attention to detail? Where was that love that shows itself in conscientiousness not merely in great outward display, but also in the small, hidden, apparently insignificant things that are as vital as oil to an oil lamp? (Cf. Rev. 2:4; contrast Luke 7:47.)
4. Presumption? Did they suppose they could get by on whatever oil remained in their lamp from former use, like church members who rest on yesterday's triumphs for Christ as an excuse for not dedicating themselves whole-heartedly today? Or, perhaps they presumed, as Edersheim (*Life*, II, 456f.) suggested, that they could borrow oil from others in the group or "that there would be a common stock in the house, out of which they would be supplied . . . in the hour of need." By presuming to leave this phase of preparation to others, they exhibit no understanding of their personal obligation. They further presume that time would be available to replenish any lack, like the disciple who hopes for tardy repentance.
5. They possessed the *form* of preparation, but not the *content*, *lamps* for giving light, but no *oil* to keep them burning at the critical hour. In this respect they resemble people who go through the motions of religion, but do not possess the dedication to Jesus and the power of righteousness that give the forms meaning. (Cf. II Tim. 3:5.) Theirs is only apparently and externally a solid relation to our absent Lord. Plummer (*Matthew*, 344) sees the *oil* as

that inward spiritual power which imparts light, warmth, and value to the externals of religion. Christian rules of life, public worship, fasting and works of mercy are good, but only on condition that they spring from, and are nourished by, the Christian spirit. Otherwise, they are as useless as lamps without oil, a burden to ourselves and misleading to others, who naturally believe that so much external profession implies what, as a matter of fact, is not there. . . . The inner life of constant communion with the Spirit of God is the oil which alone can illuminate and render beneficial to ourselves and to others the religious activity which we manifest in our daily life.

6. But, if by *oil* is meant a tenacious personal faith and life-long dedication, the foolish young ladies represent those who truly believe for awhile, embrace the Gospel with joy, are illuminated by the Spirit (cf. Heb. 6:4-6), but, because of "more pressing duties,

cares or interests," fail in faithfulness to Jesus. Then, at the moment of spiritual crisis caused by the Lord's delay, they literally run down spiritually, and, without personal spiritual resources, must turn to others' personal faith and dedication to replenish their own loss.

25:4 But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. Although these *vessels* (*angeiois*) could be thought of as the fuel chamber on the lamp itself, the expression, *vessels WITH their lamps*, and the logic of Jesus' story, together, argue that He meant a separate little flask to add oil to the lamp's receptacle when needed. This would be especially true in light of the minuscule size of the Palestinian oil lamps in common use. Regardless of the lamp's size, the demand for a possibly night-long use would dictate an adequate supply of lamp-oil, and only the sensible girls had the foresight to be so supplied.

These had not merely the form of readiness, *their lamps*, but a continuous supply of content, *the oil* to fuel them. Such Christians' lives really fulfill the function for which they are invited to share in the festive joy of the Bridegroom. Really directed by the Holy Spirit, they genuinely believe and act like it. Their spiritual life is vitally connected with its source, Jesus Christ (John 15:1ff.). They can remain constant to the end.

25:5 Now while the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. Since the groom had established no fixed schedule for his return, this delay is the critical opportunity that tests the foolish girls' real concern. Alford contrasted the unfaithful steward's attitude, "My lord tarries, there should be plenty of time," with these foolish girls' approach, "Surely he will soon be here, there should be no need for much oil." One assumed too much delay; the others, too little. Both misguessed and were caught unready.

They all slumbered and slept, i.e. "became drowsy and fell asleep." Nothing sinful here, because bodily weakness and the late hour combined to overcome their alertness, so they naturally succumbed to their fatigue. They all doze, but in a position so as to be instantly alert when the long-awaited announcement came. Their confidence, shown by their ability to sleep rather than bustle nervously about, suggests that all ten girls are convinced that they had done all they should to be ready for the happy occasion. Five have really done so. But five doze on, blissfully unaware that their shortcoming is becoming more and more obvious as their lamps burn lower and lower and their priceless chance to go buy oil, silently but permanently slips from their grasp.

Why did Jesus speak of their sleeping? Only as scenery for His story? Two suggestions:

1. Bruce (*Training*, 330), alluding to the main point of this illustration (25:13) observed:

Watching does not imply sleepless anxiety and constant thought concerning the future, but quiet, steady attention to present duty. . . . Sleep of the mind in reference to eternity is as necessary as physical sleep is to the body. Constant thought about the great realities of the future could only result in weakness, distraction, and madness or in disorder, idleness and restlessness; as in Thessalonica (II Thess. 3:12).

2. Plummer (*Matthew*, 344) said it well too:

This (sleep) seems to be a merciful concession to human weakness. It is impossible for creatures such as we are to keep our religious life always at high pressure. Certain as we are, and often as we may remind ourselves, that the Lord *will* come, and may come at any moment, either by our death or in some other way, we cannot live hour by hour as it would be possible and natural to live if we knew that He would come tonight or tomorrow morning. But it *is* possible to be constant in securing supplies of strength from the Holy Spirit; and when the call comes, whether by some crisis great or small in our own lives, or by the supreme crisis of all, we shall be ready to go out and meet the Bridegroom.

Hence, the disattention of sleep is not culpable and only apparently a failure to watch in this case, but is simply part of our human condition.

Saying, *The bridegroom tarried*, Jesus hinted once again at the delay in His Second Coming. (Cf. 24:48; 25:19.) Had He openly revealed His intention not to start earthward for two millennia, the early Christians would not have been moved to godliness and zeal by the sobering but stimulating realization that Jesus is due any day. Further, because the prediction of His return is dateless, it is exceedingly flexible, not at all binding Him deterministically to a firm schedule in any age. (Study Rom. 10:6f. in this connection: *chrònos* is the root of *chronizontos*, "tarried.")

25:6 But at midnight there is a cry, Behold, the bridegroom! Come ye forth to meet Him! At midnight, at a moment later than he was expected, when, because of the girls' fatigue and slumber, they were no longer thinking about the imminent arrival of the wedding party,

just like Jesus' delayed Second Coming. (Cf. Luke 12:38; Mark 13:35 where the uncertainty of His return date is further illustrated.) There was a cry raised by those responsible to relay the word. *Behold the bridegroom!* Again no mention of the bride, as in 25:1. Originally the cry of someone in the bridegroom's party sent on ahead to alert everyone to his arrival, this sounds like the gladdening shout of the archangel on the Last Day. This shout shall not arise from the human throats of prophets (24:23ff.), but from that of heavenly heralds (I Thess. 4:16), perhaps like those angelic voices that announced His first coming (Luke 2:10ff.)?

25:7 Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. Once again the girls appear identical in that they universally recognize the task at hand and give themselves to it. *They trimmed their lamps* (*ekômēsan*: "they arranged, set in order, prepared, put in readiness") by trimming the wick, removing the carbonized edge where the flame had burned the wick. Thus trimmed, the oil would burn more brightly with a clear flame. With reference to the foolish young ladies, this aorist is simply inceptive, i.e. they started to ready their lights, but did not complete the process, because the total trimming would include their pouring oil into the lap before lighting.

Although in our comments we have assumed it, there is no objective evidence that the girls' lamps had already been lit and burning during their long wait. Their trimming the lamps may be but the last-minute preparation for lighting the wick for the first time that night.

25:8 And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are going out. Even though the basis of their failure lay in the past, it is only at this crucial moment that these girls are jolted back to reality. That the *lamps are going out* means that the virtually dry wicks caught only for a moment. Because there was so little oil left in them, the flame could work only on the wick's fabric, not on oil with which it should have been saturated, and so kept sputtering, flickering and dying, no matter how zealously the girls tried to ignite them. They resemble people who try to coast along on the moral momentum of a past generation and suppose that their own superficial piety or forms of morality and religion have some eternal worth, even though totally void of faith and unreplenished from within by God's grace and personal devotion to Him.

If Jesus means that the girls never had any oil at all, having left for the wedding with absolutely dry wicks and lamps, He is describing countless members of European State Churches who are formally "Christians" but have never been born again. The same condemnation sentences also second- and third-generation Christians anywhere who simply grow up in the Church but do not share the spirit and faith of their fathers. Even though they appear to be Christians due to their exterior resemblance to genuine believers, these are nothing but a hangover from a previous age of true faith and zeal. They lack, because they never sought it, that absolutely essential, inner vitality to be capable of serving Jesus as He desires.

Only at this last, decisive moment is the essential difference between the ten girls revealed. (Cf. 13:43 notes.) The sensibility or stupidity of each is revealed by one fact: did they really possess the essential ingredient or not? Were they thoroughly equipped (II Tim. 3:16f.)? Their pathetic request, *Give us of your oil*, was made too late and to the wrong people.

25:9 But the wise answered, saying, Peradventure there will not be enough for us and you: go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. This response was . . .

1. **REASONABLE**, typical of these far-sighted girls, in that they continue to exhibit the same prudent logic that enabled them to plan carefully before.
2. **REALISTIC**. Theirs is not grudging selfishness that is unwilling to share its bounty, but a clear-eyed realism that understood their responsibility to the bridegroom. They must provide sufficient lighting for the entire banquet. To have divided their supply at this point would have reduced their oil supply by 50% and consequently shortened the duration of their contribution to the joy of the festivities by exactly that amount. Better to have five lights that last the duration of the banquet, than ten that burn out at mid-feast!
3. **RIGHT**, because the foolish girls had requested something to which they had no just claim.

How can anyone transfer to anyone else his own deeply-felt enthusiasm, his own profound convictions, his loving determination, or that hard-earned experience or his painfully acquired knowledge that cost him time to acquire? How can anyone impart to another his

own maturity or character, or that personal relationship with God that grows out of frequent fellowship with Him? These can be had only by personal acquisition: *go buy for yourselves*. How can anyone live on the spiritual assets of others? *There will not be enough for us and you*, is literally true, since no disciple possesses any more character or spiritual experience or hard-won growth in Christ than he absolutely needs for himself (I Peter 4:17f.).

Here Jesus gives the fatal coup de grace to the popular belief that some people are good beyond their own spiritual requirements, hence have more than sufficient to save themselves. He crushes that baseless hope that such spiritual giants can somehow share with their needy brethren. Some Jews clung to the all-covering merits of Abraham, many Catholics to the treasury of merit accumulated by the saints and Mary especially, some Protestants to the saintliness of a godly relative, while the Mormons baptize the living for the dead. The error common to them all is the supposition that the character of Christ produced by the spiritual power of the Holy Spirit in each of His people is a quantitative and transmissible value that can be transferred to others. Nonetheless, the all-essential oil must be one's own. None can be saved by the faith, zeal, hard work and sacrifices of others. Last-minute appeals for a change in the rules, Jesus emphasized, are rightly unavailing.

Considering the midnight hour, *go ye rather to them that sell, and buy*, sounds like a foolish suggestion quite out of character for the wise virgins. However, these girls were *wise*, not omniscient, for even the wisest of the virgins could not know the time-lapse between the announcement of the bridegroom's approach and the entrance into the feast. So, if but one shop-keeper could be awakened and induced to open his shop to furnish them their need under the circumstances, the advice of the wise was actually sound, the only possible thing to do under the circumstances. In reality, however, the time had passed to act on this good advice. The foolish girls may have considered the hint their only hope, and so attempt it. That they actually succeed in securing the oil is not implied by their later arrival (25:11). They may have dared return without it, foolishly hoping for admission anyway.

25:10 And while they went away to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage feast: and the door was shut. In going to buy at this late hour, these senseless girls act perfectly in character with their former foolishness, not foreseeing

that the village oil merchants could have been at the wedding feast too, or that, even if the wedding procession moved ever so slowly to the final destination, the time lost would be too great to find a merchant willing to send a servant to open up and procure them some oil. Characteristically, they did not calculate this, just as they missed their other guesses about such things.

While they went . . . the bridegroom came. This is the same point made earlier. The crucial hour of Christ's return can strike at any moment, surprising people in whatever spiritual state they are then. Some might be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness, like the evil administrator (24:48f.) or caught off guard like the householder (24:43). Others might be simply asleep (Luke 17:34) or at work (Matt. 24:40f.). Other servants of God might be unjustifiably overconfident about the completeness of their own preparation, like these foolish girls (25:10).

Jesus no longer terms *those who went in with the bridegroom* "wise virgins," but *those who were ready*. Their wisdom simply consisted in their preparing before the deadline. By His saying, *they that were ready went in*, Jesus implies, "Those who were not ready were shut outside," a sentence He will confirm later. This is the moment of truth when the empty claims, the vacant forms and unmeaning rituals of merely external Christianity will be found useless.

To the marriage feast: even if there were other features in the traditional marriage, like the festive procession, etc., what is really important for these girls is their participation in *the marriage feast* itself. To share in it is to know all the joy of the festivities. To miss this is to lose the best part. (Cf. the marriage supper of the Lamb; Rev. 19:7ff.; 21:2.)

What terrible finality rings in the words: *and the door was shut!* (Cf. Luke 13:25.) Just as God shut the ark door, shutting Noah and his family in and shutting the ungodly world out (Gen. 7:13ff.), so also here the bridegroom orders the banquet-hall door shut, closing the prepared ones in and the unprepared out. The opportunity for grace has passed and forgiveness is now impossible, according to our gracious Lord "who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens" (Rev. 3:7). Until that moment, the door of mercy is open to the worst of sinners who repents; thereafter it will be closed forever.

25:11 Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. Flushed and out of breath but still hopeful, the tardy girls rush back to the banquet-hall. Did they find one sleepy merchant

to sell them the needed oil? Because Jesus did not affirm they succeeded, this hypothesis must be discarded. In the nature of the reality illustrated, the oil of Christian experience cannot be gained after the Lord has returned. It will then be too late. So, their return probably means that they found no one to open their shop, and, in desperation, they now attempt to be admitted to the wedding feast without the oil anyway.

Lord, Lord (kùrie, kùrie). They do not address him as "Lord God," but as "Mister" or "Sir," since, for them, he is just another man getting married. However, their repeated cries remind us of Jesus' pained question (Luke 6:46) and of His judgment (Matt. 7:21ff.). *Open to us.* This distressed appeal implies that he should recognize them and grant them entrance. To the stupidity of not readying themselves in time, they add the final folly of demanding the impossible. By what right could they hope to function as bridesmaids to bring joy to the bridegroom, when, without the essential ingredient for such service, they were sadly unqualified to fulfill any responsibility as light-bearers at his wedding feast? They resemble those twice-a-year churchgoers who, without the spiritual vitality that gives power and character to the life and faith of the godly, nevertheless suppose that the Lord must welcome them even without it. How could they be filled with fullness of joy in His presence, when they do not share His wisdom, His Spirit or His character, enough to submit to the discipline of readying themselves for His coming?

25:12 But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. (Cf. 7:21ff.; Luke 13:25.) This solemn response means, "I do not recognize your claim to participate." In the Semitic idiom, in addition to its usual meaning, "to know," this verbal concept also meant "to admit or recognize one's rights or claims." (Cf. Exod. 33:12f., 17; Nah. 1:7, RSV; John 10:14f., 27; Rom. 8:28f.; I Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9; I Thess. 5:12; II Tim. 2:19.) So, while this bridegroom undoubtedly does know who these five girls are, nevertheless, because of their carelessness toward his feast, his disappointment moves him to treat these acquaintances *as if* he had never met them. He disowned them by treating them as if they had never been members of his wedding party, and left them outside. Why should he admit anyone who claims to be a bridesmaid, but who, due to neglect, never fulfills the purpose of their calling?

Why, too, does God mercilessly refuse to pardon what, on the surface, appears to be an excusable oversight? After all, can He not forgive someone for a minor unpunctuality who happened not to bring enough lamp fuel? But the "oversight" of the foolish girls revealed a serious character defect: they cared too little to surrender precious preparation time to him. He did not matter enough to them to justify their giving close, personal attention to ready themselves individually on time. Can anyone, who treats his own discipleship in a perfunctory way, who neglects to obtain what is easily obtainable and absolutely indispensable for participation in the divine joy and the very purpose for which they were invited, really object, if they find themselves thrown out for neglecting to acquire it?

25:13 Watch therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour. This final word really concludes five parables that all accent this one point: because the final schedule lies within the province of God, hence no human can be trusted to know it, the only possible course open to us is constant vigilance. (See on 24:36, 42, 44, 50; Mark 13:33, 35; Luke 21:34-36.) Although Jesus' application covers essentially the same ground as the other parables, this story emphasizes how the truly far-sighted, alert individuals distinguish themselves in any crowd of Christians: they make adequate preparation in time, because they know that this spiritual maturation, which requires a lifetime, cannot be crowded into the last hour.

In this story Jesus does not spell out in what the watching consists. But the readers of Matthew's Gospel are not left to wonder, because, in His larger context, Jesus emphasized:

1. Remove all hypocrisy by consistency (23:1-4), by true humility (23:5-12), by a non-sectarian spirit (23:13-15), by real reverence for God (23:16-22), by moral equilibrium (23:23f.) and by inner purity (23:25-28).
2. Accept at full value the messages and warnings of all of God's spokesmen (23:29ff.).
3. Develop mental and moral alertness (24:44) which carries out personal responsibilities with diligence (24:45f.), working profitably for the Master (25:20ff.).
4. Show a sensitive concern for the needs of others (24:45; 25:35-40).
5. Do anything Jesus requires (28:20). And Matthew is full of information in this area.

Ye know not the day nor the hour. When our highest motivation should normally be a sensitiveness to the Lord, an eagerness to serve

Him, a quick-witted ambition and a zealous love, why does Jesus accentuate our fearful ignorance of the fateful Last Hour as the ground for watchfulness? Because, where love grows weak and attention dull, apprehension and fear may be the only self-protective mechanism left that will stir the coals of conscience into flame and shock us into dutiful alertness once more. Every day consciously lived in this uncertainty conducts us directly into deliberate choices to make ourselves holy as He is holy (I Peter 2:13ff.; 3:11; I John 3:1-3). However, this can function only to the degree that we really believe that He is to return certainly and unexpectedly. To the believer, therefore, this uncomfortable uncertainty is perfectly calculated to stimulate that conscientiousness required to produce the character He thinks essential to be ready when He comes.

This parable illustrates the inner spiritual readiness for Christ's coming. The story that follows stresses our outward expression of the capacities He intrusts to us (25:14ff.). In both Jesus teaches the strict individuality of our answerability to God: no one can hide in the group. During our present service, all stewards resemble each other in outward respects. At the end, however, those who have only the forms or the intellectual knowledge, but not the fulness of God in their individual soul and no loving response to the living Christ, will be finally and permanently denounced and divided from those in whom the Spirit really dwells.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. Explain the meaning of the following terms as Jesus used them in this parable:
 - a. kingdom of heaven
 - b. virgins
 - c. wise and foolish
 - d. lamps
 - e. oil
2. Explain the oriental marriage customs that shed light on the meaning of this story.
3. List other New Testament Scriptures that illustrate or help interpret the following phrases:
 - a. "the marriage feast"
 - b. "the door was shut"
 - c. "Lord, Lord, open to us!"
 - d. "I know you not."
4. List other parables that share the same fundamental points illustrated in this one, indicating which features are parallel.
5. State the one point which this parable shares with no other parable

in this great last discourse of Jesus, the point that throws new light on the main theme of all these parables.

6. What is the principal difference between the wise and foolish girls, as this is expressed in their conduct? In what did the wisdom or folly of each consist?
7. List the main points of comparison between this parable and the reality it illustrates.
8. What does this illustration teach about the Second Coming of Christ?

5. Illustration of the wise and foolish stewards (25:14-30)

14 For *it is* as *when* a man, going into another country, called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. 15 And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one; to each according to his several ability; and he went on his journey. 16 Straightway he that received the five talents went and traded with them, and made other five talents. 17 In like manner he also that *received* the two gained other two. 18 But he that received the one went away and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money. 19 Now after a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and maketh a reckoning with them. 20 And he that received the five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents; lo, I have gained other five talents. 21 His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy lord. 22 And he also that *received* the two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: lo, I have gained other two talents. 23 His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy lord. 24 And he that had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art a hard man, reaping where thou didst not sow, and gathering where thou didst not scatter; 25 and I was afraid, and went away, and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, thou hast thine own. 26 But his lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I did not scatter: 27 thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the bankers, and at my coming I should have received back mine own with interest.

28 Take ye away therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him that hath the ten talents. 29 For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away. 30 And cast ye out the unprofitable servant into the other darkness: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Jesus began this parable by saying, "For it will be as when a man going on a journey, etc." What, exactly, is "like a man going"? With what does the word "For," connect this story? Do you think this "for" is important to the interpretation of this parable?
- b. Why did this lord distribute his goods so unequally among his servants? Should he have done things this way?
- c. Do you see anything in the situation that would indicate that the master's explicit wish was that each steward make him a profit? Do you see any kind of contract that would condemn the unprofitable servant and justify the others?
- d. Why did the lord praise and reward the first two stewards equally?
- e. What, if anything, does the expression, "Enter into the joy of your master," indicate about our final reward for faithful service?
- f. If this parable is often thought to teach something about Christian stewardship, what is it doing in the middle of Jesus' sermon on the Second Coming? What is the connection between stewardship and the Last Day?
- g. If the philosophy is correct that "righteousness should be its own reward" and that "we should do nothing for rewards," then how are we to understand Jesus who does not hesitate to tell stories like this one which promises high rewards to those who serve Him well? Does this not constitute a pay-off for being good and actually corrupt that good by its self-seeking, calculating motivation?
- h. Would not the lord in Jesus' story have gotten further with his third servant if, instead of intrusting him with but one talent, he had placed, say, two or even five at his disposal? Would not this show of trust have communicated more to the servant, motivating him to do a better job than he did? What is the lord's fundamental reason for not intrusting any more to him? Why did he give him as much as he did?

- i. When the lazy steward returned the one talent, why did not his lord accept it back?
- j. How does this illustration carry forward concepts introduced in previous stories Jesus told? What are these points of contact with the other stories?
- k. What do you think motivated the one-talent man to hide it rather than invest it?
- l. On what reasonable basis could that third servant have dared describe his boss the way he does? Was there any truth in the accusations he uses as justification for his fear?
- m. How do you explain the fact that the master did not debate his servant's evaluation? Was the evaluation too true and well-known to doubt? If not, then why did the lord use the servant's own analysis to condemn him?
- n. The master ordered: "Cast out the *unprofitable* servant." How does this description of the wicked, slothful servant serve to underline the point of Jesus' story?
- o. This entire story is centered around making money, either by profitable trading or by banking interest, and the only person condemned is the one who made no money. How do you harmonize this concept with "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20), "Sell your possessions and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail" (Luke 12:33), etc.? If it is wrong to make lots of money, how could Jesus condemn the steward who did not make a profit with his masters's money? But, if one keeps making himself poor through charity, how can he ever become a good and faithful (= profitable) servant by seeking to make more money?
- p. How is it possible to take from a man what he does not have? Jesus affirmed, "From him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." Explain.

PARAPHRASE

"The way God operates His Kingdom, which not incidentally affects the manner in which our lives are to be spent watching, may be compared to a man about to leave home on a trip. He called his slaves in and put his property in their hands. To the first one he committed some money equivalent to ten years' pay for the average day-laborer. To another servant he handed over the equivalent of roughly

four years' pay. The third man received the equivalent of two years' pay. The owner distributed this money to each man according to his relative ability. Then he went on his journey.

"The man who had received the largest sum went immediately to put the money to work, and doubled his sum. Similarly, the second man did business with his, and doubled his sum. However, the slave who had been trusted with the smallest sum, went and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money.

"A long time later the master of those slaves returned and asked them to give account of his money. The one who had been entrusted with the largest sum stepped up, bringing his profit. 'Sir,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. Look: I have doubled your capital!' His master responded, 'Good work, you excellent, trustworthy servant! You have shown you can be faithful with a small amount. I will put you in charge of something big! Come and share the happiness of your master!'

"Likewise, the man who had the two talents came forward, 'Master,' he began, 'you handed me two talents. Look here: I have earned you two more!' To him the master replied, 'Splendid! Sound and reliable servant, you have proven yourself trustworthy in a small way. I will trust you with greater things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"Then the man who had received the smallest amount came forward. 'Master,' he began, 'I knew you were a harsh, stubborn man that enriches himself at the expense of others. So, I was scared and went and buried your money in the ground. Here is your money back.' But his lord answered him, 'You ungenerous, lazy servant! You thought that I enrich myself at others' expense? In that case, you should have placed my money on deposit with the bankers and, upon my return, I would have received my capital with interest! So, take the money away from him and give it to the man who now has the most. The person who uses well what he has will be entrusted with more, and he will have plenty. But the person who thinks he has nothing will forfeit even his "nothing." Also, fling that good-for-nothing servant into the darkness outside where people mourn and grind their teeth in frustrated rage!'"

SUMMARY

During Jesus' absence, the present moment is a stewardship of God's goods entrusted to us according to our individual ability to

handle them. These are to be invested for His advantage, because an accounting will be given. However, there is promotion for good stewards of God's grace, but also crushing humiliation for those who do nothing to promote the Lord's profit. Thus, the period before Jesus returns must be put to responsible use in productive service for Him.

NOTES

25:14 **For it is as when a man . . . For . . . as** (*Hòsper gâr*) unquestionably binds this stewardship story to what precedes it, but how? What is the connection?

1. McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 217) argues that the kingdom of God in general is not the immediate subject, but, rather, the way we are to watch, thus linking our story to the conclusion drawn from the parable of the ten virgins (25:13). But this overemphasizes his objection to supplying "the Kingdom of heaven" as subject, as did the King James translators. However, the larger, contextual picture painted in Matthew 24, 25 is truly "the Kingdom of God," i.e. how He intends for us to understand and respond to various phases of His government. (See note on 25:1.) So, Jesus has not really changed the subject, but merely amplifies one more phase of it.
2. Rather than bog down in technical definitions of God's Kingdom, Jesus focuses all attention on activity, the human actions that will be judged by their true Lord and King. So, by saying, *For*, He proceeds to explain how best to watch in light of the fact that His return date cannot be known. The Talents Parable, therefore, teaches that our time, now graciously conceded to us by God, is most profitably used, not as the foolish virgins of the previous story, but in faithful, fruitful use of everything He entrusts us with for His glory, while the time and opportunity are ours, as the five wise virgins and the businesslike stewards of this story. The Virgins Parable rightly precedes the Talents Parable, because the former lays stress on the constant *state* of individual readiness and the need for spiritual power within, while the latter emphasizes the devoted, individual *labor* required to achieve it. Alford (I, 251) noted another antithesis: the foolish virgins thought their part too easy, while the wicked steward thought his part too hard. Continuing to develop his "faithful and wise servant" theme (24:45; see on 25:2), Jesus now illustrates how conscientious His

disciple must be in seeking his Lord's advantage through correct management of His affairs during His absence.

A man, going into another country. Once more our Lord implies that His absence from earth is going to require some time (cf. 21:33) and that His return would not be imminent (cf. Luke 19:11f.), a point repeated later (25:19). In this way He continues to correct the mistaken notion involved in the disciples' original questions that assumed that His Second Coming and the end of the world would be more or less contemporaneous with Jerusalem's fall. (Cf. 24:3, 8, 14.)

He called his own servants (= slaves, *douloï*). Modern views of ancient slavery cannot but warp our understanding of this illustration, since the relationship between masters and slaves in antiquity was not always that of ranting tyrant and grovelling serf. Rather, as Jesus implies, slaves could be entrusted with any phase of their master's affairs, even to the point of handling great sums of money. (Cf. 18:24.) Merely because someone sold himself into slavery to pay debts does not mean that he necessarily toiled at menial labor until his debt to his owner was paid. Were he a skilled artist, musician or teacher captured in war, or perhaps a good businessman fallen on hard times, his skill would be especially valuable to his lord. Hence, he could be expected to labor in his area of expertise for his master's profit.

These called are *his own servants* who, because part of his household, could be trusted with the employment he now has in mind. Here are Jesus' disciples and all those who believe on Him through their word and who accept responsibility to Him as His stewards. These are not worldlings nor hirelings, but His own property (*tous idïous douloùs*). Just because they belong to Him, He has a proper, prior right to their time and effort.

Nevertheless, we may not exclude unbelieving worldlings altogether from stewardship responsibility, even if they are not contemplated primarily by Jesus' parable. In fact, the ungodly are God's property too. Whether they acknowledge or understand it or not, their Creator has a proper and prior demand on them too. While there is a true, unique sense in which believers alone are servants of Jesus Christ, this does not rescind that ancient and unchanged demand that every man "fear God and give Him glory." This is the "eternal gospel" to every man (Rev. 14:6). The original, high calling of man was to be a responsible steward of God's creation (Gen. 1, 2; Ps. 8).