

Commentary on Matthew 24 & 25

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Chapter 24 – Jesus struggles once again to untangle the issues involving His Kingdom, the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Nation, and His Return at The End of Time. Of all the passages in Scripture, this chapter of Matthew has suffered the most abuse and misunderstanding. The greatest mistake is to forget that Jesus is a Jewish rabbi teaching Jewish men a spiritual understanding of real world events. In the previous chapter, we saw Jesus ended by lamenting the coming destruction of Jerusalem. As a first-rate Hebrew writer, Matthew keeps the narrative in context, one principle of teaching leading to the next, all in context. This chapter is no different. Jesus is warning His disciples about the coming destruction in AD 70, and how they should view it.

Naturally, the Twelve are still locked into those false Messianic Expectations. Foremost in their minds is noting the rising tension as a sure sign He is about to declare Himself Messiah and establish His reign in their world in some tangible way. They still don't see the Cross, they still don't see how the rejection of Christ by the Jewish leaders will bring destruction on the Holy City. Instead, they are wondering how He intends to take His throne there.

Jesus has fresh on His mind the sorrow of the City's destruction, as recorded at the end of the previous chapter. Among His followers were residents of Jerusalem who were intimately aware of any new additions or modifications to the Temple edifice. These things they pointed out to Jesus, assuming He had not yet seen them. To these, along with the Twelve, He declared a very literal prophecy about Titus and his army ensuring that no two stones of the Temple would remain vertically stacked.

They must have stared in stunned silence as Jesus walked away. How could the Temple of their God be destroyed? How could God want that? As they gathered later on the peak across the Kidron Valley, where the Temple and the City in all their glory were visible on the opposite ridge line just below eye level, His entourage came privately and asked for a fuller explanation of the prophetic words. They asked two questions, believing they were connected. So many Christians today make the same mistake, assuming that what follows are events far distant from His time. That is, they assumed that the Temple destruction, His rising in glory to declare the Kingdom, and the End of Times were all the same thing. However, they weren't sure how those things were connected, so they asked Him to explain.

Jesus takes pains to untangle what was actually three issues. He pointed out that the destruction of the City was one event, and while tied to His proclaiming the Kingdom, that was not the same as the End of Times. First the Temple comes down, meaning the final nail in the coffin of Covenant of Moses and the earthly nation of Israel. However, His Kingdom was not a historical event *per se*, but a spiritual event, because it was a spiritual Kingdom. As for His return and the End of Times, that was another matter entirely.

Jesus begins by answering the question implied, but not asked: What suffering comes with serving this Kingdom of Heaven? This is addressed to avoid confusing that answer

with answers for the other questions. He warns in verses 4-14 what events do *not* mark His Return: “See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass.” Verse 7 is an established prophetic phrase (Haggai 2:22) reminding them not to be concerned with the rising or passing of any human government, nor any natural disasters. That’s simply the background noise of fallen human existence: “All these things are merely the beginnings of sorrows.” The next few verses (9-14) are just the typical reaction of the world to people possessed of a single-minded commitment to a Kingdom not of this world. The Final Day will come after the gospel has reached the entire world; the words do not necessarily imply that it would be immediately following that accomplishment, nor is it precisely defined what that accomplishment means in concrete terms. It serves more to say, “All of that is a long way off. You need to be more concerned with your mission.”

The specific prophecy of the Temple destruction we now know came true in AD 70. In this (15-22), Jesus warns them to flee the city when they see the Romans violating the Temple grounds, no longer honoring the prohibition they supported while ruling the Jews by keeping non-Jews out. Some of those living at the time would need to heed this advice, and leave town, or face being caught up in the slaughter. That it was indeed a major holocaust is not in dispute. Because Christians would certainly be still in the city, Jesus promised the Father would make it pass quickly.

For the sake of long-term Christian teaching, Jesus warns that His return will not be secret. Many evil and deranged folks would claim to be Him, but it won’t be like that at all. It would be something so obvious, no human could miss it. When He Returns, there won’t be any confusion whatsoever what is happening (23-28). Verse 29 is a standard prophetic statement, not to be taken literally. It refers to something so catastrophic there is no way to describe it. The whole world as we know it would be completely altered. The Second Coming could not be secret, but would be painfully obvious.

All of that was simply to answer the first question.

Thus, Jesus now turns to the second question (30-31). He describes some unmistakable earmarks of His Return, something different from the previous discussion. Every eye will see Him and recognize Him as God, and angels will be visibly present. He cautions them to fix this in their minds (32-33), to make sure they can tell the real deal as surely as they can discern the change of the seasons. The Second Coming is a distinct event, with no warning whatsoever. All these other signs mean other things. Then returning to His discussion of the Temple Destruction, He warns that they would live to see it (34), so heed the marks of this one event which is clearly forecast by well known prophetic signs. He reinforces that warning by mentioning that His words are *The Word* (35).

However, the Second Coming will not have any warning signs (36). The Son Himself was not entrusted to know, so it’s not possible for Him to tell. It compares to the Flood in that no one (except Noah) knew it was coming (37-39). It came suddenly. Using terms commonly understood to depict a sudden coming of judgment and wrath, Jesus describes a couple of scenes depicting victims snatched up by arresting soldiers (40-41). The ones taken are the guilty, and any other meaning was unknown to the Jews of that time. This will not be a convenient moment for anyone.

He then launches finally into a call for faithfulness (42-51). The whole point of all this is that *there will be no signs*. You cannot possibly predict by digging into the text and extracting semantic details to establish a sequence. His warning is: Get ready now, by obeying to the fullest extent. You can't know. You can't even guess. Don't try to guess, because it's a waste of Kingdom resources.

Thus, Jesus answers the first question plainly, but warns them not to associate the second question with the same event. His mention of the Destruction of Jerusalem was quite consistent with His message of what really matters in the Kingdom: getting away from the ancient Covenant of Moses, getting away from the focus of One Place on earth (John 4:23). It would never again matter, because that covenant was about to be ended, fulfilled, completed, with no unfinished business. Every day He had tried to help break the spell of false understanding for His Disciples, teaching them that the Temple would soon be just a pile of rubble. The old ritual framework would be dead, and being a Jew would mean nothing. Only those who walked Christ's path would find God's favor.

Chapter 25 – Offering a trio of parables, Jesus explains just what it means to be prepared for His Return at the End of Time.

He was trying to show the relationship between the destruction of Jerusalem, His ascent to His throne, and His Return to redeem the fallen world. For each of these events, Jesus warned His disciples that they must prepare. Preparing for His rule was a matter of spiritual understanding they would gain only when the Holy Spirit fell. It would require the presence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts to even understand the spiritual nature of His reign. For the destruction of Jerusalem, preparedness was a more practical matter of recognizing when Rome was ready to besiege the city. For His Return, the issue is quite different – we must live in perpetual readiness. Jesus offers three parables to explain how Kingdom service was the whole matter, for which no timeline was possible.

Jewish wedding traditions are rich and varied, but certain features are fairly well established for Jesus' day. For example, we understand that the bridegroom would go to his bride's home, where the priest would engage them in various rituals. She would then leave her childhood home with him, and they would typically arrive at his home around sundown for a celebration with feasting and distribution of gifts, which might last several days. This provides the background for a vivid parable using standard Hebrew symbols.

The focus of the narrative is the group of virgins who hope to be included in this celebration, symbolizing the people of Israel. It is their birthright to be included, but it requires some effort to claim that birthright. The lamps represent the light of God's revelation, which Israel carried in the Law. Their fire was dying out, and the only fire that would continue burning in the New Covenant will be fired by the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the oil. Those who do not have Him will not be ready to participate. Some Jews get this oil; some never will. No one can ride the spiritual rebirth of another. If the light of their testimony is the Talmud, then they will miss the Messiah, and be excluded from Heaven. While the Lord delayed, giving them ample time, there was a certain and distinct endpoint to His patience. At some moment that no one can predict, the End will come. Messiah will Return to redeem all Creation, but also to judge all mankind.

Everyone living in Jesus' time could remember when one of Herod's sons had to appear before Caesar in Rome to fight a petition by opponents to his inheriting the throne his father bequeathed him. Should he be arrested there in Rome, all his private property could be forfeited, so he wisely left some of his affairs in the hands of trusted servants. Known as a hard man, he hardly would have allowed them to merely preserve his assets in stasis, but expected the normal business to continue apace in his absence. In this parable, Jesus is the king going away to His Father's throne for a time. During His absence, He fully expects His servants to employ their gifts from Him to the maximum affect, so His domain among the hearts of men will grow. While the word translated "talent" described a large quantity of money, we rightly use that word in English to describe any particular ability bestowed by God. All our abilities and talents are His, and He demands we use them to increase His Kingdom, serving in ways that make His glory obvious to all. Of those to whom the Son offers much grace, they are expected to share that grace with equal generosity, because that's how the Kingdom gains, increasing its treasury of souls. Anyone who does not apply himself with fervor is unfit for the Kingdom, destroying what little he has, and will not fare well when He Returns.

The Final Judgment of humanity is described as a shepherd liquidating his flock. Raising sheep in First Century Palestine followed ancient established practices, honed to perfection from centuries of experience. Given that the very best breeds of sheep in terms of what they produce were also just about the stupidest animals known, a good shepherd kept goats in the herd to protect them. Sheep were deeply focused on just a few things: eating, drinking, and making more sheep. Predators could easily slip in and devour the sheep, because they often wouldn't notice. Goats would smell predators coming, and either fight or flee. Sheep were stupid enough to wander off a cliff, and would easily flee over one when frightened. Goats would pay attention and flee to safer ground. But goats were not sheep; they were fundamentally different and less valuable.

Jesus portrays Himself as the Master Shepherd. His sheep have a mission, and that mission is to feed on His Word, drink deeply of His Spirit, and bring to birth new souls for the Kingdom. They have His own nature in themselves, and will do by instinct His works, even if they don't quite understand it. The power of the Holy Spirit works to create a holy instinct, a tendency to serve Him in a hurting world by sharing His grace and redemption. In so doing, they tend to be pretty poor at running the world. The world is loaded with predators, those who would destroy the Kingdom by the works of Satan: deceiving, stealing, and killing. To prevent the flock being harmed, the Lord gives to those who are not His sheep the commission to create a civilized world, to restrain sin. Those who do this will not succeed if they have a sheep's nature, so the Lord appoints sinners to govern our world. By their nature, they are much harsher, and do not understand the peaceful, sacrificial nature of Christ. At the End of Time, they will not understand how they cannot be included in redemption.

In this parable, our Lord describes the nature of the Covenant of Noah. Social stability is the requirement given to sinful men in a sinful world. The work is messy and the results aren't pretty, but this is the plan of God to keep things under some semblance of order until the End comes. His people live among these civil rulers, and will tend to follow the laws of men. However, His people's true purpose and focus of attention is the Kingdom of Heaven, not any kingdoms of men. By their calling His people will not be very effective in such worldly concerns. The obvious warning here is that we who follow

Christ cannot be goats. If we are to be any use at all to Him, our natures must make us unfit to govern the affairs of mankind. To seek such governing power violates our calling and His nature in us. It requires a nature which makes men unfit to stand before the Judgment Seat of God.

Thus, to be ready for the Lord's Return means actively serving His eternal purposes. We must be fired by the Holy Spirit to carry His light to the world. We must aggressively pursue His business using all our grace gifts, and we must not be distracted by the affairs of mere human kingdoms. Only those who embrace the fundamental change in their souls by the Holy Spirit will be ready. Those who seek other pursuits will stand before Him ashamed on that Last Day.