

The Rapture of the Saints (2)

In the previous installment of this department, we saw that the rapture of the saints who are living at the end of this age will be in two stages. Prior to the time of the great tribulation (Matt. 24:21), the overcoming, watchful, and mature believers will be raptured to the throne of God in the heavens. However, the immature believers, who are genuinely saved but who are consumed with the anxiety and enjoyment of this age, will remain on the earth to pass through the tribulation for their discipline and perfection. These later-maturing believers will be raptured near the end of the tribulation, just prior to the Lord's appearing on the earth in power and great glory.¹ That the saints at the end of the age would pass through the tribulation was the common expectation of many of the early church fathers. This is evidenced, for example, by their predictions of the church's struggle against Antichrist (2 Thes. 2:3), as Justin Martyr said, "[Christ] shall come from heaven with glory, when the man of apostasy, who speaks strange things against the Most High, shall venture to do unlawful deeds on the earth against us the Christians" (253-254). Alexander Reese notes,

All down the centuries there had existed Christians who longed for the Revelation of Christ, whilst expecting that Antichrist would come first...Christ's approaching Advent would be followed, not by the rise, but by the destruction, of Antichrist. (227)

However, beginning from the early part of the nineteenth century, many once-lost truths concerning the Lord's second coming began to be recovered, including the truth of Christ's secret coming and the rapture prior to the commencement of the tribulation. To a great degree, it was to John Nelson Darby and the British brothers that this portion was given, but even Darby failed to see the full breadth of the truth related to the end times. As a result, the school of dispensationalism holds to a one-sided view of the rapture of the saints. Since the time of Darby, the lamp of the prophetic word has shined more brightly (2 Pet. 1:19), and many more details concerning the end of the age are now clear. We can now see that the rapture is in two aspects, or stages—one before the tribulation and one near the end. The early, pretribulation rapture is a "judgment act," as David M. Panton says (43), coming in the day of reward, to reward the watchful and ready believers.

In our previous installment we considered the two aspects of the rapture mainly from Revelation. In this article we will consider them further from the Gospels, and in the coming installment we will consider the rapture as revealed in the Epistles.

The Appearing and Revelation of Christ

The rapture of the saints will take place at the time of the Lord's second coming. In the New Testament three words are primarily used related to the Lord's coming. The context and usage of these words refer sometimes to events prior to the great tribulation and sometimes to events at the end of the tribulation. One such word is *epiphaneia* (ἐπιφάνεια), meaning "to shine forth, to make visible" (1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1; Titus 2:13). Second Timothy 4:8 says, "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, with which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will recompense me in that day, and not only me but also all those who have loved His appearing [ἐπιφάνεια]." The Lord's appearing is mentioned here with respect to the crown, the reward, that will be given to Paul. As such, Christ's coming back is a warning, an encouragement, and an incentive to us. We should love it and look forward to it with earnest expectation and joy. Second Thessalonians 2:8 says, "The lawless one will be revealed (whom the Lord Jesus will slay by the breath of His mouth and bring to nothing by the manifestation [ἐπιφάνεια] of His coming)." Clearly, this refers to the Lord's coming at the end of the tribulation when He will defeat Antichrist and smite the nations with His judging word (Rev. 19:15).

Another word used for the Lord's coming is *apokalypsis* (ἀποκάλυψις), the taking away of a veil (1 Pet. 1:7, 13; 4:13). First Corinthians 1:7 says, "So that you do not lack in any gift, eagerly awaiting the revelation [ἀποκάλυψις] of our Lord Jesus Christ." To await the appearing of the Lord is a normal sign of true believers. Second Thessalonians 1:7 says, "To you who are being afflicted, rest with us at the revelation [ἀποκάλυψις] of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of His power, in flaming fire." *Power* and *fire* indicate that this revelation will transpire with the Lord's open coming at the end of the tribulation (Matt. 24:29-30; Isa. 66:15-16; Mal. 4:1).

The Parousia of Christ

The most significant word for the Lord's coming is *parousia* (1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thes. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thes. 2:1, 8; James 5:7-8; 2 Pet. 1:16; 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28), whose meaning includes that of both His *epiphaneia* and His *apokalupsis*. In Matthew 24:3 the disciples asked, "What will be the sign of Your coming [παρουσία]?" Verses 37 through 39 say,

Just as the days of Noah were, so will the coming [παρουσία] of the Son of Man be. For as they were in those days before the flood, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day in which Noah entered into the ark, and they did not know that judgment was coming until the flood came and took all away, so also will the coming [παρουσία] of the Son of Man be.

That the coming of the Son of Man will be like the "days" of Noah indicates that the Lord's coming involves a period of time with a particular characteristic. *Before the flood* indicates a time of perceived prosperity, peace, and safety. At this time the ones eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage will not know that judgment is coming. In sharp contrast to this, the great tribulation will commence with supernatural calamities, a clear sign of the time of the wrath of God, when men will call out to the mountains and rocks to fall upon them (Rev. 6:12-17).

Therefore, the days before the flood must refer to the time just prior to the great tribulation. It is at this point that the Lord's parousia begins. On the other hand, Matthew 24:27 through 30 say,

Just as the lightning comes forth from the east and shines to the west, so will the coming [παρουσία] of the Son of Man be...And immediately after the tribulation of those days,...the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the land will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

After the tribulation of those days is strong proof that the open coming of Christ will take place after the great tribulation, at which time all Israel will see Him and repent (Zech. 12:10), and He will defeat Antichrist and his armies (Rev. 19:11-21). By this we can see that the New Testament words for the Lord's coming, particularly *parousia*, refer to events both before and after the great tribulation. George Eldon Ladd wrongly concludes, "If one can make anything of language at all, no distinction can be made between the parousia, the apokalypse,

and the epiphany of our Lord. They are one and the same event" (69). However, the "days before the flood" (Matt. 24:38) cannot possibly be one and the same event as "after the tribulation of those days" (v. 29), though both describe "the coming of the Son of Man" (vv. 27, 37). Rather, the various mentions of the Lord's coming, taken together, indicate that the parousia, the coming of the Lord, extends from the beginning to the end of the three and a half years of the great tribulation.

Parousia denotes both an arrival and the consequent presence with the arriving one (Vine 208). Thus, Christ's coming will be His presence with His believers, and as such, it will extend over a period of time. It will begin with the rapture of the man-child to the throne of God in the heavens, which will transpire prior to the "thousand two hundred and sixty days" (Rev. 12:5-6), and with the rapture of the firstfruits to the heavenly Mount Zion prior to the "hour of His judgment," the fall of religious Babylon, and the worship of the beast (14:1-4, 7-9). Following this, Christ will continue His parousia by coming from heaven to the air, where He will still be concealed from the world by being clothed with a cloud (10:1), at which time the

majority of the believers will be raptured to the air (1 Thes. 4:15-17), Christ will judge all the believers at His judgment seat (2 Cor. 5:10), and the marriage of the Lamb will take place (Rev. 19:7-9). Finally, Christ will complete His parousia by coming from the air with His saints to appear on

the earth (19:11-16; Matt. 24:27; 2 Thes. 2:8).

The Two Comings of Christ

As demonstrated by the above, the Scriptures reveal that the coming of Christ will be in two main stages, separated by the duration of the great tribulation. In His coming prior to the tribulation, Christ will come as a thief. In Matthew 24 Jesus said,

Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord comes. But know this, that if the householder had known in which watch the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you also be ready, because at an hour when you do not expect it, the Son of Man is coming. (vv. 42-44)

Similarly He said to the church in Sardis, "Remember therefore how you have received and heard, and keep it and repent. If therefore you will not watch, I will come as a thief, and you shall by no means know at what hour I will come upon you" (Rev. 3:3).²

The various mentions of the Lord's coming indicate that the parousia extends from the beginning to the end of the three and a half years of the great tribulation.

A thief comes at an unknown time to steal precious things. Moreover, that a thief comes in the night (1 Thes. 5:2) indicates that the Lord's coming is kept secret and will transpire suddenly, being known beforehand by no one. Hence, the Lord's coming as a thief denotes a secret appearing to His seekers, in which He will come to those who love Him and take them away as His treasures. According to the context of Matthew 24:37-39, this will transpire in the "days before the flood," that is, prior to the great tribulation. To be ready to be taken by the Lord in this way requires our watchfulness.

On the other hand, verse 27 says, "Just as the lightning comes forth from the east and shines to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be." The second coming of Christ has two aspects. One is the secret aspect, related to His watchful believers, and the other is the open aspect, related to the unbelieving Jews and Gentiles. Lightning here signifies the open aspect, which will take place after the great tribulation, as indicated by verses 29 and 30. The Lord's coming like a flash of lightning will be a sign of the end of His parousia.

Several other prophetic indications point to the two aspects of the Lord's future coming. In His secret coming He will come as the morning star (Rev. 2:28; 22:16; 2 Pet. 1:19), which will dawn at the end of the dark age. The morning star is like the star that appeared at the birth of Christ (Matt. 2:2, 9-10). At that time the Jews had mental knowledge in dead letters concerning Christ, but the magi received a living vision concerning Him. Similarly, in the first stage of His second appearing, Christ will not be seen by the Jews and the unbelieving world. Rather, He will be the morning star to His overcomers who watch for His coming. To all the others He will appear only as the Sun of righteousness on the day of Jehovah, a day that comes, burning like a furnace (Mal. 4:1-2). This will transpire at the end of the great tribulation when Christ comes with power to be seen by all Israel and the world.

Coming for the Saints and with the Saints

At His second appearing, Christ will come to rapture the ready believers. This will be His coming for the saints. The language in 1 Thessalonians 3:13, however, is different. This verse says, "So that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints." This and other passages speak of the Lord's coming not only for the saints but with the saints (4:14, 17; Jude 14; Rev. 19:14; Zech. 14:5). George N. H. Peters concludes,

The Scriptures describe a Coming of Jesus for or in behalf of His saints...and then again another with all His saints..., and these two, differing thus in an important

particular, indicate separate stages or manifestations pertaining to the same Second Advent. Without allowing something of this kind, several acts pertaining to the one great Coming to this earth, it is impossible to reconcile such passages. (318)

Likewise, William Kelly notes that the verses cited above point to "the two great parts of the presence of the Lord Jesus":

He will first come for the saints, and in the second place He will come with them. Both are called "the coming, or presence, of the Lord." They are the two main aspects—if one may so say—of Christ's coming: the first, to gather the heavenly saints to Himself; the second, to bring them with Him when He appears in glory. (413)

Darby says similarly,

When He appears, we shall appear with Him—hence we must be with Him before even He appears at all...[His saints] will appear with Him in glory—be like Him. Now it is quite certain they will not appear with Him when they are caught up to meet Him in the air. (Writings 11:115)

This is the only accurate way to reconcile all the verses we have cited above.

However, in order to maintain the posttribulational concept, some have attempted to compress the Lord's coming for and with the saints into a single, two part motion, "two aspects of a single indivisible event" (Ladd 91), that takes place at Christ's coming in glory at the end of the tribulation. Alexander Reese says,

At the Parousia in triumph of our Lord Jesus Christ, His faithful people, as they see Him coming, will be caught up to meet Him in the air: they go forth to meet Him, and then return with Him to earth to share His triumph in the Kingdom of Glory. Christ has come for His saints, and with them at the same crisis." (238-239)

This argument comes mainly from the phrase εἰς ἀπάντησιν, translated as meet in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, which says, "Then we who are living, who are left remaining, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." Reese cites the analogy between meet here and its other uses in the New Testament (Matt. 25:1, 6; Acts 28:15), claiming that "the party met continues after the meeting to advance still in the direction in which He was moving previously" (238). The argument here is that the Lord will descend, meet the ascending saints, and continue to descend to the earth, requiring that the ascending saints immediately turn around to join Him in His descent. In Matthew 25 and Acts 28, however, little

is actually said about the direction of the motions or the timing and intervals involved in the movements. In addition, the verbs cognate to ἀπάντησιν (ὕπαντάω and συναντάω) do not offer the technical meaning that Reese suggests. In general, his argument is weak.

Prior to the beginning of the tribulation, Christ will come as a thief for the watchful and ready believers and take them to the throne of God in the heavens, the heavenly Mount Zion (Rev. 14:1), to stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:36). Near the end of the tribulation, He will catch up the majority of the believers to the air (Rev. 14:14-16; 1 Thes. 4:17). Then in the air He will set up His judgment seat, before which all the resurrected and raptured believers will appear (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10), at which time the overcoming saints will be called to the marriage dinner of the Lamb (Rev. 19:8-9). Following this, He will come to the earth, with His overcoming saints as His army, to defeat Antichrist (vv. 11-14). All these events will intervene between the Lord's coming for the saints and His coming with the saints. This sequence gives meaning and coherence to the two separate aspects of the Lord's coming.

The Imminent Coming of Christ

Philippians 3:20 and 21 say, "We eagerly await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transfigure the body of our humiliation to be conformed to the body of His glory." First Corinthians 1:7 likewise tells us that the believers are "eagerly awaiting the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ," and Hebrews 9:28 says that Christ "will appear a second time to those who eagerly await Him." Titus 2:13 says that we are "awaiting the blessed hope, even the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." All these verses show that the proper attitude of believers is to constantly look for the Lord's coming, an event that may occur at any time. The imminence of the Lord's coming is indicated in Revelation 22:7, 12, and 20, in which Jesus says, "I come quickly." It is also apparent in Matthew 24:42, which says, "Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord comes," and in verse 44, which says, "For this reason you also be ready, because at an hour when you do not expect it, the Son of Man is coming." That the Lord's coming is imminent, strictly speaking, need not mean that it is immediate but rather that it will be unexpected and may be at any time. Therefore, as we eagerly await His coming, we prepare ourselves by watching and praying. This has been the attitude of faithful saints throughout the course of the entire church age, and it will be the condition of the overcomers when Christ returns.

In order to maintain the proper attitude toward imminence, many teach that we cannot look for further fulfillments of prophecy or visible, telling events in the world that would signal His soon appearing. It is the thesis of pretribulationism that to look for such events imposes a necessary delay between the present time and the time of the Lord's coming. Arthur T. Pierson states,

The imminence of the Lord's coming consists in two things: its certainty as a revealed fact, and its uncertainty as to time...It constitutes therefore an overhanging imminent event always liable to occur...How can one look for an event as imminent which he knows is not to take place for a definite time to come? (48-49)

Gerald B. Stanton concurs: "No prophesied, or clearly scheduled, event stands between the present hour and the catching away of the Church at the rapture" (108). However, the Scriptures do seem to foretell certain events as needing to transpire before the Lord's coming. In the years after Christ's ascension, even the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:2), the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom (v. 14; 28:19-20), and the martyrdom of Peter (John 21:18-19) may have been considered as prerequisites to the Lord's return. Although these have now transpired, certain signs of the Lord's coming in Matthew 24 have not. These include the abomination of desolation being set up in the temple (v. 15), the coming of false Christs (vv. 23-24), and signs in the heavens (v. 29), all of which must precede the coming of the Son of Man (v. 30).

On the one hand, the imminence of the Lord's coming demands an any-day expectation, but on the other, certain signs are said to precede His appearing. It is in the apparent antagonism of these two aspects of prophecy that a major factor of the debate lies. Dispensational pretribulationists maintain that the imminence of Christ's coming precludes signs, and post-tribulationists insist that signs preclude imminence. Accordingly, the one-sided conclusion of the former is that the entire church will be raptured prior to the great tribulation, and that of the latter is that no believers will be raptured until Christ's coming in power at the end.³

Nevertheless, it is both true that the New Testament speaks of the signs of Christ's coming and that His coming will be sudden and unexpected, like that of a thief. Without reconciling both aspects of these truths, only contradictions can be found. "Truth ever flies on two wings; and no prophecy is of *isolated* interpretation" (Panton 20).

Seemingly opposing testimonies of Scripture are complementary, not antagonistic, and it is in the synthesis of these truths that the broader, governing view is found. The proper synthesis of the prophecies of Christ's coming is that He will appear quickly and in a hidden way to rapture His watchful believers prior to the great tribulation. Then, near the end of the tribulation, after the fulfillment of the signs concerning the temple and the Antichrist, Christ will catch up the majority of the believers and openly manifest Himself in power to the Jews and to the world. Thus, the twofoldness of the divine truth is that the Lord's coming is both imminent and will be preceded by signs, pointing to the two aspects of His coming and of the rapture.

The Two Stages of the Rapture

The Theocratic Kingdom by George N. H. Peters, a participant in the prophetic Bible conferences of the 1870s and 1880s, is considered perhaps "the most factual and voluminous written defense of the premillennial system" (Stanton 154), from which Lewis Sperry Chafer quotes extensively and frequently. It is presented in the form of two hundred and six propositions in three volumes. The thesis of "Proposition 130" is that both the second coming of the Lord and the accompanying rapture of the saints should not be considered as a single event. Peters says,

Comparing all the events that are included in the Sec. Advent, it is simply impossible, *without great violation of order, etc.*, to crowd them all together as the instantaneous resultants of such a Coming. This, then, impresses *caution* in not compressing what is intimated concerning the translation or removal of saints necessarily to one transaction or day. (315)

He notes several scriptural indications of the two aspects of the Lord's coming (318-319). First, he points out that the Lord will come for and subsequently with the saints, indicating "*separate stages or manifestations* pertaining to the same Second Advent," without which understanding it is impossible to reconcile the various passages that speak of that coming. Second, he notes that the Lord's coming will be at a time of peace and security, on the one hand (1 Thes. 5:3; Matt. 24:37-39), and at a time of war, great distress, and suffering, on the other (vv. 21-22). The Lord will also come in a concealed, thief-like way (vv. 43-44), and again in a way so open and conspicuous that all shall witness Him (v. 30). Most significantly, Peters points to the two Old Testament types applied to the rapture: firstfruits and harvest (Rev. 14:4, 14-16; Exo. 23:19; Lev. 23:10), explaining that the meaning of these two terms would be entirely lost "if we did not allow that the one necessarily goes before the other, leaving *an interval* between them" (318). He adds, "It is by observing this characteristic of the Sec. Advent that

the true force of the injunction to constantly look and watch for the Coming of Jesus can be appreciated" (318-319). Thus, "a gathering of saints *before the harvest* is indeed one of the Divine procedures pertaining to the last things of this dispensation" (322).

Peters identifies the harvest as genuine believers in the church who will remain on earth to pass through the great tribulation. The effect of their being left behind will be salutary to their own spiritual maturity and to the spread of the gospel during that time. Being corroborated by the certainty of the judgments of God, the preaching of the church will be powerfully renewed. Such a revival will be inspired by the

astonishing removal of certain chosen ones, accounted worthy, owing to their distinctive faith in God's promises, to escape. Let this event occur just as it is described; let here one and there one of the believing and watching be taken, and surely those who believe in God's Word and are left behind will be *most wonderfully affected* by the event... The Church...*will recognize its chronological position, will see what is before it, and, energetically infused by fear and hope, prepare itself* for the fearful ordeal through which it must pass. And we are assured that the Church in this contest, overpowered as she will be, will sustain the persecution *with triumphant faith.* (327-328)

As to who will be raptured at the secret coming of Christ, Peters notes,

There is a difference between *mere* salvation and *the special* honor, station, dignity, etc., that God *in addition* may be pleased to bestow upon certain ones. There were other pious ones when Enoch and Elijah were translated, and yet *they only* were favored; and we doubt not that *many* who ultimately will be saved with great glory (because of their faithful witnessing during the last severe trial) will *be left* at this translation...A personal, individual acceptance of the truth *combined* with a happy experience of its sanctifying influence, together with testifying in its behalf before others, is imperatively needed. (332)

Peters is definite that although some persons of "distinctive faith" will be raptured, others of the church who "believe in God's Word" will be "left behind." This is the difference between "mere salvation" and the honor bestowed on those who will partake of the early rapture. We commend the foregoing as a strong statement both of the early rapture of the watchful and ready believers prior to the great tribulation and of the general rapture of the majority of the believers near the end of the tribulation. That the twofold coming of the Lord in His parousia at the end of this age will be accompanied by a rapture in two stages is the only way to reconcile the several and various passages of Scripture on the subject.

The Prophecy of the Kingdom in Matthew 24 and 25

Matthew 24 and 25, the Olivet discourse, is a significant passage in the New Testament, unveiling through prophecy the condition of the world from the time of the Lord's ascension to the end of the age. As such, it is a significant prophecy of the eschatology not only of the Jews and of the nations but also of the New Testament believers, and thus has much bearing on the proper understanding of the rapture of the saints. In 24:3 the disciples asked, "When will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming and of the consummation of the age?" The disciples' questions concern three matters: the time when "these things" would take place, including not only the destruction of the temple spoken of by the Lord in verse 2 but the things mentioned in 23:32-39—the filling up of the sins of Jerusalem and her desolation, the sign of Christ's coming, and the sign of the consummation of the age. The Lord's word from 24:4 through 25:46 answers the disciples' question concerning these three matters.

It is crucial to understand to whom this prophecy of the Kingdom was spoken and to whom it applies. Dispensational teaching emphasizes the application of the Gospel of Matthew to the Jews and the political nation of Israel. C. I. Scofield summarizes this view by the following systematic precepts:

Israel is in the foreground from the call of Abram to the resurrection of Christ...The mission of Jesus was, *primarily*, to the Jews...The *doctrines* of grace are to be sought in the Epistles, not in the Gospels...the Gospels do not unfold the doctrine of the Church...The Gospels present a group of Jewish disciples, associated on earth with a Messiah in humiliation...[Much in the Gospels] belongs in strictness of interpretation to the Jew...[Matthew] is peculiarly the Gospel for Israel. (vi, 989-990, 993)

Robert Anderson, who preached with Darby in western Ireland, speaks even more emphatically of Matthew in particular:

The First Gospel does not contain a single word that is inconsistent with its scope and purpose in the Divine scheme of revelation, as a record of the Lord's mission and ministry as Israel's Messiah; and it will be studied by believing Israelites in days to come as if the present Christian dispensation had never intervened. (126)

This extreme and peculiar conclusion virtually erases the Gospel of Matthew from the Christian's Bible, except to make it a historical appendix to the story of Israel.⁴

To be sure, Matthew 24:1-31 is the prophecy of the Kingdom concerning Israel. Verses 4 through 14 span the time from the Lord's ascension to the consummation of the age. Some aspects of this prophecy have been fulfilled, and some are in the process of being fulfilled. Although this section primarily concerns the Jews, the tribulations and the preaching of the gospel mentioned in it take place generally in the entire world. All the tribulations of the New Testament age (the birth pangs, v. 8), along with the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom, are used by God to produce His many sons so that He can constitute the church in this age, accomplish the kingdom in the coming age, and produce the New Jerusalem in eternity as the ultimate consummation of the church and the kingdom that He may have an eternal expression in eternity future (Recovery Version, see notes in Matt. 24). The preaching of the gospel of the kingdom may be considered a sign of the consummation of the age, in partial answer to the disciples' third question.

Verses 15 through 26 speak directly of the great tribulation, beginning with the "abomination of desolation," the setting up of the image of Antichrist in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. This idol will be another sign of the consummation of this age. Following this, verses 27 through 30 portray the Lord's open coming in power, which will take place at the end of the great tribulation. No one knows the length of time spanning the events mentioned in verses 4 through 14, but the prophecy in verses 15 through 31, concerning the remnant of the Jews, will be fulfilled in the last three and a half years of this age, the second half of the seventieth week prophesied in Daniel 9:27.

Dispensational Theology and the "Jewish" Character of the Prophecy of the Kingdom

To cast Matthew 24 and 25 primarily in view of the remnant of the Jews at the end of the age obscures a significant word of prophecy for the New Testament believers, particularly concerning the rapture of the saints of the church age. The dispensational view is that "the reference [in Matthew 24] to Daniel and the great tribulation, which never concerns the church, but Israel, shows us that we are not on Christian, but Jewish ground" (Ladd 131). Stanton speaks very strongly in this manner:

Dispensationalists hold that Matthew 24 speaks of Israel in the Tribulation and not of the Church, which they believe to be already raptured...The setting and the cast of the chapter is unmistakably Jewish...The Church and

*All the tribulations
of the New Testament age
are used by God to produce His
many sons so that He can
constitute the church in this age.*

her removal finds no mention in Matthew 24. (57, 59, 61)

John Walvoord concurs: “The rapture is not found at all in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, although the second coming of Christ is clearly spoken of and the events that precede it are described” (*Tribulation* 92-93).⁵ However, the justification that he offers is flawed. At the time of the Lord’s word in Matthew 24, it had not been revealed to the disciples that His coming to establish His kingdom would be long delayed, nor did they understand how the believers would be taken up to meet Him. Thus, Walvoord concludes,

Up to this point the disciples had had no instruction on [the rapture]. They did not even clearly understand the difference between the first and second comings of Christ. Their questions indicated that they were first of all concerned about the destruction of Jerusalem...

What they were talking about was Christ’s coming to establish His kingdom and the end of the age preceding it, during which, from their viewpoint, they could still be living. Accordingly the nature of the question is such that the church is not in view, nor is the rapture introduced. (87)

Walvoord’s reasoning is that if the disciples asked only concerning the restoration of the theocratic kingdom of Israel, the Lord’s answer should have matched their question and not touched matters concerning the church, since, as Walvoord states, “The disciples were in no mood or situation to understand such a new doctrine” (88). In actuality, though, the Lord’s speaking was continually new (Mark 1:27; John 13:34) and frequently not according to the disciples’ “mood or situation.” When the disciples spoke in admiration of the temple, Jesus spoke of its destruction (Matt. 24:1-2). When they inquired as to which of them was the greatest, Jesus spoke to them concerning childlike humility (18:1-4; Mark 9:33-37), and when they were eager to see Jesus received by the crowds, He spoke to them of falling into the ground and dying (John 12:20-26). Nevertheless, Walvoord insists, “At this point in their spiritual education the disciples would not have understood the subject of the Rapture any more than they understood the subject of the death and resurrection of Christ” (*Question* 186). Here is the flaw in his logic. Although the disciples did not understand the Lord’s word concerning His death and resurrection, He spoke it anyway (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19). In the same way, it is not logical to say that Jesus’ answer in Matthew 24 and 25 was constrained to match the disciples’ question. Watchman Nee notes, “Even though they were mistaken, the Lord did not answer in a mistaken way. Ignorance cannot stop the answer of the Lord” (15:277). Regardless of the disciples’

limited knowledge and expectation, Jesus’ answer was broad and inclusive, dealing with both the Jews, the New Testament believers, and the nations.

Walvoord concludes, “To the pretribulationist it is obvious that the rapture is not in view in [Matthew 24]” (*Tribulation* 86-87). However, it is not at all obvious that the Lord would omit the church and its taking up from His longest, clearest prophecy concerning the end of the age. Once again, to understand Walvoord’s statement and the general view of the “Jewish” character of Matthew 24, we must bear in mind the overriding hermeneutic of dispensationalism, that is, that the church and the remnant of the Jews cannot both share in the fulfillment of the same prophetic portion of the Word. Stanton asks, “When before did God ever have two separate witnessing bodies upon earth? God is not a God of confusion. Does He not terminate a former course of action before establishing a new one?” (68-69). It is only the perceived ecclesiological necessity of the church’s absence from the final three and a half years of this age that makes the dispensational view of Matthew 24 “obvious.” Thus, as we saw in the previous installment of this department, it is dispensational theology, not consistent exegesis, that drives this view of eschatology.

Rightly Dividing the Prophetic Word

The teaching that is now called dispensationalism was initially developed by John Darby, whose understanding of the prophecy of the kingdom emphasizes the role of the remnant of the Jews in the last days. In particular, he sees the three and a half years of the great tribulation as pertaining primarily to the Jews, pointing out that it will be “a time of distress for Jacob” (Jer. 30:7), for “your people” (Dan. 12:1), that is, Daniel’s people, the Jews.⁶ He sees the same emphasis in Matthew 24. Verse 15 says that the abomination of desolation will stand in the “holy place,” the sanctuaries in God’s temple. Verse 16 says, “Let those in Judea flee to the mountains,” and verse 20 says, “Pray that your flight may not be in winter, nor on a Sabbath.” Darby concludes, “All is local and Jewish—has no application to hopes which rest on going to meet Christ in the air.” Thus, these verses apply the great tribulation “distinctly to Jacob, Jerusalem, and Judea, and the Jews, not to the church” (*Writings* 11:111). Darby speaks similarly of the warning against false Christs and false prophets in verse 24, finding this to be a “convincing proof that the passage does not apply, properly speaking, to the church,” which by that time, Darby feels, should already have been caught up to the air to meet the Lord (5:206). Again he concludes,

The Lord was speaking of Jerusalem and the temple...The age has nothing to do with the christian dispensation, so-called, or the Church...Judæa and

Jerusalem are named as the *exclusive scene* of what is passing and the events which are to take place. (10:267-268)

To try to find the church in this portion of the Word, he says, is to “reduce the Church to the level of Jews” (10:268). Such arguments are common among dispensational writers, such as Stanton, who asks concerning verse 20, “Are Christians bound by a sabbath law...How then is this the Church?” (59). In arriving at this conclusion, Darby and subsequent dispensational teachers consistently focus on verses 1 through 31, especially citing the verses with a distinctly Jewish character, such as those quoted above. However, when Darby considers the entirety of chapters 24 and 25, he presents a more accurate and general view. This he does in his *Synopsis* of Matthew. After 24:31 and before 25:31, he says that we see another class of persons, “the disciples of Christ, outside the testimony borne in the midst of Israel,” that is, the church, composed of those who have “come out from the world, and still more from Judaism.” “All this part of the discourse—namely, from chapter xxiv.31 to chapter xxv.31—is an exhortation, an address from the Lord, on the subject of their duties during His absence” (165-166, 172). These duties include both the corporate responsibilities of His household (the church) and the individual responsibilities of the believers. Then at 25:31 the prophetic history, suspended at 24:31, resumes with the judgment of the nations.

Thus the whole effect of Christ’s coming, with regard to the kingdom and to His messengers during His absence, is unfolded: with respect to the Jews, as far as verse 31 of chapter xxiv.; with respect to His servants during His absence, to the end of verse 30 of chapter xxv., including the kingdom of heaven in its present condition, and the heavenly rewards that shall be given; and then, from verse 31 to the end of chapter xxv., with respect to the nations who shall be blessed on the earth at His return. (175)

It is clear that Darby associates the second portion of the prophecy, from 24:32 through 25:30, with the New Testament dispensation and the New Testament household of God, repeatedly mentioning “the assembly,” “the church,” and “Christians” (166-168, 171-172). His three-fold division definitely places the church and the New Testament believers into Christ’s prophecy of the kingdom in Matthew 24 and 25, and as such, it is a clearer distinction than is ordinarily offered by Darby’s twentieth-century adherents. Thus, generalizations such as Stanton’s—“The setting and the cast of the chapter is

unmistakably Jewish” (59)—cannot be taken at face value. This observation will assist us in our consideration of 24:40 and 41, in which we see the rapture of the believers, the constituents of the church, prior to the commencement of the great tribulation.⁷

The Prophecy of the Kingdom concerning the Church

The Lord’s answer to the disciples’ questions in Matthew 24:3 is in three sections. The first section, in verses 4 through 31, concerns the Jews. As such, the many items in this section—including wars, famines, earthquakes, false prophets, signs, wonders, the temple, winter, the Sabbath, the flight of the Jews, the tribes of the land, the sign of the Son of Man, and the gathering of the chosen ones—should all be interpreted literally. Following this, verse 32 says, “But learn the parable from the fig tree.” *But* indicates the beginning of a new section and thus represents a great divide in the Lord’s discourse. For the first time in this chapter a parable is introduced. In 13:11-13 the Lord indicated to the disciples that He spoke in parables in order to hide the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens from the opposing and rejecting Jews. Thus, the introduction of a parable in 24:32 indicates that what follows is spoken to the church. Witness Lee notes,

The disciples, the audience for the Lord’s word here, had a twofold status, one as representatives of the remnant of the Jews and the other as the

New Testament believers, who constitute the church. In the section of the Lord’s word that concerns the Jews (vv. 4-31), the disciples represent the remnant of the Jews, whereas in the section that concerns the church (24:32—25:30), they represent the New Testament believers. In the four Gospels, in matters regarding outward circumstances, the Lord treated His disciples as Jews, but in matters concerning spirit and life, He considered them New Testament believers. (Recovery Version, Matt. 24:20, note 2)

Watchman Nee points out that the very disciples to whom the Lord spoke in Matthew 24 were being cultivated by Him to be the pillars in the church (19:527; Gal. 2:9). To say that their status before the resurrection of Christ was only as Jewish disciples is to require them to abandon their training in the Gospels once they became New Testament believers. In Matthew 28:19 and 20 the Lord said, “Go therefore and disciple all the nations,... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” According to the Lord’s charge, all the nations were to become His disciples, and they, as Christians, were to observe all the words He had spoken in the four Gospels.

The Lord's commandments were given not only to the disciples of that time but also to those who later heard the apostles' teaching and believed. It is a mistake, therefore, to restrict the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels to the Jews, or Jewish disciples, only.

Robert Gundry proposes further reasons why the Lord's audience in Matthew 24 should be considered as Christians (134).⁸ Two days after the Olivet discourse (26:2), the Lord spoke to the same disciples the deeper mysteries of God's New Testament economy, including their mutual indwelling with the Father and the Son (John 14:20, 23), their mutual abiding in Christ (15:4), and the Spirit of reality (14:17; 15:26; 16:13). To be sure, the audience on this day was New Testament disciples. Only a few weeks later these same disciples were baptized in the Holy Spirit to form the nucleus of the first church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:4; 8:1). Moreover, the names of the twelve disciples are upon the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem, as distinct from the names of the twelve tribes of Israel inscribed on the twelve gates (Rev. 21:12, 14). All these confirm that the disciples present at the Lord's discourse in Matthew 24 were the first representatives of the church, the New Testament people of God.

Douglas J. Moo draws parallels between the Lord's word in Matthew 24 and the words of Paul in 1 and 2 Thessalonians (Reiter 194).⁹ The false Christs and false prophets in Matthew 24, for example, may correspond to Satan's operation in power, signs, and wonders of a lie in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-11. The apostasy in the former chapter (v. 12) is parallel to the apostasy in the latter (v. 3). To be sure, Antichrist in the former chapter (v. 15) is the man of lawlessness in the latter (v. 3). Likewise, the Lord's coming with power in the former chapter (v. 30) is His coming to slay Antichrist in the latter (v. 8). Notably, the Lord's exhortation to watch and be ready in Matthew 24:42 and 44 parallels Paul's word concerning watching in 1 Thessalonians 5:6-8. Since Paul's word to a New Testament church is substantially similar to the Lord's speaking in Matthew 24, there is no reason to conclude that the whole of the latter chapter is distinctly Jewish and not for the church. This helps to set Matthew 24 and 25 in their proper context as a prophecy whose audience includes the believers of the New Testament church.

The section of the prophecy of the kingdom from 24:32 through 25:30 speaks of the fig tree, the ark, the householder, the thief, household slaves, virgins, and talents, all of which should be interpreted spiritually. Winter in 24:20, for example, is a literal winter which makes flight difficult, but summer in verse 32 signifies the age of the restored kingdom, which will begin at the Lord's second coming. Likewise, the house in verse 17 is

literal, but the house in verse 43 is spiritual, signifying the conduct and work that a believer has built up in his Christian life. Robert Govett (*Olivet* 9; *Rapture* 37) and Watchman Nee (15:256-257) note the following further differences between the first and second great sections of chapters 24 and 25. The first section is local, principally in Judea, but the second section is universal, transpiring wherever the gospel has spread. The first section is material, composed of men, women, and nursing babies, but the second section is moral, composed of slaves and virgins. The first section distinguishes between Jews and Gentiles (ἔθνος, 24:7, 9, 14) and speaks of false Messiahs, the Sabbath, and the nations, but all distinctions in the second section, such as those between the wise and foolish virgins, are spiritual, not national or ethnic. Moreover, in the first section the Lord's exhortation is to flee (vv. 16-20), but in the second section it is to watch and be ready (vv. 42, 44). By all indications, the object of the Lord's word of prophecy changes in verse 32, and the subsequent parables are all directed to the church. This is of crucial consideration with respect to the rapture of the believers.

One Is Taken Referring to the Rapture

In verses 37 through 39 the Lord said,

Just as the days of Noah were, so will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as they were in those days before the flood, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day in which Noah entered into the ark, and they did not know that judgment was coming until the flood came and took all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.

This indicates that in the days of the Lord's parousia, people will be befuddled by eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage, that is, in the abuse and excess of the necessities of human life, which occupy man and keep him from God's interest, having no sense of the coming judgment (vv. 38-39). This corresponds to 1 Thessalonians 5:2 and 3, which say, "Like a thief in the night, so the day of the Lord comes. When they say, Peace and security, then sudden destruction comes upon them, just as birth pangs to a woman with child; and they shall by no means escape." To be sure, the indulgences of eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage in the false sense of security will not be characteristic of the great tribulation, a time of calamities and sufferings. Rather, they point to the end of the present age, at its darkest hour, prior to the coming of the Lord as the thief. Hence, the events spoken of beginning from Matthew 24:37 transpire with the Lord's secret coming and the subsequent beginning of the tribulation.

Verses 40 and 41 say, "At that time two men will be in the

field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left.” *Taken* (from παραλαμβάνω) means “to take with one’s self, to join to one’s self...an associate, a companion” (Thayer 484). That the same word is used in Luke 17:34-36 indicates its particular appropriateness. When it is used of the Lord as the taking One, it is always positive. Jesus took (παραλαμβάνει) His closest disciples—Peter, James, and John—to the Mount of Transfiguration to reveal to them His glory (Matt. 17:1), and He took (παραλαβών) them aside to a place called Gethsemane to watch and pray with Him (26:37). In 20:17 He also took (παρέλαβεν) the twelve disciples aside privately to unveil to them His death and resurrection. In John 14:3 He said, “If I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again and will receive (παραλήψομαι) you to Myself, so that where I am you also may be.” To receive the disciples to Himself was to put them into Himself in His resurrection (v. 20). Thus, with respect to the relationship between the Lord and His disciples, παραλαμβάνω has the most intimate and even organic denotation. Thus, *taken* in Matthew 24:40 and 41 refers to the Lord’s taking of His watchful believers through rapture to, with, and for Himself prior to the time of His judgment of the earth in the great tribulation.

The one distinctly negative use of παραλαμβάνω is found in John 19:16, in which the Roman soldiers “took” Jesus to be crucified. However, even here the verb is consistent with its other usages in the Gospels, signifying a personal escort, a leading by accompaniment. The common argument against *taken* as referring to the rapture is that Matthew 24:39 says, “The flood came and took all away.” In this verse, to take away is to take into judgment. Walvoord applies this understanding by saying,

In the illustration from “the days of Noah,” those who are taken away by the flood are the ones who are drowned, and the ones who are left are ones who are left in safety in the ark. It would be strange to have a clear illustration like this be completely reversed in the application of verses 40-41. (Question 188)

However, *took* in verse 39 is from an entirely different verb, αἶρω, which has a much less personal denotation. It is mostly used related to taking up common objects, such as household items, garments, and even stones (vv. 17-18; John 8:59) and is not infrequently used in a negative sense, such as to take violently (Luke 6:30), to take away unto death (“Away from the earth with such a man,” Acts 22:22), to take away the gift from the slothful slave (Matt. 25:28), and to take away, remove, a sinful brother

from the church (1 Cor. 5:2, 13). The use of αἶρω in Matthew 24:39, for taking away in judgment, is consistent with this negative sense.

The positive and personal denotation of *taken* in Matthew 24:40-41 is echoed in Genesis 5:24, which says, “Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.” *Took* here in Hebrew is *laqach*, denoting to “take and carry along with oneself” (Brown 542), which is almost identical to Thayer’s definition of παραλαμβάνω. In 2 Kings 2:9-11 Elijah is taken up into heaven through rapture (“received, accepted,” Young 959), and in Ezekiel 3:14 the prophet is lifted up and taken away by the Spirit. In Genesis 5 Enoch was taken, raptured, into the presence of God. The Septuagint renders *laqach* in verse 24 as μετατίθημι, “to translate, to transfer to another place.” This is Paul’s word in Hebrews 11:5, which says, “By faith Enoch was translated so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had translated him.” By all of the above, we may confidently conclude that *taken* in Matthew 24:40-41 refers to the rapture of the believers, like that of Enoch and Elijah. This will transpire before the great tribulation.

The indulgences of eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage in the false sense of security will not be characteristic of the great tribulation, a time of calamities and sufferings.

Being Watchful, Ready, Faithful, and Prudent

Verses 40 and 41 tell us that “one is taken and one is left.” Several reasons point to the fact that both the one taken in rapture and the one left

behind are genuine New Testament believers. The strongest reason is based on a proper view of the coherence of 24:32 through 25:30. As we have seen, verses 40 through 42 in chapter 24 speak of two in the field or at the mill, with the exhortation, “Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord comes.” Following this is the parable of the householder and the thief, in verses 43 and 44. *The householder* refers to the believer, and *house*, to his conduct and work. A thief comes at an unknown time to steal precious things. The Lord will come secretly as a thief to those who love Him, and He will take them away as His treasures. The Lord concluded by saying, “For this reason you also be ready, because at an hour when you do not expect it, the Son of Man is coming.” Thus, the portion from verses 32 through 44 is on watchfulness and readiness with respect to the rapture. After this, in verses 45 through 51, is the parable of the household slaves, which is a word concerning our need to be faithful and prudent in expectation of the Lord’s coming.

Although watchfulness, readiness, faithfulness, and prudence are covered in chapter 24, they are not covered

fully. Thus, there is the need for the parables in chapter 25, which offer a complementary word for each aspect in chapter 24. At the end of the parable of the virgins, in 25:1-13, the Lord said, “Watch therefore, for you do not know the day nor the hour.” *Watch therefore* indicates that this passage completes the word concerning watchfulness and readiness for rapture in 24:32-44. Although chapter 24 tells us to watch, it does not tell us the way to watch. The way to be watchful and ready, which is revealed in chapter 25, is to buy the extra portion of oil, that is, to be filled with an extra portion of the Spirit by paying a price, such as giving up the world, dealing with the self, loving the Lord above all, and counting all things loss for Christ. Verse 8 says, “The foolish said to the prudent, Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” *Going out* is σβέννυνται (present passive), as in 1 Thessalonians 5:19, in which Paul tells the believers, “Do not quench [μὴ σβέννυτε] the Spirit.” The lamps of the foolish virgins were lighted; their lamps contained some oil but did not have an adequate supply to bear a shining testimony at the coming of the bridegroom. Hence, they represent the believers who are regenerated with the Spirit of God and indwelt by the Spirit but who have not been filled with Him sufficiently to have their whole being saturated with Him. Thus, to watch and be ready is to be filled with the Spirit and not quench the Spirit.

In the same principle, the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 is a word concerning faithfulness and prudence, which completes the corresponding word in 24:45-51. Chapter 24 deals with the slave’s unfaithfulness in fulfilling the Lord’s commission, and chapter 25 deals with the slave’s unfaithfulness in using the Lord’s talent. Again, it is the longer parable in the latter chapter that shows us the way to be faithful. The way to be faithful and prudent is to be positive, aggressive, and active to use the Lord’s gift to the fullest extent. Thus, the Spirit affords the believers not only the infilling for their readiness but also the gifts for their faithfulness.

Another indication that the parables in chapter 25 are a completion of 24:32-51 is found in the numbers two and ten. Ten is the major part of twelve (Gen. 42:3-4; 1 Kings 11:30-31; Matt. 20:24). Hence, the ten virgins in chapter 25 represent the majority of the believers, who will have died (“slept”) before the Lord’s coming, and the two in 24:40 and 41 represent the remaining believers, who will be alive (“in the field...at the mill”) until the Lord’s coming. Therefore, the two in the field or at the mill, the householder, the virgins, and the household slaves are the same persons, in principle, viewed from the aspects of watchfulness and readiness in life and faithfulness and prudence in service (Lee, *Matthew* 745-746). Only by being filled with the Spirit as virgins and trading with the Lord’s gifts as faithful slaves can we be prepared to be raptured at the Lord’s coming. The one who is taken is

the believer who is filled with the extra portion of the Spirit, and the one who is left is the believer who, although regenerated, lacks the filling of the Spirit.

Both the One Taken and the One Left Being Believers

There are definite indications that the persons in 24:32—25:30 are the believers of the New Testament age. First, the Lord said, “You do not know on what day your Lord comes” (24:42). *Your Lord* in verse 42 corresponds to *my master* in verse 48 and *the master of those slaves* in 25:19. An unsaved person has no master-slave relationship with the Lord. Rather, the unbelievers say, “We do not want this man to reign over us” (Luke 19:14). Only genuine believers can say, “Jesus Christ our Lord,” “our Lord Jesus Christ,” and “Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 1:4; 5:1, 11, 21; 6:23; 7:25; 8:39; 15:6, 30). Apart from the Spirit of God one can say, “Jesus is accursed,” but only in the Holy Spirit can a man say, “Jesus is Lord!” (1 Cor. 12:3). Even if an unbeliever speaks presumptuously to call Christ his Lord, the Lord Himself does not speak amiss, and He did not use unbelievers’ false terms in Matthew 24 and 25. Therefore, the household slave and the steward of his master’s talents in these chapters are New Testament believers, who take Jesus as their Lord. In this principle, both the one taken and the one left in 24:40 and 41 represent the believers of the church age who live until the Lord’s coming.

Second, the Lord exhorted them, “Watch therefore” and, “be ready” (vv. 42, 44). To watch and be ready is an exhortation given only to Christians. The Lord would not charge unsaved people to watch. To the Jews the Lord said, “Flee to the mountains” (v. 16). To escape from the housetops to the mountains will be the means of deliverance for the Jews at the end of this age. Jews are not charged to watch for the Lord’s coming. Rather, to be ready to meet the Lord, a Jew must receive the Lord Jesus, the Christ, and be saved. Otherwise, he will be found in his status as an unbelieving Jew at the manifestation of Antichrist and will have to flee to the mountains.

Likewise, unbelieving Gentiles are also not called to watch and wait for the Lord. *Watch* (γρηγορεῖτε) means to “give strict attention to, be cautious, active” (Thayer 122). For what should an unbeliever watch, in light of the Lord’s coming, and to what should he give strict attention? Should he be ever alert as to his need to be saved, yet uncertain about when, assuming that the day of his salvation is not in his control but comes unexpectedly? This is opposed to the genuine gospel, which says, “Now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). To the unbelievers the apostles preached, “Repent” (Acts 2:38), and “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved” (16:31). Unbelievers are not called to watch; they are called to receive salvation today. For a Jew or an unbelieving

Gentile to watch, wait, and look for the coming of the Lord, thus delaying his salvation until the future, is a perversion of the New Testament gospel. Who then is to watch at the end of the age? It is the believers. "Watchfulness implies a heart already awakened by grace: we do not tell the *dead to watch*" (Panton 21).

Govett points out that in Matthew 24:17-18 the Lord warned against physical burdens for the ones fleeing to the mountains, but in verse 38 He warned against the spiritual burdens of the abuse and indulgence of physical necessities. "'Take heed to yourselves' as regards your *moral state*, is the cry to the *church*: 'beware of things *without*,' is the call to the *earthly elect*" ("Taken" 518). Herein is the distinction between the warning to the fleeing Jews and the warning to the two in the field and the two at the mill. To be sure, those who are commanded to watch are the believers.

Watch Therefore and Be Ready

Matthew 24:44 says, "For this reason you also be ready, because at an hour when you do not expect it, the Son of Man is coming." The Lord's word in chapters 24 and 25 was a private discourse with His disciples (24:3). Therefore, the "you" in verse 44, those who are commanded to be ready, are the representatives of the New Testament believers. *To be ready* (ἔτοιμοι) is "to make the necessary preparations, get everything ready" (Thayer 255). What preparations should an unbelieving Jew or Gentile make to receive Christ? Rather, "all things are ready" (ἔτοιμα, 22:4). Unbelievers prepare in vain, for the preparations for salvation have already been made. Rather, the call to watch and be ready is for believers alone (1 Thes. 5:6). To assign the duty of watching and preparing to the unsaved is to sacrifice the whole import of the Lord's words. Govett notes,

If...the one taken be a believer, but the one left an unbeliever, then the Savior's lesson is not only lost, but inverted. Instead of acting as a keen lesson to the saints to be vigilant at all times, it will have the effect of an opiate. Then its strain must be as follows. "O happy believer! come Christ when he may, you are always ready. Fear not! Though you pamper the lusts of the flesh, though you are seeking to heap up riches as the sand, though you love the world, and mingle in all its gaieties, you will sustain no damage. Fear not! None but the wicked will be left. Sleep on and take your rest!"...

I must stand then by the interpretation which gives to

Jesus' words their highest force, which really ministers the most potent motive to vigilance; which, while it acknowledges the perseverance and final salvation of the saint, preaches yet the differences, great and eternal, of *reward according to works*. (*Rapture* 86)

The complete gospel of the New Testament calls on unbelievers—both Jews and Gentiles—to believe, and it calls on believers to watch and be ready by their growth in life and faithfulness in service. Although all genuine believers are certainly and eternally saved, and their salvation will persevere, only those who are watchful and prepared will be rewarded with the early rapture prior to the great tribulation.

To Stand before the Son of Man

Luke 21:34 through 36 says,

Take heed to yourselves lest perhaps your hearts be weighed down with debauchery and drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day come upon you suddenly as a snare. For it will come in upon all those dwelling on the face of all the earth. But be watchful at every time, beseeching that you would prevail to escape all these things which are about to happen and stand before the Son of Man.

This passage is parallel to Matthew 24:37-42. The eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage in Matthew correspond to the debauchery, drunkenness, and anxieties of life in Luke. Likewise, the flood in Matthew is parallel to the sudden, unexpected coming of the day of the Lord as a snare in Luke, and "watch therefore" in Matthew 24 corresponds to Jesus' exhortation in Luke to be watchful at every time and to beseech. Clearly, the conditions and instructions in these two portions are the same.¹⁰ Moreover, the snare upon "all those dwelling on the face of all the earth" in Luke 21 is the "hour of trial, which is about to come on the whole inhabited earth, to try them who dwell on the earth" in Revelation 3:10. Therefore, to "escape all these things" is to be taken, raptured, before the great tribulation. Hence, the Lord's word in Luke 21:36 is the fulfillment of the promise He gives to the church in Philadelphia.

Just prior to the tribulation, the Lord will still be on the throne in the heavens (Mark 16:19; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3), from which His parousia will begin. At this time, certain believers, such as the first-fruits in Revelation 14, will be raptured to the throne of God to stand with the Savior on the heavenly Mount

Zion (v. 1; Heb. 12:22). This is to “stand before the Son of Man” in Luke 21:36. Then near the end of the tribulation, the Savior will come from heaven with those who were raptured and descend to the air to continue His parousia. At this point, the majority of the believers will be raptured. This later rapture will transpire “in the air” (1 Thes. 4:17), not at the throne of God in the heavens. After this later rapture Christ will judge all the resurrected and raptured believers at His judgment seat, and He will enjoy His marriage feast with the overcomers. Then in the final stage of His parousia, Christ will descend from the air to the earth with His overcomers as His conquering army to defeat Antichrist and set up His kingdom on the earth.

The subject of the Lord’s admonition in Luke 21 is the believers’ escape from the tribulation by means of rapture. In order to escape, we must prevail. *Prevail* (κατισχύω) means to “be strong to another’s detriment, to prevail against; to be superior in strength; to overpower” (Thayer 341). It is a word used for an antagonistic struggle, as in Matthew 16:18. To be sure, to prevail is not for the purpose of gaining eternal salvation; we receive salvation freely by grace, not by struggle. Rather, it is to be vigilant against the stupefying and drugging trend of the age, an exercise which takes place after salvation. The strength and ability to prevail come from watchfulness and beseeching. We need to be watchful and pray daily in a particular way so that we may receive the strength that comes from the resurrection life within us to stand against the trend, the tide, of the world. If we are strengthened in this way, we shall not be caught by the trend of this age. Rather, we shall be full of Christ and be “buoyant,” ready to stand before the Son of Man in the early rapture. Concerning Luke 21:36, Watchman Nee notes,

This verse is a promise, but it is a promise with conditions. If the whole church will be raptured before the tribulation, are *all* the Christians watching at every time and beseeching? If some of them are not, this verse cannot be used as an evidence that the whole church will be raptured before the tribulation. (19:514)

Peters says likewise, noting that even some who seem to watch for the Lord’s coming will not partake of the early rapture: “It is not simply those who ‘*watch*’ that shall ‘*escape*,’ but those, Luke 21:36, who ‘*watch and pray always*,’ avoiding the corrupting influences around them”; and he quotes Joseph Seiss to the same effect, “The first translation, if I may so speak, will embrace *only the select few* who watch and pray always” (332). The believers at the end of this age must be watchful and beseeching in order to escape the things which are about to happen, that is, the things in the great tribulation, and be raptured to the throne of God.

Coming Forward to the Throne of Grace

In order for our hearts to not be weighed down (v. 34), we must go forth to meet the Bridegroom, dropping every encumbering thing and going out of the world to meet the coming Christ (Matt. 25:1). We must also pray unceasingly, praying at every time in spirit and being watchful, on the alert, for the maintaining of our prayer life (1 Thes. 5:17; Eph. 6:18). In order to ascend to the throne of God in the heavens on the day of the rapture, we must every day come forward with boldness to the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16). The very Christ who is sitting on the throne in heaven is also now in us (Rom. 8:10), that is, in our regenerated human spirit (2 Tim. 4:22), where the dwelling place of God is (Eph. 2:22). That Christ is both in the heavens and on the earth is illustrated prophetically by Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28:12-17, in which he saw a ladder set up on the earth and reaching to heaven, on which the angels of God were ascending and descending. Jacob said, “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” As the fulfillment of Jacob’s dream, Jesus told Nathanael, “Truly, truly, I say to you, You shall see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (John 1:51).

At Bethel, the house of God, which is the gate of heaven, Christ is the ladder that joins earth to heaven and brings heaven to earth. Since today our spirit is the dwelling place of God, it is now the gate of heaven, where Christ is the ladder that joins us, the people on earth, to heaven and that brings heaven to us. Hence, whenever we turn to our spirit, we enter through the gate of heaven and touch the throne of grace in heaven through Christ as the heavenly ladder. Therefore, we must seek the things which are above by setting our mind on the spirit and walking according to the spirit (Col. 3:1; Rom. 8:6, 4). In this way we come forward to the throne of grace, where Christ is today as our Minister and our High Priest (Heb. 8:2; 4:14-15; 7:26), ministering to us the heavenly life, grace, authority, and power and sustaining us to live a heavenly life on earth (Recovery Version, 1:3; 4:16; notes). As such a heavenly people, we will not be unaccustomed to the enjoyment of Christ in the heavens, and the rapture will not carry us into a foreign and unfamiliar realm. Rather, we will be prepared to be raptured to the throne of God in the heavens, which will transpire at the early, secret coming of Christ before the beginning of the great tribulation.

The Rapture in the Day of Reward

Robert Govett notes, “The rapture takes place, not in the day of grace, but in the day of reward according to works” (“Tracts” 65). As we have seen, Genesis 5:24 speaks of the taking, the translation, of Enoch. The first mention of

a matter in the Bible should be considered as the seed of all subsequent instances, establishing its principle. As the development of the seed, Hebrews 11:5 and 6 say,

By faith Enoch was translated so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had translated him. For before his translation he obtained the testimony that he had been well pleasing to God. But without faith it is impossible to be well pleasing to Him, for he who comes forward to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Enoch was the first person to be raptured. Thus, the first mention of the rapture establishes the principle that our being raptured depends on our being mature in the divine life by our walking with God. Enoch walked with God day and night for three hundred years, and He did this by faith, believing that God is and that He is a rewarder (μισθαποδότης, from μισθός [wage] and ἀποδίδωμι [pay]; thus, a payer of wages) of those who diligently seek Him. After three hundred years of seeking God and walking with Him, Enoch was taken by God, thus obtaining the reward of not seeing death.

Watchman Nee concludes,

All of the words in the four Gospels are for the Christians. In this way, the words that indicate that the rapture is only for those who are watching, praying, and preparing, as spoken in the four Gospels, are for all the Christians. If this is the case, not all Christians will be raptured before the tribulation. Therefore, the condition for the rapture is not regeneration, but being watchful. (19:534-535)

Concerning Luke 21:36, George H. Lang speaks similarly,

This most important and unequivocal statement by our Lord sets aside the opinion that all Christians will escape irrespective of their moral state, and also negatives the notion that no escape is possible. There is a door of escape; but as with all doors, only those who are awake will see it, and only those who are in earnest will reach it ere the storm bursts. (38)

The condition for the rapture of the believers prior to the great tribulation is not merely regeneration but also watchfulness in life and faithfulness in work after a person is saved. If regeneration were the only condition, there would be no reason for the Lord to exhort us to be watchful. In Matthew 24:40-42 the Lord did not entreat the disciples to repent, believe in Him, and be regenerated. He charged them only to be watchful. Hence, the one

taken and the one left behind are both saved ones, born-again believers in God's New Testament economy, of whom one—like Enoch—is rewarded for watchfulness, and the other is left behind. Similarly, in Luke 21:34-36 Jesus exhorted His disciples to take heed, be watchful, and beseech that they would prevail to escape the things which are about to happen, that they may be raptured early to stand before the Son of Man in the heavens. Again, this implies that some, even genuine New Testament disciples, may not prevail and thus may not escape the things of the great tribulation at the end of this age but will remain on the earth to be taken at a later time. This is the faithful word of the Bible concerning the rapture of the saints in the day of reward.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹Please see "The Rapture of the Saints (1)," *Affirmation & Critique* XI.2 (Oct. 2006): 74-91.

²It is argued by many that the Lord's prophetic word in Matthew 24 was spoken to the Jews, not to the church. However, the warning spoken in Revelation 3:3 is clearly to the church in Sardis, a church in the New Testament dispensation. This strongly implies a similar audience for the almost identical word spoken in Matthew 24:43 and 44. Moreover, the warn-

ing to Sardis is not made to mere unbelievers in the appearance of a church, for the Lord calls them "the church" (Rev. 3:1). False believers may call themselves the church, but the Lord would never call them so. Hence, the Lord's warning concerning His coming as a thief in Matthew 24 and Revelation 3 is spoken to genuine believers in the church.

³J. Barton Payne attempts a synthesis of the two views in which the coming of Christ is both posttribulational and imminent. However, he accomplishes this only by avoiding "rigorous futurism" (105) in the interpretation of prophecy. According to his view, many of the antecedents to the Lord's coming—including the seventieth week of Daniel 9, the "time of Jacob's trouble," and the ten horns (Rev. 13:1)—may be past (106-108, 115-116), and the great tribulation is "potentially present, and perhaps almost finished" (133), except for a "brief" portion yet to come (114, 141). Thus, the requisite signs of Christ's coming and His coming itself can still be "as occurring at once" (92), and Christ's coming at the end of the tribulation still "might be tonight" (102). However, this interpretation is not based on the more accurate futurist interpretation of prophecy. Payne calls his view the "classical viewpoint" of the "early and the reformation church" (158-159), although he admits that Irenaeus,

Tertullian, and other early fathers are “exceptions” to this view (17-18, 146, 150). Ironically, these exceptions to Payne’s “classical” view are the most important and accurate millenarians of their time.

⁴Although most dispensationalists claim that the New Testament is silent toward the church until the day of Pentecost, Anderson moves the transition even further, to the calling of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (75). However, Acts 8:1 clearly mentions “the church which was in Jerusalem” prior to the conversion of Paul in chapter 9. Another of Anderson’s claims that the Gospels are entirely Jewish is that the title *Son of Man*, so frequent in the Gospels, is never used in relation to the church (78). This claim ignores Stephen’s vision in Acts 7:56 and John’s in Revelation 1:13 and 14:14. Anderson’s extreme dispensationalism moves us even further from the truth.

⁵It is commonly taught that John 14 is the first mention of the rapture in the New Testament, and for many dispensationalists, the only time it is mentioned in the Gospels. Walvoord says, “The only passage clearly indicating a rapture is John 14:1-3...This passage, taken literally, indicates that the believer is going to go to heaven at the time of Christ’s coming for Him [sic]” (*Question* 193, 195). The subject of John 14 is the dispensing of God in His Divine Trinity to build up a spiritual, organic, and mutual abode with the redeemed and regenerated believers in Christ. Thus, the Lord “went” on the day of His crucifixion and “came” on the day of resurrection so that He may indwell the disciples and bring them into the Triune God to form a divine-human incorporation (vv. 6, 17, 20, 23). Robert H. Gundry attempts a similar exposition, stating that Jesus went to prepare “spiritual abodes within His own person” (152-155). Regrettably, Walvoord calls this a “fanciful” and “extreme form of exegesis,” a “desperate attempt of posttribulationists to spiritualize this passage and eliminate it as referring to the rapture” (*Tribulation* 92-93). It is regrettable that, having denied the rapture in Matthew 24, dispensationalists find it instead in John 14, thus annulling the significance of one of the deepest passages in the Bible. For a thorough exposition of John 14 in the light of God’s New Testament economy and the erroneous teachings concerning heaven, see “‘In My Father’s House’: The Unleavened Truth of John 14,” *Affirmation & Critique* V.2 (April 2000): 22-36.

⁶The fact that Jeremiah 30:7 and Daniel 12:1 speak only of Israel in the tribulation is often invoked to argue that the tribulation is distinctly Jewish; thus, it is said, the church will not be present in it. However, one of the tenets of dispensationalism is that the church, being a mystery revealed only in New Testament times (Eph. 3:4-5), is nowhere mentioned in the Old Testament. Therefore, it is hardly remarkable that the church’s place in the tribulation seems to be omitted from the Old Testament prophets, and it is unsafe to build a thesis on that observation.

⁷We are not, of course, invoking Darby for support of a different view of the rapture in 24:40-41. This discussion simply

establishes the crucial threefold division of the prophecy of the kingdom that clearly places the church in a portion of the Word that is often but mistakenly called Jewish.

⁸Gundry’s thesis is one of “posttribulationism...with a scripturally measured dispensationalism” (28). Although his stance as a whole is peculiar, certain specific observations, such as the ones we cite here, are sound.

⁹Moo’s view, like that of Gundry, is posttribulationism, which we do not accept as such. Once again, though, the specific observations we cite here are valid.

¹⁰According to the parallelism between Matthew 24 and Luke 21, to “escape all these things” in the latter (v. 36) is equivalent to be “taken” in the former (vv. 40-41). This strengthens the understanding that to be taken in Matthew 24 is to be raptured prior to the great tribulation. Regrettably, concerning the Lord’s command to watch in these two chapters, Stanton states,

The primary reference in these passages is not to the Church at all, but to Israel in the Tribulation (Matt. 24:29, 30). Christian watchfulness is based on verses such as 1 Thessalonians 5:6 and Titus 2:13, and these say nothing about being accounted worthy to escape. (175)

He supports this statement by citing Matthew 24:29-30, which speaks of the Lord’s open coming to the Jews. As we have seen, though, the object of the Lord’s speaking changes at verse 32, after which He is speaking to the church, a fact that is clearly recognized by Darby. The misled concept that teachings and exhortations for the church are found only in the Epistles and not in the Gospels is typical of dispensationalism, and in this case it has the effect of divorcing “Christian watchfulness” from the Lord’s exhortation to watch, be ready, and beseech to escape. This is to strip the words of both Jesus and Paul of their crucial significance.

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Footnotes from the Recovery Version of the Bible

"And I saw, and behold, there was a white cloud, and on the cloud One like the Son of Man sitting, having a golden crown on His head and a **sharp** sickle in His hand. And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, Send forth Your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come because the **harvest** of the earth is **ripe**. And He who sat on the cloud thrust His sickle upon the earth, and the earth was **reaped**" (Rev. 14:14-16).

sharp: The sharp sickle in the Lord's hand indicates that the Lord is the One who reaps God's field.

harvest: The harvest of the earth is God's people on earth, the believers in Christ (1 Cor. 3:9). At His first coming to the earth, the Lord sowed Himself into His believers (Matt. 13:3-8, 24). All the believers since that time, who have received Him as the seed of life, have become God's crop on the earth. The first-ripe ones will be reaped as the firstfruits to God before the great tribulation, as indicated in vv. 1-5. The majority will ripen with the help of the sufferings in the great tribulation and will be reaped, raptured, at the end of the great tribulation.

ripe: Lit., dried. To be ripe is to be "dried" of all the earthly water. The suffering of the great tribulation, like the parching sun, will dry up the earthly waters from the believers who are left on the earth in the great tribulation, enabling the believers to ripen.

reaped: The reaping here will take place after Antichrist forces people to worship him and his image (v. 9). Hence, it refers to the rapture of the majority of the believers, who are left on the earth to pass through the great tribulation.