

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART TWENTY-FIVE

It seems likely from 24:1 that Jesus' hard hitting attack on religious hypocrisy in chapter 23 was actually delivered in the courtyard of the temple, the very centre of Jewish religion, which in chapter 21 He had reclaimed as His own house. He had had to defend His house from the businessmen who had tried to take it over for trade, and the religious leaders who had sought to make it a centre for spiritual control of ordinary people. As He left the temple area the disciples began to behave like tourists, pointing out the beautiful architecture to their friend from Galilee. Jesus was not impressed and predicted the temple's destruction, which actually happened in AD 70, nearly 40 years into the future.(24:1,2)

The disciples asked Jesus three questions in the same sentence assuming that the answers would be the same, that the destruction of the temple, Jesus' return and the end of the age would all happen together. They asked about the timing of these events and the signs that they were imminent. Jesus declined to answer their most pressing question of 'when?'. The end of the temple and the end of the age would be two events separated by many centuries. In the rest of the chapter Jesus spoke about both, winding His prophecies in together because in many ways the first event would foreshadow the second.

First Jesus listed a series of five problems which would arise before the end of history as we know it. People would be misled by false claims to be the Christ and by false teachers if they did not heed Jesus' warnings. Terrible catastrophes would occur, war, famine and earthquake, which would cause fear to those who did not trust Christ. Christians would be persecuted and hated because they were faithful to Jesus Christ. Some professed believers would fall away because their love for God had grown cold and they would turn on one another. Law and order would break down. All these problems have recurred in cycles throughout the world and throughout history. But despite all this, real Christians would stay faithful to Christ and His task of reaching out with the gospel to every nation. As believers have gone through cycles of pressure and suffering they have assumed that this was the end. It will only be when finally every people and language group have heard the gospel in their own language that Jesus will return. Our responsibility is clear.(24:3-14)

The ultimate insult to God, called the 'abomination of desolation', would be to offer a sacrifice to another god in His temple. Daniel had spoken often of this.(Dan.9:27; 11:31; 12:11) Its first historical fulfilment had come in BC 167 when a mad ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes, who thought he was the Greek god Zeus come to earth, ordered a pig sacrificed to his statue in the Jewish temple. It may well be that the Romans did something similar after capturing the temple in AD 70. Jesus warned His followers if they were living in Judea at such a time to escape to the nearest mountains without delay. History records that much of the Christian community did exactly that in AD 68 in a lull in the fighting between the Jews and the Roman army.(24:15-20)

Those events were followed by a time of terrible suffering for the Jews in which 600,000 died. Tribulation for them has continued in cycles ever since. The most recent was the Holocaust under Adolf Hitler which killed 6,000,000. Christians too

have endured cycles of persecution throughout history and will do so again. At such times false claims to be the Christ returned are particularly attractive. There have been many false Christs even in my lifetime. Jesus reminded His friends that when He did return it would be a world wide event that could not be mistaken. Just when persecution is at its worst the supposed corpse would be surrounded by vultures, and then He would come!(24:21-28)

Jesus' final return would be preceded by other dramatic events affecting our view of the sun, moon and stars which had been frequently predicted in the Old Testament.(Isa.13:10; 24:23; Ezek.32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15; Amos 5:20;8:9; Zeph.1:15) When just this happened as Jesus hung on the cross there must have been many Jews who wondered if this was the final moment.(Matt.27:45) When these scriptures are fulfilled for the final time, two more events will accompany. Unbelievers in every people group will realise what they have rejected and believers will be taken by angels from all over the world to be with Jesus.(24:29-31)

In the rest of the chapter Jesus used several pictures to illustrate what should be our response to the warnings of what He promised actually occurring. Leaves on a fruit tree foreshadow the fruit itself. People in the time of Noah had been warned of the flood but given no date. They had chosen to ignore the warnings and carry on life as usual. We are to live in a state of readiness for His return with no information on date like a householder prepared for a burglar on any night. The final illustration was of two slaves who were given responsibility by their master while he was away. Neither knew the date of his return. One got on with his work. The other pleased himself and would one day face the master's judgement.(24:32-51)

In chapter 25, Jesus told further stories to explain our responsibility in expectation of His return.

25:1-13 Q.1 Who was the bridegroom and who were the 10 virgins? What does their need of lamps tell us about the world we live in? What does oil picture throughout the Bible?(Heb.1:9) And what is the lamp for?(Prov.20:27) What according to this story is our responsibility in relation to Christ's return? What was the response of the foolish virgins? How do people react like this today? What does this story tell us about when and why we should trust Christ?

25:14-30 Q.2 A talent was a gold bar worth thousands of dollars. What did the talent picture in this story? What decided how many talents were entrusted to each slave? Who was the master and who were the slaves? What did the faithful slaves do with the talents? What does this represent as far as we are concerned? What did the master promise to the faithful slaves? What glimpse does this give us of the future? What was wrong with the unfaithful slave's actions? How did his answer show his real heart? How could the same be applied to us? Was it not unfair to give an extra talent to the one who already had ten? What is the message in this for us?

25:31-46 Q.3 Who will eventually have to come before Christ's throne when He returns? Who were the sheep and who were the goats? What was promised to the sheep? What grounds did Jesus give for recognising them as sheep? Does this mean that salvation is based on good works? What did the goats not do? What judgement was promised to them? How should this story change our response to needy people?