

A Straightforward Guide to Matthew 24 & 25

Randall Hardy

There are some passages of Scripture which are considered difficult to understand and consequently have become controversial in many people's minds. High in this list are those books and chapters which deal with events closely associated with the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth, which are commonly referred to as apocalyptic. The best known of these passages are the book of Revelation, the later chapters of Daniel and of course Matthew 24. Over the years it has been my experience that many of the difficulties are caused by an eagerness to tie down the fine details of these passages in ways we can imagine them being fulfilled *from our present position in history*. The biggest problem with this approach is that it so often distracts us from the overall message of the book or chapter. Simply put, looking at each verse through a microscope prevents us from appreciating the panoramic view of the passage. In these notes I seek to do nothing more than introduce the wide-angle view of the teaching Jesus gave in response to a series of questions from his disciples.

What is the context?

“A verse out of context is a pretext” is an oft repeated but seldom heeded principle amongst Christians. The Bible has become for some a series of proof texts, strung together by stories which seemingly have very little relevance to what is said in the verse used to validate the doctrine or practice one is seeking to authenticate. Over the years I have discovered that an important key to understanding the Scriptures (and this includes the ‘difficult’ apocalyptic ones) is to return them in our thinking back into the context in which they are found and in which they were written. This is what I seek to do with Matthew 24 in this study.

With any Scripture there are three concentric circles which provide the context in which it should be understood.. These are:

- a) Its immediate context – the verses and chapters around it;
- b) The context of the book it is in – when and why was it written and where in the narrative the passage concerned is located.
- c) The context of the whole of the Scriptures – The Bible is the best commentary on the Bible and we should seek to understand every passage in the light of the whole.

In this introduction to Matthew 24 we will see the importance of all three levels, and how understanding the context of Jesus' teaching helps us to appreciate the message He was seeking to impress upon His followers in the last week of His ministry on earth.

The immediate context may not simply mean the passage which surrounds the verse in question. Yes, this is important in this case, but so also is an understanding of what had happened in Ch. 23 and what Jesus continued to teach in Ch. 25. Similarly, understanding why Matthew included this in his gospel and where it comes in the ministry of Jesus, provides the reader with the bigger picture. It is rare these days to find Christians reading even the gospels as they were intended to be read. The books of Bible were mostly written as historical records of God's dealings with men over the years. Some bring a prophetic element to that history, whilst others record the history of men with a burden, writing heartfelt letters to friends and acquaintances. Perhaps with the exception of much of the Book of Proverbs, none were written as a series of one line, stand-alone comments and should not be studied as if they were. It is my belief that Christians are disadvantaged because we very rarely just read through books of the Bible as most people read through say a novel or other historical accounts. I would encourage this style of reading both privately and publicly, but that is another matter. Here I will confine myself to looking at what Jesus taught in this famous discourse, why He taught it to His disciples and what is its relevance today to those who are now His followers.

Its Place in Matthew's Gospel

It is always helpful to remind ourselves of events surrounding any particular passage of Scripture. In this case, perhaps the first thing to recall is **when** in His ministry Jesus shared this knowledge with His disciples. From Ch. 21 onwards, Matthew records the events of the last few days of Christ's life as an ordinary human being. This account starts with preparations for Jesus' triumphal but humble entry into Jerusalem on what has become known as Palm Sunday. He is to die on a cross before the end of that week and He is determined to use the remaining time effectively. Having cleansed the temple of traders, he travels to Bethany for the night. The next morning, Monday on our calendar, he returns to the temple, but this time to teach. However on His way back into Jerusalem He spots a fruitless fig tree and in an apparent outburst of anger cursed it for its barrenness. The speed at which it withered surprised His disciples and also prompted a short lesson on what it means to have faith.

Once in the temple Jesus begins to teach the gathered crowd and as usual attracts a significant group of opponents who try to trick him with question after question. From Ch. 21:23 He dialogues with all who challenge Him, asking questions and telling parables in order to teach them and the onlookers about the Kingdom of God and God's purposes. It is worth reading those chapters as an introduction to Ch. 24, for His parables have a recurring theme – a father, a landowner and a king, men with authority who had to address problems which arose when those under their authority were disobedient and ignored what they had been ordered to do. All these parables carried the same message - Israel had ignored their God; two of them carry severe warnings of the consequences of their actions, backed up as ever with Old Testament scriptures. From that time on all His opponents began to plot to bring about His downfall and each group used their most devious question to try and trick Him, but failed to do so. Finally, Jesus asked them a question straight from the Scriptures and their inability to answer brings to an end their questioning, but not His condemnation of them. Ch. 23 is one of the most cutting criticisms of unbelief and hypocrisy to be found anywhere, not just in the Bible.

In Matt. 23:34-36 Jesus makes it clear that His earlier parables were all aimed at the stubbornness of the Jews, and the scribes and Pharisees in particular, in resisting His Father's will. He declared that this generation (better expressed "*race*", i.e. the Jews) would continue to persecute and kill the prophets and wise men He was going to send them. His condemnation of their unbelief concludes with a lament for the city of Jerusalem and those who live there. "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'*" (v37-39). What we may find difficult to appreciate today is what effect this lament, coupled with the parables Jesus had told earlier, had on His ordinary listeners that day. Did they forget its words in a few days like most Christians seem to forget sermons these days? Or were these words so different from what they heard in the synagogues week by week, that they caused some of them to think differently from then on?

The Disciples' Reaction.

The disciples of Jesus, as most people know, were chosen mostly from the manual workers of the day. Whilst they had spent a lot of time with Him over the previous three years, in many ways they retained the same outlook on life as most of their peers. It should not surprise us therefore when the questions they put to Jesus in the wake of His strong words are more practical than theological. No doubt they are the same questions as many of the bystanders had in their heads after hearing Jesus' last discourse in the temple. They had heard things they had not expected to hear and were perhaps looking for reassurance that things would not be as bad as they thought He had implied. There had been great excitement at the rebuilding of the temple by Herod – from the days of Solomon onwards the temple had always been a source of national confidence and pride, though Jeremiah had warned against such foolishness – Jer.7:1-

15 - a passage Jesus had quoted the day before when He drove the traders from the temple. Perhaps to soften the blow and to bolster up their own hopes, Ch. 24 starts with the disciples pointing out the beauty and majesty of the temple to Him. Perhaps they were concerned that they had misunderstood His warning that Jerusalem's house would be made desolate – was He saying that the time and effort put into restoring the temple had all been in vain? Why might this concern them?

We should remember that at this time Judea was an occupied territory. The Romans were foreign invaders who had set up their own government and the Jews were once again the tail and not the head (Deut. 28:13) in the land their God had given them. However, they also had the prophetic scriptures which foretold of a coming king and kingdom when, as they understood them, Israel would be restored to the glory and authority it possessed at the time of David and Solomon, its greatest kings. This was the hope of many in Israel at that time, that their God would re-establish them as a great nation. The rebuilding of the temple was seen by many as a sign that the day of the LORD's deliverance of them from the Romans was drawing near. Was Jesus saying that this hope was misplaced? Perhaps His quotation from Jeremiah as He emptied the temple should have prepared them. Yes, their hope in the temple was misplaced, for as they pointed to the temple He said, *"Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down."* (24:2).

He might have been gentler in breaking this news to them, but He knew His time with them was now very limited. However, His directness seems to have caused them to question other hopes they had in their hearts and minds, for as soon as the opportunity arose, they invited Him to put their thinking straight on three matters concerning the future. The topics of these three questions are vital to our understanding of the rest of this chapter and the next one. What they asked Him was:

- *When will these things be?*
- *What will be the sign of Your coming?*
- *(What will be the sign) of the end of the age?*

These are found in v3. but we should also set them in the wider context of the rest of the Bible, and the Old Testament in particular.

This study is not the place to detail every scripture from the Old Testament referring either to the coming of Messiah (an event most Jews expected to be fulfilled by an earthly ruler who would re-establish Israel as a super-power) or to the final events of history known as 'the Day of The LORD'. However, it is important for us to remember that in Jewish thinking these were both important future events, and that Old Testament prophets in particular had predicted many things both about the oppression and the eventual deliverance of Israel.

One example of where these two events sit side by side can be found in Haggai 2. Again the temple is involved, but this time it was half-built, having been neglected by those who had returned from exile in Babylon because they had been more concerned to make their own houses comfortable. Haggai was raised up by The LORD to reprimand them and is one of a very few prophets to have his warnings heeded. It is a very short book and worth reading as a whole, but here we will consider a few verses in the second chapter. Addressing Zerubbabel, the prophet asks who remembers Solomon's temple, pointing out how meagre the new temple is by comparison. He then tells Zerubbabel to be strong, for The LORD is with him, and to work hard to accomplish the set task of rebuilding the temple. In v.6 & 7 The LORD promises to shake all that can be shaken. This will seemingly cause all the nations of the earth to bring their treasures to the temple and to fill it with glory. Verse 9, makes this promise, *"The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former," says the LORD of hosts. 'And in this place I will give peace,' says the LORD of hosts."* Is it any wonder that the Jews looked forward to this time? However, when the writer of Hebrews quoted from these verses, he gives them a very different emphasis - *"Now this, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are*

made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire.” (Heb. 12:27-29)

The Jews had developed their religion with a materialistic world view, but in the New Testament such materialism is revealed for what it is, and the signs have always been there in the Old Testament for those with eyes to see them. Whilst we can perhaps see why the Jews understood promises such as this one in Haggai to mean that one day Israel would again be a magnificent nation, when we read this and other similar promises in the light of the commentary provided by the New Testament, we can be left in no doubt that their hopes for an Israel which would one day overcome the foreign armies of occupation were mistaken. Jesus had taught His disciples not to lay up treasure on earth, but in heaven and helping them to see that this applied as much to collective ambition as it does to personal wealth was very much part of what they were discovering on this Monday, two days before His death. He was reminding them that His kingdom was not of this world, but that it had everything to do with righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). That it was concerned neither with religious ritual nor political dominance was a lesson which would remain with most of them for the rest of their lives.

Then the End Will Come

Jesus answered His disciples' three questions in a different order to that in which they were asked. This has tended to confuse our thinking, especially when we dip into this passage for an understanding of future events whilst ignoring the context of the discourse in which the verse of our choice is found. We shall highlight some of the dangers of this approach as we go along. In the first place, understanding which question Jesus is answering provides the best guide to how what He said is to be understood. By carefully reading through the passage as a whole and keeping these three questions in mind, it becomes very easy to identify each of his answers. He answers their last question first: “(What will be the sign) of the end of the age?” This can be seen by His three references to the end between vs.4 and 14. We will break it down into the three sections separated by these three phrases.

The first three verses (4-6) end with the phrase, “*but the end is not yet*”. It should therefore be understood that what precedes this statement are things which have nothing to do with the end of the age (N.B. “age” not “world”), except that they will happen between Jesus speaking and the end of the age. These include false Christs seeking to deceive people, and reports and rumours of wars. Jesus instructed them (and us) not to be troubled by these things, for they are all fulfilling His Father's purposes. What then follows is a section(vs.7- 13) which amplifies the difficulties which will occur in the period between that time and the end of the age. The wars between nations will be accompanied by famines, pestilences, and earthquakes, but these are not the culmination of the terror of what is to come, only “the beginning of sorrows”. This is a phrase which was used to describe the very first labour pains a woman feels when the time to give birth gets close. This has led many who expect a quick labour to believe that these things are a marker of the start of the end, an end which has only recently begun. However, these mild labour pains have been going on ever since Jesus ascended into heaven. The Roman Empire disintegrated in civil war and there have been many more battles since. Natural disasters did not suddenly begin in the twentieth century, but have been known through the last 2000 years. All this serves to emphasise Christ's point that these were only the early stages of the suffering (sorrows) which were to come upon the world.

Turning his attention from the problems the world will have to endure, in v.9-13 He warns them that the Church will also pass through many tribulations. Christians will be **hated** in every country because of their loyalty to His authority (this warning has not expired). We will be betrayed and murdered – the fruit of that hatred. Inside the Church, false prophets will try to attract followers to themselves rather than to Christ. The lack of Godly authority outside the Church will cause many inside it to lose their love for Him. But with all these warnings comes a precious promise, “*But he who endures to the end shall be*

saved.” (v.13) In the first place this is a promise to Christians whom He knew would have to endure all types of suffering in this age. He encourages us to know that it's well worth not losing our faith and our confidence in Him no matter what happens to us. It echoes what He had already warned them, that He was sending out His followers as sheep amongst wolves (Mt 10:16-42). In the middle of this discourse He told them, *“Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.”* (vs.32-33) The importance of holding fast our confession of Jesus Christ through every trial is what He was reminding us all of when He promised salvation to those who endure. Of course such a promise of rescue is of no value if it is not set against the awfulness of failure to endure. Both here and in Ch.10 Jesus is addressing His disciples, and by implication His whole Church, and His promises always have a warning of failure with them. His promise to acknowledge us before His Father if we confess Him for who He is before men, is countered by His warning that those who deny their allegiance to Him in this life will be rejected by Him before His Father's throne. In the same way, the promise of salvation to those who endure must carry with it a warning of not being saved to those who don't endure. Jesus knew His Church would suffer persecution throughout the rest of history, and He encourages its members to stand firm and to endure all things for His name's sake.

Jesus ends His answer to their question about the sign (note: singular *sign*, not *signs*) of the end, with a very simple and clear statement. Even though the political and 'natural' worlds have been through upheaval after upheaval, and this has been matched by pressure on Christians to deny Him as Christ and Saviour both from outside and within the Church, their mission would not fail. After His death and resurrection and as part of His final instructions to them before He ascended back to His Father, Jesus was to command them to *“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.”* (Mk 16:15) Before they had even received that command, He was promising that they, and those who followed them in the faith, would be successful. At some point in the future He promised them, *“this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations,”* and once this had happened, *“then the end will come”* (v.14) This then is the simple answer to their question - 'When you and those who follow you in my Church complete the task of preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God in all the world then, and only then, will this age come to an end.' The signs of the end of the age are not wars, famines, earthquakes nor are they a persecuted Church or the rise of false Christ's outside the Church and false prophets within it – these are just what *must* happen along the way. There is just one thing necessary before the end of this age that we, God's people, complete the task He has charged us with and the gospel of His authority is made known to every creature. Perhaps this is what Peter had in mind when He challenged His readers about the lifestyle they should be living given their knowledge that one day this earth and the universe around it were going to be destroyed with fire! *“Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and **hastening** the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?”* (2 Pet. 3:11-12) Could it be that we hasten that day's arrival by getting on with our great commission to make His gospel known everywhere? Once our Father's house is full, it will be time for the wedding feast to begin (Luke 14:23).

A little clarification is needed here. In recent decades an underlying assumption has been adopted by many western Christians, though it is rarely explained. This builds on a particular interpretation of the phrase found in Matt. 28:18, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations....”*. Many now assume this to mean that every **nation** (or people group) around the world will have to be discipled or **Christianised** before Jesus returns. This is **not** what Jesus said in Matt. 24. What He actually said was that the Gospel of the kingdom would be **preached** as a witness to all the nations. This condition therefore has nothing to do with how that preaching is received, but the extent to which the authentic gospel is carried by faithful messengers. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find that the need to *“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many*

are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it." (Matt. 7:13-14) will one day be set aside so that all nations can accept His rule before He returns. The expectation that they will accept Him is a false hope and has led many to offer a different gospel to that which Jesus preached whilst He was on earth. Actually, the Scriptures warn that godlessness will *increase* as time passes.

Flee to the Mountains!

Jesus now turns his attention to another of their questions, but which one? The answer is not as neatly framed as the previous one which had clear statements at the end of three sections, but it is not too hard to discern what He answers next. In the next eight verses (15-22) He speaks of several things which are either geographically specific, confined by time or are things over which they have control. He speaks of the 'abomination of desolation' which Daniel had described as an event in the temple in Jerusalem (Dan. 8:13), and He warns those in Judea to hide in the mountains. These are both specific places and not general instructions to Christians everywhere. Together, they should leave us in no doubt that He is now answering their question concerning **when** His prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in particular would take place. In His answer He makes it clear that this is not an academic or theological issue, but a matter of life and death! When the temple is desecrated, any Christian who is in Judea at the time, needs to get out into the mountains **without any delay!** Those who are in the field should not go back home to get extra clothes. Even if they are on the roof of the house, they should not go back inside (the steps were external in Israel) to grab anything to take with them. The need to escape would be that urgent. He also warns those who are pregnant or have young children that escape for them will not be easy – something we see reflected in pictures of refugees fleeing war zones today. He urges them to pray that it will not be winter when this happens, for that is the worst time to be a refugee fleeing into the mountains for safety.

Perhaps some think that the warning of "great tribulation" in v21 means that in this section Jesus is waning about the time of suffering described as 'the great tribulation' in Revelation 7:14 "*These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*" The context however is clear that the events in this section are concerning the destruction of the temple and the city which followed just a few decades after His death. It is sobering to think that the suffering of those days was worse for those who experienced it than what will be experienced by men and women at the end of the age. The suffering was so bad that no one would have survived if The LORD had not limited its duration. His reason for cutting it short was for the sake of His elect -Christians who were caught up in His judgement on the faithlessness of Israel. The book of 2 Chronicles contains a very sad statement, "*And the LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, **until there was no remedy.** Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand.*" (36:15-17) If this happened when they had rejected His many messengers, what should they have expected when they rejected His Son? God was willing to spare Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of ten righteous men if they could be found, therefore we should not be surprised that for the benefit of those who believe on His Son, He limited the suffering of the people of Jerusalem. Yet Jesus still warned them that when they saw the desecration of the Holy of Holies they should not stay in Jerusalem, but get out as quickly as possible. The route they were to take would be their choice, but they were warned not even to pack. When Jesus returns, the route taken by His followers will be upwards and not of our choosing – and packing will not be necessary!

So Shall the Coming of the Son of Man Be!

For the rest of this chapter and the whole of the next one, Jesus speaks of what will happen prior to and at His return. (This is not the same as the end of the age, but is closely linked to it.) The Scriptures list many events which will be associated with the end of the world, some according to Revelation taking place before Jesus reigns on earth for a thousand years and some after that time. One key factor in that series of events will be the return of Christ to the earth. It may be that His disciples, having not yet understood why He was “going away” or where He was going, did not understand what His return would be like either.

Until this point, neither Matthew, Mark nor Luke have made any mention in their gospels that Jesus was either going away or coming back. It is John who tells us that He taught them and the Jews that He would not always be around. John’s narrative of the final week of Christ’s ministry on earth begins in Ch. 12, but in John 8 he records Jesus telling the Jews, *“He said therefore again to them, ‘I go away, and you shall seek Me, and shall die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come.’”* It is in John 14 where He tells His disciples that He was going to prepare a place for them and then come back to get them, but this is on the last night of His earthly ministry. We have no clues therefore what He had told them about His departure and His return prior to Matt. 24, but whatever He had said had made an impression on them. They knew He was going away and coming back, and the latter was important enough to be listed with questions about the destruction of the temple and the end of the age. It is probable they were still thinking that He would return to restore Israel as a great nation. This was definitely true after He was raised from death, for in Acts 1:6, Luke records that they asked Him, *“Lord, will You **at this time** restore the kingdom to Israel?”* Jesus’ reply on that occasion was in essence the same as in Matthew 24 & 25 – that is a long term project; I want **you** to concentrate on the here and now. Before we look at the parables through which Jesus made this point, we should first look at the warnings He gave for our protection against false claims.

Knowing how the human heart operates, Jesus knew that between then and His return there would be many who would set themselves up as alternative Messiahs and prophets either through self or demonic delusion. He wanted His followers to be equipped to know how to distinguish these impostors from His genuine return, and the test is astonishingly simple. In warning them that they will be tested in this way, He explains that if anyone in the future claims to be Him and there is a need to travel to meet that person, then they are an impostor. His return, He says, will be visible to all – like lightning that reaches across the whole of the sky. (Some have speculated that every eye will be able to see His return because of TV – and now the Internet no doubt – but that makes no sense in the context of this Scripture.) Jesus’ return will be a universal public event at which everyone will get a grandstand view. No one has to take vultures to a carcass, they just turn up. When Jesus returns His disciples will meet Him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17) and we will not need planes to get us there! His message simply is, ‘Don’t go looking, just keep watching.’

Verses 29 to 31 simply amplify the previous two – they emphasise how spectacular His return will be and how we will get to meet Him! We should not be distracted by his use of ‘tribulation’ into linking these verses to those which speak of the destruction of Jerusalem. The Greek used here is a word which means affliction, anguish, distress, persecution, and trouble as well as tribulation. From what He says will happen we can see that the trouble which Jesus says will proceed His return is that of the great tribulation. It will be great because it will be going on everywhere, not just in one city or nation. He says everyone will already be watching the sky, for the sun and moon will no longer provide light and in the darkness the stars will be seen falling out of the sky! Having got the world’s attention in this way, Jesus says He will return on the clouds **with power and great glory**. Too late the nations of the earth will mourn their rebellion against Him (Psalm 2) for like Israel (Zechariah 12:10) they too will recognise the One they rejected for whom He really is **-King of Kings and Lord of Lords!** As He returns Jesus

promised He would send out His angelic servants to every part of the earth to gather His elect from wherever they are – which is why we will not have to go looking for Him. They will not overlook any true believer. They will even empty the graves of those who died believing in Him and, according to Paul, these will be the first to be gathered up to Him (1 Thess. 4:16). This is encouraging news – we will not need to go looking for Him, He will come looking for us!

The Fig Tree will Sprout Again

Jesus then pointed out that creation itself contains parables from which we should learn, and He singled out the fig tree. The lesson was a simple one; when it starts to produce new growth it is a sign that summer is near. When these things begin to happen, they/we are to know that His return is getting close. But what things? Not everything He listed above, for the destruction of Jerusalem came and went and He has not come back. Certainly he is referring to the tribulation of those days which precedes His return and in particular to the collapse of the sky and the lights He had put in it. These will be terrifying events and His followers will need confidence that He is still in charge and has not forgotten them. His next comment (v34) however has been the source of much debate; *“Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.”* Did He mean those alive at that time, His audience on that day? This cannot be so because they have all died. Could He be promising a time of trouble which would be limited to no more than an average lifespan? If so how can we know when that generation began? Has not the church been persecuted and martyrs killed from a few months after He said this right through to the present day? In Rome as well as by Islam, communism and a multitude of other philosophies – and everywhere from massive arenas to isolated jungles? How could this promise be understood in China, where several generation have been persecuted for their faith? Which generation will not pass away?

The suggestion which I find most helpful is that we have the clues to how we should understand this in the context of the statement itself. We have already noted how earlier that day He had seen a fruitless fig tree and had cursed it, causing it to wither immediately. Now He was using a fig tree as a parable, but this was not the first time He had done so. In Luke 13 we find His parable about a fruitless fig tree which was given an extra year to produce fruit. If it did not, it would be cut down. This was a warning to the Jews of their need to repent of their unbelief and a warning of what will happen to them if they did not. It is very probable that when He cursed the fig tree, it was a demonstration that its owner would no longer tolerate Israel's failure to produce fruit. Between that act and this passage we have His seven woes to the religious leaders of Israel. Like the fig tree, Israel was to be cursed and would wither. Now Jesus is telling His audience that His Father's wrath is restrained by mercy. Israel is not finished, the destruction of the temple would not mark their final end. The fig tree one day will find life in its branches again and will put forth leaves. The Greek word translated 'generation' can equally mean 'nation' or 'race'. Could it be that by mentioning the fig tree in the way He did, Jesus was saying to His disciples, “Israel will be judged, but before I return it will find new life”? Israel was not discarded from His Father's plans, but it was to be set aside for a while. Israel would not disappear from the earth – which it could easily have done – but in time it will blossom again and He will preserve it through all which lies ahead. He confirms this promise and everything else He has said with these words, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away.” Christians and Jews alike can rely on His faithfulness in spite of our faithlessness.

Caught by a Cataclysm

The next section of His response to their questions is possibly one of the most misunderstood in the New Testament. This is because parts of it have become the catch-phrase of a theology which cannot be found in the New Testament, yet we find it hard to read or hear those verses without the twist which this teaching puts on them. But first we need to see this: having told them to be watchful for the signs of His return, He makes clear that they should not expect to be given precise details of its timing. Instead He

says they should learn the lesson of events from the time of Noah. The mention of Noah's name will always bring to mind the time when The LORD destroyed the world which then existed with water. Whilst we often refer to this as the Flood, that word underplays the horror of this outpouring of divine anger and justice. The New Testament, like the Septuagint (a Greek version of the Old Testament translated in the centuries before Christ was born) always uses the Greek word from which we get the English 'cataclysm' and not 'flood'. The Old Testament also has a special word which refers only to this one event, and not to other floods it records. This tells us that this event was far more terrifying than the flood we imagine and those we see on the TV news from time to time. I cannot expand this here, but the Cataclysm Noah survived was not caused simply by rain, but through underground springs bursting open and washing all before them, whilst the earth was bombarded from outside the atmosphere with what were most probably some form of comet or similar frozen water. The latter are almost certainly what have scarred the moon and its craters are a reminder of the awfulness of God's judgement in the past.

Jesus warned that His return will be just like the days which preceded the Cataclysm. Men and women will be living almost normal lives and completely ignoring their Creator. We often overlook the warnings they had been given. Not just through Noah's preaching, but a thousand years earlier Enoch had been raised up as a prophet to call them to repentance (Jude 14). Like many later prophets he had named his son in line with his message – Methuselah means, "When he dies it will come". Whilst Enoch was relatively young, God did not allow him to die, but took him directly to heaven, like Elijah later. Five hundred years after that Enoch's great-grandson had begun an absurd but prophetic task – at The LORD's command he began to build a massive boat and preach that people should repent because their Creator was angry at their evil ways. That ship was now finished and Noah's grandfather, Methuselah, had recently died but the people, confident in their own arrogance, paid no attention. They just got on with everyday life – weddings were all the rage as was any other excuse for a feast. They even saw many animals come and get into this wonderful folly built by Noah, but they did not realise what it meant. Noah and three of his sons and their wives went aboard and the door shut behind them, but their festivities carried on and no one thought any more about it. Today, we have had two thousand years of clear warnings, twice as long as they had, but as Peter prophesied (2 Peter 3) most people do not take His promised return seriously. Life is carrying on as always, and living for our own pleasure takes up more and more of our time, particularly in the Western world. This is the world to which Jesus was pointing when he said that the time preceding His return would be like the world in which Noah lived.

To understand the implications of this, we must now read Matt. 24:39 carefully, "*and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.*" Who was taken away by the Cataclysm? The believers or the unbelievers? Those who **did not understand** because they **did not believe** were both taken by surprise and taken away by the raging waters. It will be the same when He returns, warned Jesus Christ. The **unbelievers** will be both surprised by events and taken away by them. When Jesus spoke of people being taken by surprise, it was those who were not watching, those who were not believing. Paul later wrote that believers need not be taken by surprise in that way. "*For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness;*" (1 Thessalonians 5:2-5). Noah was ready for God's judgement when it came, but those who were wilfully ignorant of The LORD's warning were taken away by that same judgement. This is the picture (type) Jesus gave when warning His followers what would happen at His return.

Whilst v41 & 42 are often quoted, they are usually used to argue that it is the believing man/woman who will be taken whilst the unbelievers will be left behind. Is it not strange that we have completely turned around what Jesus was saying? His warning was that when He comes back the unbelievers would be taken away and believers kept safe, but many Christians today think it is believers who will be taken

away. The ones who are watching and waiting will be safe because they will be prepared through their obedience to The LORD, just as Noah was. This is the point of what Jesus was saying, but because many take these statements out of their context, we miss the point of what He was teaching His followers. They have become cornerstones of a teaching which says we cannot be prepared, that Christians will be taken by surprise and that to be taken away is a blessing not judgement! Noah and his family were not told the day or even the year the Cataclysm would be sent, but they were told to prepare for it. They began in plenty of time, not just when their prophetically named forefather Methuselah died – imagine how ill prepared they would have been if they had waited until after his funeral to start building the ark!

Remember too this was not a slowly rising flood caused by heavy rain, but a powerful cataclysm of water which carried almost everything before it. Luke is more specific than Matthew. In 17:27 he records Jesus as saying, *“they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, **until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.**”* The Cataclysm destroyed the unbelievers on **the day** it started - they had no opportunity to board makeshift rafts or an armada of small boats. They were not left sitting out a storm until they starved to death. Unlike Noah they were not prepared and the Flood came and took them away, leaving them no opportunity to repent of or regret their folly. This is what Jesus says it will be like for unbelievers who do not believe He is coming back. They will be unprepared and taken away by the awfulness of that day. It will be too quick for them to repent when they see Him. Yes, believers will escape the wrath of God which will be revealed that day, but it is they who will remain afterwards – they will be left in the field and at the grindstone and the ungodly will be taken away. We do not know when that day will be, but if we walk by the Holy Spirit we will not be surprised when it comes, we will be ready and waiting.

Ready and Alert

In answering their question about when His coming would be, Jesus did not seek to provide His followers with a timetable of events, but to impress upon them how they were to prepare for His appearance so that they would not be taken unawares by it and swept away in judgement. Having drawn the parallel between the Cataclysm and that day, He urges them to be ready and alert. *“Be on the alert”* He said, *“for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.”* He then tells them the obvious - if a householder knew when thieves were going to break into their home, they would have been watching for them. As His disciples we know without a doubt that our Master is coming back, but we don't know when. Because it could be any time, we need to be alert and watching. To do that we need to be doing what He has commanded us, and not pleasing ourselves.

Before He finished speaking Jesus used two parables of the kingdom to illustrate His point and these are in Ch. 25. They are very well known, but they are rarely studied in the context of what Jesus had said in reply to the previous three important questions. In introducing these parables Jesus asked them which one of two types of servant was wise. Both were to be left with responsibilities towards their master's other servants whilst he went away. Both knew they would be required to give an account of their actions when the master returned. One had the attitude that his master would be away for a long time so he could take it easy for a while. Rather than caring for his colleagues he oppressed them. He was not careful with his master's other possessions and invested them and his time on bad company. The other was diligent and obedient, properly looking after everyone he had been made responsible for. Both were surprised when their master returned. Both received justice for their attitudes expressed through their actions. One was rewarded with greater responsibility. The other, Jesus said, would be cut in pieces and numbered among the hypocrites adding, *“weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth”* which is clearly a reference to Hell (see: Matt. 8:12, 13:42 & 50, 22:13, and 25:30). It is not simply to preserve our souls that we must be diligent in Christ's absence, but because we have responsibilities towards Him and the people around us. If we fail to take our responsibilities seriously, then His appearing will be not the blessing we expect, but the horror described by Amos. *“Alas, you who are longing for the day of the LORD, For what*

purpose will the day of the LORD be to you? It will be darkness and not light; As when a man flees from a lion, And a bear meets him, Or goes home, leans his hand against the wall, And a snake bites him. Will not the day of the LORD be darkness instead of light, Even gloom with no brightness in it?" (5:18-20)

The two parables which Jesus then told are the wise and foolish virgins and what we commonly call the parable of the talents, though it is actually about two wise servants and one foolish one. They have much in common. In both the most important person has gone away and in both the people on whom our attention is focussed know he is coming back. In the first there is an expectancy of the season when the bridegroom will return, but no one is certain as to exactly when it will be. Ten virgins were to welcome him with burning lamps, but only half of them have prepared for a long wait. The others expected everything to happen quickly, but it did not. Their wait went on into the night and people began to fall asleep. When they were awoken with the announcement of his arrival, the ill-prepared saw that they were low on oil for their lamps and tried to get some from the others. These were the wise ones who had not only been prepared for the wait, but knew that their own resources were limited and could not be shared with others at this important time. Not only did the foolish women miss the bridegroom's arrival, they also found themselves locked out of the wedding feast. Even though their appeal was heard inside, the bridegroom pointed out the terrifying truth – their lack of preparation revealed that he had never known them. Jesus ends this parable with the warning to His disciples, "*Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.*"

In the second parable the three servants received different amounts of their master's money to put to work in his absence. Two traded with what they had been given and doubled their money. The third out of fear put what he had been given in a safe place and did nothing with it. When their master returned, **after a long time**, they were commanded to return all they had and explain what they had done with what he had given them. The two who had increased the money both received the same praise and reward. The third, the one to whom least had been given, greeted his master with an accurate description of his character, but then added because of fear of him he had done nothing with what he had been given. His knowledge of his master's attitude only seemed to bring greater wrath upon him – he knew the right thing to do and did not do it and for that he was condemned. His little was taken away and given to a faithful servant and he was cast "*into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*"

In His answer to their question about the sign of His coming, Jesus sought to prepare them not to watch world events, but to prepare for a long wait. A wait which they knew would come to an end, but they could not be sure exactly when that would be. However, it was an end they could be prepared for, even though many would be caught unaware. In order to be ready they needed to keep alert by doing what they had been commanded to do. This would include caring for their fellow servants, going on being filled with the Holy Spirit (the oil in the lamps) and making the most of what their Master had entrusted them with. It is the same today as it was then. We must keep alert and ready, knowing that one day He will return even if we cannot be exactly sure when that will be.

Actions not words

To round His message off, Jesus told them what lay ahead on the day He returned. We need to remember that this is not necessarily within a 24 hour day of His return, but it will be one of the components of His return. If we are looking forward to His return, we need to remember that what He next describes will be as much a part of it as the moment when He slays the Antichrist with "*the breath of His mouth*" (2 Thessalonians 2:8). His burden is that He wants His followers to be prepared for this day and not be taken by surprise by it. He describes how, at His coming, He will divide the sheep from the goats, believers from unbelievers, the blessed from the cursed. These are gathered from everywhere on the earth and some want to argue that this refers to those who have never been Christians.. However the context, at the end of His extensive answer to their questions, seems to rule this out. We also have a similar warning in

the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7) where He warned that calling Him “Lord, Lord” would not secure the salvation of anyone. He also said it was the one who “*who does the will of My Father who is in heaven*” who would enter the kingdom of heaven. That point is reinforced at the end of Matthew 25. Those who are numbered as His sheep are those who served others in His name and so served Him. Those who ignored “*one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them,*” are gathered together as goats, who are consigned to “*the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels*”. What a contrast between being sent for eternity prepared for Satan (v41) and inheriting the kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world (v34).

What a way for Jesus to conclude His public teaching ministry during His incarnation. All that remained now was for Him to prepare His disciples for His betrayal, death, resurrection and departure to His Father’s side. That He would do when He ate the Passover with them. What can we therefore learn from this final discourse?

First and foremost, times of trouble lay ahead for the world and the Church. These were not signs of the end, but birth pains which would lead eventually to the end of the age. The suffering His followers would go through was mostly universal, but one episode in the near future focussed on Jerusalem and its temple, would be particularly horrific. They had to make every effort to escape from this, even though His Father would limit its duration for their sake. Being inside the Church was no protection against the coming problems. False Christs and false prophets would arise and they needed to be watchful. When He does return there will be no need for us to travel to Him because His angels will gather us from wherever we are. However, in the meantime we cannot do whatever we want – we are to be watchful and obedient even though His return seems to be taking a long time. His Father knows when the gospel of the Kingdom has been preached to every nation, and when it has He will send His Son back to earth in glory and in power. That day will be terrible for those who are not ready for it, but we can be as prepared as Noah was for the Cataclysm which destroyed the corrupt world of his day. That was a terrible day in which those who had ignored their Creator were taken away in instant judgement. These were indeed times when those who believed in Him would need to endure to the end to be saved.

Perhaps though there is a particular sting in the tail of this message for today’s Church. Not everyone who calls Him Lord will be saved. We need to be like the servant who cared for His fellow servants. We need to be like the wise virgins who prepared for a long wait and had sufficient oil with them to meet any delay. We need to be diligent servants who trade wisely with the gifts and ministries He has given us. And above all, it will not be our words but our actions which show Him if we have believed in Him.

Ambassadors of the Absent King

The day of The LORD, the day of His return will not be welcomed by many. It is not for us to know when that day will be – there is no train company timetable – but it is for us to be ready on time. At the moment our Master is not physically standing behind us watching what we doing, and we can be lulled into a false sense of security, or more correctly lethargy. We are strangers and pilgrims on the earth, who should be looking forward to the time when our Saviour returns and we can be with Him. However, the things of this world are attractive to us. These are not just its wealth and possessions, but also its power and prestige. We very easily value them more than we value the things which have yet to be revealed, because our fallen human natures find it far easier to live for today than for eternity. The problem runs through every aspect of life – school teachers as well as employers know the truth of the proverb, “When the cat’s away the mice will play.” Sadly Christians can easily live like that with respect to the return of Christ. We have turned salvation into something which is solely for eternity and, knowing we can never be fully perfect on this earth, hope that on His return Jesus Christ will magically change us into His likeness and forget all our failings since we first believed on Him. (Like salvation, forgiveness has also been focussed solely on where we will spend eternity.) The message of Matt. 25 in particular is that

whilst He is away Jesus wants us to be like Him, so that we will be ready for His return.

To be like Him we must value those He has created and with whom He wants to spend eternity. These are the ones He wants to feed now, to refresh with drink, to clothe, to visit when they are sick or in prison. He is at His Father's side and must wait there until the time is right for His return. In His absence we are His representatives on earth and just like He handed the freshly created earth over to Adam to care for, so He has left us with the responsibility of continuing what He was doing before He went away. Are we getting on with that task or are we living for ourselves?

When Jesus went to the synagogue in His home town of Nazareth (Luke 4), He read from Isaiah 11 which said that the Spirit of The LORD was upon Him *"to preach the gospel to the poor,.. to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favourable year of The LORD."* Jesus fulfilled that prophecy in two ways – spiritually and physically. He both preached the good news of His Father's desire to forgive, setting captives free from their sins, and He fed the hungry and healed the sick. He gave sight both to the physically and to the spiritually blind. I suspect there has always been a dichotomy in the Church between those who want to concentrate on people's spiritual needs and those who believe their practical needs to be paramount. To be like Jesus, to be His ambassadors whilst He is away, we need to care for people as He would. He fed them, He healed them, He told them to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and to that end He told them to repent. We can do some or all of these things and still be living for ourselves – if we are, in time it will be revealed.

The servant who will receive His master's approval when Jesus Christ returns is the one who has been living for Jesus Christ whilst He has been away. This is the vital understanding which Jesus sought to impress on His followers in response to their questions about the end of the age and His return. Our prime task is not to decipher the closeness of His return from the details of world history, but to know and to warn ourselves and others that a righteous king is coming back to act with justice towards all who have lived on the earth.

© Randall Hardy – February 2008

A copy of this article can be found on the Internet at:

www.amen.org.uk/studies/rh/matt_24.htm