

Why Matthew 24:36-25:30 Describes the Rapture Rather Than the Second Coming

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Since the mid-1900s, pretribulationists have almost universally interpreted Matthew 24:36-25:30 as pertaining to the second coming. This interpretation has resulted in considerable confusion concerning the New Testament's teaching on the rapture of the Church, and the nature of the second coming. It is the purpose of this short essay to establish by five simple proofs that Matthew 24:36-25:30 cannot pertain to the second coming, but rather is a description of the rapture. The hope is that this will result in the recovery of the truth of this passage concerning the imminency of the rapture, and the correct interpretation of the passage. This paper does not deal in detail with the interpretation of Matthew 24:36-25:30; for that see: *The Olivet Discourse: A Reconstruction of the Text from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with Commentary*, by the author (Biblical Reader Communications, 2010). As an introduction, the reader may wish to read: "The New Pretribulationism," by the author (Biblical Reader Communications, 2011).

Five proofs that Matthew 24:36-25:30 describes the rapture

1. The removal in both the Noah illustration (Mt. 24:37-39 cf. Lk. 17:26-27) and the Lot illustration (Lk. 17:28-29) does not fit the second coming.

At the second coming the unrighteous will be removed, and the righteous will remain to inherit the kingdom (Mt. 13:30, 41-43, 49-50). However, in both the Noah illustration (Mt. 24:37-39 cf. Lk. 17:26-27) and the Lot illustration (Lk. 17:28-29) the righteous are removed from the sphere of judgment, and the unrighteous are left to be destroyed. It is sometimes objected that in the Noah illustration it is said that the unrighteous are the ones taken; however, that is a misunderstanding of the metaphor "took them all away" (Mt. 24:39). This metaphor does not refer to the unrighteous being taken anywhere, but to their being destroyed; Luke's account of both the Noah illustration (Lk. 17:26-27) and the Lot illustration (Lk. 17:28-29) make this quite clear. In contrast, the illustration of Noah's deliverance perfectly illustrates the rapture. Noah and his family were lifted above the waters of judgment and were returned after the judgment abated. Note how this fits perfectly with the Lot illustration (Lk. 17:28-29), both of which are appropriate analogies for the rapture.

2. The conditions described in the Noah and Lot illustrations are incompatible with the second coming.

These illustrations both make the point that life will be normal at the time of this appearing, with people going about their mundane activities of eating and drinking, marrying, buying and selling, planting, and building, right up to the moment that judgment falls on them unexpectedly; such cannot describe the conditions at the second coming. At the second coming the earth will be at the peak of catastrophic judgment, with the bulk of mankind having already perished and the earth left in ruins. According to Isaiah the judgments of the day of the LORD will make men "more scare than gold" (Isa. 13:13); the earth will be "completely laid to waste" (24:3); its inhabitants "burned up" (24:6); the earth will become "a desolation" (13:9); the sun, moon, and stars will fail to give light (13:10); the heavens and the earth will be shaken from their place (13:13), and the world will be in the midst of the most destructive war in history (Rev. 9:13-17), and men will be experiencing plagues so severe that they will be in great anguish (Rev. 16:1-11). So terrible will this time be that

Jesus said if it were to last longer than the appointed time all flesh would perish (Mt. 24:22). The normalcy prominently pictured in the Noah and Lot illustrations (which can also be deduced from the parable of the ten virgins) cannot be harmonized with the biblical description of the late tribulation period, which leads to the inevitable conclusion that these illustrations must pertain to a different appearing at a different time, prior to the outpouring of divine judgment. Note, however, that these illustrations fit perfectly with the rapture.

3. The appearing described in Matthew 24:36-25:30 is sudden, unexpected, and imminent (cf. 24:42-44), but the second coming is none of these.

The second coming will be preceded by many definite signs over a period of seven years. (Is that not the principal idea communicated in Matthew 24:4-30?) Not only that, but once the abomination occurs in the temple, believers will be able to calculate the very day of the second coming (see Chapter 7: "Tribulation Chronology," p.145). After the breaking of the sixth seal even the unredeemed will know that the end is near (Rev. 6:12-17, esp. vv. 15-17). How could anyone think that believers living in the terrible last days of the tribulation would not know that the second coming is near? The view that Matthew 24:36-25:30 is a warning to believers concerning the second coming borders on the absurd.

4. Jesus likened his appearing to a thief in the night (24:43). However, that analogy would be inappropriate if applied to the second coming.

At the second coming Jesus will not appear suddenly without warning, as does a thief. He will return on the heels of many signs in unspeakable splendor with the armies of heaven to rescue the righteous, destroy his enemies, and establish his kingdom. His advent will even be preceded by a special sign in the heavens (Mt. 24:29-30). However, the analogy of the thief is quite appropriate to the rapture when he will appear suddenly, unexpectedly, without signs or warning, to take his Church. In fact, one cognate of the word *harpazo* (the term used to describe the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17) is *harpagmos*, which refers to a "robber."

5. In the parable of the virgins (Mt. 25:1-13), which illustrates the same truth as the Noah and Lot illustrations, it is the righteous who are taken and the unrighteous who are left behind.

The parable of the virgins cannot illustrate the second coming, since the righteous will not be removed at the second coming, leaving the unrighteous behind. It might be countered that the unrighteous will also be gathered once the righteous have been gathered; however, in the parables of Matthew 13, Jesus expressly indicated multiple times that at the second coming it would be the unrighteous who would be gathered out "first" (Mt. 13:30, 41-43, 49-50). If we took the parable of the virgins to describe the second coming, how would it be possible to gather the unrighteous from among the righteous if the righteous were already gone? Obviously the particulars of this parable do not fit the second coming. Also, the mixed profession of faith (believers and unbelievers professing a common faith) does not fit what we know of the tribulation period after the great persecution and apostasy (Mt. 24:9-10), but it fits well with the end of the Church age, just prior to the rapture; hence the warning in 2 Thessalonians 5:3-11.

Those who teach that Matthew 24:36-25:30 pertains to the second coming sometimes object that the Church did not exist when the discourse in Matthew 24-25 was spoken, and consequently the truth revealed there cannot pertain to the Church. Such an argument is without merit on the following grounds: 1) As we have seen, it is impossible that the description in Matthew

24:36-25:30 could be the second coming, since none of the details are compatible. 2) Since Jesus knew that his appearing is to be a dual event (rapture/second coming), in order to give a proper answer to the disciples' question concerning his coming (Mt. 24:3) it was necessary to broach this truth. 3) The disciples to whom Jesus was speaking would become the pillars of the Church (Eph. 2:19-20) in less than eight weeks (Acts 2). Since Jesus had already revealed the future existence of the Church (Mt. 16:18), it is entirely appropriate that he would address a truth pertaining to the Church at this point. (Just two days after this discourse Jesus instituted the observance of the Lord's Supper; few would argue that the Lord's Supper does not pertain to the Church.) Thus, the objection that the rapture cannot be in view because the Church did not yet exist is without merit.

Conclusions

There can be no serious doubt that in his Olivet Discourse our Lord introduced the concept of a dual appearing (rapture/second coming), and there can also be no serious doubt that Matthew 24:36-25:30 pertains not to the second coming, but to the rapture of the Church. The early pretribulationists (Darby, *et al*) were likely influenced by the prevailing interpretation to view 24:36-44 as pertaining to the second coming, and the new pretribulationists, beginning with Thiessen and Chafer, simply carried this erroneous interpretation to its logical conclusion (viewing the description of the second coming as extending all the way to 25:30). However, one of the fundamental laws of logic (the Law of Identity) leads to the conclusion that a thing cannot be what it is not, and it could not be more clear, or certain, that the description given in Matthew 24:36-25:30 cannot be a description of the second coming. This regrettable string of failed biblical interpretation has done great injury to the doctrine of the rapture generally, and to the doctrine of imminency specifically. Sadly, this misinterpretation is deeply ingrained in contemporary pretribulationist teaching. Nevertheless, the truth is that this passage is the first clear presentation of the rapture of the Church contained within the pages of the Bible, and it was taught by the one who will someday return to fulfill all that he has said.

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