

Just as the Days of Noah Were

The Gospel of Matthew speaks of the “gospel of the kingdom” (4:23; 9:35; 24:14), the gospel of Christ as the King-Savior. The basic thought of the Gospel of Matthew is that we must repent of not being in the kingdom and of not being under the kingship and authority of Christ (3:2; 4:17). Therefore, Matthew is a rich source for our enlightenment concerning the truth of the kingdom as a central component of the “word of righteousness” (Heb. 5:13), the truth concerning the believers’ responsibility and accountability to God for their life and service in the church age. In this article we will consider the Lord’s prophetic word of warning in Matthew 24:32-51.

Matthew 24 and 25 are the Lord’s great prophetic word, which mostly concerns the events that will transpire at the end of the church age, at His coming with His kingdom in its full manifestation and glory. In 24:3 the disciples asked the Lord Jesus, “When will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming and of the consummation of the age?” The disciples’ question concerned the time when “these things” would take place, including the destruction of the temple in verse 2 and the judgments in 23:32-39; the sign of Christ’s coming; and the sign of the consummation of the age. The Lord’s prophecy concerning the kingdom in chapters twenty-four and twenty-five is His answer to His disciples’ question. This answer is in three sections. The first section, in 24:4-31, concerns the Jews, the chosen ones. The second section, from verse 32 to 25:30, concerns the church, the New Testament believers. The third section, in 25:31-46, concerns the Gentiles, the nations who are alive on the earth at the time of the Lord’s return. J. N. Darby divides these three sections in the following way: The first fourteen verses of chapter twenty-four are a general history from Christ’s ascension to the consummation of the age, while the turn to the abomination of desolation in verse 15 takes us to the last days of this age, particularly with respect to the Jews at that time: “The Lord gives the history of the testimony in Israel, and that of the people themselves, from the moment of His departure until His return” (*Synopsis* 163). Then after verse 31, the prophetic history jumps, as it were, to verse 31 of chapter twenty-five. Darby continues, “As chapter xxiv. 31 relates the gathering together of Israel after the appearance of the Son of man, chapter xxv. 31 announces His dealings in judgment with the Gentiles” (164). What then of the intervening portions between 24:31 and 25:31? He says,

From Matthew 24:32 to 25:30 the Lord gives a practical comment on this solemn subject, and in these parables instructs the disciples as to their just position as Christians *during His absence*.... Thus we have, in connection with the Lord’s going away, what concerned the Jewish people, christian responsibility, and the judgment of the Gentiles. (*Writings* 248-249)

These excerpts from Darby’s commentaries are illustrative of the view of most credible Bible expositors that between the Lord’s prophecy concerning the Jews and that concerning the Gentiles, 24:32—25:30 is a word spoken directly to the disciples as Christians, New Testament believers, a fact that is critical for its interpretation and application. Therefore, everything spoken by the Lord in this portion is a matter of “christian responsibility”; it is related to the watchfulness, readiness, faithfulness, and prudence of the believers.

A Crooked and Perverse Age

Verses 32 to 44 of chapter twenty-four are a word of warning concerning the disciples’ need to watch and be ready for the Lord’s second coming. Verse 32 says, “But learn the parable from the fig tree: As soon as its branch has become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that the summer is near.” *Summer* here signifies the age of the restored kingdom of Israel (Acts 1:6), which will begin at the Lord’s second coming, as confirmed by the companion verses to this portion in Luke 21:28-31 and by the numerous references to the day, the hour, and the time of the Lord’s coming in this portion of Matthew 24. Verses 37 to 39 warn us, the believers, as to the nature of those days. Verse 37 says, “For just as the days of Noah were, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.” *Days* here is plural, referring to a period of time. *Coming* in this verse is παρουσία (parousia), from παρά (with) and οὐσία (being). Its literal meaning is “presence,” denoting both an arrival and a consequent presence. When used in connection with the return of Christ, it denotes a period of time, the course of His coming, constituting His presence with His people. It may refer to this period of time in a general sense, as in 1 Corinthians 15:23, 1 Thessalonians 4:15, and 2 Peter 3:4, or it may be used for the conclusion of this period, as in Matthew 24:27 and 2 Thessalonians 2:8 (“the manifestation of His coming”). In Matthew 24:37, as in verses 3 and 39, it refers to the course of the period of

His coming. Verse 37 tells us that when the days of the Lord's parousia are about to come, the situation on the earth will be like that in the days of Noah.

Noah lived in a crooked and perverse age. As a result of the fall, the evil nature of Satan had been injected into man (Gen. 3:1-6; John 8:44). As a further result, this evil nature of Satan in man devised and developed a godless human culture (Gen. 4:16-24). In Genesis 4 unrepentant Cain departed, went out, from the presence of the Lord and built a city for his self-existence without God, as the basis of the godless culture that was to come. Following him, Lamech, who boasted arrogantly of murdering a young man, fulfilled his lusts in marrying two wives. The first was Adah, whose name means "adornment," implying one who adorned herself and made herself beautiful. Of her was born, Jabal, who invented cattle-raising for the purpose of making a living apart from God, and Jubal, who invented music, the first form of amusement in human culture after man lost the enjoyment of God Himself and thus became empty and without satisfaction. Of Lamech's second wife was born Tubal-cain, who having lost God as his security, invented weapons of defense. Of her also was born Naamah, whose name means "making herself lovely and pleasant," implying beautification for the sake of man's lust. Thus, in this exemplary picture of the descendants of Cain before the time of Noah, we see all the seeds of modern, godless, human culture: cities for self-existence, work for self-support, entertainment for self-fulfillment, weapons for self-preservation, and adornments for self-indulgence.

The World and the Age

All these matters have been ordered and systematized into a single κόσμος, the satanic world system, set up by Satan, the ruler of this world (John 15:19; 17:14; James 4:4; 1 John 2:15; 5:19). Watchman Nee defines the *kosmos* as "the whole circle of worldly goods, endowments, riches, advantages, pleasures, which though hollow and fleeting, stir our desire and seduce us from God, so that they are obstacles to the cause of Christ" (61). Similarly, Witness Lee writes,

God created man to live on the earth for the fulfillment of His purpose. But His enemy, Satan, in order to usurp the God-created man, formed an anti-God world system on this earth by systematizing men with religion, culture, education, industry, commerce, entertainment, etc., through men's fallen nature, in their lusts, pleasures, and pursuits, and even in their indulgence in necessities for their living, such as food, clothing, housing, and transportation. (Recovery Version, 1 John 2:15, note 2)

A similar word to κόσμος is *age*, αἰών, denoting a period of time marked in New Testament usage by spiritual or moral characteristics. *Age* denotes the present, practical part of the world, that part which we contact and in which we live.

This satanic world is composed of many different ages, each having its own particular pattern, characteristics, fashions, styles, trends, manners, customs, and ideas. Ephesians 2:2 says that we once "walked according to the age of this world, according to the ruler of the authority of the air, of the spirit which is now operating in the sons of disobedience." Second Corinthians 4:4 exposes Satan as "the god of this age," who has blinded the thoughts of the unbelievers, and Galatians 1:4 says that Christ "gave Himself for our sins that He might rescue us out of the present evil age." Romans 12:2 exhorts us not to be "fashioned according to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind." This means that we should not be assimilated by the world to the extent that we who have been separated from the world unto God have the same image as this age. Even Demas, a fellow worker of Paul, abandoned Paul, "having loved the present age" rather than the Lord's appearing (Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:10, 8). To be sure, we cannot forsake the world without forsaking the present age that appears before us.

Indulgence in God-ordained Necessities

At the time of Noah, the godless culture on the earth produced an evil, crooked, corrupted, and perverse generation, and the evil power of darkness corrupted the earth and filled it with violence. Genesis 6:5 says, "And Jehovah saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Verses 11 and 12 say, "The earth was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth." Man himself even became flesh, in whom dwells personified sin (v. 3; Rom. 7:17-20). The generation of Noah had a certain characteristic, which was the indulgence of the lustful self. In Matthew 24:38 and 39 the Lord Jesus said,

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.

For in verse 38 indicates that what follows is the explanation of why and how the Lord's parousia will be like the days of Noah. In the days of Noah people were befuddled by eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage. In the beginning, eating, drinking, and marriage were ordained by God for man's existence. We are taught to take our food with thanksgiving and to hold marriage in honor (1 Tim. 4:3; Heb. 13:4). Because of man's lust, however, Satan utilizes these necessities of human life to occupy man and keep him from God's interest. At the end of this age, near the coming of the Lord's parousia, this kind of situation will be intensified. Satan will increasingly utilize these God-created things to stupefy, drug, and befuddle human beings.

Judgment Coming like a Flood at the Lord's Return

The second characteristic of the people at the time of Noah is that they did not know that judgment was coming until the flood came and took them away. When the Lord's parousia is about to come, people will likewise be befuddled by the necessities of this life and will not know that God's judgment, signified by the flood, will come upon them by the Lord's appearing. The believers, however, should be de-drugged and should soberly know that Christ is coming to execute God's judgment upon this corrupted world (1 Thes. 5:6; 1 Pet. 4:7). Are we the believers saved from the befuddling, intoxicating, soporific effect of the attraction and demand of the age in these last days? It is possible that many children of God have allowed themselves to be drugged and dulled in their senses by the thick atmosphere of the current age. Watchman Nee applies the Lord's word of warning not to unbelievers but to believers. He says:

While it is true that sin and violence will be greater than ever at the close of this age, it is apparent from God's Word that it is not specifically these with which the Church will have to grapple then, but with the spiritual appeal of far more everyday things....These things are not inherently sinful; they are simply things of the world. Have you ever in all your days paid such attention to the good life as now? Food and raiment are becoming the special burden of God's children today. What shall we eat? What shall we drink? Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For many these are almost the sole topics of conversation....There was a time when the Church rejected the world's ways. Now she not only uses them; she abuses them....And this we add from hard earned experience, that commerce is the field in which, more than in any other, "the corruption that is in the world through lust" relentlessly pursues even the most high-principled of Christians, and apart from the grace of God, will all too easily overtake them to their undoing. (108, 111-112)

The "undoing" of the world-loving and age-captured Christians is the spoiling of their pure pursuit toward the Lord, their insufficiency of transformation, their immaturity in the divine life, their unfruitfulness in service to the Lord, and the rebuke and consequences that they will suffer at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10). The conditions of evil living that stupefied the generation of Noah before the flood portray the perilous condition of man's living before the great tribulation and the Lord's parousia. At the time leading up to the Lord's coming, people, including the genuine but defeated believers, will be oblivious, stupefied, drunken, and drugged by the enemy through their unhealthy attachment to and pursuit of God-ordained necessities. But as they are carried along by the course of the age, they will meet the flood of the Lord's judgment at His coming. And when the course meets the flood, these defeated believers will be subject to the Lord's

judgment and come under His discipline. This is the word of righteousness in the New Testament.

One Is Taken and One Is Left

Matthew 24:40 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." To be taken is to be raptured by the coming Christ into His presence. If we would participate in the overcomers' rapture to enjoy the Lord's parousia and escape the judgment at the end of this age, we must overcome the stupefying effect of man's living today. At the beginning of His parousia, Christ will rapture the believers who have been watchful in life and are then mature and ready. Those who have not been watchful, who were carried along by the course of this age and did not pursue the Lord to be perfected in life and faithful in service, will remain on the earth for a certain period of time. For a proper understanding of the rapture of the believers, we must depart from the opinions of most traditional Bible expositions. In this subject we are more indebted to certain contemporaries of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Brethren, including Robert Govett, G. H. Pember, G. H. Lang, and D. M. Panton, enlightened exponents of prophetic Scripture.

The two men and the two women in Matthew 24 represent the living believers at the time of the Lord's second coming. We enumerate our ground for this conclusion as follows. First, the context of this short but significant prophecy is the portion from Matthew 24:32 to 25:30. As we have seen, this section of the Lord's prophecy is given to the church, the New Testament disciples. Therefore, it is not a gospel message to unbelievers; rather, it is a word of warning to the believers to watch and be ready. The feeling of the Lord's word here is grave and admonitory. Could the disciples have received His word in such a feeling if the eventuality of their rapture was secure and predetermined by electing grace alone? For the recipients of this word to apply it to another class of people reduces it to a word of consolation, not a word of admonition, and its effect would be complacency, not caution. The Lord indeed knew how to give words of encouragement and consolation, but this is not His intent in this prophecy to the church.

Second, the one not taken is not a nominal Christian, as many expositors conveniently propose. The Lord's prophecy in Matthew 24 and 25 is clearly given to three classes of people: the Jews, the believers, and the nations who are living at the time of the Lord's return. The Lord does not address a fourth category, the so-called professing church. This portion speaks of, as Darby says, "christian responsibility."

Third, the Lord's command to watch is a word for the believers. Matthew 24:42 says, "Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord comes." *Watch* here is

γρηγορέω, “to keep awake, to be alert, not to be negligent,” as in 26:41 (“watch and pray”) and 1 Thessalonians 5:6 (“watch and be sober”). In Revelation 3:3 the Lord says to the church in Sardis, “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.” Thus, it is to the church, not the unbelievers, that the Lord says, “Watch.” This is confirmed by Matthew 24:44 in which the Lord says to His disciples, not to another class of people, “You also be ready.” It is the believers, who constitute the church, who must hear this sober word. Moreover, *therefore* in verse 42 ties that verse to the two preceding verses. Here is a cause and effect: *watch therefore* has the meaning of, “Since these things are to happen, do this!” Since one is taken and the other is not, the believers in the perilous time before the Lord’s parousia must be diligent, vigilant, and watchful.

Fourth, the distinction between the one who is taken and the one who is left is not one of saving faith in the Lord Jesus. Rather, the difference is in the maturity of life; one is mature in life, and the other is not. Unbelievers are commanded to believe, but believers are commanded to watch. As Pantou says, “No soul can *watch* for Christ until it *loves* Christ; and even of those who love Him, few love His appearing” (22). It is for watchfulness that the one is taken, and it is for failure to watch, not unbelief, that the other is left. To watch is to live a vigilant life of separation and distinction from the current age and of pursuit of the Lord for the growth and maturity in the divine life. This is a matter distinctly for those who have believed in the Lord.

Fifth, it is a blind error to say that only unbelievers fail to watch. Peter, John, and James were unable to watch with the Lord in Gethsemane (26:40). Ananias and Sapphira did not watch when they lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11), and Demas had already lost his watchfulness when he loved the present evil age and forsook Paul. What believer can search his heart and say that he has never ceased watching even for an hour? If we are not watching, and if Christ returns in the hour of our slumber and immaturity, we will not be taken by Him; we will be left behind.

Sixth, Matthew 24:42 ends with “your Lord comes.” When speaking to the disciples, Jesus calls Himself “your Lord.” This is comparable to *master* in verse 45. The Lord is the Lord to the disciples and the Master over His household. The warning that one will be taken and the other left is given to those who call Jesus *Lord*, even *my Lord*. Clearly, these are none other than genuine believers.

Seventh, the “two” in the field or at the mill are needed to complement the ten virgins in 25:1-13. Twelve is the number of completion and perfection in God’s economy. The ten virgins signify the majority of believers, who will have died before the Lord’s coming. The two men or two women in 24:40-41 represent the remaining believers,

who will live until the Lord’s coming. Thus, all of the above, the two and the ten, are believers, fulfilling the consistent scriptural significance of the number twelve.

Eighth, there is no ground to say that the one not taken is an unbeliever; other than the ground of an *a priori* rejection of the possibility that defeated, world-loving Christians will not enjoy a rapture into the Lord’s presence prior to the judgments at the end of the age. Such an interpretation is a retrofitting of traditional doctrine into a word of the Lord that does not otherwise allow for it. And indeed, an examination of the commentaries on this portion of the Word is a study in contradictions and conundrums of many kinds. Matthew Henry, for example, writes concerning those who are not taken that they are the dross among the gold, the chaff among the wheat, who will suffer the condemnation of sinners. When the elect are gathered together, he says, these others will be “left to the devil and his angels, who, when Christ has gathered out his own, will sweep up the residue (363).” Yet, he adds,

We must therefore *give diligence*, 2 Pet. iii. 11, 14....we must have our lamps ready trimmed;...we must have our plea ready drawn;...we must have our accounts ready stated and balanced; there is an inheritance which we then hope to enter upon, and we must have ourselves ready, made meet to partake of it. (363)

According to Henry, we who must be ready, that is, we who may or may not be ready, are the “disciples of Christ,” yet those who are not ready are condemned and “left to the devil and his angels”—Henry’s term for eternal perdition. However, perdition can never be the lot of a disciple of Christ. If we are sure to be taken up at the beginning of the Lord’s parousia, if a timely rapture is the convenient entitlement of every believer—ready or not ready—to what end must we be ready? This traditional interpretation leaves us in a conundrum.

Matthew Poole also leaves us in a quandary. Speaking of both the two in the field and the parable of the householder, he says,

It seemeth here rather to be understood of that separation which Christ shall make at the day of judgment, of the sheep from the goats, the elect from the reprobates; for of that coming our Saviour seemeth to be speaking, both in the preceding and in the following words. (117)

Yet concerning the need of the believers to watch, he adds,

Our Saviour...presseth upon his disciples a sober, heavenly, and holy life; intimating that by such a life only they can make themselves ready for the coming of Christ, and to stand before the Son of man, when he shall appear in his power and glory. (117)

The truth of the gospel of grace is that “the elect” and “the reprobates” are distinguished uniquely by the saving faith in the Lord Jesus, not by the quality of their lives. How then can Poole propose that “a sober, heavenly, and holy life” prepares the true believers for the Lord’s coming, if only the unbelievers—“goats” and “reprobates”—will be unprepared? A Christian who is not sober, heavenly, or holy, as many are not, can never be a “goat.” Poole’s underlying error is in saying that the one in the field who is not taken is not a believer. To interpret the one not taken as an unbeliever or nominal believer, and follow with “Watch therefore” as a warning to the believers, leads only to contradictory, false, and vague notions that annul the truth and intent in the Lord’s warning. We may even say that such false, traditional teachings themselves are part of the stupefying, complacency-generating drug that characterizes the befuddling situation at the time of the Lord’s parousia.

Kept from “the Hour of Trial,” the Great Tribulation

To be taken, in Matthew 24:40-41, is to be raptured before the great tribulation (v. 21), the extraordinary time of trial during the last three and a half years of this age, the second half of the last week prophesied in Daniel 9:27. The tribulation is the “hour of trial, which is about to come on the whole inhabited earth, to try them who dwell on the earth” (Rev. 3:10). The Lord promised the church in Philadelphia that He would keep her not only out of the trial, but out of the hour of trial, because she has kept the word of the Lord’s endurance. This promise indicates that the believers who keep the word of the Lord’s endurance will be raptured before the great trial, implying that those who do not keep the word of the Lord’s endurance will be left in the trial. G. H. Pember warns that the world-loving Christians, although by nature being the wheat among the chaff, must be perfected by remaining in the hour of trial. Because of this, they are among “them who dwell on the earth”:

The last expression is doubtless to be understood in a moral sense of all those who have settled themselves upon the earth, with little or no aspiration beyond it; and who must be tested, because there is some wheat even in that vast heap of chaff. For there are many who believe in the Lord Jesus, but do not go much further in His ways; who are careless of pressing on to know Him and the power of His resurrection, being content with things here below, with their Churches and acts of devotion and good works. And so their thoughts are fixed upon earth: they seldom contemplate the heavenly calling, and do not look for that blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Such a state of mind must engender worldliness, and cause those who have it to be more or less dwellers upon the earth. And to separate them from the altogether carnal, to make them start back with horror from the things

that are seen and long for the advent of the Deliverer, the hour of trial will come: they will be made to experience what the world is when the restraining influence of the Spirit is withdrawn, and the Mystery of Lawlessness unveiled. (399-400)

Luke 21:34-36 is a companion portion to Matthew 24. The Lord Jesus says,

But 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.

That day in verse 34 is the great tribulation, which will come as a snare to those who are not watchful. By watching and beseeching, the overcoming believers have the strength and the ability to escape the great tribulation, to be raptured before the great tribulation. To stand before the Son of Man is to stand before the Savior on Mount Zion in the heavens before the great tribulation (Rev. 14:1, 4). This is a reward only to those believers who overcome the befuddling, drugged situation on the earth before the Lord’s parousia by continually watching and praying.

Being Faithful and Prudent

Matthew 24:45-51 is a parable of faithfulness and prudence in the believers’ ministry in the house of God. Faithfulness is shown toward the Lord, whereas prudence is exercised toward the believers. Verses 45 through 47 say,

Who then is the faithful and prudent slave, whom the master has set over his household to give them food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Truly I say to you that he will set him over all his possessions.

Household refers to the believers, who constitute the church (Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15). *Give them food* refers to ministering the word of God and Christ as the life supply to the believers. Therefore, the faithful and prudent slave is a steward in God’s house, a household administrator, a good steward of the grace of God (Eph. 3:2, 8; 1 Pet. 4:10). This slave will be blessed at the coming of the Lord by being rewarded with the authority to rule in the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens (Matt. 25:21, 23).

In 24:48-51, however, the Lord warns the disciples concerning another kind of slave. These verses say,

But if that evil slave says in his heart, My master delays, and begins to beat his fellow slaves and eats and drinks with the drunken, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, and will cut him asunder and appoint his portion with the hypocrites. In that place there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

Most Bible expositors agree that verses 45 to 51, along with the entire portion of Matthew 24 that we have examined here, is the Lord's word to His disciples as New Testament believers. Because of this, many teachers have taken it upon themselves to explain who this evil slave is in relation to the church. Matthew Henry says,

This parable, with which the chapter closes, is applicable to all Christians, who are in profession and obligation God's servants; but it seems especially intended as a warning to ministers; for the servant spoken of is a *steward*.... The vilest of creatures is a wicked man, the vilest of men is a wicked Christian, and the vilest of them is a wicked minister. (364-366)

This summary is exemplary of many teachers, even though the term *minister* more often than not presents the unnecessary, even incorrect, connotation of the formal vocation of ecclesiastical leaders, as evidenced by Henry's subsequent references to the pulpit. R. C. H. Lenski speaks similarly of the evil slave:

He accepted his lord's trust, he promised faithful and competent service....He is a sample of those ministers in the church who act like popes. Instead of doing the work graciously entrusted to him, he gives rein to the lower passions which he has had to hide while his lord was present. He now carouses, eats, and drinks in company with base fellows like himself. Now he is a sample of the ministers who are self-seekers, who also indulge their flesh, even its basest side, when they think they can do so with safety. (959-960)

In most cases, this apparently simple interpretation leads to one and the same convenient conclusion: In the professing church today there are true ministers and false ministers; the false ministers, being unbelievers, will perish in hell with the particular condemnation commensurate with their false claim of position. We cannot agree with this conclusion, and in fact, it leavens the truth of the New Testament. The evil slave in this parable is a genuine believer, saved through his faith in Christ and placed as a functioning, ministering member in the Body of Christ. First, the context of this parable is the Lord's prophecy to the New Testament disciples in Matthew 24:32—25:30. Therefore, the purpose and tone of this portion is a warning to the believers, not to unbelievers or nominal Christians. Refer to our arguments above in this regard.

Second, both the faithful and the evil one are called "slaves." *Slaves* signify the believers from the aspect of service. They are the redeemed of God, who have been bought with a price, who serve Him in this age, and who will serve Him for eternity (1 Cor. 6:20; Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:7; 4:7, 12; Titus 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 1; Rev. 22:3). Unbelievers do not have the position of slaves. Rather, they are those who say, "We do not want this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14). Therefore, both the faithful slave and the evil slave in Matthew 24 are believers.

Third, the "master," signifying the Lord Jesus, is master both of the faithful slave and of the evil slave. In verse 48 the evil slave says, "My master delays." This is no lie or cynical hypocrisy, for verse 50 confirms that the Lord is indeed "the master of that slave." Having the Lord Jesus as his Master, even the evil slave is a believer.

Fourth, this parable speaks of "his household." Ephesians 2:19 says, "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." First Timothy 3:15 says, "But if I delay, I write that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth." "His household" is the church of the living God, composed of the redeemed, regenerated believers. There are no unbelievers in the church, and there are no false believers in the service of the church. The only way to interpret the evil slave as a false Christian in a position of ministry is to say that the Lord's household here is tantamount to Christendom, or Christianity in its general, outward appearance, in which the false come together with the true. This is an inexcusable confounding of the truth of the New Testament with the sad history of Christianity. The Lord knew how to speak of false Christians (Matt. 13:24-30), but He did not call them "his household." In this parable the Lord is referring to "My church" (16:18), the household of God in its pure nature.

Fifth, both the faithful slave and the evil slave are appointed by the Lord to their position. Matthew 24:45 says that the faithful slave was set over the Lord's household. In verse 48, which introduces the evil slave, the same designation is not needed explicitly, for it is understood: The Lord simply turns to "that" evil slave, but in the same vein. Much has been said about the emphatic *that* in this verse. In the matter of their status and appointment, too much of a distinction should not be made between the faithful slave and the evil slave. Alford suggests that the two slaves may even be the same person in two states of mind: "The question is not here asked again, τίς ἐστὶν κ.τ.λ., [who is, etc.] but the transition made from the good to the bad servant, or even the good to the bad mind of the same servant, by the epithet κακός [evil]" (247). Lang demonstrates that

Darby and F. E. Bruce were also of this opinion (220-222). The New Testament tells us that the Holy Spirit places the overseers in the church, and the Lord appoints the services in and gives the gifted members to the Body (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 12:5; Eph. 4:11). We strongly repudiate the leavened notion that the Lord has or ever would appoint an unbeliever to a position of authority, service, or ministry in the church.

Sixth, the evil slave believed that the Lord was coming (Matt. 24:48). His evil lay not in unbelief but in that he fixed the time of the Lord's coming and relegated it to the future. The unbelieving do not acknowledge the Lord's coming. Rather, they mock the truth of the Lord's return and do not understand the hope that is in us, the believers (2 Pet. 3:9, 3; 1 Pet. 3:15).

Seventh, Matthew 24:49 says that the evil servant began to beat "his fellow slaves" (συνδούλους). *Fellow* indicates that the evil slave and the others of the household shared the same status. Believers are not yoked with unbelievers in the service of the house of God.

Eighth, the only difference between the two slaves is that one is faithful and prudent while the other is evil. Verses 48 and 49 enumerate his evil characteristics: he says that his master delays his coming, he beats his fellow slaves, and he eats and drinks with the drunken. Nothing is said here of unbelief or the rejection of the gospel. Sadly, not loving the Lord's appearing, mistreating the fellow believers, and indulgence with the worldly are not the unique province of the unregenerated. These are all sins to be found among the Lord's own children.

Being Cut Asunder

The above arguments clearly indicate that the evil slave is a true but unfaithful believer in the Lord's service. In fact, were it not for the punishment meted out to that slave, as recorded in verse 51, the entire history of the interpretation of this parable may have been different. This indicates that the traditional interpretation of this parable is based solely on the refusal of many Christian teachers to believe that a slave of God can be disciplined by the Lord at His coming; indeed, the whole of the interpretation turns on this prejudice. Let us examine the end of this parable in this light. Verse 50 says, "The master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know." The first characteristic of the evil slave is that he believes in but does not look for the coming of the Lord. The problem with the evil slave is not that he does not know that the Lord is coming, but that he does not expect Him. He does not want to live the kind of life needed in preparation for the Lord's coming. He, like Demas, loves the present age rather than the Lord's appearing. Therefore, the day of the Lord's coming will take

him by surprise. During the interim, however, he mistreats the fellow believers and keeps company with worldly people, who are drunk with worldly things.

Verse 51 continues, "And will cut him asunder and appoint his portion with the hypocrites. In that place there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth." We must examine the phrase *cut him asunder*. If misunderstood, it would seem to imply a punishment so final and fatal that as a metaphor it should stand for nothing short of the complete destruction of the evil slave by the judgment of the Lord at His coming. The metaphor, however, does not require such a meaning, and the context of these verses actually precludes it. *Cut asunder* (διχοτομέω) is a violent term, and it causes revulsion in the mind of many Bible teachers if applied to believers. A number of teachers propose that it refers to the punishment of sawing captives or criminals in two (2 Sam. 12:31). The translation "cut in two" or "cut in pieces," however, is not demanded by the Greek. The American Standard Version offers "severely scourge" in the margin. This would follow from Luke 12, the parallel portion to Matthew 24. In Luke 12:46 the Lord speaks of the slave who is cut asunder. Then He immediately follows with, "And that slave who knew his master's will and did not prepare or do according to his will, will receive many lashes; but he who did not know, yet did things worthy of stripes, will receive few lashes" (vv. 47-48). Thus *cut asunder* may be equated with *lashes*. Vine allows for this interpretation:

Some take the reference to be the mode of punishment by which criminals and captives were cut in two; others, on account of the fact that in these passages the delinquent is still surviving after the treatment, take the verb to denote to cut up by scourging, to scourge severely, the word being used figuratively. (264)

By any interpretation, the punishment meted out to the unfaithful slave in Luke 12 is in degrees of severity, as denoted by *many lashes* and *few lashes*, which certainly precludes the meaning of "cut in two," which cannot be done in degrees. Because of this, and because the term itself is figurative, we are in no way obligated to believe that it refers to the final judgment of false Christians, or the unbelieving in general, which will result in their perdition in the lake of fire. This meaning is simply not required.

The first component of the Greek word in question is δίχα, meaning *apart*. It adds the sense of separation to διχοστασία, *division* (Rom. 16:17; Gal. 5:20). For this and the above reasons, we favor the general translation of "cut asunder," implying a rending that causes separation, a dividing, a setting apart. This is consistent with the form of the word as it comes into modern Greek, διχοτομω', meaning "to partition." In principle, it is the same idea expressed in John 15:6, in which an unfruitful branch is "cast out," that is, cut off from the participation in the riches of

the life of the vine. To be cut asunder in Matthew 24:51, therefore, is to be cut off from the glorious Christ, from the glory of His kingdom, and from His glorious presence in His kingdom, unable to participate in Christ and the glory of His kingdom in the manifestation of the kingdom, which the faithful slaves will enjoy. It is the lot of those slaves of God, who though redeemed, regenerated, and placed in positions of service, are unfaithful and evil in loving the present age, mistreating fellow believers, and indulging in the company of worldly people. They do not live and serve in the reality of the kingdom today, and at the Lord's coming they will be cut asunder, cut off, from the manifestation of the kingdom in glory. This is not to perish eternally but to be chastened dispensationally.

Verse 51 also says that the master of the evil slave will “appoint his portion with the hypocrites.” This does not mean, however, that the evil slave will perish in the lake of fire. In Matthew, the book of the kingdom, the issue is not salvation. The issue is the kingdom: whether we shall receive a reward to enter into the kingdom, or whether we shall lose the reward, miss the enjoyment of the kingdom, and suffer punishment and discipline where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Weeping indicates regret, and gnashing of teeth indicates self blame. Regret and self blame for a life of indulgence in this age and unfaithfulness in service to the Lord will be the portion of the evil slave. Again, we assert, this does not mean that he will lose his salvation. Alford makes this distinction. The evil slave, he says, is a genuine servant of the Lord who falls away from his erstwhile truth and faithfulness. Concerning *with the hypocrites* he says,

Notice that *this servant also is one set over the household—one who says ὁ κύριός μου [my master, Alford's emphasis]—and began well—but now ἄρξεται τύπ., [begins to beat, Alford's emphasis] &c.—falls away from his truth and faithfulness;—the sign of which is that he begins (lit. shall have begun) to κατακυριεύειν τῶν κληθῶν [lord it over the allotments] 1 Pet. v. 3, and to revel with the children of the world. In consequence, though he have not lost his belief (ὁ κύρ. μου), he shall be placed with those who believed not, the hypocrites. (247-248)*

A Word of Warning

The parables in Matthew 24:32-51 are a serious and grave word of warning to the believers, especially those who live until the Lord's parousia at the end of this age. There are two great unknowns that give warning to the true Christian: the uncertainty of the time of one's own death as well as the uncertainty of the time of the Lord's coming. Toward the time of the Lord's coming, His parousia, the wickedness of the age will be intensified, just as it was in the days of Noah, and even the unwatchful believer may become drugged and stupefied by indulgence in God-given necessities. Thus befuddled by the things of this age,

such a believer will not love the Lord's appearing and look for it. Rather, he will be surprised and troubled by it. Caught up in the course of the age, he will find it easier to mistreat fellow believers rather than feed them, and he will tend to enjoy the things of the world with those who are drunken with the world. Then at the Lord's coming, he will be left behind in the great hour of trial, and he will be cut off from the Lord and His bright glory in the coming kingdom. The rapture is a reward only to those believers who overcome the befuddling, drugged situation on the earth before the Lord's parousia by continually watching and praying. It is the natural consequence of their continual growth in life unto maturity. For the Lord's coming we need to prepare ourselves, love Him, grow in Him, and serve His household faithfully, that at His appearing we may be mature to be raptured and may be rewarded by Him to rule over the nations with Him in the millennial kingdom. This is the word of righteousness in the New Testament.

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