

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXXIV

by Thomas Ice

“Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.”

—Matthew 24:40–42

In the early 1970s, probably the most popular song within the “Jesus movement,” was one entitled: “I Wish We’d All Been Ready,” by Larry Norman. I was involved in this movement and we rarely met when we did not sing Norman’s song. This song about the rapture includes the following lines:

A man and wife asleep in bed.
She hears a noise and turns her head, he's gone.
I wish we'd all been ready.
Two men walking up a hill.
One disappears and one's left standing still.
I wish we'd all been ready.

While I tend to like songs about the rapture, (I generally like this song), I do not think Matthew 24:40–42 (compare Luke 17:34–37) is a reference to the rapture, instead, Christ has in mind His second coming.

ONE WILL BE TAKEN

The illustration used in this parable is straight forward in both examples. There will be a separation where one individual will be taken and the other left behind. Also, in context, it is clear that one is a believer and the other is not. This describes a clear separation process. The question related to this passage is who is taken and who is left behind. Those who hold to pretribulationism have argued both ways on this issue. Does this refer to the believer being taken and the unbeliever left behind, or just the reverse, where the unbeliever is taken away in the believer is left to enter the kingdom? I believe the latter view is the correct. It is the unbeliever who is taken away in judgment.

As I have been arguing throughout Matthew 24, the focus is upon the second coming while the rapture is nowhere to be found in this passage. In Matthew 24, our Lord is teaching about the events leading up to His return (tribulation events in verses 4–26), followed by a revelation of His second coming, which is then followed by parables that drive home lessons related to His previous teachings (32–51). I think it would be inconsistent to introduce parables about the rapture when He has not taught about that event in this passage.¹

It is true that when the rapture occurs there will be a separation of believers from unbelievers when we are snatched away from planet earth. It is true that somewhere there will two people together and one is taken while the other is left, however, that is not what is spoken of in Matthew 24 because of the context. These parables are making points about what Christ taught in 24:4–31.

TAKEN IN JUDGMENT OR SALVATION?

The Greek word used in verses 40 and 41 is *paralambano*, made up of the root word *lambano*, which means “to take” or “receive” and the preposition *para*, which means “along side of.” Thus, the meaning of this verb is “to take into close association, take (to oneself), take with/along.”² The only place that I could find where this word is clearly used of the rapture is of Christ’s initial disclosure of this mystery in John 14:3: “I will come again, and *receive* you to Myself.” Since *paralambano* is not a technical term that has the same meaning in every instance it is used in the New Testament, like any word in any language, usage must be determined by how it is used in a given context.

Some have tried to argue that “taken” here refers to the pre-trib rapture. There is a small minority of pretribulationist that see these two verses as a reference to the rapture.³ For example, David L. Cooper said, “The dominant idea is that the one who is a child of God will be taken, whereas the one who has never made his peace with the Lord will be left to pass into the Great Tribulation.”⁴ As Louis Barbieri has noted: “The Lord was not describing the Rapture, for the removal of the church will not be a judgment on the church. If this were the Rapture, as some commentators affirm, the Rapture would have to be posttribulational, for this event occurs immediately before the Lord’s return in glory.”⁵

Some have said that *paralambano* is only used of positive relations. However, such is not the case. It is used of the Roman soldiers taking Jesus away from the Garden of Gethsemane to the Praetorium and eventual crucifixion (Matt. 27:27; John 19:16). It is used of the devil taking Jesus with him to show Him all the kingdoms of this world (Matt. 4:5, 8). This verb is also used of the exercised demon returning to the newly swept house and taking with it seven other spirits (Matt. 12:45; Luke 11:26). Stan Toussaint discusses this matter as follows:

Is this a description of the rapture of the church or of the taking of the wicked to judgment? Those who take the former position argue that “to take” (*paralambano*), the verb used here, is to be differentiated from “to take” (*airw*), the verb used in verse thirty-nine. It is asserted that *paralambano* signifies the act whereby Christ receives His own to Himself. However, *paralambano* is also used in a bad sense (cf. Matthew 4:5, 8; John 19:16). Since it is parallel in thought with those who were taken in the judgment of the flood, it is best to refer the verb to those who were taken for judgment preceding the establishment of the kingdom. The difference in verbs can be accounted for on the basis of accuracy of description. “The flood came and swept them all away” is a good translation.⁶

CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATION

For me, the strongest reason to take the separation depicted in this passage as a reference to ones taken away in judgment is the context. It appears that verses 40–41 are illustrating that which preceded it in verses 36–39, namely that those who were not prepared in the days of Noah were taken away, in judgment, by the flood. Verse 39 ends by saying, “so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.” Clearly the emphasis in this verse is on unbelievers being taken away in the judgment of the flood. Therefore, verses 40–41 drive that point home by giving a couple examples of the coming separation that will occur at this time of judgment. Arno Gaebelein notes the following:

Two classes were living in Noah's day. The one who were unbelieving and these were swept away by the divine judgment. The other class was Noah and his house, and he and his own were left and not destroyed by the judgment. It will be so again in the coming of the Son of Man. The unbelievers will be *taken* away in the day of judgment and wrath; the others will be *left* on the earth to receive and enjoy the blessings of the coming age and enter into the kingdom, which will then be established.⁷

PARALLEL PASSAGE

Another reason to see verses 40–41 as illustrating ones who are taken in judgment is the parallel passage found in Luke 17:24–37. In a previous section (17:26–30), Christ speaks of the coming of the Son of Man being just like the days of Noah and Lot. In both illustrations it was the wicked one who was taken in judgment. Luke 17:27 says, “the flood came and *destroyed* them all.” Verses 28 and 29 say: “It was the same as happened in the days of Lot . . . and *destroyed* them all.” (emphasis added) Verses 34–36 gives three illustrations of the separation of believers and unbelievers. Then the following question is asked by the disciples: “Where Lord?” This question means where are the unbelievers taken? Jesus answers: “Wheresoever the body is, thither will the eagles be gathered together.” Eagles in this context imply vultures who hover over and scavenge a dead corpse. Thus, anyone would be able to see where a dead body is because of the vultures hovering above (Rev. 19:17-21). Such language clearly supports the notion that the ones taken are removed to judgment. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Christ introduces the rapture in the “Upper Room Discourse” found in John 13–17. Jesus not only discloses the new truth of the rapture (John 14:1-3), but many other things relating to the impending Church age. There is an emphasis in the Upper Room Discourse upon Christ's introduction of a number of topics that He said would be expanded upon later when the Spirit of Truth would come to the Apostles (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). The result of the later activity of the Holy Spirit is the New Testament Epistles where they were given greater revelation about New Testament truths like the rapture of the Church.

² 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. 767.

³ I did find a published pretribulationist who says that this passage refers to both the rapture and the second coming. He called it a dual reference. See Allen Beechick, *The Pre-Tribulation Rapture* (Denver: Accent Books, 1980), pp. 231–68.

⁴ David L. Cooper, *Future Events Revealed (According to Matthew 24 and 25)* (Los Angeles: Published by David L. Cooper, 1935), p. 101. See also Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, Revised Edition (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, [1982], 2002), p. 650, a disciple of Cooper.

⁵ Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., “Matthew,” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), p. 79.

⁶ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold The King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980), p. 281.

⁷ Arno C. Gaebelien, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, [1910] 1961), pp. 515–16.