


## PART ELEVEN

# Preparation for the Death of Christ

### THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

**§ 139a**  
**Setting the Stage**  
(Mt 24:1-3;  
Mk 13:1-4;  
Lk 21:5-7)

In this section Jesus will describe two events: The destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) and the Second Coming. Somewhere in the middle of this chapter we need to draw a line between these two events. But that is easier said than done, and there has been great diversity in where various scholars draw their lines. There are several reasons this simple task has been so hard.



First, some of this stuff we're about to read could easily describe *both* the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Coming. That's not so uncommon with prophecy (e.g., Isa 7:14; Jer 31:15; Micah 5:2). The initial "fulfillment" may merely picture and/or point to a greater future fulfillment. Thus, it has a "now-but-not-yet" feel to it. In the same way, here in Matthew 24, words which are presently applied to the destruction of Jerusalem, may ultimately describe the Second Coming (vv. 23-31). For example, some of the trouble Jerusalem experienced in A.D. 70 may be expanded to a global scale at the "end of the age." In fact, Luke takes a picture that Matthew relates to the destruction of Jerusalem (Mt 24:17-20), and, in a different context, relates it to the Second Coming (Lk 17:31).<sup>1</sup>

Second, prophecy is often fulfilled figuratively. Somehow we feel sheepish about interpreting these things figuratively. It just feels less "faithful." But if we interpret something literally that was *intended* to be figurative we will miss the real meaning of the passage (cf. Jn 2:19-21; 3:3-4; 6:51-52; 11:11-12; etc.). Furthermore, we assume that this passage moves along chronologically, but that may not be the case. Some have suggested that Jesus moves back and forth, intertwining talk about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Coming.

Third, this is apocalyptic material. It might be called hyper-prophecy (like Daniel and Revelation). It is filled with prophetic imagery and vocabulary, much of which is nonliteral. Although this sounds very odd to us in the 20th

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<sup>1</sup>It is this author's opinion that Mt 24:4-22 deal primarily with A.D. 70. Mt 24:23-31 has dual reference to both A.D. 70 and the Second Coming. And the material after Mt 24:36 deals exclusively with the return of Christ.

century, apocalyptic literature was not all that uncommon in the first century.<sup>2</sup> Even so, it clearly is a difficult genre to interpret. Part of the problem is that it was not written for the purpose of explanation as much as for exhortation. That is, apocalyptic literature is not designed to describe eschatological chronology<sup>3</sup> but to encourage suffering saints to remain faithful until the end.

Fourth, the millennial system with which we approach this passage will affect where we “draw our line.” Some can rightly claim that they have adopted no millennial view (a-, pre-, or post-). But nearly everyone has some presuppositions about eschatology and prophetic literature whether aware of them or not. These will color our thinking and partially determine where we draw the line between A.D. 70 and the return of our Lord.

<sup>1</sup>Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. {“Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!<sup>[MK]</sup> {adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God.<sup>[LK]</sup>”<sup>24</sup>Do you see all these things?” he asked. “I tell you the truth, {the time will come when<sup>[LK]</sup> not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

Mt 24:1-3 with  
Mk 13:1-3;  
Lk 21:5-6

<sup>3</sup>As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives {opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew,<sup>[MK]</sup> the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

It has been a wonderful day in the temple for the disciples. Their master has answered every question thrown at him and has stumped the Jewish leaders with questions of his own. Then Jesus denounced the Pharisees more harshly than ever before (Mt 23). Now it was time to return to Bethany for the evening.

The disciples are beside themselves. It has been a day of decisive victory for Jesus and consequently, for them. As they strut out of the temple, they are soaking in the moment as deeply as one would sniff fresh spring blossoms. It is indeed a great day. They note, in particular, the grandeur of the temple. They have no thought of its destruction, only its occupancy. Very likely they think that Jesus is on the verge of taking over the very temple buildings for the establishment of his kingdom. Perhaps they are making “dibs” on their own personal office space. After all, they are the chief executives of this new kingdom.

The temple was a spectacular sight (Josephus, *Ant* 15. 391-402; *Wars* 5. 184-227; Tacitus, *Histories*, 5.8.12). Herod the Great began renovating it in 19 B.C. It would not be completed until about A.D. 60. But even now it was mostly finished and elaborately decorated.

Jesus lays a bombshell on them: “Do you see these buildings? They will be obliterated!” Then, without any further word of explanation, Jesus walks out of

<sup>2</sup>B.S. Easton, “The Little Apocalypse,” *BW* 40 (1912): 130-138, goes so far as to say that nothing in this passage is new; each image can all be paralleled in extant apocalyptic literature.

<sup>3</sup>We find in Matthew 24 a series of *thens*. This is a rather loose chronological marker in apocalyptic literature. It may mean, “right after this,” or “the next in a series of events,” or merely “therefore” (a logical rather than a chronological marker).

the eastern gate, across the Kidron Valley and up the Mt. of Olives<sup>4</sup> about three fifths of a mile away, overlooking the temple mount. There he sits down. A bewildered group of disciples catch up with him. Mark says that it is Peter, Andrew, James and John who ask the questions, but surely the other disciples followed along and are also privy to Jesus' answer.

The disciples ask three questions: (1) When will the temple be destroyed? (2) What will be the sign of your coming? And (3) what will be the sign of the end of the age? In their minds all three of these things will happen simultaneously. They cannot imagine the destruction of the temple before the "end of the age." From our vantage point we can see at least two distinct events: (1) The destruction of Jerusalem; and (2) the Second Coming. Jesus will describe both events in the following chapter. Unfortunately, he will make as little distinction between the two events in his answer as the disciples did in their questions. This has caused a great deal of difficulty in explaining this passage.

**§ 139b**  
**Birth Pains**  
 (Mt 24:4-14;  
 Mk 13:5-13;  
 Lk 21:8-19)

These verses are often applied to the Second Coming of Jesus. But if they can be applied to A.D. 70, they probably ought to be. After all, you would expect Jesus to answer his disciples' first question first — about the temple. More importantly, verse 16 urges the disciples to flee to the Judean hills. That can hardly apply to Jesus' return. It will do no good to run when Jesus comes back, and his disciples certainly wouldn't want to.

Mt 24:4-8 with  
 Lk 21:8-11

<sup>4</sup>Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. <sup>5</sup>For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,'<sup>a</sup> {and, 'The time is near.'<sup>LK</sup>} and will deceive many. {Do not follow them.<sup>LK</sup>} <sup>6</sup>You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen {first,<sup>LK</sup>} but the end is still to come. <sup>7</sup>Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes {and pestilences and fearful events and great signs from heaven<sup>LK</sup>} in various places. <sup>8</sup>All these are the beginning of birth pains."

<sup>a</sup>5Or *Messiah*, also in verse 23

There were a number of signals that pointed to the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus called them "birth pains." That is an appropriate description since they were painful to endure, they signaled that something big was coming, and they made you think it was right around the corner when, in fact, it was yet a ways off. Jesus points out three birth pains in particular: False christs, wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters and diseases. All three can be located between A.D. 30-70.

**False christs:** Josephus testifies that this period was rife with false messiahs (*Wars* 2. 259-264). Even the book of Acts lists a few of them: Theudas and

<sup>4</sup>Hence this discourse is called "The Olivet Discourse." This mountain held special eschatological overtones for the disciples (cf. Zech 14:4).

Judas (5:36-37), an Egyptian (21:38), and perhaps even Bar Jesus (13:6-8), and Simon Magus (8:9ff). There is no question that many such self-proclaimed messiahs took advantage of sociopolitical unrest and deceived many.

***Wars and rumors of wars:*** The Jews were threatened during this period by three different emperors: Caligula, Claudius, and Nero (Meserve, p. 23). But far more dangerous to the Jewish nation were the internal factions which waged civil war among the Jewish people.

***Famines and earthquakes:*** There were a number of documented earthquakes and famines during this period including the one predicted by Agabus in Acts 11:28 during the reign of Claudius (A.D. 44). Others include A.D. 46 or 47; 51; 60; 62 or 63 (Meserve, p. 25).

Luke's phrase "fearful events and great signs from heaven" probably represents prophetic vocabulary summarizing the three previous "birth pains." Even so, none of these indicates that the end is imminent. They only signal the coming of yet greater suffering.

{“You must be on your guard.”<sup>Mk</sup>} <sup>12</sup>But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you {and put [you] to death.<sup>Mt</sup>} They will deliver you to {the local councils and flogged in the<sup>Mk</sup>} synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. <sup>13</sup>This will result in your being witnesses to them. <sup>14</sup>But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. <sup>15</sup>For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. {For it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.<sup>Mk</sup>} <sup>16</sup>You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. <sup>17</sup>All men {all nations<sup>Mt</sup>} will hate you because of me. <sup>18</sup>But not a hair of your head will perish.”

Lk 21:12-18 with  
Mark 13:9-11;  
Mt 24:9

[vv. 12-18 = Mt 10:17-22, see comments on § 70b]

It is appropriate that both Mark and Luke incorporate this passage into the Olivet Discourse. When Jesus first spoke these words he was sending out the 12 for their first “solo flight.” But none of these things took place during the Apostles’ first tour. Thus, we know that Jesus was prophesying about future events, many of which can be catalogued in the book of Acts. Therefore, these words are just as applicable here, if not more so, than in Matthew 10.

<sup>10a</sup>“At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, <sup>11</sup>and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. <sup>12</sup>Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, <sup>13</sup>but he who stands firm to the end will be saved {gain life.<sup>Lk</sup>} <sup>14</sup>And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

Mt 24:10-14 with  
Lk 21:19

Here are three more signs that come before the destruction of Jerusalem: Persecution, heresies, and preaching the gospel to the “whole world.” These, too, merely presage the impending doom.

**Persecution:** The book of Acts catalogues sufficiently both civil, organized persecutions (7:54-60; 8:1-9:2; 23) and local, sporadic persecution (13:50-51; 14:18-19; 16:19-23; 17:5-10; 19:23-41). Tacitus speaks for much of the Roman world when he describes Christians as a “class hated for their abominations” (*Annals*, 15.44). In A.D. 64-68, Nero enacted the first official Roman persecution against the church.<sup>5</sup>

**Heresies:** The church constantly had to fight heresies, from the Judaizers of Acts 15 to the Gnostics of 1 John. Galatians, Colossians, 2 Corinthians, 2 Timothy, 2 Peter, 1 John and Jude were all written in part to counter the false doctrines prevalent in the early church. And it gets no better after the destruction of Jerusalem when John writes in Revelation against false apostles (2:2), the synagogue of Satan (2:9, 13; 3:9), Nicolaitans (2:6, 15), teachings of Balaam (2:14) and Jezebel (2:20).

**Preaching the gospel to the “whole world”:** This verse is often used to “prove” that this section must refer to Jesus’ Second Coming and cannot refer to the destruction of Jerusalem (e.g., Barclay, p. 336; Walvoord, p. 183). Armerding, in fact, says that Jesus’ return cannot be imminent because the gospel has not been fully preached.<sup>6</sup> Using the same logic, Hendriksen argues the opposite. He says, “A brief survey of the progress of missions from the earliest period until the present day will convince anyone that we are approaching the end.”<sup>7</sup>

However, the phrase “whole world” [*oikoumenē*] signified “the inhabited known world” (cf. Mt 4:23; 9:35; Lk 2:1; Josephus, *Ant* 15.387; 19.193). This is quite different than what we think of — we would include South America, Hawaii, Russia, Japan, etc. The word *oikoumenē* did not indicate all this. It was essentially equivalent with the Roman Empire. In other words, Jesus did not mean that every last person would hear the gospel, but that the gospel would reach to all *known* nations. The bottom line is this: Paul claimed that the gospel *had* reached the *oikoumenē* (Rom 1:8; 10:18; 16:26; Col 1:6, 23; 1 Thess 1:8). It is therefore fair to say that this prophecy was fulfilled prior to A.D. 70.

At the same time, the destruction of A.D. 70 appears to be a microcosm of the impending doom of the whole earth. Thus, the patterns and principles Jesus lays out in this speech may, in fact, apply equally to both events. Thus, the complete preaching to the Roman Empire as a precursor of A.D. 70 may well picture the completion of the great commission as a precursor to the parousia. Acts 3:19-20 may also point in this direction insofar as repentance is somehow involved in Christ’s return. Is it really such a novel thought that Jesus would return after we have completed what he asked us to do?

One final note before moving on to the next section. Jesus said, “He who stands firm to the end will be saved,” or as Luke puts it, “will gain life.” This is

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed list of first century persecution and animosity toward Christians, see W. Barclay, “Great Themes of the NT: VI Matthew 24,” *ExpT* 70 (1959): 327-328.

<sup>6</sup> C.E. Armerding, *Dreams, Visions, & Oracles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), p. 169.

<sup>7</sup> W. Hendriksen, *Lectures on the Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1951), p. 19.

not talking about steadfastness as a requirement for salvation, although that sentiment is expressed elsewhere (Mt 10:22; Heb 10:36-39; Rev 2:10-11; etc.). It refers to the destruction of Jerusalem. Those who continued in their belief in Jesus fled the city and were spared its horrible destruction. As Luke says, they “gained life.” On the other hand, those who forsook Jesus were under the same doom as the rest of Jerusalem.

[MT 24:]<sup>15a</sup>“So when you see standing in the holy place {where it does not belong<sup>Mk</sup>} ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’<sup>a</sup> spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—{When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies,<sup>Lk</sup>} <sup>16</sup>then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. <sup>17</sup>Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. <sup>18</sup>Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. {Let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. <sup>22</sup>For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written.<sup>Lk</sup>}”

**§ 139c**  
**Abomination**  
**of Desolation**  
(Mt 24:15-28;  
Mk 13:14-23;  
Lk 21:20-24)

<sup>a</sup> <sup>15</sup> Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11

The “Abomination that Causes Desolation” is some action or entity which causes both sacrilege and destruction. Daniel predicted that this terrible thing would be in the holy place (i.e., the temple). The Jews of the intertestamental period applied this appropriately to Antiochus Epiphanes who entered the temple with his Syrian armies in 167 B.C. He murdered a number of worshipers, allowed his troops to fornicate in the temple, slaughtered a pig on the altar of God and then ransacked the edifice (1 Macc. 1:54-61; 6:7). That is a good example of the “abomination that causes desolation.” The “Abomination that Causes Desolation” was also applied to 63 B.C., when the Roman general Pompey ransacked the city and actually entered the Holy of Holies. Yet Jesus looks for a still future fulfillment. Certainly the destruction of A.D. 70 fits that description. This is especially true considering that Luke describes this event as “Jerusalem being surrounded by armies” (21:20). Josephus (*Wars*) describes the horrors of that desolating sacrilege:

- 5.31            People’s cries were louder than the fighting.
- 5.429-438    Jewish soldiers tormented citizens for food. Children stole food from elderly parents and mothers stole food from their infants.
- 5.446-451    Thousands of crucifixions.
- 6.1-2        Horrid descriptions of the famine and piles of dead bodies.
- 6.201-213   Cannibalism within the city — a mother consumed her own baby.
- 6.271-280   Burning of Jerusalem.
- 6.285-288   False prophets said that God would save them.
- 6.406        Fire quenched by blood.
- 6.420        1,100,000 died and 97,000 taken captives and sold into slavery.
- 7.1-3        Every stone torn down except for a few notable towers.

These predictions surely must refer to A.D. 70. If they refer to the Second Coming, why were the people commanded to flee to the Judean hills? Are they really going to escape Jesus' coming? And why would Christians want to run from Jesus? Verses 16-18 have no relevance to the Second Coming in this context. But they have great relevance to the destruction of Jerusalem. During the siege that culminated in A.D. 70, Cestius Gallus made a mysterious retreat from the city in A.D. 68 (Josephus, *Wars* 2.538-539).

But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafed to approved men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella. And when those that believed in Christ had come thither from Jerusalem, then, as if the royal city of the Jews and the whole land of Judea were entirely destitute of holy men . . . (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.5.3)

Jesus was talking about a literal flight out of the city once the Roman armies had surrounded it. It would be easier to escape if the women were not pregnant, if the flight was not in winter, or on Saturday when it would be more difficult to travel because of Sabbath restrictions (cf. Mt 24:19-20). The Christians a generation later took Jesus at his word and did, in fact, escape the massacre of Jerusalem, saving their lives and their families.

Luke claims that all these sufferings were in fulfillment of that which had been written. He is speaking, of course, of OT prophecies such as Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. But Jesus himself predicted these events on more than one occasion: Lk 13:35; 19:43-44; 23:28-31; Mt 23:35-38. These verses add important details about the specific sufferings during the siege of Jerusalem. They also clarify the fact that this was not a result of poor politics or the natural cruelty of men. This was God's divine judgment on the city for killing the Messiah, God's very own Son.

But does this text *only* refer to A.D. 70? Many Bible students look for another future fulfillment in connection with the "Man of Sin" standing in the Holy Place (2 Thess 2:1-9; Rev 13:3-10).<sup>8</sup> While that may be true (time will certainly tell), the clear parallel of Luke 21:20 & 24 points to the armies surrounding Jerusalem in A.D. 70. These words were literally and completely fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem. A future event is not needed to adequately fulfill this prophecy.

Lk 21:23b-24

"There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. <sup>24</sup>They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

<sup>8</sup>E.g., Lewis Chafer, *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy* (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1922) and John Walvoord, *Matthew — Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974).

<sup>19</sup>“How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! <sup>20</sup>Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. <sup>21</sup>For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of {when God created<sup>Mk</sup>} the world until now—and never to be equaled again. <sup>22</sup>If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect {whom he has chosen<sup>Mk</sup>} those days will be shortened.”

Mt 24:19-22 with  
Mk 13:19-20

There are two things that might point to a yet future fulfillment of these verses. First, Luke 21:24 sounds like Romans 11:25 “until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.” Since Romans 11:25 is still future, some have wanted to make Luke 21:24 future as well. But just because two verses use similar words does not mean they are talking about the same thing. Indeed, Luke and Paul are dealing with two different topics. Luke is talking about the destruction of Jerusalem. Paul is talking about Gentile evangelism. They are not true parallels even though they sound similar. Thus, Romans 11:25 can’t push Luke 21:24 into the future.

Second, Matthew says that this suffering was unparalleled since the beginning of time and will not be surpassed until the end of the world. It is pointed out that more Jews were killed in Nazi Germany than were killed in A.D. 70. Hence, it is said, A.D. 70 was not the worst persecution of the world. Therefore, these prophecies must point to the tribulation of the last days. However, the measure of this tribulation may not be in its sheer numbers but in its magnitude. As a punishment from God, as described by Josephus, A.D. 70 was unsurpassed in its spiritual and physical terror. In addition, during the fall of Jerusalem, they not only had to contend with the Romans but with the civil war inside the city as well. To make matters worse, the suffering of A.D. 70 was not merely the loss of human life, but the desecration of the Holy City and the temple of God. This event permanently altered Judaism by removing its temple and thus its sacrifices. In that sense, A.D. 70 was the worst suffering ever experienced by the Jews.

In addition, placing this tribulation at the end of the world introduces a couple of difficulties into the text. First, there is this uncomfortable gap of some 2,000 years between Matthew 24:20 and 21. Second, why would Jesus say that this suffering was “never to be equaled again”? If it is the final tribulation, it goes without saying that it would be unsurpassed.<sup>9</sup>

Matthew 24:22 also seems to point to A.D. 70 rather than the end of the world. Jesus said that this tribulation would be cut short so that the elect would survive. What would be the value of the physical survival of the elect at the end of the world? It seems more appropriately applied to the Jews of A.D. 70. By cutting short the time of tribulation, God preserved for himself a remnant of Jews. That is God’s consistent promise for his people (Isa 6:13; Rom 9:27-29; 11:5, 29).

<sup>9</sup>Blomberg (p. 359), suggests that this tribulation period encompasses the entire period from the devastation of A.D. 70 through Christ’s return. While that solves the problem of describing A.D. 70 as the worst suffering of all time, it creates another problem. These descriptions (vv. 15-25) are quite specific. To make a generic application of verse 21 seems out of character for this context.



Mt 24:23-28  
with Mk 13:23

<sup>23a</sup>At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. <sup>24</sup>For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. {So be on your guard.<sup>Mk</sup>} <sup>25</sup>See, I have told you ahead of time.

<sup>26a</sup>So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. <sup>27</sup>For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>28</sup>Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather."

[vv. 25-28 = Lk 17:23-24, 37, see comments on § 120b]

"At that time" [lit., "then," Gk. *tote*] is sometimes used as a chronological marker and sometimes as a logical marker. Here it seems to be the latter. It doesn't tell so much what will happen next, but the logical implication of false messiahs whenever they appear. We are anxious to see Jesus. We are fatigued by the trouble of this world. That makes us ripe for deception by false messiahs who claim to be Jesus. It's nothing new (cf. 2 Thess 2:1-2). Nor is it really complicated. When Jesus returns, it will be as obvious as lightning. Therefore, if anyone claims to be Christ and calls you to follow him, don't. Christ will come get you; you don't have to chase after him to some desert or secret cult compound. The implication of "false Christs" is not that their miracles are fakery, but that they deceive rather than lead one to God.<sup>10</sup>

These guys will appear throughout history, until Jesus returns. Luke, for instance, uses these very words to describe Jesus' Second Coming (17:22-24, 37). But they have equal relevance to A.D. 70 (cf. Mt 24:5). The only difference is that Matthew adds that these false messiahs would also perform great signs. Although this sounds like "End Time Talk" (cf. Mt 7:21-23; 2 Thess 2:9-12; Rev 13:11-17), it can be fairly applied to both events.

With verses 27-28 we now move clearly to the end.<sup>11</sup> When Jesus does return, there will be some pretty severe judgment. Verse 28 describes it with a picture, not from a courtroom but on the battlefield. Dead bodies are strewn across the land with vultures feasting on their carrion (cf. Rev 19:11-21). Judgment will be like that when Jesus returns. In other words, wherever there is sin there is sure to be judgment. Just as Jesus' return will be seen by all, so every sin will fall prey to his judgment.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. G. Harris, "Satan's Deceptive Miracles in the Tribulation," *BS* 156/623 (1999): 308-324.

<sup>11</sup> Although J.A. O'Flynn would argue that even verse 27 could be viewed apocalyptically with Jesus' judgment at A.D. 70 ("The Eschatological Discourse," *ITQ* 18 [1951]: 277-281).

Like verses 27-28, this passage is primarily pointed at the Second Coming. But when we read them against their OT background, they can also describe the social and political upheaval of A.D. 70. In fact, in Luke these galactic disorders are connected with the fall of Jerusalem even more closely than in Matthew and Mark.

**§ 139d**  
**Coming of the**  
**Son of Man**  
 (Mt 24:29-31;  
 Mk 13:24-27;  
 Lk 21:25-27)



<sup>29a</sup>“Immediately after the distress of those days  
 “the sun will be darkened,  
 and the moon will not give its light;  
 the stars will fall [Ezek 32:7; Joel 2:10,31; 3:15] from the sky,  
 and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”<sup>a</sup>”

Mt 24:29

<sup>a</sup>29 Isaiah 13:10; 34:4

<sup>25</sup>“On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. <sup>26</sup>Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

Lk 21:25-26

<sup>30</sup>“At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. <sup>31</sup>And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.”

Mt 24:30-31

“Immediately” after the tribulation period there will be “galactic” turmoil. When will that be? Well, the word “immediately” may indicate, using prophetic vocabulary, “the next in a series of events” which may, in fact, still be a long way off. At the same time, this word “immediately” is used eighty times in the NT and always means “without delay, on the spot, right then.” There are only two exceptions to this. First, Mark 4:5, in the parable of the soil, says that the little plant sprang up “immediately” because it had no depth of soil. Here the word signifies a very short time, especially as compared to other plants. The other exception is 3 John 14, where John says, “I hope to see you immediately.” Of course, it would take some travel time. Thus, the word could be understood as “a short time.”<sup>12</sup> But a delay of 2,000 years is probably out of the question. And since “immediately” is an uncommon word for Matthew, it seems to have particular relevance for him here. Consequently, if Matthew 24:23-28 has any relevance to the destruction of Jerusalem, then the events of verses 29-31, which follow “immediately,” must be applied figuratively to the events of A.D. 70.<sup>13</sup>

So while these verses will be ultimately fulfilled when Jesus returns, these galactic events also picture the destruction of Jerusalem. That sounds odd to us. But the disciples, steeped in OT literature, would have no problem seeing the con-

<sup>12</sup> It is certainly not correct to interpret *eutheōs* “immediately” merely as an indefinite period of time, contra Floyd Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> T. Hatina argues this in “The Focus of Mk. 13:24-27 — The Parousia or the Destruction of the Temple?” *BBR* 6 (1996): 43-66.

nection. For instance, this phrase, “the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven . . .” was used several times in the OT to describe the fall of a great nation. In Isaiah 13:10, 19 it refers to **Babylon**; in Isaiah 34:4 it refers to **Edom**; and in Ezekiel 32:7-8 it refers to **Egypt**. Borrowing language from the prophets, Jesus describes the fall of a great nation. “This language need not be the break up of the entire universe” (Lewis, p. 128).

Some, in fact, would even relate Matthew 24:30 to the fall of Jerusalem. The “Son of Man in the clouds” can be interpreted as a Jewish idiom for “the day of the Lord,” when he comes in wrath and punishment (based on Dan 7:13-14). This agrees with a number of figurative OT references to the Lord coming in the clouds (Deut 33:26; Ps 68:4) and in judgment (Isa 30:27; Ezek 30:3; Nah 1:3). After all, this destruction was a result of God’s punishment for the murder of Jesus (Lk 19:42-44; 23:28-31; Mt 23:35-39). Furthermore, “All nations of the earth mourning” can be literally translated “All the tribes of the land.” Thus, this mourning of verse 30 could refer to the tears of the Jews. Some would mourn their own suffering, others would regret having killed Jesus (Zech 12:10-14; Jn 19:37). But ultimately this pictures the Second Coming of Jesus when all nations will mourn at their own judgment (1 Thess 4:17; Rev 1:7). That will be a day of divine harvest (v. 31; cf. Mt 13:24-30, 47-50).



**§ 139e**  
**Lesson of the**  
**Fig Tree**  
 (Mt 24:32-41;  
 Mk 13:28-32;  
 Lk 21:28-33).

[MT 24:32<sup>a</sup>] “Now learn this lesson {parable<sup>LK</sup>} from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. <sup>33</sup>Even so, when you see all these things {happening,<sup>Mk</sup>} {stand up and lift up your heads, because<sup>LK</sup>} you know that it {your redemption<sup>LK</sup>} is near, right at the door. <sup>34</sup>I tell you the truth, this generation<sup>a</sup> will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. <sup>35</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

<sup>a</sup>34 Or *race*

The parable of the fig tree is simple. When you see the shoots coming off the branch turn green and start to put out little leaves, you know that summer is right around the corner. In other words, there are certain signs in the natural world which foretell the coming season. So also, Jesus gives the disciples certain signs which allow them to recognize the impending destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Mt 16:28; Mk 9:1; Lk 9:27). They can bank on Jesus’ words. In fact, Jesus’ words are even more stable and enduring than the physical universe (Mt 24:35). That is just the kind of comfort needed in the kind of tribulation they are about to face.

Now many expositors will apply the parable of the fig tree to the Second Coming of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> Luke’s “redemption” talk does sound an awful lot like Romans

<sup>14</sup>For a comparison of these two interpretations, see A. McNicol, “The Lesson of the Fig Tree in Mark 13:28-32: A Comparison Between Two Exegetical Methodologies,” *RestQ* 27 (1984): 193-207.

8:23. And as we have noted, the previous verses (Mt 24:27-31; Mk 13:24-27; Lk 21:25-27) can be applied to the Second Coming as well as to the destruction of Jerusalem. However, this does not obligate us to press the present verses into the same “double service” as the previous pericope. Remember, Jesus is answering two questions without clearly differentiating between them. It would not be unnatural for him to use a double metaphor and then return to material which speaks only of A.D. 70. There are several reasons why this parable probably does not apply to the parousia.

First, the parable urges the disciples to look for and discern the season of this tribulation. While that is appropriate for the events of A.D. 70, it is not appropriate for the Second Coming. The whole point of Matthew 24:36-25:30 is that you *cannot* know when Jesus will come. Some find a way around this conundrum by saying that while we can’t know the day or hour (Mt 24:36), we can know the month and year. Aside from the fact that all such prognostications presently have a batting average of 0%, they also fail to appreciate the simple language of Jesus. Whether it is a day, an hour, a month or a year, we simply cannot know when Jesus is coming back. The words “day” and “hour” signify time in general and not specific chronological increments (Mt 7:22; 10:19; 24:42, 44, 50; 25:13; 26:45). The word “day” likely suggests “Day of the Lord,” meaning, in prophetic vocabulary “the day God comes for judgment and salvation” (Joel 2:11; Amos 5:18, 20; Mal 4:5). In other words, “day” stands for the end of the age. We just can’t know when that will be. Hence we are urged to be prepared.

Second, verse 36 begins with a pair of particles *peri de* (= “but”). The NIV leaves them totally untranslated. That’s surprising since this combination sets up a fairly strong contrast. It would be like capitalizing our word “**BUT**.” In other words, verse 36 seems to indicate a distinct shift in emphasis. Hence, it is reasonable to read verse 36 as the dividing line of the chapter. Although there is some material in the first half of the chapter which has dual reference to A.D. 70 and Christ’s return (i.e., vv. 23-31), it deals primarily with the events of the first century. The rest of Matthew 24 and 25, however, deals exclusively with the Second Coming.

Third, Jesus says that all these things would take place within a generation. His audience would be thinking in terms of about forty years and certainly would include themselves in that group. This, of course, fits perfectly with A.D. 70 but not well at all with “end-time” events. There are several proposed solutions. (1) Chalk it up to error either on the part of Jesus or of Matthew. We reject that because (a) there is a better explanation and (b) the Bible has demonstrated its accuracy. (2) Begin counting the generation (i.e., 40 years) not from Jesus’ day but from the “budding of the fig tree” which used to be commonly applied to the reestablishment of the Jewish nation in 1948 or the Six Day War of 1967 until the 40 years elapsed. Although this is linguistically *possible*, it seems improbable in this context and in light of the other places Jesus uses this word *generation* (cf. Mt 16:28; 23:35-36; Mk 9:1; Lk 9:27). (3) Some have sug-

gested that “generation” should be translated as “nation,” with special reference to the Jewish nation. As Alford points out, “*genea*” has in Hellenistic Greek the meaning of ‘a race or family of people’ (cf. Jer 8:3 LXX, and Mt 23:36).<sup>15</sup> This has led some to think of it in terms of a continuing generation until the end of time (Ryle, p. 323). It is true that Matthew 12:45; 17:17; 23:36; Luke 16:8; 17:25 and Philippians 2:15 *may* be understood as referring to the whole nation of Israel. But it still meant the nation AT THAT TIME. The simplest and most straightforward understanding of “generation” would be the contemporaries of Jesus. Those standing before Jesus would see the fulfillment of everything written between verses 4 and 35 of Matthew 24, even if verses 27-31 also apply to the Second Coming.

**§ 139e (cont.)**  
**No One Knows**  
**the Time of His**  
**Coming**  
 (Mt 24:36-41;  
 Mk 13:32)

[MT 24:36<sup>44</sup>] “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup>As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup>For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; <sup>39</sup>and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup>Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. <sup>41</sup>Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.”

[vv. 37-41 = Lk 17:26-27, 34-35, see comments on § 120b]

Everything from here on out refers to the Second Coming. Jesus lays out three important truths about his return. First, he tells us, in no uncertain terms, that we cannot know when it is. The angels don’t even know when it is. In fact, Jesus, himself, did not know when he would return. And we think we will figure it out?!

Second, Jesus tells us that his coming will surprise a lot of people. He compares it to the days of Noah. Noah preached for decades that a flood was coming. But people ignored him, going about business as usual. When the flood came it caught them by surprise with catastrophic results. That is how it will be when Jesus comes back.

Third, the Second Coming will divide even the most intimate relationships. A couple of guys are farming a field together; they will be separated. Female coworkers, grinding at the mill, will be separated. Luke 17:34 adds that two people will be separated even from the same bed — husbands from wives and children from parents.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody, 1958), p. 244.

Because we don't know when Jesus is coming back, because his return will be a surprise to so many, and because it will sever so severely even the most intimate relationships, we had better be ready for Jesus to return at any moment. That's the thrust of the following four parables. In their own way, they each say the same thing: BE READY!

**§ 139f**  
**Four Parables**  
**to Urge Us to**  
**be Ready for**  
**Jesus**  
 (Mt 24:42-25:30;  
 Mk 13:33-37;  
 Lk 21:34-36)



<sup>34a</sup>“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. <sup>35</sup>For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup>Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

<sup>34a</sup>“It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.”

Mk 13:34

Mark and Luke both give summary statements prior to this first parable which warn the disciples to keep watch. It sounds most like Matthew's first parable but it is also similar to the fourth (Mt 25:14-30).

### **#1: Like a Thief in the Night: Jesus Comes Unexpectedly**

<sup>42a</sup>“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. <sup>43</sup>But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>44</sup>So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

Mt 24:42-44

[vv. 42-44 = Lk 12:39-40, see comments on § 108c]

Thieves don't send you their itinerary with an expected time of arrival. If they did, they would likely find a pit bull or a shotgun waiting for them. Like a thief, Jesus will come with no advanced warning (Lk 12:39; 1 Thess 5:2, 4; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; 16:15). This does not indicate a secret rapture anymore than it indicates that Jesus is a criminal. The single point of comparison is that Jesus comes without warning.

Jesus used a common prophetic phrase to describe his coming: “Day of the Lord” (Joel 2:11; Amos 5:18, 20; Mal 4:5). Even in the OT, it is often pictured as imminent (Isa 13:6, 9; Ezek 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14; Obad 1:15; Zeph 1:7, 14). It signified, of course, the coming of God. And it had a two-pronged result. First, those who were faithful to God would receive his protection and rewards. Those who were not would be severely punished. In the OT “The Day of the Lord” often signified a temporal judgment on a particular nation. But in the NT it usually indicates the final judgment (cf. 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Pet 3:10). Hence, Jesus’

return and judgment day are pictured here as a single event which takes place at a single time.

### **#2: Like a Faithful Servant: Jesus Comes Later than Expected**

**Mt 24:45-51** <sup>45</sup>“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? <sup>46</sup>It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. <sup>47</sup>I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. <sup>48</sup>But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’ <sup>49</sup>and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. <sup>50</sup>The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. <sup>51</sup>He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

[vv. 45-51 = Lk 12:42-46, see comments on § 108c]

Matthew and Luke tell this same parable word for word,<sup>16</sup> but they place them in different contexts. In Luke, Peter sparks this response by asking Jesus if his parable refers to everyone or only a special few. In other words, Peter is asking about special privileges. Jesus turns the tables and talks about Peter’s special responsibilities. Here, however, the emphasis is not on responsibility so much as it is on preparedness.

As the weeks roll into months, and months into years, it is easy for a servant to be seduced into slacking off from his duties. The longer the master is away, the less likely, it seems, that he will return in the very next moment. But the opposite, in fact, is the case. He is coming back. And with each tick of the clock, his return is that much closer (Rom 13:11)!

### **#3: Like Foolish/Wise Virgins: Jesus Comes Sooner than Expected**

**Mt 25:1-5** <sup>1</sup>“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup>Five of them were foolish and five were wise. <sup>3</sup>The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. <sup>4</sup>The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. <sup>5</sup>The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.”

It was not uncommon for the Messiah to be compared to a bridegroom (Isa 54:4-6; 62:4-5; Ezek 16:7-34; Hos 2:19; cf. Jn 3:27-30; Mt 9:15; Mk 2:19-20). This is a typical picture of a Palestinian wedding. After the wedding ceremony at the bride’s home, there would be a parade through the streets which led to the home of the groom where there would be a big banquet. It was the job of the bridesmaids to wait for the groom and his procession. But one never knew just how long that would take. Since it was night, they took their handheld oil lamps with

<sup>16</sup> Out of 102 words in the Greek text there are only 14 words that are not identical, letter for letter. Six of the words are synonyms, five of them are different verb tenses, and there are three words which one writer uses that the other does not.

them. These lamps were nothing more than a clay bowl about three inches in diameter and pinched on one side so as to hold a wick. These lamps only held about a tablespoon of oil. Thus, it was important to carry extra oil with you if the groom was delayed.

**WARNING:** This parable has a number of details which are merely for rhetorical interest and should not be allegorized. (1) Five were wise and five were foolish. This does not mean that about 50% of the church will not go with Jesus when he returns. (2) The fact that they all fell asleep does not suggest that they were unfaithful or “backslidden.” These maidens were expected to be prepared to escort the groom into the wedding gala, but they were not expected to stay awake as they waited. After all, they were not Roman soldiers, they were bridesmaids. (3) The bridesmaids were virgins. This is not intended to symbolize the purity of the church. Single women of that era were not typically sexually active. Thus the term “virgin” is virtually equivalent to “young woman.” (4) Five of them took a flask of oil. This does not likely represent the Holy Spirit. Some have used such an allegory to explain the apparent selfishness of the five wise women. If oil represents the Holy Spirit then of course they did not share their “Spirit” because that is not possible whereas oil they may have been able to share. But that is an overinterpretation of the parable. The point of the parable is simply this: You must be prepared for Jesus. If you are, then you are wise and get to go with Jesus. If you are not prepared, then you are foolish and excluded from the party.

<sup>64</sup>At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

Mt 25:6-13

<sup>74</sup>Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup>The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

<sup>944</sup>‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

<sup>1044</sup>But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

<sup>1144</sup>Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’

<sup>1244</sup>But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’

<sup>1344</sup>Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

In the middle of the night the ten bridesmaids were awakened with a cry announcing that the groom was on his way (cf. Mt 24:31; 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16). As they wiped the sleep from their eyes and scurried to their feet, they fiddled with their wicks to kindle a decent flame. The “foolish five” pulled their wicks out so as to increase the flame. But it only sucked the last few drops of oil from their lamps. They begged the “flasked five” to share some of their oil. But that might jeopardize their own supply since the bridegroom was still a short distance away and still might have an unexpected delay. So the wise virgins refused. Instead they sent the “foolish five” off to the local merchant to purchase their own oil.



The foolish five scampered off to buy some oil. Normally the shops would be closed. But during a big wedding celebration in the community they would naturally open up their little shops to supply whatever needs the family might have. Remember, we are not talking about a department store here; it's a small family business.

By the time the foolish five returned, the groom had already arrived, entered the house and shut the door, taking the five wise maidens with him. The foolish five beat on the door and begged to come in. But the groom said, "Go away, I never knew you." That may sound calloused, especially since these poor gals ran to the store to get the oil. But this is the same reception Jesus promised the false prophets (Mt 7:23). Their lack of preparation betrays their lack of love.

#### **#4: *Like Servants Entrusted with Wealth:***

This parable is an awful lot like the one Jesus told about five days earlier while en route from Jericho to Bethany (Lk 19:11-27; § 127b). The main difference is that Jesus tells the parable in Luke to warn them that the kingdom of God was not imminent as they expected (Lk 19:1). In Matthew, however, this parable warns them to keep on the lookout for that kingdom.

There are other minor differences:

Luke 19:11-27	Matthew 25:14-30
Nearing Jerusalem	Leaving Jerusalem
10 Servants, given one "mina" each.	Three Servants, given 5, 2, and 1 talent respectively.
The citizens hated the would-be king.	No mention of other characters
King	Rich Man
Each servant given one city for each mina earned	No specific reward mentioned
The last servant hid the money in a "napkin."	The last servant hid the money in the ground.

The similarities, however, outweigh the differences:

1. The last servant hides the money rather than depositing it.
2. "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things . . ."
3. The wicked servants give a similar evaluation of their master.
4. The extra money is given to the servant who earned the most.
5. "For everyone who has will be given more . . ."
6. Both parables end in judgment.

These similarities do not necessarily indicate that Matthew and Luke were editors rather than reporters of Jesus' words. It is perfectly reasonable to assume

that Jesus told the parable twice, altering the details for rhetorical interest and variation for his audience.

<sup>14</sup>“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. <sup>15</sup>To one he gave five talents<sup>a</sup> of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. <sup>16</sup>The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. <sup>17</sup>So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. <sup>18</sup>But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.”

Mt 25:14-18

<sup>a</sup> <sup>15</sup>A talent was worth more than a thousand dollars

It is difficult to know for sure just how much money the master gave his servants. For one thing, a talent was a unit of weight, not a monetary value. The value of a talent would vary greatly depending on whether you have a talent of gold, silver, or bronze. All we can say for certain is that this is a huge amount of money to play with.

When Jesus used the word “talent” his audience thought about money. When we use the word “talent” our audiences think about skills and abilities, and to that extent we misread the parable. At the same time, the symbol of money in the parable represents all the resources we have been given by God including our money and our abilities, as well as our time, opportunities, etc.

Each servant was endowed according to his ability. The first two lived up to their reputation and past performance, earning 100% of what was entrusted to them. The last servant refused to even try. Instead he dug a hole in the backyard and hid the money.

<sup>19</sup>“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.’

Mt 25:19-23

<sup>21</sup>“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

<sup>22</sup>“The man with the two talents also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.’

<sup>23</sup>“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’”

[vv. 19-23 = Lk 19:15-18, see comments on § 127b]

As in the previous account of this parable, the master rewarded the faithful servants with multiplied wealth.

<sup>24</sup>“Then the man who had received the one talent came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have

Mt 25:24-30

not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. <sup>25</sup>So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

<sup>26</sup>His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? <sup>27</sup>Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

<sup>28</sup>'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. <sup>29</sup>For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. <sup>30</sup>And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

[vv. 24-30 = Lk 19:20-27, see comments on § 127b].

This wicked servant obviously lied when he said he was afraid of the master. Had he actually been afraid of the master, he would have deposited the money for interest with a moneylender. The truth is, he was convinced that the master was not coming back. He hid the money so that he could dig it up later and use it for himself! This turned out to be a bad bet, for when the master returned the servant got what was coming to him (v. 30). Steinmetz says:

The swift justice meted out to the lazy servant puts a merciful end to any notion that the disobedient and the dishonest will be able to blackmail their way into the Kingdom of heaven by manipulating the goodness of God or playing on divine pity. God's goodness is too clever to be taken in by such nursery tricks. Divine pity will forgive sins, but it will not condone them.<sup>17</sup>

Although Jesus' return has been delayed for a long time, he is coming back. And when he does, we will give an account to him of our stewardship of life. Those who prepared well for his coming will be delighted with their reward. Those who have counted on his continued delay will be shocked, judged and punished most severely.



**§ 139g**  
**Judgment at**  
**the Second**  
**Coming**  
(Mt 25:31-46)



This pericope concludes the series of parables about Jesus' return, and closes out the entire Olivet discourse. It shares the basic theme of the previous parables: Be ready . . . Jesus *IS* coming back! This scene, though, does not appear to be a parable itself. Rather it looks like a sketch of the judgment which comes with Christ's return. The sheep and the goats are metaphors for the righteous and the wicked. But the rest seems to be a true description rather than a parabolic illustration of judgment.

Mt 25:31-33

<sup>31</sup>'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations

<sup>17</sup> D.C. Steinmetz, "Mt 25:14-30," *Int* 34 (1980): 172-176.

will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup>He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.”

This is a vivid picture of judgment using a shepherding analogy. It was common for several flocks of sheep and goats to be penned up together for the night or even to graze together during the day. But there were times when they had to be separated (for instance, when shearing the valuable wool from the sheep). Although these shaggy animals may look quite a bit alike, there is a great difference in their character and value. The divisions were clear. In the same way, the judgment will clarify who is for Jesus and who is not.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>34</sup>“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup>For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup>I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

Mt 25:34-40

<sup>37</sup>“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup>When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

<sup>40</sup>“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”

What determines whether someone is a sheep or a goat? Like every other judgment scene of the NT it is made on the basis of deeds (Mt 16:27; Jn 5:28-30; Rom 2:5-11; 2 Cor 5:10; 1 Pet 1:17; Rev 20:11-15). Does this grate against salvation by grace? How can one be saved by grace but judged by works? It is simply this: When we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, the only thing that will really matter is our relationship to Jesus — have we trusted (i.e., placed our faith) in him? The answer to that question is not in our talk but in our walk. How we live our lives is the surest way to tell what we believe. Our good deeds don’t save us. But they clearly demonstrate our primary commitments.

Jesus highlights six deeds that are typical of his followers. These aren’t all the things they do but they are characteristic of the kinds of things they do. They aptly summarize the basic needs of humanity: Food, clothing, shelter, and acceptance. As we analyze these six behaviors, we find that they require large amounts of personal time and money, the two most precious commodities for most of us.

<sup>18</sup> Verse 31 reminds us of Rev 19:11-18; verse 32 reminds us of Rev 20:11-15. The difference is that Matthew says nothing about a thousand year gap that separates the Second Coming from judgment day (Rev 20:1-10). So should we incorporate a millennium here between Mt 25:31 & 32? Probably not. Both Matthew 25 and 2 Peter 3:10-13 (both of which are less figurative than Revelation) present a simple chronology for the end of time: Jesus comes, the earth is destroyed, judgment ensues (cf. Mt 16:27; Jn 5:28-30). While this does not satisfactorily answer all our questions, especially about the book of Revelation, it does seem to be the simplest reading of Jesus and Peter.

The sheep are shocked, not that they inherit the kingdom but that they had personally ministered to the King in his times of distress. They simply did not recognize him. Jesus explains why. They did not actually minister to him personally. But when they met the needs of the least and the lost, Jesus took it personally. There is some debate as to whether the “least of these brothers” are disciples or not.<sup>19</sup> Likely Jesus intends for us to extend our kindness to all people, but especially to Christians (Gal 6:10).

Mt 25:41-46

<sup>41</sup>“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup>For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

<sup>44</sup>“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

<sup>45</sup>“He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

<sup>46</sup>“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

The goats are sent to hell with Satan and his angels.<sup>20</sup> They are punished, not because of the evil they did, but the good they neglected to do. This is not because they didn’t “pay their dues” to get into heaven, but because their behavior betrays their lack of commitment to Jesus, the only way into heaven.

Jesus said earlier that the wicked from Sodom and Gomorrah (Mt 10:15), Tyre and Sidon (Mt 11:22, 24; Lk 10:14), Nineveh (Mt 12:41; Lk 11:32), and the Queen of Sheba (Mt 12:42; Lk 11:31) would stand in judgment and testify against Israel for rejecting Jesus and demanding signs. Now that would sound scandalous to the Jews. This text retains that same element of shock. These goats can’t believe what they are hearing because (1) they did not accept the truth that Jesus is judge (Jn 5:22, 30; 9:39), and (2) they underestimated the seriousness and thoroughness of that judgment (Mt 12:36, words; Rom 2:16, thoughts; and 1 Cor 4:3-5, motives).

<sup>19</sup> For a clear statement of the issue from someone of the “particularist” perspective, see G. Foster, “Making Sense of Matthew 25:31-46,” *SBET* 16/2 (1998): 128-139. However, J.P. Heil offers a cogent argument that through Reader-Response both may be operative. “The Double Meaning of the Narrative of Universal Judgment in Matthew 25:31-46,” *JSNT* 69 (1998): 3-14. It should also be noted that while goats had a negative connotation among the Romans and were “flocked” separately, neither was true in Palestine. Goats and sheep were both “honorable” animals. Cf. K. Weber, “The Image of Sheep and Goats in Mt. 25:31-46,” *CBQ* 59/4 (1997): 657-678.

<sup>20</sup> Let’s not be confused by this verse into thinking that God has his angels and his counterpart, Satan, also has his angels. God is ontologically different than his angels. That is, He is creator, they are created. But Satan is ontologically equal to his followers/angels. They are both created by God and will ultimately be in subjection to God.

This is the beginning of the end. We watch as the various players move into position for this final act. In this section Jesus prepares for his part with one final passion prediction. The Jewish rulers prepared for their role by plotting Jesus' arrest and assassination. In the next two sections, Mary prepares by anointing Jesus as if for burial. Finally, Iscariot prepares by consulting with the Sanhedrin about betraying Jesus.

**§ 140**  
**Preparations**  
**for Jesus'**  
**Passion: Jesus**  
**& the Priests**  
 (Mt 26:1-5;  
 Mk 14:1-2;  
 Lk 22:1-2;  
 cf. Lk 21:37-38  
 in § 131)

[MT 26:]<sup>1</sup>When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, <sup>2</sup>"As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."

<sup>3</sup>Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, "and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. <sup>5</sup>"But not during the Feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people."

We have just ended the fifth and final discourse of the book of Matthew, as indicated by the words "when Jesus had finished saying all these things" (cf. Mt 8:1; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1). These events may have taken place as Jesus' band left the city late Tuesday afternoon after a very full day in the temple. But more likely they took place on Wednesday. That, after all, would still be counted by the Jews as two (inclusive) days before the Passover, which would begin after sunset on Thursday. Of more importance is the fact that Jesus, in this fourth prediction, specifies the exact time of his trial.

While Jesus is tucked away in Bethany (cf. Lk 21:37-38), the Sanhedrin is busily working on this sticky little problem. Some two months ago, also under Caiaphas' direction,<sup>21</sup> they determined to kill Jesus (Jn 11:49-53). Now, under Caiaphas' own roof, they reiterate their purpose and redouble their efforts. Their very first assassination attempt goes back two years and two Passovers (Jn 5:18). Since that time, however, they have learned to watch out for the crowds because the common people just love Jesus (Mt 21:46; Mk 12:12). After the Triumphal Entry (Sunday), the cleansing of the temple (Monday) and the day of discussions (Tuesday), they will have to be especially careful to avoid arresting Jesus in the presence of his growing supporters. Indeed, if the people riot, Rome would be quick to squelch the riot and replace these rulers. They fear for their country and their own positions. They determine that "one man must die for the nation" (Jn 11:50).

In verse 2 Jesus says that he will be betrayed during the Passover feast. But in verse 5 the Sanhedrin wants to avoid any confrontation during the feast for fear of the people. What they don't count on is this golden opportunity named

<sup>21</sup>In November of 1990, the burial cave of a wealthy "Caiaphas" family was uncovered just south of Jerusalem. It contained ossuaries (which were most common between 30 B.C. and A.D. 70). This is very possibly the tomb of this same Caiaphas we read about in our text. Cf. Z. Greenhut, "Burial Cave of the Caiaphas Family," *BAR* (Sept/Oct, 1992): 29-36.

Iscariot. When he comes along and offers to hand Jesus over to them, they just can't pass that up, even though it would entail obvious risks. We are also reminded that the following events did not proceed based on the plans of men but on the sovereignty of God. These events are on the track of God's predetermined will and are not to be derailed.

**§ 141**  
**Preparations**  
**for Jesus'**  
**Passion: Mary**  
 (Mt 26:6-13;  
 Mk 14:3-9;  
 Jn 12:2-8)

This event actually took place about five days earlier. Chronologically it fits between the time Jesus arrived in Bethany and the Triumphal Entry (see § 128a). Matthew and Mark place it topically here, to show the ignorance of the apostles. John adds Iscariot to the mix, highlighting his greed.<sup>22</sup> Thus, one of the only clear motives we are given for Judas' betrayal is his lust for petty cash. But this event also shows how ignorant the Eleven were of Judas' true character.

Because he held the purse strings, they fell in behind him in his condemnation of Mary's act of devotion.

**§ 142**  
**Preparations**  
**for Jesus'**  
**Passion: Judas**  
 (Mt 26:14-16;  
 Mk 14:10-11;  
 Lk 22:3-6)

[LK 22:]<sup>3</sup> Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. "And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus,

[MT 26:]<sup>15</sup> and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" {They were delighted to hear this and<sup>Mk</sup>} counted out for him {promised him<sup>Mk</sup>} thirty silver coins.

[LK 22:]<sup>6</sup> He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present.

Luke tells us that Satan entered Judas (Lk 22:3), likely on Wednesday. Then again on Thursday evening, after Judas ate the bread that Jesus handed to him, John also says that Satan entered Judas (Jn 13:27). This sounds like Acts 5:3, when Peter said to Ananias, "How is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit?" Apparently Satan has the ability to plant ideas into people's minds and hearts that they then implement. We may never know the mechanics of how Satan influences people, but we are warned that he indeed does. All three Synoptics note that Judas was one of the twelve, as if to say, "If he was not above such deviance, you too be careful!" We must be vigilant in warding off Satanic influence. By resisting his suggestions and temptations we can send him scurrying away (Jas 4:7).

<sup>22</sup> Some have suggested that Judas just wanted to force Jesus' hand and push him into his role as Messiah. But what good would that have done Judas? Even if it worked, would Jesus have retained such a traitor as treasurer in the kingdom?! (cf. W.B. Smith, "Judas Iscariot," *HibJ* 9 [1911]: 529-544).

There have been numerous suggestions as to what motivated Judas to betray Jesus. Perhaps he was jealous of Jesus or disgruntled over the Mary incident. Perhaps he was impatient and wanted to force Jesus to institute the kingdom through a final conflict with the Sanhedrin. Perhaps he was disillusioned that Jesus did not turn out to be the political Messiah that Judas expected. Perhaps Judas was trying to turn a fast buck to replace the money he pilfered from the funds. Perhaps he was trying to save himself as he saw the inevitable and ugly conflict between Jesus and the religious hierarchy coming to a head. We will probably never know the motive, only the result, both for Jesus and Judas. We do know, however, that Judas was operating under the heavy hand of predestination (Ps 41:9; Zech 11:7-14). That is not to say that he had no control over what he did. But it is to say that he, like Jesus, worked out exactly what God had ordained from long ago.

He was promised thirty pieces of silver, the price of a common slave (Exod 21:32). In return, Judas promised to hand over Jesus at an opportune time, away from the crowds.

The Synoptics indicate that Jesus ate the actual Passover meal on Nisan 14 before he was crucified on Nisan 15 (roughly equivalent to our April). Some, however, have interpreted John 18:28 and 19:14 to say that Jesus died at the very time the Passover lambs were being slain on Nisan 14. If that is true then we have an obvious contradiction between John and the Synoptics.

**§ 143**  
**Preparation**  
**for the**  
**Passover Meal**  
(Mt 26:17-19;  
Mk 14:12-16;  
Lk 22:7-13)

One solution has been to suggest that either John or the Synoptics were mistaken or purposefully altered the text to make a theological point. Not only does this denigrate the integrity of the Scripture, it lacks substantial evidence. A second solution suggests that there were two actual dates of the Passover based on two different calendars. For example, Jaubert argues that Jesus followed the Essene solar calendar,<sup>23</sup> or that the Passover sacrifices and meals were spread over two days because of the flood of visitors to Jerusalem.<sup>24</sup> This would put the Passover on Thursday for the disciples but on Friday for the Sadducees.<sup>25</sup> Hoehner argues that there was a difference in how the Galileans and Judeans reckoned their days (from sunrise or sunset).<sup>26</sup> Hence Jesus and the

<sup>23</sup> Annie Jaubert, *The Date of the Last Supper* (New York: Alba House, 1965). One great weakness of her view is that her evidence for the Essene solar calendar comes from a third century document.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Maurice Casey, "The Date of the Passover Sacrifices and Mark 14:12," *TB* 48/2 (1997): 245-247.

<sup>25</sup> N. Walker argues that the sixteen passion events recorded in the Gospels would have to occupy three days rather than a 24-hour period. Thus, he supports a Tuesday Last Supper in "Pauses in the Passion Story and Their Significance for Chronology," *NovT* 6 (1963): 16-19 and "Yet Another Look at the Passion Chronology," *NovT* 6 (1963): 286-289.

<sup>26</sup> H.W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977).



other Galileans ate the Passover a day before the Judeans did. Others have suggested that the discrepancy stemmed from an argument between the Pharisees and Sadducees. However, none of these arguments based on a calendar have strong documentary support.

There is a third solution that is much simpler. Jesus and his disciples celebrated the actual Passover. John knew that. After all, he was familiar with synoptic chronology. In fact, John 13 also describes the Passover Jesus celebrated. (1) It was in Jerusalem rather than Bethany, which had been their haunt the entire week. (2) They are pictured as reclining at the table at night, which is indicative of a festival meal. And (3) when the disciples saw Judas exit urgently they believed he was going out to get last minute supplies for the Passover meal or to give alms to the poor. These are indications of a Passover meal. Consequently, what John calls the Passover (18:28), is actually the *chagigah* (Num 28:18-19), which opened the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Was John confused about what it was actually called? No. In John's day, there was little distinction between the Passover (Nisan 14) and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Nisan 15-21). Both terms were used interchangeably (Mt 26:17; Mk 14:1, 12; Lk 2:41; 22:1; Josephus, *Ant* 2.317; *Wars* 5.98). So it was perfectly acceptable for John to identify this special meal as the Passover. Besides, every other time John uses the term "Passover" he refers to the entire feast, not the single meal (Jn 2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; 13:1). Therefore, we suggest that Jesus and the disciples ate the actual Passover meal, celebrated on Nisan 14. Furthermore, the Jews of John 18:12 refused to enter Pilate's praetorium so they would not be disqualified from the rest of the seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread, not the actual Passover meal.<sup>27</sup>

Mk 14:12-16 with  
Lk 22:8; Mt 26:18

<sup>12</sup>On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

<sup>13</sup>So he sent two of his disciples, {Peter and John,<sup>Lk</sup>} telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. <sup>14</sup>Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: {My appointed time is near.<sup>Mt</sup>} Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' <sup>15</sup>He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

<sup>16</sup>The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

It is now Thursday, the 14th of Nisan. The Passover was a seven day memo-

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Carson, pp. 528-532; and B. Smith, "The Chronology of the Last Supper," *WTJ* 53 (1991): 29-45. F. Chenderlin, "Distributed Observance of the Passover: A Preliminary Test of the Hypothesis," *Biblica* 57 (1976): 1-24, adds a couple of additional keen points. First, there were probably too many Passover participants to have all the lambs killed and eaten in a single day. Hence, he argues for a "distributed observance" in which the Passover would be celebrated on successive days. Second, if that were the case, the Jewish leaders may have preferred to eat the Passover on the holy high Sabbath during Passover week rather than strictly on Nisan 14.

rial to the Exodus (Exod 12:13-27; 23:15; 34:18; Deut 16:1-8; Jubilees 49:1-2, 10-12; Philo VI, 2.41.224 & 2.42.228), also called the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Josephus, *Ant* 2.317). Faithful Jewish worshipers gathered in Jerusalem from all over the empire. Some estimate as many as a million Jews packed the city, requiring some 100,000 sacrificial lambs (Butler, p. 524). The slaughter and stench of rivers of warm blood would be overwhelming.

Each home celebrated with a roasted lamb, bitter herbs (horseradish, bay, thyme, marjoram and basil [Butler, p. 524]), wine, and a dipping sauce for the lamb [*haroset*]. They would gather enough people to consume the entire lamb. During the meal four ceremonial cups of wine were passed around the table, separated by the singing of the “Hallel” Psalms (113–118). After the second cup of wine, the youngest in the house was instructed to ask the meaning of the Passover observances. The patriarch of the family then explained the story of how God delivered Israel from their bondage in Egypt.

The disciples know that it was for this purpose that they had come to the holy city, for the residents of Palestine were only allowed to eat the Passover in Jerusalem (Carson, p. 534). So they ask Jesus where they should prepare for the celebration. He sends Peter and John to look for a man carrying a water jar. This fellow would stick out like a sore thumb. After all, carrying water jars was typically “women’s work.” They are to follow him to his house and then tell its owner that Jesus is ready to use their upper room. This is quite possibly the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where Jesus first appeared to the Eleven (Lk 24:33-36; Jn 20:19), where the early church met for prayer (Acts 1:13-14; 12:12), and where the Holy Spirit first descended on the disciples (Acts 2:1-4).

Apparently they had some kind of previous agreement since the room is already prepared when the disciples arrive. Either that or the owner expects some other pilgrim group to request the use of his upper room, which was not uncommon. But Jesus has been in the area for the better part of a week and has had ample opportunity to make such arrangements. All of this allows the disciples to meet privately, if not secretly, away from the crowds. It also prevents Judas from “leaking” their location to the Sanhedrin.

[Lk 22:14] When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. <sup>15</sup>And he said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. <sup>16</sup>For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.”

After sundown on Thursday, Jesus and his men meet privately, perhaps even secretly, in the upper room of some unnamed home in Jerusalem. Like the other families who met in Jerusalem for this feast, this little band has bound together as a spiritual family for a sacred memorial (Mt 12:50). They take their places around a U-shaped table which sits about six or eight inches off

**§ 144**  
**Opening**  
**Conflict at the**  
**Passover Meal**  
(Mt 26:20;  
Mk 14:17;  
Lk 22:14-16,  
24-30)

the ground. They lay on their left elbow on cushions around the perimeter of the table. For Jesus, this is much more than a festive meal. It is even much more than a Passover celebration. Jesus knows that he is the antitype of the exodus; he is the Passover lamb, slain for the deliverance of his people. This meal commemorates his imminent destiny (Jn 1:29). It is the last time he will participate in the Passover incarnationally. There will be another banquet . . . a wedding feast. But that will be another day. For now he expresses his intense longing to share this meal with his men with the Hebrew idiom, “*With desire, I have desired to eat this Passover with you.*”

Lk 22:24-30

<sup>24</sup>Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. <sup>26</sup>But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. <sup>27</sup>For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. <sup>28</sup>You are those who have stood by me in my trials. <sup>29</sup>And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, <sup>30</sup>so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

[vv. 25-27 = Mt 20:25-28 & Mk 10:42-45, see comments on § 125b].

As they enter the upper room, the Twelve rekindle an argument that has come up twice before: Which of them is the greatest? The first time they argued about this was over a year ago (Mt 18:1-5; Mk 9:33-37; Lk 9:46-48; § 90). The last time couldn’t have been much more than a week ago (Mt 20:17-28; Mk 10:32-45; § 125b). All three times this argument followed on the heels of Jesus’ passion prediction. And all three times Jesus rebuked them rather sternly. Surely they are a bit embarrassed when he again overhears their debate.

The Twelve have given up three years of their lives to follow Jesus and they have sacrificed much to do so. Jesus assures them that such sacrifice will not be in vain. They will be rewarded in a big way — leadership in the kingdom, special places at the Messianic banquet, and a judgment throne for each of them. However, all this is still a ways off. They are called now to continue to sacrifice and serve.

This concept is one of Jesus’ most common themes. It runs counter to everything the world teaches: “Look out for #1,” “Do your own thing,” “Me first,” etc. But Christians operate by a different set of rules.

#### § 145

**Jesus  
Washes the  
Apostles’ Feet**  
(Jn 13:1-20)

As they enter the upper room, the disciples get into a little foray about their prospective positions. The argument is likely kindled over who is to sit closest to Jesus. Undoubtedly they neglected Jesus’ six-month-old advice to the Pharisees about

sitting in the lowest position rather than elbowing your way up the table (Lk 14:7-11).

Jesus has just given a verbal response to the disciples' debate about who was the greatest (Lk 22:24-30). He now gives a visual response. He said that he came as one who served and not as one who sits at the table (Lk 22:27). The astonished disciples are about to learn just how true that is. This foot washing is a prelude to the cross; both bring cleansing.

<sup>1</sup>It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.<sup>a</sup>

Jn 13:1-5

<sup>2</sup>The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. <sup>3</sup>Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; 'so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. <sup>5</sup>After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

<sup>a</sup> *1 Or he loved them to the last*

John sets the theological stage for this event by noting several things. First (v. 1), the Passover is approaching. This feast symbolizes all that Jesus came to accomplish. This is the beginning of the final act. Second (vv. 1-2), Jesus loves his disciples thoroughly, to the "bitter end." Even so, Iscariot, whose heart is now submitted to Satan, plans to betray that consummate love. The contrast is colossal. Third (v. 3), Jesus is fully in control. There are no accidents here, no runaway trains. Jesus purposes, plans, and executes the will of God to whom he shall soon return.

While the disciples settle into their prospective cushions and the Passover meal is being served, Jesus unpretentiously rises from the table and wraps himself with a towel. It appears that he is wearing nothing but a loincloth in the fashion of a slave (cf. v. 12; 19:23-24; Phil 2:7). He undertakes the neglected task of washing the disciples' feet. They are appalled! It was, after all, the job of the lowest servant in the house to wash peoples' feet as they entered, before they ever started serving the meal. Foot washing saved the guests from the embarrassment of sullyng the hosts' throw rugs. But the disciples neglected it in lieu of their own argument about their individual importance. One of them should have at least offered to wash Jesus' feet. But while they are busy arguing about seats, Jesus sets out to perform this humble task. How humiliating it must have been for the Twelve, knowing that Jesus was doing for them what they should have offered to do for him.

<sup>6</sup>He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jn 13:6-11

<sup>7</sup>Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

<sup>8</sup>"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

<sup>9</sup>"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

<sup>10</sup>Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." <sup>11</sup>For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

Peter objects strenuously. In fact, he goes overboard (which was not the first time either literally or figuratively). He orders Jesus to back off, saying, "You will never wash my feet 'forever,'" [*eis ton aiōna*]. Jesus replies, "If I don't wash your feet, you have no part with me." So Peter swings the pendulum clear to the other side and requests a complete sponge bath. You know, if a little is good, a lot must be better. But since he has already taken a bath his feet are the only part that need washing. Peter's mention of washing his head (or face) and hands is significant. Culturally the hands represented authority and energy while the head and face represented power and honor. In other words, Peter was submitting his most noble parts to Jesus, not merely his ignoble feet.<sup>28</sup>

Jesus is not merely talking about water and body parts. This is symbolic of a deeper cleansing. There is one in their presence whose avarice cannot be wiped away as easily as Palestinian dirt. John, in a parenthetical comment, explains that Jesus knows good and well what Judas plans to do. These words must burn deeply within Iscariot. One is also compelled to wonder what this foot washing did to him as the loving hands of the Master touched him tenderly.

Jn 13:12-17

<sup>12</sup>When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. <sup>13</sup>"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup>Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup>I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. <sup>16</sup>I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup>Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."

The lesson is simple. Jesus is the teacher. His students are not greater than he. Therefore, if he serves in such a lowly fashion, his disciples must be prepared to do the same. Now the act of washing feet certainly does not hold the same cultural significance for us as it did in the first century. So while foot washing may be a humbling gesture and a beautiful religious act, it lacks the same pragmatic significance as it had with the Apostles. Jesus calls us, not to a single act but to a single attitude which may manifest itself in many different ways. In our day it might mean taking out the trash, cleaning bathrooms, or changing diapers. "Foot washing" translates into performing lowly tasks which

<sup>28</sup>G.S. Shae, "Why Feet, Hands and Head?" *BT* 48/2 (1997): 221-228.

everyone else avoids because of pride.<sup>29</sup> While that grates against our fallen instinct, Jesus promises a blessing to those who live this way (v. 20).

<sup>18</sup>“I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill the scripture: ‘He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.’<sup>a</sup>

Jn 13:18-20

<sup>19</sup>“I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am He. <sup>20</sup>I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me.”

<sup>a</sup> 18 Psalm 41:9

Judas was predestined to fulfill Psalm 41:9 (cf. Zech 11:7-14; Ps 69:25; 109:8; Acts 1:20). Apparently God looked into the future and saw what Judas was going to do and recorded it in Scripture before Judas was ever born (1 Pet 1:2). That does not necessarily mean, however, that God predestined Judas to damnation. There are a considerable number of men who were individually predestined by God in the Bible.<sup>30</sup> With the possible exceptions of Jesus and Judas, not one of them was predestined to salvation or damnation but to a task God assigned for them to perform. No doubt, they would perform the task. But they could either do it God’s way or their own way. For example, Pharaoh was going to let the Israelites go. He chose to do it his own way and God forced his hand. Jonah’s biography tells a similar story. While we may not be able to solve the apparent paradox between the sovereignty of God and the free will of man, we assume that Judas Iscariot *chose* to betray Jesus and will be held personally accountable for his actions.

As interesting as such theological speculation might be, it misses the thrust of Jesus’ words. He predicted Judas’ betrayal so that when it came to pass, his faithful followers would know for certain that Jesus was indeed the Christ. That would be crucial in those dark days of his death when he looked like anything but a conquering Messiah. Not only that, in the days following his ascension, this prediction will serve as a reminder of their own predestined position with Jesus. Those who accept the Apostles accept Jesus; and those who accept Jesus accept God the Father.

<sup>29</sup> However, A. Edgington, “Foot washing as an ordinance,” *GTJ* 6.2 (1985): 425-434, argues that it should be practiced as an ordinance. He suggests that foot washing in Jn 13:1-17 and 1 Tim 5:10 meet the three criterion of an ordinance: (1) A physical act which is ceremonial in nature. (2) A symbolic representation of a spiritual reality expressly taught in the NT. (3) A command to perpetuate it by Christ or his apostles. However, all three of these are questionable at some level.

<sup>30</sup> Abraham (Neh 9:7); Jacob and Esau (Gen 25:19ff; Mal 1:2-3; Rom 9:10-13); Pharaoh (Exod 9:16; Rom 9:17); Saul and David (1 Sam 16:1-14); Josiah (1 Kgs 13:1-3); Cyrus (Isa 41:25; 44:28; 45:1-13; 2 Chr 36:22ff); John the Baptist (Mal 4:6; Isa 40:3; Lk 1:17ff); Jesus (Isa 42:1; Mt 12:18; Lk 9:35; Acts 2:23; 4:28); Iscariot (Ps 41:9; 69:25; 109:8; Mk 14:10; Acts 1:20); Apostles (Lk 6:13; Jn 6:70; 15:16); Paul (Acts 9:15; 13:2; Rom 1:1; Gal 1:15; Eph 3:7); Rufus (Rom 16:13); Jeremiah (Jer 1:5).