

Hard to be Understood - Matthew 24

by Barry O'Dell

Matthew 24 has been misunderstood and misused by many people to teach things that have no basis in sound Biblical doctrine. Perhaps the best way to understand this chapter is to begin by noticing some phrases that appear several times. "Tell us, when shall *these things* be" (v. 3)? "For *these things* must come to pass" (v. 6). "And except *those days* should be shortened" (v. 22). "Immediately after the tribulation of *those days*" (v. 29). "When ye shall see all *these things*" (v. 33). "Till all *these things* be fulfilled" (v. 34). In contrast to those statements verse 36 reads, "But of *that day* and hour knoweth no man." Jesus made a clear distinction between "*these things/days*" as opposed to "*that day*." It is also important to study Mark 13 and Luke 21:5-33 in order to get a complete picture of what was being discussed.

Jesus left the temple after teaching and told His disciples "*There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down*" (Matt. 24:2). Naturally, as Jewish men, the pronouncement of the destruction of Jerusalem disturbed them and they wanted to know the *when* and the *what* of Jesus' prophecy (Matt. 24:3). Matthew 24 can easily be understood by noting the clear distinction made in verse 36 with the small word *but*. It is translated from a small Greek word ($\delta\epsilon$) that shows transition.¹ In answering the disciples' question Jesus went from speaking of *those days/things* to *that day* and *hour* (vs. 36, 42, 44, 50).

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As Jesus addressed their concerns about the destruction of Jerusalem, He informed them that there would be many different signs. Deception (v. 4-5), wars and rumors of wars (v. 6-7), religious persecution against the apostles (v. 9-12), and the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy (Dan. 9:27; Mk. 13:14; Lk. 21:23-24). While there is still deception, war, and persecution today, the mention of the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy nails down the time of the events Jesus was discussing. Luke's account specifically mentions the surrounding of Jerusalem by armies and the

desolation that would take place. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote of these events as recorded in *The Complete Works of Josephus*. The Roman destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 fulfilled the signs that we have recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21.

Another point to be noticed in the first thirty-five verses of Matthew 24 is this: "*Then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains: let him which is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house: neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes*" (v. 16-18). From these statements it is obvious that Jesus was speaking of a local event in Jerusalem. He basically told His disciples to "get out of town!" When Jesus returns for judgment on the world there will be nowhere to run or hide! It will not be a local event that can be escaped. Also, in understanding Matthew 24, verse 34 cannot be overlooked. Jesus said, "*Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.*" His apostles would witness these events. If they were in Jerusalem when it was surrounded by armies they would have been able to escape. Matthew 24:1-35 is not speaking of the final judgment on the world, but of the coming destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37-38).

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Matthew 24:29 uses language that is familiar to students of the Bible. The darkening of the sun, moon, and stars is used by Isaiah (13:10-11; 34:4-5) and Ezekiel (32:6-8) to speak of the destruction of nations. Joel used similar language in his prophecy about the establishment of the church (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:15-20). Jesus used language that His disciples would easily understand, but that some struggle with today. It was language that signified a traumatic event that would have an impact on the world. There would be many signs that the Lord was coming in judgment against the city of Jerusalem in the lifetime of His disciples. Just as God came in judgment against Babylon and Egypt, so He would against Jerusalem.

In contrast, Matthew 24:36-51 teaches many important truths about the coming of Jesus at the “end” (1 Cor. 15:24). The Father alone knows of that day (Matt. 24:36; Mk. 13:32). Just like in the days of Noah people will be going about the usual activities of life when judgment comes (Matt. 24:37-41). Because it is the case that there will be no sign(s) of Jesus coming He told His disciples to “Watch” (Matt. 24:42-46; Mk. 13:32-37). The New Testament is full of statements regarding the nature of Christ’s return. “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh” (Matt. 25:13). “But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know

perfectly that 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 Thes. 5:1-4). “*But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night...*” (2 Pet. 3:10). “*Be ye therefore ready also: for the Son of Man cometh at an hour when ye think not*” (Lk. 12:40). Jesus’ return will be visible (Acts 1:11), audible (Jn. 5:28-29), and without any advanced notice.

Since it is the case that Jesus’ return will be sudden and without notice, what is man’s responsibility? “*Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing*” (Matt. 24:45-46). We must be prepared for His sudden return (Matt. 25:1-13) and actively working for His cause (Matt. 25:14-30). As Peter wrote, “*Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of Him in peace, without spot, and blameless*” (2 Pet. 3:14). Matthew 24 is not really hard to be understood if it is kept in context and if we have an understanding of other Bible passages on the same subject.

1. Ray Summers, *Essentials of New Testament Greek*, Revised. Broadman & Holman, 1995. Page 42.

Hard to be Understood - Revelation 20 and the 1,000 Years

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From the outset, the apostle John affirms that the prophecy he received on Patmos was “*signified*,” meaning that it was delivered by means of signs and symbols (Rev. 1:1). None then who wish to grasp the meaning of Revelation should disregard this fundamental principle of interpretation as he reads the book. Rather, one’s understanding of the text must be flavored by an appreciation that, unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise, the images, symbols, and visions found within the book of Revelation are to be taken figuratively. That which John received figuratively, and recorded figuratively, must be regarded figuratively if one is to properly understand this highly symbolic portion of Scripture.

The proponents of Premillennialism take this highly figurative language and create from it a literal thousand-year kingdom upon the earth. The entirety of their belief system rests upon their misuse of this single passage, Revelation 20:4-6, for no other Scripture speaks of a thousand-year reign. Therefore, in order to achieve their ends, Premillennialists choose to ignore the figurative nature of certain portions of the book of Revelation in order to justify their belief in a millennial reign of Christ from Jerusalem upon David’s throne. But even within the twentieth chapter of Revelation itself, Premillennialists are not consistent in their application of what should be viewed as literal versus what should be viewed as figurative. They would readily admit that the key, the chain, and the bottomless pit spoken of in Revelation 20:1-3 are all figurative, but then they would demand

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that all references made to the thousand-year reign within that same context are to be taken literally. This pick and choose method of interpretation is nothing short of wresting the Scriptures. And if this injustice to Revelation 20 were not enough, the Premillennial position must also read into the sacred text things made from whole cloth in order to support their doctrine.

David R. Pharr, in his work *Thy Kingdom Come*, answers eight such assertions. (1) Nothing is mentioned in this text concerning Christ's second coming. (2) Nothing is said in this text regarding Christ ever coming to earth. (3) Nothing is said about Christ, or anyone else, reigning upon the earth. (4) No mention is made of Christ ruling from David's literal throne or from the city of Jerusalem. (5) Nothing in this text refers to bodies being resurrected in order to reign, but rather the focus is only upon souls. (6) There is no mention of a Rapture. (7) There is also no mention of those who were supposedly raptured ever being returned to earth in order to reign. (8) Those who are said to live and reign with Christ a thousand years are not all believers, but are those who "were beheaded" and "which had not worshipped the beast." While Premillennialists read these assertions into the text, an honest reading of the Scriptures will show that they are simply not there. If the Premillennial view of the thousand-year reign of Revelation 20 is lacking - and it is - then to what does the thousand-year reign refer? To answer that question, we invite the reader to consider four important observations.

First, John specifies that he "saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and **they** lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years" (Rev. 20:4). Please note that nothing is said here regarding the duration of Christ's reign. Rather, what is described is the reign of the martyrs **with** Christ. Though their reign with Christ is said to last a thousand years, the duration of Christ's reign is in no way defined or limited to a thousand years by this text. **Second**, the number one thousand (like other multiples of ten in apocalyptic literature) represents

completeness and is used as a figurative number in other places within the Bible. For instance, it is said that God "keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations" (Deut. 7:9). Will God then **not** be faithful to the thousand and first generation that loves Him and keeps His commandments? But consider also that God has declared, "For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills" (Ps. 50:10). Are the cattle on every other hill on earth any less divinely owned than those that live upon the thousand specific hills God spoke of? Such is an absurdity. Rather, the number one thousand used in Deuteronomy 7 and Psalm 50 merely symbolizes a very large and complete number of something just as it does in Revelation 20. If this is not the case in Revelation 20, then not only will the reign of the righteous cease at the end of the millennium, but so to will their lives, for John said that "they lived **and** reigned with Christ a thousand years." If the duration of their reign is literal, then so too must be the duration of their lives, for both are said to last a thousand years.

This pick and choose method of interpretation is nothing short of wresting the Scriptures.

Third, the thrust of the opening verses of Revelation 20 is to depict, not the reign of Christ upon the earth, but the reigning of His martyred saints who had been beheaded for the witness of Jesus and the Word of God. According to verse 4 John saw thrones, and upon those thrones sat the disembodied souls of the victorious dead who had been slain by their Roman persecutors, but who, for a long and complete period to come, would reign with their Lord. These same ones who had been slain and whose voices earlier cried out "How long, O Lord?" (Rev. 6:9-11) are now depicted as safe from Satan and reigning as victors with Christ. **Fourth**, Christ's reign is not yet to come, but rather has already begun. God promised David that one of his seed would establish a kingdom and that it would stand forever (II Sam. 7:12-13). Mary was told that it would be her son, Jesus, who would so reign (Luke 1:32-33). And then on Pentecost, while the kingdom (church) was being established, Peter would say that the promise made to David and to Mary had now been fulfilled (Acts 2:29-36). To desire a physical millennial kingdom on earth, then, is to miss out on the spiritual and glorious kingdom of Christ, His church.

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Fulton County Gospel News

USPS Publication #211780

...is a periodical publication issued bimonthly by the church of Christ at Third & Bethel (PO Box 251), Mammoth Spring, AR 72554-0251.

POSTMASTER: Please mail all changes of address to the above address.

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This paper is supported by voluntary contributions for which we are grateful. Financial information will be furnished upon request.

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