

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXXIII

by Thomas Ice

“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.”

—Matthew 24:36–39

With the prohibition clearly stated against attempts to date-set, our Lord says that no one knows the time of His return, not the angels, nor the Son, but only the Father. But, what does this mean in light of the fact that Matthew 24:4–31 speaks concerning the tribulation period that is seven 360-day years, divided at the midpoint by the abomination of desolation? In other words, alert believers in the tribulation should be able to know the exact day of the second coming. I believe that believers in the tribulation will indeed be able to know the day of Christ’s return since Luke 21:28 says, “But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Also, Matthew 24:34 is a time related statement saying that the generation that sees “all these things,” (i.e., the events of the seven-year tribulation) will not pass away until Christ returns. So what does Matthew 24:36 mean in light of these things?

NO ONE KNOWS

In this passage Jesus is referred to as “the Son.” When the New Testament uses terms like “the Son,” or “the Son of Man,” as occurs in the next verse, it stresses His humanity and the incarnation. This passage does not say, “that no man will ever know. This He did not say.”¹ I agree with most commentators that this passage is saying that in His incarnation as the Son of Man it was not given to Him (or revealed to Him) the time of His return. I am sure that He knows the day and the hour upon His return to heaven. John MacArthur notes the following:

Therefore, even on this last day before His arrest, the Son did not know the precise day and hour He would return to earth at His second coming. During Christ’s incarnation, the Father alone exercised unrestricted divine omniscience.²

Ed Glasscock echoes this understanding: “The Lord did not attempt to display His deity but rather, in contrast, emphasized His humanity. As an obedient servant in His humanity, Jesus did not know the day or the hour of His return.”³

Jesus is saying that in essence He was not telling them at that time when He was returning. However, this does not mean that those at a future time would not be able to know when He was returning. Yeager says: “The thought of the context is that at the time that Jesus spoke this to His disciples, and even yet now, at the current writing, nobody knows the day and the hour.”⁴ It is not until after the rapture, when one is in the tribulation that God’s prophetic clock will resume ticking. For believers living

during that time they will be able to know at least the day when Christ will return to planet earth.

THE DAYS OF NOAH

In the second illustration following His Olivet Discourse (24:4–31) Jesus announces a parabolic comparison between His second coming and that of the days of Noah (24:37). While not specifically called one in the passage, it has the distinctives of a parabolic comparison. “The coming of the Son of Man will be *just like* the days of Noah” (emphasis added). Christ is making a comparison between His return (24:36) and the antediluvian days of Noah.

First of all, the passage says that the second coming of Christ will be *just like* the days of Noah. The word order in the original language reads as follows: “For just as the days of Noah, in this way is the coming of the Son of Man.” The intensive particle “just as” *osper* is a “marker of similarity between events and states.”⁵ When combined with the demonstrative adverb “in this way” *houtos*, Christ is saying that the days of Noah were exactly the same as will be the time of Christ’s return.

Does this mean that there is an extensive list of items that can be compared with the days of Noah? I do not think so. There is a single primary point that Christ emphasizes in each of the parables that He gives. In this one it is preparedness. “The likeness is seen in the suddenness of the coming of the judgment and the unpreparedness of the world for it,” declares Toussaint.⁶ Daniel Harrington says, “The point of the comparison between the days of Noah and the coming of the Son of Man is the unexpectedness of the crisis. . . . So unexpected was the flood that people did not recognize it until it had already come upon them.”⁷

On more than one occasion the New Testament compares the second coming to the flood in Noah’s days (Luke 17:26–27; 2 Pet. 2:4–11), as well as to other judgments such as the days of Lot (Luke 17:28–30). The central point found in these passages is that unbelievers were not prepared for God’s judgment. This is the intention of Christ in this passage as well.

EATING AND DRINKING

Lack of preparedness is reinforced by the examples that our Lord cites. The Greek word used here for “eating” *trogo* is not the word normally used. It means, “to bite or chew food, *eat* (audibly), of animals . . . chew, nibble, munch.”⁸ It is only used six times in the Greek New Testament, the other five uses are all found in John, usually of eating Christ’s flesh. The normal New Testament Greek word for “eating,” which is used in the parallel passage (Luke 17:27), is *esthio*. It occurs 158 times in the Greek New Testament and means, “to take something in through the mouth, usually solids, but also liquids, *eat*.”⁹ What’s the point? The point appears to be “implying luxurious living.”¹⁰ The unprepared of that day will be so absorbed in pleasing themselves, or said another way, chomping on food, that they miss the fact that they are living in extraordinary times that would justify the abandoning the normal routines of life. Alfred Plummer also explains as follows:

The special point of the analogy is not that the generation that was swept away by the Flood was exceptionally wicked; none of the occupations mentioned are sinful; but that it was so absorbed in its worldly pursuits that it paid no attention to solemn warnings. Instead of saying: “It is certain to come; therefore we must make preparation and be always on the watch,”

they said: “No one knows when it will come; therefore there is no need to trouble oneself about it yet. Other matters are much more urgent.”¹¹

The events that Christ had just described (the tribulation in 24:4–31) should evoke concern about God’s plan for history. Instead, the unbelievers want to continue their own pursuits of their daily routines. Robert Govett explains: “The love of the world is displayed by men’s being given over to eating and drinking. Had they believed the message of wrath just about to come, they would have fasted and wept.”¹² A desire for the status quo is a manifestation of unpreparedness.

MARRYING AND GIVING IN MARRIAGE

While eating and drinking relates to daily unpreparedness, marrying and giving in marriage illustrates unpreparedness concerning one’s long-range perspective. Marriage, while certainly an institution ordained of God is good in-and-of itself, the point here is that one should not be engaged in long-ranged planning while unprepared for impending judgment. Meyer tells us that it is “descriptive of a mode of life without concern, and without any foreboding of an impending catastrophe.”¹³ Just as it would make no sense to plan marriage in the days of Noah leading up to the Flood, if one was unprepared to face God’s judgment, in the same way, it makes no sense to plan for marriage in the face of the events of the tribulation that will lead up to the second coming.

In the days of Noah, Noah had been preaching concerning the coming judgment of God (2 Pet. 2:5), yet no one, other than Noah’s family paid attention to his message. Instead, they went about business as usual, ignoring the warnings of God’s Word. Govett captures the sense well in the following:

Hence these pursuits are spoken of, not as evil in themselves, but as they practically give the lie to the warnings of God. These are only reasonable, so long as the present scene is to go on as it is. The accumulating property, when both life, property, and posterity are to be destroyed, is folly.¹⁴

These practices by the unprepared ceased “the day that Noah entered the ark,” just as they will in the future when Christ returns.

THEY DID NOT UNDERSTAND

Perhaps the most sobering statement in this passage is that “they did not understand.” They did not put two and two together, Jesus said, “*until* the flood came and took them all away.” Jesus then said, “so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.” Here we have a similar construction that we saw in verse 37, which is the “marker of similarity between events and states.”¹⁵

Not only should similarities be noted, but it is also important to see contrasts as well. It is important to note that the rejecters of God’s Word, who “did not understand,” in verse 39 is juxtaposed with the admonition to believers in verse 33, which says, “even so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.” The Greek verb *ginosko* is used in both passages and translated “recognize” in verse 33 and “understand” in verse 39. This Greek word has the meaning in these contexts of “to grasp the significance or meaning of something, understand, comprehend.”¹⁶ The difference between the one who understands and the one who does not is based upon who accepts God’s Word and who does not.

Actually, verse 39 does say that they the unbelievers did come to understand these things. However, their understanding did not come *until* the flood came and took them all away. This is one of the many things that separate believers from unbelievers. Believers accept God's Word before an event occurs because they trust Him and His prophetic word. On the other hand, an unbeliever has to be shown these things through experience, in this case a very bad experience. What about you? Do you trust God and His Word because He says it, or are you one who has to be shown things from experience? There is a big difference between the two. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament* (Bowling Green: Renaissance Press, 1978), Vol. 3, p. 324.

² John MacArthur, *The New Testament Commentary: Matthew 24–28* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), p. 72.

³ Ed Glasscock, *Matthew: Moody Gospel Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), p. 476.

⁴ Yeager, *Renaissance*, Vol. 2, p. 326.

⁵ Walter Baur, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., rev. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 1106. (abbreviated as BDAG)

⁶ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold The King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980), p. 280.

⁷ Daniel J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 342.

⁸ BDAG, p. 1019.

⁹ BDAG, p. 396.

¹⁰ A. Carr, *Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges. The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Cambridge: At The University Press, 1896), p. 273.

¹¹ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, 2nd. edition (Minneapolis: James Family, n.d.), p. 340.

¹² Robert Govett, *The Prophecy on Olivet* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing Co., [1881] 1985), p. 95.

¹³ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879), vol. 2, p. 155.

¹⁴ Govett, *Prophecy*, p. 96.

¹⁵ BDAG, p. 1106.

¹⁶ BDAG, p. 201.