

Differences between 1 Thessalonians 4 and Matthew 24

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I. The Nature of the Problem

One of the many battlefields often frequented by eschatological combatants is the question as to whether the coming of our Lord spoken of in the Olivet Discourse (most fully given in Matthew 24 but also provided in Mark 13 and Luke 17) is the same coming as discussed by the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4. Attendant to this dilemma are the similar idea presented in 1 Thessalonians 5 and 2 Thessalonians 2.

Posttributionalists consider the two passages as referring to the coming of Christ at the end of seven year period of God's judgments on the earth. On the other hand, pretribulationists, with the exception of Matthew 24:36-44, generally believe that the Matthean passage gives information on the current age through the seventieth week of Daniel, or the seven year tribulation period, up to the coming of Christ in judgment.

The Olivet Discourse and the 1 Thessalonians 4 passages have many terms and events that appear to refer to the same phenomena and thus serve as the basis of identifying 1 Thessalonians 4 with the revelation of Christ at the end of the tribulation rather than a rapture or rescue of the church from the world prior to the time of God's judgment, the Day of the Lord.

The purpose of this paper is to subject the identification of the respective two comings in these passage to discern whether they in fact do refer to coming of Christ in judgment, or rather to two aspects of the coming of Christ, one to rescue His bride from harm's way before judging the world, and the other to reveal Himself as God's Messiah and King to Israel and ruler over the earth.

II. The Similarities of the Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24:3-31) and the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

There are at least four types of similarities between the Olivet Discourse and the discussion in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: (1) both passages have a coming of Christ mentioned, (2) both have Christ coming in the clouds, (3) both have the angels of God accompanying Christ, (4) and both passages have a gathering of God's people.

A. Both passages have a coming of Christ

Matt. 24:3: "And what will be the sign of Your coming (paresais), and of the end of the age?"

Matt. 24:3: "For many will come (elusontai) in My name, saying 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many."

Matt. 24:27: "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming (paresia) of the Son of Man be."

Matt. 24:30: "and they will see the Son of Man coming (erchoman) on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."

Matt. 24:37: "But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming (paresia) of the Son of Man be."

Matt. 24:39: "so also will the coming (paresia)of the Son of Man be."

Matt. 24:44: "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming (erchetai) at an hour you do not expect."

1 Thess. 4: "we who are alive and remain until the coming (paresias) of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep."

This expression is also found in the trial of Jesus when he proclaims before the Jewish council in Mark 14:62: "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming (erchoman) on the clouds of heaven." (NW)

B. Both passages have Christ coming with the clouds

Matt. 24:30: "coming on the clouds (nephelon) of heaven with power and great glory."

1 Thess. 4:17: "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds (nephelon) to meet the Lord in the air."

C. Both passages have the angels of God accompanying Christ

Matt. 24:31: "He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet"

1 Thess. 4:16: "with the voice of an archangel"

D. Both passages have a gathering of God's people

Matt. 24:31: "And they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

1 Thess. 4:17: "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

III. Principles of Interpretation about Meaning and Significance

A. What makes up a meaning?

A meaning is a reality expressed by various constituent parts which may or may not all be expressed in a given statement but are never disparate from the meaning and its parts.

By this I mean that when we say that an author means a certain thing in a text, we understand that the meaning may have more than one idea included within it but never contradictory ideas to the meaning. Moreover, in seeking to determine if the meaning in one passage of Scripture, like Matthew 24, is the same as the meaning in another passage, like 1 Thessalonians, it is the dissimilarities that must given special attention, not the similarities.

B. Meaning/type and implications/traits

A type is determined by all those defined elements (traits) that make a thing, or concept, what it is but not something else.

For example, in looking at a physical object to determine its type, we must look at all those elements that go into making it what it is, but we must also look at what makes it not something else. A tree and bush illustrate this idea.

C. How dissimilarities among types helps determine meaning

1. Different versus disparate

A look at the difference between different meaning from disparate meaning may be explained by looking at Galatians 3:26-28 where the meaning is the status one has in the Abrahamic regardless of social position one has, whether slave or free, Jew or Greek, male or female. The meaning, though unstated in the text, also includes further implications, namely, whether rich or poor, black or white, parent or child, etc. has any bearing on one's position in Christ. These are legitimate applications consistent with the meaning. Application is meaning consistently carried into a new situation. Nothing, however, is said or implied in the passage regarding one's function in the church, an improper application often given.

We should use the same kind of analysis in the Olivet Discourse and 1 Thessalonians 4.

IV. Dissimilarities between the Coming of Christ in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and the Olivet Discourse (Mt 24:3-31)

A. The Two Texts are Asking, and Answering, Different Questions

Matthew 24 begins with the disciples of Christ going with Him through the temple area and responding to His comments on the temple's destruction. There questions regarding the destruction of the temple and His subsequent coming of Messiah with its attendant ending of the present age giving way to the age of Messiah were very natural. Christ's answer to clarify His coming in the heavens in judgment after the temple's destruction and at the end of the age (including the tribulation period, Daniel's 70th week) deals in detail with these questions.

On the other hand, Paul the apostle is responding to the matter of the death of saints in view of an eager anticipation of an imminent coming of Christ for His church. The natural discussion centers in the certainty of a future resurrection founded in the redemptive acts of the Savior which takes on an eschatological and apocalyptic dimension, salvation as a future historical event.

B. The sense of urgency in 1 Thessalonians versus watchfulness toward the future in the Olivet Discourse

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13 we observe that the apostle has a sense of urgency to explain the matter of the coming of Christ to receive His church in view of the deep concern of the Thessalonians over the death of some of the believers. The experience of the church within its own community, then, is in view, not cataclysmic events occurring in the world or in nature. In Matthew 24, the concern is about events in the world around, from persecution to tribulation, events in nature, the destruction of the temple, the rise of antichrist and antichrists.

C The importance of the death and resurrection of Christ salvific concepts in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 versus the in the Olivet Discourse

The essence of the kerygma, the death and resurrection of Christ is pivotal in 1 Thessalonians and serve as the foundation for, the teaching of Christ's coming with those who had died to be reunited with their bodies as well as with living believers. The salvation offered is not merely deliverance from the physical wrath of God but escape from that wrath relates to the soteriological dimensions of Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection. A similar idea is found in a later book by Paul, 1 Corinthians, where the certainty of the resurrection directly depends on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus.

In the Olivet Discourse the coming does not impinge on the kerygma but on the Messiah's nature and mission of judgment. The closest one gets is the statement of the gospel of the kingdom, but this is stated in general terms rather than "the gospel" as described by Paul in Romans 1:16. He comes to gather His elect for sure, but the emphasis is not on gathering them to Him in the air and the elect are not resurrected ones, but the Jews, most likely, scattered in the diasporas to the four corners of the earth (v. 31). His coming, as well, is primarily not one of comfort, but one that brings mourning (v. 30) and judgment on the earth (probably vv. 36-41; v. 29).

D. The gathering together and catching up (1 Thess. 4 & 2 Thess 2) versus being taken away (cf. Jn 14:3) & left in the Olivet Discourse (cf. Lk 17)

The terminology of the removal of the church from the earth is "catching up" and being "gathered together" with Christ. On the other hand, Matthew 24 speaks about being taken away in judgment. It should be granted that this terminology closely resembles words used of the rapture in 1 and 2 Thessalonians (gathered) and John 14:3 (receive, *paralambano*), but the association is not exact. The gathering in 1 Thessalonians is gathered together with Christ (and 2 Thess 2:1 by previous reference of 1 Thessalonians 4) whereas the mention in Matthew 24 speaks only of being gathered together by angels, without reference to where the gathering occurs. The use of *paralambano* in John 14:3 is clearly in the context of Christ's coming for His disciples, whereas the *paralambano* in Matthew 24 is in a strong context of judgment (compare Luke 17:26ff).

It would be well here to mention the mistake of Robert Gundry in arguing that the use of *katabano* requires coming to the earth in 1 Thessalonians 4:16. The word is not consistently used this way in the literature. Moreover the figure of a king coming to rescue His people, fight a war, and victoriously entering into an enemy city to rule fits well the coming in two aspects of rescue and revelation, with a war in between.

E. The Son of man theme (Dan 7, etc.) in the Olivet Discourse versus the Lord and Savior in 1 Thess. 4

The Son of man theme is found throughout chapter 24 of Matthew (and parallel texts), strongly picking up the theme of Daniel 7 and 9. Such a Messianic designation would not be missed on the disciples nor on the Sanhedrin at Christ's trial (mentioned earlier). This theme is totally missing from the rapture passages in 1 and 2 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians 15.

F. Judgment in Matthew 24:3-31 but Salvation in 1 Thessalonians 4

1 Thessalonians begins with a statement of deliverance for the people of God from the coming wrath (1:10). Such an idea is present in both chapters 4 and 5 when speaking of the church at the coming of Christ. He rescues His people; they are not to endure the wrath He will bring on the earth but will be taken out of harms way. Certainly they could be kept by God through the time of wrath (as are the two witnesses and the 144,000 Jewish converts), but He has different plans for His bride. On the other hand, the major emphasis in Olivet Discourse is His coming as Son of man to execute judgment and assert the Ps 2, 110 and the Daniel 7 passage kind of Messianic role.

G. Archangels and the great shout in 1 Thessalonians 4 and angels and a shout in Matthew 24

A host of angels is present in the gospel of Matthew (24), their function together the elect throughout the earth. No such role is mentioned in 1 Thessalonians. They rise with the shout of the Christ, very similar to His shout for Lazarus to rise from the dead. Only the archangel, possibly Gabriel in view of the trumpet,

V. Identification of the Second Coming in judgment with the Olivet Discourse and 1 Thessalonians 5 and 2 Thessalonians 2 and that of 1 Thessalonians 4 with 2 Thessalonians 2 and 1 Corinthians 15

A. The Revelation of Christ Passages

1. Judgment in Mt 24, Mk 13, 2 Thess. 2, 1 Thess. 5
2. Day and night themes in Mt 24, Mk 13, 2 Thes 2, 1 Thess 5
3. Tribulation in Mt 24, Mk 13, 2 Thess 2, 1 Thess 5

B. The Rescue by Christ Passages

1. Resurrection in 1 Thess 4 and 1 Cor 15
2. Rapture in 1 Thess. 4 and 2 Thess 2
3. Mystery in 1 Thess 4 (revelation), 2 Thess 2:1-2 (revelation), and I Cor. 15:50-58 (mystery)

VI. Conclusion of the Matter