

Hartford Bible Students

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Day of the Lord Comes as a Thief

“. . . the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night . . . But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.”

1 Thess. 5:2-4

To many Christians, the second coming of Christ is an earthshattering event. If so, how do we explain the above text describing his return “as a thief in the night?” We suggest that the second presence of Christ is not a cataclysmic event, but a period of time during which he accomplishes the preparation of the world for his Messianic Kingdom. The text above indicates that the true Christian would be alert and searching for evidence of Christ’s return. When his disciples asked Jesus, “...what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world,” he did not leave them clueless, but proceeded to list many evidences which would be indications of this time. (Matt. 24:3)

Mistranslations Foster Misunderstandings

The word “coming” in Matthew 24:3 is a misleading translation of the Greek word “parousia” — “para,” meaning “beside” or “alongside of,” and “ousia,” a form of the verb “to be.” The thought is to be beside another or in their presence. When the roll is called in the schools of Greece, the proper response to one’s name being called is to reply “Parousia,” that is, “Present.” Thus, the Scripture would be more properly translated: “. . . what shall be the sign of thy presence . . .”

The second part of the disciples’ question was, “What shall be the sign . . . of the end of the world.” The Greek word translated “world” is “aion” and means age. Therefore, Jesus’ answer would indicate the conclusion of the time period in which he would return. Proper translations are critical, because mistranslations lead to false expectations. For example, many Christians have the impression that the literal end of the world is coming at Christ’s return. This contradicts the thought that “the earth

abideth forever.” (Eccl. 1:4) How comforting to know that Jesus was not referring to the end of the world, but the end of the Gospel age.

The “Days” of Noah

One such evidence of this end of the age was that “. . . as the Days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the son of man be.” (Matt. 24:37) To many Christians the concept of Christ’s coming (parousia-presence) merely means the imminence of his actual return. However, likening the presence of Christ to the days of Noah will show a far more dynamic significance. The Luke 17:26 account states: “As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man.” As it is obvious that Noah was present “in the days of Noah,” so it should be equally obvious that the Son of man would be present in “the days of the Son of man.”

The prophecy continues by elaborating the events of Noah’s day which would find their parallels in the days of the Son of man. Matthew 24:38, 39 reads: “For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.” It was the lack of awareness, then, and not the wickedness of Noah’s day that formed the illustration of conditions at the time of the return of Christ.

Additionally, it was not the flood, but the presence and work of Noah before the flood which prefigured the return of Christ at his Second Advent. This, then, is the import of the days of Noah. As life continues its hectic pace with its eating, drinking, and marrying, it is a temptation for the Christian to be swept along in this current of events and become drowsy. “Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.” (1 Thess. 5:6)

The Wise and the Foolish Virgins

In the chapter following the signs of the end of the age, Jesus gave his disciples a parable which would further warn to be awake and watching for the evidence of his return. "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins [Christians espoused to Christ] . . . five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps [God's Word], and took no oil [the spirit of truth] with them: but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh [the return of our Lord]; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps [searched the Scriptures and trimmed away every vestige of error]. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out . . ." (Matt. 25: 1-13)

Jesus was warning his disciples that there would come a time when he would return and seek those who would be awake, watching and searching the Scriptures for the evidence of his return. "I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." (2 Cor. 11:2) The parable concludes: "Afterward came also the other virgins saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh." (Matt. 25:11-13)

It is most important to note that Jesus is not saying this hour would never be known, for why would he have given so many signs of his return? Why indeed would Jesus need to give signs unless he knew that only those watching for these signs would be aware of what they meant? No, we can see that Jesus is illustrating conditions among his followers at the time of his return.

Notice that the virgins are broken up into two classes—one which is diligent and excited about their coming bridegroom, and the other which is less zealous. The first class is ready when the bridegroom returns and the second class lacks the oil—the spirit of truth gained by diligent study, prayer, and fellowship with other Christians.

The consequence of this unpreparedness is that the foolish virgins are unaware of the return of the bridegroom and lose the chief blessing of being a part of the "bride of Christ." Revelation speaks of this group of believers as those who serve "before the throne," and not on the throne. They are still in heaven, but serving in a lesser capacity. Psalms 45:14-15 confirms this: "The virgins, her companions who follow her, will be brought to Thee; they will enter into the King's palace." The Apostle Paul also speaks symbolically of those in heaven: ". . . one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead." (1 Cor. 15:41-42)

The watchers, the children of light, see the day dawning and their Day Star, Jesus, arising on the horizon while the world still sleeps. This blessed knowledge so strengthens and energizes their hearts that they are sanctified in a way they could not be otherwise. He has kept his promise, He has come again.

They see the foregleams of the Sun of Righteousness which will eventually rise with "healing in his wings" (Mal. 4:2) to bless the groaning creation. With joy they realize that they will also be with him as, "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." (Matthew 13:43)

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