

Matthew 24

by John Nelson Darby

John Nelson Darby's sermon on Matthew 24 explores the prophetic warnings and the condition of Israel and the world leading up to the return of Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 24:1

Topics: "Prophecy", "Vigilance in Faith"

Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on Matthew 24, emphasizing the consequences of Israel's rejection of the Messiah and the ensuing judgment upon Jerusalem. He discusses the prophetic nature of the chapter, detailing the trials the disciples will face, the rise of false prophets, and the eventual return of Christ to gather the elect of Israel. Darby highlights the importance of the disciples' testimony during Christ's absence and the need for vigilance in awaiting His return. He warns against complacency and worldliness, illustrating the distinction between faithful servants and those who neglect their responsibilities. Ultimately, the sermon underscores God's sovereignty and the fulfillment of His promises regarding Israel and the kingdom.

Transcript

We have already seen that the rejection of the testimony to the kingdom in grace, is the cause of the judgment that falls upon Jerusalem and its inhabitants. Now in chapter 24 we have the position of this testimony in the midst of the people; the condition of the Gentiles, and the relation in which they stood to the testimony rendered by the disciples; after this, the condition of Jerusalem, consequent upon her rejection of the Messiah, and her contempt for the testimony; and then the universal overthrow at the end of those days: a state of things which should be ended by the appearance of the Son of man, and the gathering together of the elect of Israel from the four winds.

We must examine this remarkable passage, at once a prophecy, and instruction to the disciples for their direction in the path they must follow amid the coming events.

Jesus departs from the temple, and that for ever—a solemn act, which, we may say, executed the judgment He had just pronounced. The house was now desolate. The hearts of the disciples were still bound to it by their former prepossessions. They draw His attention to the magnificent buildings that composed it. Jesus announces to them its entire destruction. Seated apart with Him on the Mount of Olives, the disciples inquire when these things were to happen, and what would be the sign of His coming and of the end of the age. They class together the destruction of the temple, the coming of Christ, and the end of the age. We

must observe, that here the end of the age is the end of the period during which Israel was subject to the law under the old covenant: a period which was to cease, giving place to the Messiah and to the new covenant. Observe also that God's government of the earth is the subject, and the judgments that should take place at Christ's coming, which would put an end to the existing age. The disciples confounded that which the Lord had said of the destruction of the temple with this period. [See Footnote #66] The Lord treats the subject from His own point of view (that is to say, with regard to the testimony which the disciples were to render in connection with the Jews during His absence and to the end of the age). He adds nothing as to the destruction of Jerusalem, which He had already announced. The time of His coming was purposely hidden. Moreover the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus put an end, in fact, to the position which the Lord's instructions had in view. There was no longer any cognizable testimony among the Jews. When this position shall be resumed, the applicability of the passage will also recommence. After the destruction of Jerusalem until that time the church only is in question.

The Lord's discourse is divided into three parts:- 1. The general condition of the disciples and of the world during the time of the testimony, to the end of verse 14; 2. The period marked out by the fact that the abomination of desolation stands in the holy place (v. 15); 3. The Lord's coming and the gathering together of the elect in Israel (v. 29).

The time of the disciples' testimony is characterised by false Christs and false prophets among the Jews; persecution of those who render testimony, betraying them to the Gentiles. But there is yet something more definite with regard to those days. There would be false Christs in Israel. There would be wars, famines, pestilences, earthquakes. They were not to be troubled: the end would not be yet. These things were only a beginning of sorrows. They were principally outward things. There were other events which would bring them into greater trial, and test them more thoroughly-things more from within. The disciples should be delivered up, put to death, hated of all nations. The consequence of this among those who made profession would be that many would be offended; they would betray one another. False prophets would arise and deceive many, and, because iniquity abounded, the love of many should wax cold-a sorrowful picture. But these things would give occasion for the exercise of a faith that had been put to the proof. He who endured to the end should be saved. This concerns the sphere of testimony in particular. That which the Lord says is not absolutely limited to the testimony in Canaan; but as it is from thence the testimony goes forth, it is all connected with that land as the centre of God's ways. But, in addition to this, the gospel of the kingdom should be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations, and then should the end come-the end of this age. Now, although heaven is the source of authority when the kingdom shall be established, Canaan and Jerusalem are its earthly centre. So that the idea of the kingdom, while extending throughout the world, turns our thoughts to the land of Israel. It is "this gospel of the kingdom" [See Footnote #67] which is here spoken of; it is not the proclamation of the union of the church with Christ, nor redemption in its fulness, as preached and taught by the apostles after the ascension, but the kingdom which was to be established on the earth, as John the Baptist, and as the Lord Himself, had proclaimed. The establishment of the universal authority of the ascended Christ should be preached in all the world to test their obedience, and to furnish those who had ears to hear with the object of faith.

This is the general history of that which would take place until the end of the age, without entering on the subject of the proclamation which founded the assembly properly so called. The impending destruction of Jerusalem, and the refusal of the Jews to receive the gospel, caused God to raise up a special testimony by the hands of Paul, without annulling the truth of the coming kingdom. That which follows proves that

such a going forth of testimony of the kingdom will take place at the end, and that the testimony will reach all nations before the coming of that judgment which will put an end to the age.

But there will be a moment when, within a certain sphere (that is, in Jerusalem and its vicinity) a special time of suffering shall set in as regards the testimony in Israel. In speaking of the abomination that maketh desolate, the Lord refers us to Daniel, that we may understand whereof He speaks. Now Daniel (chap. 12, where this tribulation is spoken of) brings us definitely to the last days-the time when Michael shall stand up for Daniel's people, that is, the Jews, who are under the domination of the Gentiles-the days in which there shall be a time of trouble, such as never had been nor ever again should be, and in which the remnant should be delivered. In the latter part of the previous chapter of that prophet, this time is called "the time of the end," and the destruction of the king of the north is prophetically declared. Now the prophet announces that 1335 days before the full blessing (blessed is he that has part therein!) the daily sacrifice should be taken away, and the abomination that maketh desolate set up; that from this moment there should be 1290 days (that is, one month more than the 1260 days spoken of in the Apocalypse, during which the woman who flees from the serpent is nourished in the wilderness; and also than the three years and a half of Daniel 7). At the end, as we find here, the judgment comes and the kingdom is given to the saints.

Thus it is proved that this passage refers to the last days and to the position of the Jews at that time. The events of the time past since the Lord uttered it confirm this thought. Neither in 1260 days, nor in 1260 years, after the days of Titus, nor in 30 days or years after, did any event take place which could be the accomplishment of these days in Daniel. The periods are gone by many years ago. Israel has not been delivered, neither has Daniel stood in his lot at the end of those days. It is equally plain that Jerusalem is in question in the passage, and its vicinity, for they that are in Judea are commanded to flee into the mountains. The disciples who shall be there at that time are to pray that their flight may not be on a sabbath day-an additional testimony that it is Jews who are the subject of the prophecy; but a testimony also of the tender care which the Lord takes of those who are His, thinking even in the midst of these unparalleled events, of whether it would be wintry weather at the time of their flight.

Besides this, other circumstances prove, if further proof were needed, that it is the Jewish remnant who are in question, and not the assembly. We know that all believers are to be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. They will afterwards return with Him. But here there will be false Christs on the earth, and people will say, "He is here in the wilderness," "He is there in the secret chambers." But the saints who shall be caught up and return with the Lord have nothing at all to do with false Christs on earth, since they will go up to heaven to be with Him there, before He returns to the earth; while it is easy to understand that the Jews, who are expecting earthly deliverance, should be liable to such temptations, and that they should be deceived by them unless kept by God Himself.

This part then of the prophecy applies to the last days, the last three years and a half before the judgment which will be suddenly poured out at the coming of the Son of man. The Lord will come suddenly as a flash of lightning, as an eagle to its prey, unto the spot where the object of His judgment is found. Immediately after the tribulation of those last three years and a half, the whole hierarchical system of government shall be shaken and utterly overthrown. Then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. This verse (30) contains the answer to the second part of the disciples' inquiry in verse 3. The Lord gives His disciples the warnings necessary for their guidance; but the world would see no signs, however plain they might be to those that understand. But this sign should be at the moment of the Lord's appearing. The

brightness of His glory whom they had despised would shew them who it was that came; and it would be unexpected. What a terrible moment, when, instead of a Messiah who should answer to their worldly pride, the Christ whom they had despised shall appear in the heavens!

Afterwards the Son of man, thus come and manifested, would send to gather all the elect of Israel from the four corners of the earth. It is this which ends the history of the Jews, and even that of Israel, in answer to the disciples' question, and unfolds the dealings of God with respect to the testimony among the people who had rejected it, announcing the time of their deep distress, and the judgment that shall be poured out in the midst of this scene when Jesus comes, the subversion of all powers great and small being complete.

The Lord gives the history of the testimony in Israel, and that of the people themselves, from the moment of His departure until His return; but the length of time, during which there should be neither people nor temple nor city, is not specified. It is this which gives importance to the capture of Jerusalem. It is not here spoken of in direct terms-the Lord does not describe it; but it put an end to that order of things to which His discourse applies, and this application is not resumed until Jerusalem and the Jews are again brought forward. The Lord announced it at the beginning. The disciples thought that His coming would take place at the same time. He answers them in such a manner that His discourse should be of use to them until the capture of Jerusalem. But when once the abomination of desolation is mentioned, we find ourselves carried on into the last days.

The disciples were to understand the signs He gave them. I have already said that the destruction of Jerusalem, by the fact itself, interrupted the application of His discourse. The Jewish nation was set aside; but verse 34 has a much wider sense, and one more really proper to it. Unbelieving Jews should exist, as such, until all was accomplished. Compare Deuteronomy 32:5, 20, where this judgment on Israel is specially in view. God hides His face from them until He shall see what their end will be, for they are a very froward generation, children in whom is no faith. This has taken place. They are a distinct race of people unto this day. That generation exists in the same condition-a monument of the abiding certainty of God's dealings, and of the Lord's words.

To conclude, the government of God, exercised with regard to this people, has been traced to its end. The Lord comes, and He gathers together the dispersed elect of Israel. The prophetic history continues in chapter 25:31, which is connected with chapter 24:30. And as chapter 24:31 relates the gathering together of Israel after the appearance of the Son of man, chapter 25:31 announces His dealings in judgment with the Gentiles. He will appear doubtless as the lightning with regard to the apostasy, which will be as a dead body in His sight. But when He shall come solemnly to take His earthly place in glory, that will not pass away like lightning. He shall sit upon the throne of His glory, and all nations shall be gathered before Him on His throne of judgment, and they shall be judged according to their treatment of the messengers of the kingdom, who had gone out to preach it unto them. These messengers are the brethren (v. 40); those who had received them are the sheep; those who had neglected their message are the goats. The account then which begins chapter 25:31, of the separation of sheep and goats and of its result, pictures the nations who are judged on earth according to their treatment of these messengers. It is the judgment of the living, so far at least as regards the nations-a judgment as final as that of the dead. It is not Christ's judgment in battle as in Revelation 19. It is a session of His supreme tribunal in His right of government over the earth, as in Revelation 20:4 I speak of the principle or rather of the character of the judgment. I do not doubt that these brethren are Jews, such as the disciples were, that is to say, those who will be in a similar position as to their testimony. The Gentiles, who had received this message, should be accepted,

as though they had treated Christ in the same manner. His Father had prepared for them the enjoyment of the kingdom; and they should enter into it, being still on earth, for Christ was come down in the power of eternal life. [See Footnote #68]

I have, for the moment, passed over all between chapter 24:31 and chapter 25:31, because the end of this last chapter completes all that concerns the government and the judgment of the earth. But there is a class of persons whose history is given us in its great moral features intermediately between these two verses I have just mentioned.

These are the disciples of Christ, outside the testimony borne in the midst of Israel, to whom He has committed His service, and a position in connection with Himself, during His absence. This position and this service are in connection with Christ Himself, and not in connection with Israel, wherever it may be that this service is accomplished.

There are however, before we come to these, some verses of which I have not yet spoken, which apply more particularly to the state of things in Israel, as warning to the disciples who are there, and describe the discriminating judgment which takes place among the Jews in the last days. I speak of them here, because all this part of the discourse-namely, from chapter 24:31 to chapter 25:31-is an exhortation, an address from the Lord, on the subject of their duties during His absence. I refer to chapter 24:32-44. They speak of the continual expectation which their ignorance of the moment when the Son of man would come imposed on the disciples, and in which the disciples were intentionally left (and the judgment is the earthly one); while from verse 45, the Lord addresses Himself more directly, and at the same time in a more general manner, to their conduct during His absence, not in connection with Israel, but with His own-His household. He had committed to them the task of supplying them with suitable food in due season. This is the responsibility of ministry in the assembly.

It is important to remark that in the first parable the state of the assembly is looked at as a whole; the parable of the virgins and that of the talents give individual responsibility. Hence the servant who is unfaithful is cut off and has his portion with hypocrites. The state of the responsible assembly depended on their waiting for Christ, or their heart saying He delays His coming. It would be on His return that judgment should be pronounced on their faithfulness during the interval Faithfulness should be approved in that day. On the other hand, practical forgetfulness of His coming would lead to licence and tyranny. It is not an intellectual system that is meant here: "the evil servant says in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming"; his will was concerned in it. The result was that the fleshly will manifested itself. It was no longer devoted service to His household, with a heart set upon the Master's approval at His return; but worldliness in conduct, and the assumption of arbitrary authority, to which the service appointed him gave occasion. He eats and drinks with the drunken, he unites himself to the world and partakes in its ways; he smites his fellow-servants at his will. Such is the effect of putting off during His absence, deliberately in heart, the Lord's return and holding the assembly to be settled down here; instead of faithful service, worldly-mindedness and tyranny. Is it not too true a picture?

What is it that has happened to those who had the place of service in the house of God? The consequences on either hand are these: the faithful servant, who from love and devotion to his Master applied himself to the welfare of His household, should be made ruler on his Master's return over all His goods; those who have been faithful in the service of the house shall be set over all things by the Lord, when He takes His place of power and acts as King. All things are given into the hands of Jesus by the Father. Those who in humility have been faithful to His service during His absence shall be made rulers

over all that is committed to Him, that is, over all things-they are but the "goods" of Jesus. On the other hand, he who during the Lord's absence had set himself up as master, and followed after the spirit of the flesh and of the world to which he had united himself, should not merely have the world's portion: his Master should come quite unexpectedly, and he should receive the punishment of hypocrites. What a lesson for those who take to themselves a place of service in the assembly! Observe here, that it is not said he is drunken himself, but that he eats and drinks with those that are so. He allies himself with the world and follows its customs. This moreover is the general aspect which the kingdom will assume in that day, although the heart of the evil servant was wicked. The Bridegroom would indeed tarry; and the consequences that might be expected from the heart of man will not fail to be realised. But the effect, we then find, is to make manifest those who had [See Footnote #69] really the grace of Christ and those who had not.

Footnotes for Matthew 24

66: In fact, this position of Israel, and the testimony connected with it, were interrupted by the destruction of Jerusalem; and this is the reason why that event presents itself to the mind in connection with this prophecy, of which it is certainly not the fulfilment. The Lord is not yet come, neither the great tribulation; but the state of things to which the Lord alludes, to the end of verse 14, was violently and judicially interrupted, by the destruction of Jerusalem, so that in this point of view there is a connection.

67: The gospel of the kingdom was confined to Israel in chapter 10 and here this, though no subject of the teaching, is the subject supposed up to verse 14, but there is no formal distinction made: the mission in chapter 28 is to the Gentiles; but then there is nothing of the kingdom but rather the contrary, though Christ be only risen, but all power given to Him in heaven and earth.

68: There is no possible ground for applying this parable to what is called the general judgment, an expression indeed wholly unscriptural. First, there are three parties, not merely two-goats, sheep, and brethren; then, it is the judgment of the Gentiles only; and, further, the ground of judgment is wholly inapplicable to the great mass even of these last. The ground of judgment is the way these brethren have been received. Now none have been sent at all to the vast majority of the Gentiles in long ages. The time of this ignorance God winked at, and another ground of judgment as to them is given in the beginning of Romans. Christians and Jews have been already treated of in chapter 24 and the previous part of chapter 25. It is just those whom the Lord finds on earth when He comes, and who will be judged according to their treatment of the messengers He has sent.

69: How solemn the testimony given here to the effect of the assembly's losing the present expectation of the Lord's return! What causes the professing church to run into hierarchical oppression and worldliness, so as to be cut off in the end as hypocrites, is saying in the heart, My lord delayeth his coming-giving up the present expectation. That has been the source of the ruin. The true christian position was lost as soon as they began to put off the Lord's coming; and they are treated, note, though in this state, as the responsible servant.

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