

(4) Matthew 24.32-51

This verse marks the beginning of a long *parenthesis* (to 25.30) and an accompanying change in language. The Lord now illustrates his teaching with a series of parables designed to warn of the need for *watchfulness*, *readiness* and *faithfulness* in the lives of His earthly people living *in* the tribulation and imminently *expecting* the coming Christ. This is the proper **interpretation** of the verses. However, the marked change in language from *Son of man* (particularly linked with Israel and judgment) to *Lord* and *Bridegroom* (24.45 onwards) *and* mention of the Lord's period of absence (25.14), suggests there are clear **applications** to be made concerning His professing servants during the church age. It should be remembered that every parable in the NT relates *directly* to the nation of Israel (13.13). The Lord only began to speak in parables *after* his rejection, often to illustrate the (future) consequences of their actions. Parables were designed to *conceal* truth from unbelievers and *illustrate* and *elucidate* truth to believers (13.10-16).

The Olivet Parenthesis (24.32-25.30)		
Passage	Title	Key Theme
24.32-35	Parable of the <i>Fig Tree</i>	<i>Watchfulness</i> <i>Readiness</i>
24.36-42	Parallel of the <i>Days of Noah</i>	
24.43-44	Parable of the <i>Householder</i>	
24.45-51	Parable of the <i>Stewards</i>	Faithfulness
25.1-13	Parable of the <i>Ten Virgins</i>	<i>Watchfulness</i> <i>Readiness</i>
25.14-30	Parable of the <i>Talents</i>	Faithfulness

The Parable of the Fig Tree [vv.32-35]

v.32: The word “learn” suggests the parable carries a lesson (or wisdom) to be applied as a habit in everyday life. The simple illustration from nature concerns the “fig tree”. It was one of the few trees in Palestine which lost its leaves in winter. In spring, the branches would become “tender” (soft, new shoots) and ready to sprout leaves signalling the onset of summer. **v.33:** Likewise, “all these things”, i.e. the events described from v.4, especially the abomination of desolation (v.15) and signs in the stellar heavens (v.29) herald the return of Christ and establishment of His kingdom. “It is near” (i.e. the kingdom, cf. Luke 21.31) is rendered “He is near” by the RV, even “at the doors” (near at hand). Those who observe the signs and are intelligent to God’s word will understand their significance. Israel’s leaders, especially, should have been accurate observers of the times, and yet they were blind to the Messiah in their midst (cf. Matthew 16.1-4). As believers today, we are not exhorted to look for signs, but for the Saviour (Philippians 3.20); nevertheless, we should be intelligent regarding the day in which we live and interpret present-day events in the light of Scripture.

In Scripture, the “fig tree” is sometimes used as a symbol of the nation of Israel (cf. Jeremiah 24; Hosea 9.10; Matthew 21.18-19; Luke 13.6-9). In fact, Israel can be generally viewed under the figure of *three* trees. The **vine** symbolises Israel in the *past* as a people with the potential to bring *joy* to God (Isaiah 5.1-7). The **fig** tree represents Israel in the *present* as those who failed to bring forth *fruit* for God, being in blindness and unbelief (Jeremiah 24; Matthew 21.19). The **olive** tree pictures Israel in the *future* as a recovered people destined to *shine* for God (in testimony) by the power of the Spirit (Hosea 14.6; Zechariah 4). There is no hint that the fig tree in this parable represents Israel, and it may be nothing more than a simple illustration from nature. However, *if* Israel is in view, the green shoots of life are not her *national* restoration (in 1948) but rather the first signs of a *spiritual* restoration as seen in the conversion of 144,000 at the beginning of the tribulation (Revelation 7.1-8). The parallel passage in Luke 21.29-30 adds “all the trees” suggesting a movement of the gospel out to *all* the world (Matthew 24.14; Revelation 7.9).

v.34: In a further explanation of the parable of the fig tree, the Lord speaks of the *speed* with which “all these things” (vv.4-31) shall be “fulfilled”. “Verily” emphasises the statement as of particular importance. In simple terms, the “generation” that sees the *beginning* of the tribulation will also see its *end*, such will be the rapidity with which the signs will unfold. John Walvoord says, “*The generation which sees the specific signs, that is, the great tribulation, will also see the fulfillment of the second coming of Christ.*” There may also be a contrast between the awful judgment that fell on an *unbelieving* generation (cf. 23.36) and the blessed future deliverance of a *faithful* generation. A few commentators suggest the word “generation” means ‘nation’ or ‘race’ and thus make this a promise of Israel’s continued existence until the end of the age. Whilst this is sound, biblical truth (cf. Jeremiah 31.35-37) it does not seem to be a contextual interpretation. **v.35:** The veracity of such promises is again emphasised and will be a strong encouragement to the faith of those living in the tribulation. “Heaven (stellar and atmospheric) and earth”, and everything in them, will “pass away”

(2 Peter 3.10) but **never** (*double negative*) the words of Christ. The very creation His words produced in a former day will be dissolved, but not the word which spoke it into being! The words of the Lord Jesus have the same authority as the word of God, for He is God manifest in flesh (Psalm 119.89-90; Isaiah 40.6-8). The prophet of old prefaced his words with, "Thus saith the Lord". Christ, however, speaks with the authority of God Himself, "Verily, I say unto you."

The Parallel of the Days of Noah [vv.36-42]

v.36: The Lord has been explaining (in vv.32-35) what *can* be known with certainty – signs indicate the nearness of the return of Christ. This verse, and the parables that follow, deal with what *cannot* be known – the *precise* moment of the glorious arrival of the Son of man. Hence there is an exhortation to vigilance. "No man", angel or even "the Son" (cf. Mark 13.32) knows the specific timing of this precise moment. Quite plainly then, it is futile to ever make predictions as to the date of the Second Coming (or rapture). God's word is sufficient for godly Christian living (2 Peter 1.3). If something is not revealed there is no necessity for our knowing it. In any case, such knowledge would likely tend to lethargy and neglect (indifference). Rather we should be on the very *tiptoe* of expectation! Whilst this stands true for the disciples in the Lord's day, even up to the present time, those who are spiritually intelligent will recognise the signing of the covenant as the beginning of the seven years of tribulation (Daniel 9.27), no doubt counting down the 2,520 prophetic days until its consummation. They will therefore be intelligent as to the *nearness* of the Lord's return, but not its *exact* day or moment. With widespread destruction on earth, and no light from the sun or moon, it may also be impossible to keep track of the passing of days and time.

The fact the Son does not know day and hour does not undermine His deity or omniscience. Whilst it is difficult (or even impossible) to satisfactorily explain such statements, we must remember that the "times and seasons" belong to the domain of the Father's authority (Acts 1.6-7). Perhaps then He "deliberately excluded the knowledge of this particular matter from His mind" (Tatford) or "chose not to know what the Father was not pleased to reveal" (Ironside). But, in Mark's gospel (where "neither the Son" is recorded) the Lord is speaking as the **perfect Servant**, one whose mind is consumed with the Father's word and will, after all "the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth" (John 15.15). The Father, then, had not given Him this particular fact to reveal (cf. John 7.16; 12.49; 14.24).

v.37: "As" and "so shall" are words that mark similarity. The days of Noah are like the days of Christ's return. The analogy (or likeness) is the *suddenness* of the coming judgment, and the *unpreparedness* of the world to meet it. People were so absorbed in legitimate worldly pursuits they failed to heed the warning (through preaching) of imminent judgment until it was too late. People will not expect or care about the coming Christ. There are three interesting passages that deal with the flood. Genesis 6.1-8 emphasises the *iniquity* of society, resulting in corruption and violence. This was the cause of the flood. Job 22.15-18 highlights the *independence* of society – they did not want or need God. Here, in Matthew 24, it is the *indifference* of the people. They were so occupied with daily things they did not consider the future. Warning was communicated through *two* preachers; **Enoch** preached of a coming Lord (Jude 14). **Noah** preached righteousness (2 Peter 2.5). **v.38:** The normal activities of everyday life will be continuing unabated. These pursuits are not evil in themselves, but highlight the folly of *short-term living for today*, "eat, drink and be merry", and *long-term planning for tomorrow* (marriage). The Greek word "eating" is not typical and means to 'chew food' or 'eat audibly' – it implies luxurious, carefree living. Had these people recognised the significance of the days they would rather be *fasting* and *weeping*. **v.39:** Despite the plain preaching (signs) of the times, they "knew not" (*ginosko*), meaning they failed to 'understand' or 'grasp the significance' of the days until it was too late. The flood (cataclysm) came "and took them all away" – in judgment! In contrast, believers "know" (*ginosko*, v.33). Timothy Ice: "The difference between the one who understands and the one who does not is based upon who accepts God's Word and who does not." Likewise, the coming of the Son of man will take unbelievers away in judgment.

v.40: This verse (and v.41) has often been misinterpreted as referring to the rapture. This cannot be. For instance, note the Lord is speaking of the days of **Noah**, not Enoch, and for good reason! Had heavenly saints of the church age been in view, then Enoch would be the appropriate *type* as one who was raptured to heaven *before* the judgment of the flood came. But Noah is the *pattern* of the Jewish remnant on earth – faithful amidst unfaithfulness, passing *through* the judgment (in the ark) whilst being preserved by God. Furthermore, the truth of the rapture has not yet been revealed, but the seed of its truth will be sown in the upper room, where the disciples are viewed as representatives of the church, rather than here, as representatives of the faithful remnant (John 14.1-3). It is those matters of the upper room which would later be expanded through the teaching of the Spirit as recorded in the epistles (John 14.26; 15.26; 16.7). JM Davies, referring to three ante-diluvians in Hebrews 11.4-7 says, "**Abel's sacrifice silhouettes the substitutionary death of Christ and the truth of justification by faith which introduces the believer into a life of communion with God and fits him for translation to glory as illustrated in Enoch. Only after that do we read of Noah and his preservation from the judgment which overtook the world. He and his family represent those who will be spared in the coming days of tribulation.**" Advocates of the rapture view rightly point out the Greek word used is *paralambano*, a warm word,

generally implying the idea of *welcome* or *close association*, and used of the rapture in John 14.3. However, the word is not *always* used in a positive sense (cf. Matthew 4.5; John 19.16). A key question to consider is where these individuals are “taken”. First, the parallel with the days of Noah suggests a taking away to judgment (as confirmed in Matthew 13.41-42). The righteous are left to inherit the kingdom (Matthew 13.43). Second, in Luke 17.37 the disciples ask this very question! “*Where, Lord?*” to which the answer given is “*Wheresoever the body is, thither will the eagles be gathered together.*” That is, those who are “taken” become corpses that feed the vultures. This was language often used as a metaphor for judgment.

“Two in the field” probably pictures members of the same family (father and son) working their farm together. **v.41:** “Two women”, often sisters or a mother and daughter, will be “grinding at the mill” – where they sat across from one another hand-turning a stone mill. No matter how close the relationship, one is taken, and one is left. Luke adds “two in one bed”. Thus, whether day or night, working or sleeping, every time zone of earth will be affected at the moment of the Lord’s return. **v.42:** The exhortation is plain, “Watch therefore”. Stay awake! Be constantly expectant, vigilant and alert! At its most basic, this is a call to faith *in* and faithfulness *to* the coming Christ – demonstrated by righteous conduct (cf. 24.46, 49; Luke 18.8; Revelation 16.15). It is the *unbeliever* that stands *unprepared* because of **unbelief**. They are asleep to the things of God (1 Thessalonians 5.6).

The Parable of the Householder [vv.43-44]

v.43: This parable contains a further exhortation to watchfulness and concerns the *master* of a household (“goodman of the house”) whose goods are in danger from an unexpected visit by a “thief” during a “watch” in the night. Both Romans and Jews divided the night (6pm-6am) into “watches”. The Romans used four, and the Jews three. The Lord went walking on the sea in the “fourth watch” of the night (i.e. between 3-6am, Matthew 14.25). Whilst the “goodman” *could* represent future religious leaders of the house of Israel during the tribulation, the basic point of the parable is plain. The master who knew the general time and location a thief was coming to “break in” and steal would take the necessary action to be *prepared* and protect his goods. **v.44:** Therefore, people should “be ready” (completely prepared) for the coming of Christ will be at such “an hour as ye think not” – which can be translated ‘seems good’ or ‘best’. A person can only be ready by genuine faith *in* Christ demonstrated by faithfulness *to* Him in service. *MacArthur: “The indispensable preparation for His coming, apart from which expectancy will be pointless and faithfulness will be impossible, is the preparation of salvation. Otherwise a person will be ready only for judgment and damnation.”* As a nation, Israel was not well prepared when Christ came at the first – there were only a faithful few like Simeon and Anna (despite all the profession).

Clearly the Lord Jesus was not comparing Himself in *character* to the thief. Rather he was comparing His *coming* to the stealth and unexpectedness of the thief’s coming. The metaphor of a thief is generally used to describe the Lord’s coming in respect of the *ungodly* and *judgment* (1 Thessalonians 5.4; 2 Peter 3.10). Thus, all those who belong to the household of profession must be vigilant. For the unsaved and unprepared, Christ’s coming will rob men of that which they prize. Loss will be suffered. In applying the parable, believers of the church age do not *watch* for the **Son of man** but *wait* for the **Saviour** from heaven (1 Thessalonians 1.10; Titus 2.13). Are we *watching* and *waiting* for the Lord’s return, or are we spiritually *asleep* (Romans 13.11)? The imminency of the Lord’s coming should exhort us to *holiness*, *godliness* (2 Peter 3.11) and *purity* (1 John 3.3). Note. The same parable is recorded in Luke 12.38-40 where the context is **treasure!** Those who store treasure (something I love) on *earth* will inevitably have their heart pulled in the direction of earth. Those who store treasure in *heaven* will find their goals, aspirations and longings directed heavenward. The coming of the Lord should put material possessions in their proper perspective else there will be loss (as one whose home has been visited by a thief) at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

The Parable of the Stewards [vv.45-51]

v.45: Lest anyone should think “watching” (vv.42-43) implies sitting and doing nothing, the emphasis of this parable is *faithful* stewardship. The parable is also recorded in Luke 12.42-48 where the context makes reference to the returning Lord who will *bless* those servants who are “watching” for his return. He will “gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them” (v.37). Christ is the source of Israel’s sustenance during the millennial reign. Interestingly, this parable also concerns the stewardship of *feeding* the household of God, but in tribulation days.

The parable pictures a wealthy “lord” (master) with multiple slaves. Before leaving on a lengthy journey, he chooses one of the slaves to be placed in responsibility over the household which requires providing food at the proper time. Again, the primary reference may be to leadership of the nation of Israel, those who were entrusted with ascertaining the signs of the times and directing the nation to watch for Messiah. The “evil servant” is later referred to as a “hypocrite” (v.51), a word used throughout this gospel to refer to the Scribes and Pharisees. There will be **two** types of servants – the

faithful (genuine) and *unfaithful* (counterfeit). The type of servant (his true character) is manifested by his behaviour whilst waiting for the Master to return.

The Lord deals, firstly, with the “faithful and wise” servant. The word “faithful” (*pistos*) describes a person characterised by *steadfast* affection or allegiance to his lord. He is therefore worthy of *responsibility* and *trust* (cf. 25.21). The servant is also “wise” and thus exercises good judgement, especially in practical matters. In Matthew 25, the “wise” virgins “took oil in their vessels with their lamps” symbolising a genuine work of the Spirit. The “wise” are also those who *hear* the words of Christ and *do* them (7.24)! **v.46**: The servant who faithfully ministers to the household during the lord’s absence, and is found so-doing on his return, will be “blessed”, i.e. the object of his favour, and honoured with great responsibility in the kingdom (**v.47**). The wise servant had a proper attitude in light of his lord’s absence, believing that he could return at any time. That was incentive enough to act responsibly.

v.48: In contrast, the “evil servant” begins to assume the position of lord. In Luke 12, it is the *same* servant that makes a choice to be *faithful* or *unfaithful* (v.45). Such a person will be a professed disciple of the coming Christ during the tribulation, but one whose life and living does not match their profession. He is not a **true** servant for he is later called a hypocrite (v.51). This servant’s affections (“heart”) lie with himself, not his master. Thus, he believes what he desires, that his lord “delayeth his coming”, meaning to *stay away a long time*, or even *fail to come back at all*. This betrays the state of his heart – he is content that his lord should stay away. Note. The same word is translated “tarry” in Hebrews 10.37, something the Lord Jesus will not do! **v.49**: Assuming his service will not be immediately (if ever) brought to account, he begins to act wickedly. He “smites” (beats) his fellow servants and associates with the “drunken”. It is not said that he himself is drunken, but he enjoys the company of those that are. He is allied with the world and its social scene. Luke adds that he knew his lord’s will but was not ready or prepared to do that will. **v.50**: Being so engrossed in his own self-indulgence, his lord will return unexpectedly, catching him unawares. **v.51**: His conduct betrayed his true character – he is a false servant, with no allegiance to his lord – and a “hypocrite” for pretending otherwise. He shall be “cut asunder” (*dichotomeo*), lit. ‘to cut in two’. The word is used figuratively to describe scourging with the utmost severity, i.e. ‘beaten with many stripes’ (Luke 12.47). The “weeping and gnashing of teeth” graphically describes the inconsolable *grief* (sorrow) and *anguish* (pain) of those assigned to a place of eternal judgment. The phrase is used in Matthew in association with ‘outer darkness’ (8.12; 22.30; 25.30) and ‘the furnace of fire’ (13.42, 50).

In application, it must be noted that *every* believer has been given a divine stewardship. Paul and the apostles were made stewards of the “mysteries of God”, which **truth** we hold today. Peter also describes the exercise of **spiritual gift** as “good” stewardship of the grace of God (1 Peter 4.10). **Elders** are “stewards of God”, having been given a precious household to administrate (Titus 1.7). Let us not forget we have also been given natural and physical gifts which can be dedicated to the Master’s use. *MacArthur: “His life, breath, energy, talents, spiritual gifts, and every other good thing he has are trusts from God to be used in His service and to His glory.”* Are we faithful in the discharge of such precious duties? Those with a steadfast affection *for* and allegiance *to* Christ? Faithfulness is the fundamental requirement of all Christian service (Matthew 25.21; 1 Corinthians 4.2). The imminent return of Christ should be the controlling incentive in our service. Yet, sadly, there are many *nominal* believers today. Through association, they know something of the word of God and its promise of a coming Christ, but their behaviour is not in keeping with such a professed belief. Such individuals will readily mistreat the saints and immerse in the company of the worldling.