

Watch and Be Ready
For the
Coming of the Lord

An Imperative for the Present Hour

Tom Finley

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks is hereby given to Norm Young for his critical review of this writing. For this review Norm brought to bear his considerable knowledge of these truths as well as his expert knowledge of the Greek language. In addition, Norm's humble walk with the Lord gave him a spiritual sensitivity to many details, as well as a sense of the real need of this word for the body of Christ. Thank you also, Norm, for your constant encouragement to me concerning this endeavor.

I would also like to thank the following believers who read over the first draft of this writing and made good suggestions for improvement: Wayne Smith, John O'Conner, Robert Conrad and Inja Lewis. It is a joy to work together with other believers to help the body of Christ with these truths.

INTRODUCTION

This booklet will focus on the urgent warnings of our Lord to His disciples in the Gospels to always be ready for His sudden coming. Believers know that Christ's appearing is our "blessed hope," but too few realize that He will be coming again to judge all men (Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:16; Jude 1:14-15). He will not only judge and recompense the unbeliever, but He will also recompense the believer. "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS" (Matt. 16:27). For the believer the Lord's return may bring great blessing, but it also may bring great loss and even negative judgment. This is why the Lord warns us to be alert and to be ready. What is at stake is not our eternal salvation, as that was settled forever, apart from any of our works, at the time we believed (Jn. 5:24; Eph. 1:13-14; 2:8-9). Yet, at His return He will recompense us according to what we have done since we became a believer. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). Also, we shall see that there is a special end-time reward available to believers related to rapture. But for this we must watch, pray and be prepared at His coming! Because there are numerous passages and fine points related to these great matters, we cannot go into great detail or this writing would be too lengthy. This writing can only introduce you to some details and principles. It is for you, as a believer, to then be serious about these things and bring them to God in prayer, while searching the Scriptures to learn if these things be true.

Admonitions of our Lord to "watch," to "pray," and to "be ready"

We will focus on the following specific Gospel passages where we find these pressing commands: Matt. 24:42-44; 25:13; Mk. 13:32-37; Lk. 12:35-40; 21:34-36. Let us be clear about one thing. These commands are aimed at believers, not at Jews or unbelievers. If you will check the Gospel texts you will see that the talk given by Jesus on the end-times known as the "Olivet Discourse" is recorded in Matt. 24 and 25, Mark 13 and Luke 21. Mark 13:3 shows us that the ones who heard this talk were Peter, James, John and Andrew – all apostles. So the warnings to "watch" addressed to them must be to the church. Also, it was Jesus' disciples who were addressed in the narrative of Lk. 12. Besides, to "watch," or to "be alert," here means to be spiritually alert, paying attention to spiritual realities and taking needed action, especially so that one can be ready when Jesus returns. No unbeliever, or unregenerate Jew, has any capacity to be spiritually alert, nor do they have a belief in the return of Jesus. Only born again believers have the ability to be spiritually alert. We will clearly see that the warnings of our Lord to be ready have to do with much more than just being saved, or being born again. Many believers today feel that if they are forgiven and born again into God's family then they are ready for "heaven," or for the Lord's return. Nothing could be further from the truth of God's word. Do not be deceived by this kind of thought, but instead be open to learn the truth and be prepared for the imminent and soon coming of Jesus!

“Keep on the alert” *Mark 13:32-37*

³² "But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father *alone*. ³³ Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the *appointed* time will come. ³⁴ *It is* like a man away on a journey, *who* upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, *assigning* to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. ³⁵ Therefore, be on the alert--for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning-- ³⁶ in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ What I say to you I say to all, 'Be on the alert!'" (Mk. 13:32-37)

From each of the Gospel passages we will draw out certain truths about the Lord's coming. Here in Mark we clearly see the fact that no one knows exactly when the Lord will suddenly return. In verse 35 Jesus uses the four "watches," spanning from six in the evening until six in the morning, to illustrate the indefiniteness of the timing of the master's return. The uncertainty of the timing of Jesus' return has led Bible teachers to call His coming "imminent," potentially possible at any moment. An illustration of an imminent event might be an earthquake in southern California in the U. S. Geologists tell us that a big earthquake is definitely going to happen there at some point. But, no one knows exactly when. It could happen tomorrow or thirty years from now. Thus, for the people living there, the "big one" is imminent, always threatening. An event that is truly imminent cannot require that certain other events take place first, or the idea of imminency is lost. For example, if the geologists said that the big earthquake is coming, but that it must be preceded by a series of smaller shocks over several days, then the big earthquake is not truly imminent. The idea of the imminent return of Christ is shown by this passage in Mark, and by other passages such as Jas. 5:7-9, which says that "the coming of the Lord is near [or, "at hand"] . . . the Judge is standing right at the door."

Considerations on rapture

The Bible reader should notice many details earlier in Mark 13 concerning the return of Christ. For example, verse 14 talks about the desecration in the temple (cf., Matt. 24:15; Dan. 9:27; 11:31), verse 19 tells of a great tribulation unparalleled in history, and verses 24 and 25 speak of momentous signs in the heavenly bodies. All of these things happen before the appearing of the Son of Man (Christ) coming on the clouds with great power and glory (v. 26). So, how could Christ warn us that He might come at any moment, without warning, if His coming in power and glory is definitely preceded by such obvious events? This question has led many Bible teachers to consider that there are two phases to Christ's return. Those who believe in a "**pre-tribulation**" **rapture** (one that removes the church from the earth prior to the time period of the "tribulation") view the first phase as the rapture of the believers. This rapture is seen as being the imminent event, which is then followed by many events of the tribulation. Then, at the end of the tribulation period is the second phase of Christ's return on the clouds in power and glory, and this phase is commonly termed "the Second Coming." So, according to the pre-tribulation rapture theory there is first a rapture, where Christ comes suddenly and unexpectedly for His saints (without necessary preceding events or signs), and then some years later the visible coming of Christ follows, when He comes in glory with His saints (Rev. 17:14; 19:11-15). Between the two events this teaching holds that Christ is present (but unseen) in the air, which allows time for the marriage feast of the Lamb and His bride (Rev. 19:7-9), as well as for the Judgment Seat of Christ where believers are judged (2 Cor. 5:10).

Besides giving a good resolution in line with the doctrine of imminency, a pre-tribulation rapture theory is also strengthened by the idea of certain promises given to the church for exemption from the time of tribulation. One of the strongest verses the pre-tribulation teachers use is Rev. 3:10. But, as we shall later see, this verse does not fully support all of their claims. On the other hand, the Biblical teaching of Christ's return being able to happen at any moment causes severe problems for the "**post tribulation**" **rapture** theory. This other major rapture theory teaches that the catching up of the saints ("rapture") happens only after the severe tribulation and judgments of the final seven year period of this age. The "post tribulation" school of belief argues that the rapture described in 1 Thess. 4:14-17 happens when Christ comes to earth openly, as the trumpet and the gathering of God's people to Christ in the clouds in this passage matches the trumpet, the clouds and the gathering in Matt. 24:30-31. However, by placing the gathering of the church at this point this theory states that the church as a whole must go through the tribulation and be raptured afterwards ("post-tribulation"). This position presents real problems as it negates any verse that promises escape to the church from tribulation. Also, by compressing into one short time the rapture of the church and the return of Christ to fight His enemies on earth (2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 19:11-21), there appears to be no time allowed by this theory for believers to appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), or for the marriage feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-9) to take place just prior to this return of Christ in battle.

In order to consider an alternative understanding of rapture and Christ's return, we now turn to the passage in Luke, which gives some promise of escape to believers from the time of great tribulation.

“Praying . . . to escape all these things” *Luke 21:34-36*

³⁴ "Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap; ³⁵ for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. ³⁶ But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." (Lk. 21:34-36)

This passage is one of only two passages which clearly and definitely speak of an “escape” from the great tribulation of the end-times. The other passage is Rev. 3:10. The great debate on the issue of rapture concerns whether, by virtue of its timing, a rapture provides an escape to the church from the tribulation period. In trying to answer any question on Biblical doctrine, the best approach is to give the greatest weight and most careful attention to those passages which are clear, not unclear, and which bear most directly on the topic being studied. These are the only two passages in Scripture which speak directly to the subject of escape from the tribulation of the end-times. Therefore, we must look at them carefully to see what we can learn.

This passage in Luke comes at the end of a long talk Jesus had given on the end-times. Verses 34-36 come after many details of the end-time period. It seems clear that “that day” in verse 34 refers to the time of calamity and judgment (described in many preceding verses) that suddenly falls upon the whole world. In verse 34 Jesus warns His disciples (20:45) that they must take steps so that they will not be caught in that day like a trap. In verse 36 He reiterates this need for preparation by admonishing them to stay alert and pray to be strengthened in order to escape the coming calamities. “All these things” clearly refers to the things of the end-time period, especially those things which will cause men great suffering, or tribulation. We must note that this “promise” of escape is conditional.

Conditions for escape

What are the conditions for the promise in verse 34 that the day will not come upon us as a trap? The “dissipation and drunkenness” are not simply literal, but picture the excessive enjoyment of the pleasures of this life, or self-indulgence. Self-indulgence would include many things besides just what we normally consider as “sins,” such as lying, drunkenness and sexual immorality. Beyond the clear moral imperatives of God’s word, believers must seek to know how to live their daily lives. For example, how much time, money and energy should be spent on recreation, entertainment, hobbies, family affairs, education, career pursuits, etc.? If a believer has the financial means to live beyond a basic lifestyle, what lifestyle should he choose? The believer must “be on guard,” or watch his life carefully, so that his heart is not overly occupied with either the pleasures of this life or the worries of this life. This is a large topic, but in spiritual exercise this means that a believer must be willing to deny himself, not allowing what naturally pleases him, in order to do only what God allows. This basic principle of self-denial is central to discipleship. “Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me’” (Matt. 16:24). When Jesus went to the cross He denied His choice in order to take God’s choice (the cross). “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (Lk. 22:42).

This world system is constantly appealing to the fallen flesh of man to indulge itself - to fulfill its desires without any constraint. But God tells us: ¹⁵ Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. ¹⁷ The world is passing away, and a/so its lusts; but the one who does the

will of God lives forever” (1 Jn. 2:15-17). To live in godly self-denial does not mean one must live in poverty, or follow some lifestyle of abstinence or asceticism. These ideas come from legalistic rules for supposed holy living. It does mean that the disciple is voluntarily choosing to put aside his will (agreeing to “die to self”) and live unto God, being very sensitive to what the Holy Spirit is indicating is pleasing to Him. Contrary to this godly practice is the believer who is not willing to put aside his choices (at least in certain areas of life) and thus indulges himself, being unwilling to yield to the Holy Spirit in all areas of life. There is no set rule or pattern for what constitutes over-indulgence in the pleasures of this life. Instead, the Holy Spirit is there to guide each one of us into a proper living in His sight. We must be those who learn how to be Spirit-controlled.¹

Any believer who lets the pleasures of life or the worries of life occupy and control his heart will not grow in spiritual maturity and thus not be qualified to escape the coming trap of the day of great tribulation. See Luke 8:14 where the soil which produces thorns (similar to the preoccupied heart here) brings no fruit to maturity.

What are the conditions of verse 36 which are needed to “escape all these things” of great tribulation? The first requirement is that we be constantly alert to spiritual things, especially our own spiritual life and condition. True spiritual alertness may also give us a sensitivity to the movements of God in the world, the activities of Satan, conditions in the church and world developments in light of Biblical prophecy. Such alertness should prepare us and direct us to properly follow and serve God. In line with this we need to pray in order to be strengthened by God to fully follow Him in His will. In this way we will live a victorious Christian life and thus be qualified to escape “all these things.” The verb translated to “have strength” commonly means “to prevail” (see Matt. 16:18; Lk. 23:23). The King James Version uses the phrase “accounted worthy to escape,” instead of “have strength [prevail] to escape.” This difference is caused by differing ancient manuscripts on this verse. Although we do not know which manuscript is right, the overall point of the verse is the same: we must remain alert and pray in order to prevail and be qualified to escape. The second part of this promise in verse 36 is “to stand before the Son of Man.” This phrase may mean to be approved by Him at His coming (1 Jn. 2:28; Rom. 14:4; Jude 1:24). An alternative understanding could be that this “standing” before the Son of Man refers to the victorious raptured saint’s actual presence before the throne of God (Rev. 14:1, 3). To live in victory does not mean sinless perfection, but it means to have a growing consistency of holiness in our life where we live in union with Christ, not under the dominion of the fallen flesh (see 2 Pet. 1:5-11). In summary, a life of spiritual victory is the overall condition for escape in this passage in Luke.

“Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.” (Rev. 3:10)

The verse above from Revelation is a favorite verse of the pre-tribulation rapture school. They see this verse as a very strong promise “to the church” for escape from the coming great tribulation. Yes, it is a strong promise, but once again we must see it is conditional. Firstly, this promise was written to only one of the seven churches in Rev. 2 and 3, namely to the church in Philadelphia. That church was the sole fully overcoming church among the seven. All of the other churches had shortcomings, except for the church in Smyrna. However, the church in Smyrna had not yet been tested. In contrast, Philadelphia had already been tested and approved. The saints there had kept the Lord’s word and not denied His name (3:8). They already had gained a crown, signifying the reward of reigning with Christ in the next age (3:11). They only needed to hold fast to what they had already achieved in the Lord’s eyes (3:11). Are these conditions true of the whole church, all believers? Certainly not, as the other six churches show. These seven churches were not only actual assemblies in Asia, but they represent the kinds of congregations, including the various types of believers, that we encounter in the church

¹ For more help on this topic of discipleship, please see the author’s lesson series entitled, “*The Victorious Christian Life*,” which is located at the following website: www.seekersofchrist.org.

age. The condition for escape is clear: “**Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you** from the hour of testing.” To keep the word of Christ’s perseverance means to be faithful to follow Him through every temptation, difficulty and circumstance, just as He obeyed God the Father. Again, this does not mean sinless perfection. When there are failures in the lives of such overcoming saints, however, their practice would be to immediately confess and forsake any known sin or act of worldly living. Such saints must indeed be raptured from the earth as they are kept not only from the effects of the tribulation, but even from the very hour (time period) of that world-wide trial.

Therefore, the promise for escape in Rev. 3:10, just as in Luke 21, is **conditional**, and the condition is to live an overcoming Christian life. **In both passages we see that escape is possible, but escape is conditional.** In contrast, the “pre-tribulation” school says that all believers who are alive when Christ comes shall escape, with no conditions whatsoever. According to that teaching, even believers who may be living in terrible sin will be raptured. The “post-tribulation” school says that no believers who are alive when Christ comes will escape living through the period of great tribulation. Considering the conditions attached to the two clearest verses directly relating to “escape,” I personally feel confident that the teaching of the two most popular schools on the subject of rapture (“pre-tribulation” and “post-tribulation”) cannot be correct. The truth seems to be that only part of the church will be raptured before the tribulation, the faithful and victorious part. This teaching on rapture is less known by believers, but it has been in existence for many years, and may be termed the “selective rapture.” The remainder of the church is raptured later, as I will explain in this writing.

Early rapture is a reward

Some argue that rapture is a matter of grace, with no consideration of our works or actions. Therefore, to them, all believers must be treated equally by God in rapture. However, we must remember that although God gives us all eternal salvation by grace (Eph. 2:8-9) that is not the end of the story in His dealings with us. God also deals with believers according to the principle of “reward” (the different Greek words used mean “wages,” “recompense,” or “repayment” to the person, positive or negative, based upon their doings). In fact, when Jesus returns He will deal with all people on the principle of “recompense according to works” (Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; Rev. 22:12). Believers will be judged and recompensed at the Judgment Seat of Christ according to the principle of recompense, not grace (2 Cor. 5:10). Therefore, there is no necessity of applying the grace principle to a rapture, which does not deal with our eternal salvation.

The Scripture tells us that God delights to reward His people who follow Him in obedience. Hebrews 11 gives us a record of many who followed the Lord in faith at a cost, and the chapter speaks plainly of reward (Heb. 11:6, 26). This chapter tells us that God “is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (11:6). All positive rewards for God’s people do not necessarily follow the Judgment Seat of Christ. God rewarded Simeon and Anna with a special revelation and meeting of the new born Messiah due to their faithfulness (Lk. 2:25-38). God rewarded Enoch with being taken without seeing death, a type of rapture as a reward (Heb. 11:5). The “selective rapture” is a reward to those seeking saints who are following Christ fully when He suddenly comes at an unknown hour. This rapture is a reward that is promised by God (Lk. 21:36; Rev. 3:10). If a Christian reading this booklet is concerned that he or she has not followed the Lord fully and will miss this early rapture, please know that it is not too late to be prepared for that day. A believer can confess his wrongs, change his ways, and then begin to follow the Lord fully, looking eagerly for Jesus’ return. God is gracious and will forgive us where we have failed in the past. He is always willing to grant us a new start to be prepared for His return and for the Judgment Seat of Christ (see Ez. 18:20-32 on this principle).

The doctrine of rapture is not a foundational doctrine of the faith, although it certainly has importance. Because it is not foundational, we must allow for differences in understanding among believers without dividing from them in fellowship. It should also be noted that there have been godly and spiritually useful believers in the universal church who have held to each of the

differing rapture views.² Therefore, let us not divide from one another over this topic, but instead let each one be persuaded in his own mind on the matter and receive all believers warmly in spite of their views on the matter of rapture (Rom. 14:1-8). In deciding what is the truth regarding the subject of rapture we should be careful to be convinced solely by the Bible. It is often too easy to be persuaded of some doctrine because it is popular or is promoted by some popular teacher we respect. But, each of us should try to put aside any bias due to the popularity or the attractiveness of a doctrine. It is certainly easier to accept a rapture teaching that does not require anything of us than a teaching which requires us to be an overcoming Christian in order to be raptured out before the time of great tribulation.

Now, let us go on to see some other passages about rapture which will confirm the selective rapture theory.

The Principle of the Harvest

In understanding the matter of rapture we must look at God's principle for the grain harvest. This principle was shown in the Old Testament in Lev. 23:10-22. God told the Israelites that the first fruits (the early ripened grain) were to be offered to God. Later came the general harvest of the field, with some gleanings for the benefit of the poor and the stranger. Thus, the order and timing of the grain harvest was set: first the first fruits, later the general harvest and the gleanings. In the New Testament Jesus also mentioned the grain harvest:

²⁶ "And He was saying, 'The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; ²⁷ and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows--how, he himself does not know. ²⁸ The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.'" (Mk. 4:26-29)

This parable in Mark follows the parable of the sower, where Jesus sows the word into men's hearts. Thus, this parable speaks generally of a harvest of believers after they have matured – "when the crop permits [at the point of the matured grain], . . . put in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

In Matthew 13 Jesus spoke of the wheat crop. In Matt. 13:24-30 Jesus spoke the parable of the wheat and the tares. He said that the tares and the wheat should be allowed to grow together in the world unto the point of harvest (v. 30). In His explanation of this parable, Jesus told His disciples that the harvest comes at the end of the age (13:39). These two parables together indicate that the gathering of believers at the end of the age will be like the gathering of a grain harvest. The crop is reaped as it matures. In the principle of harvest there should be some first fruits which ripen early, then a general harvest, as well as gleanings, for grain that ripens later.

The harvests in Revelation 14

This picture of a harvest of believers is fulfilled in the book of Revelation, especially in chapter 14. Rev. 14 opens with 144,000 "first fruits" who are standing on the heavenly Mt. Zion in the

² Since many readers will have never heard of the selective rapture view, they may wish to know the names of some who have held this teaching. Some names are: Hudson Taylor (The China Inland Mission, 19th century), G. Campbell Morgan (British Congregational minister, 19th/20th centuries), A. B. Simpson (19th/20th centuries; Christian and Missionary Alliance), Robert Govett (British expositor, 19th century), G. H. Lang (British teacher, 20th century), Evan Roberts (of the 1904 Welsh revival), D. M. Panton (20th century British teacher; editor of the "Dawn" magazine), George N. H. Peters (19th century American Lutheran pastor; author of "The Theocratic Kingdom"), T. Austin-Sparks (20th century British teacher), and Watchman Nee (with the "Little Flock" movement in China, 20th century).

presence of God and the Lamb (please read Rev. 14:1-5). In the book of Revelation many things are literal, but some things are symbolic (like the “lamb” pictured in Rev.5:6 and the “key” to the bottomless pit in Rev. 9:1). The 144,000 figure here is probably symbolic and, as a multiple of twelve, has an obvious connection to the church (the twelve apostles). This group represents the early ripened ones of the church who are raptured – “purchased from the earth” (v. 3). They are not literally virgins, as there is no “defilement” (v. 4) as respects sex in marriage. The virginity of the first fruits signifies their purity of devotion to Christ Himself (2 Cor. 11:2-3). Such overcomers in actuality may be men or women. These are ones “who follow the Lamb wherever He goes” (v. 4). This shows their complete obedience to Christ alone. And, they have utmost moral integrity – “no lie is found in their mouth; they are blameless” (v.5).

After the first fruits are harvested, we see the rest of the grain harvest happen in Rev. 14:14-16. Verse 15 tells us that this harvest happens when the remaining crop is ripe: “Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe.”

If we look carefully at Rev. 14 we will notice a clear sequence of events in six scenes³:

1. The “first fruits” are on the heavenly Mt. Zion with the Lamb whom they have followed (vs. 1-5).
2. An angel announces to the whole earth that the hour of God’s judgment has arrived (vs. 6-7).
3. A second angel (sequential in Greek) announces the judgment upon Babylon (v. 8).
4. A third (sequential) angel issues a warning about worshipping the beast (the Antichrist) and describes the persecution of the saints during the time of great tribulation (vs. 9-13).
5. The Son of Man reaps His harvest of ripened grain from the earth (vs. 14-16).
6. The clusters of grapes, men fully ripe for judgment, are gathered and thrown into the great winepress of God’s wrath (vs. 17-20).

This sequence clearly presents the rapture of the overcoming saints (the first fruits) prior to the hour of judgment falling upon the earth, including the time of the beast’s reign and great tribulation.⁴ It also pictures the remaining saints going through the tribulation, to be raptured afterwards as mature grain. It is certainly a spiritual principle that God’s children often need great trials in their lives to help them be serious about following God and maturing in their faith. The majority of believers are simply not motivated enough to follow God in a truly seeking fashion, willing to obey Him at any cost. However, when believers of this type realize that they have missed an early rapture and then face the great trial of living on the earth during the time of the Antichrist and God’s final judgments, they will become very serious and begin to mature.

The rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4

Now we must see how the passage in 1 Thessalonians 4, which describes a “rapture” or “catching away” of the saints, fits into this sequence. Here is the passage:

³ Grateful acknowledgment is given to G. H. Lang for pointing out this most telling sequence of six scenes in his book on rapture entitled, “*Firstfruits and Harvest.*”

⁴ This early harvesting of first fruits should include a resurrection of the overcoming dead saints, as well as the living. The dead are raised “each in his own order [or “company”]; Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His Coming” (1 Cor. 15:23). A literal rendering of this last clause is: “afterward the ones of Christ in the presence of Him.” In the feasts of the Lord in Lev. 23 there was first a single sheaf of first fruits waved before the Lord, representing Christ’s resurrection (Lev. 23:9-11). Then, fifty days later two loaves were waved, which were still part of the “first fruits,” which were gathered before the general harvest (Lev. 23:15-17). Christ’s coming is His *parousia* (presence) consisting of a period of time when He is near the earth in the clouds after leaving His place with the Father. During this prolonged period there will be various raptures and the Judgment Seat of Christ.

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. ¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thess. 4:13-18)

This portion was written by Paul to the believers in Thessalonica because they apparently had some concern that those who had died might not participate in the glory of Christ's second coming. Paul assures them that those who have died in Jesus will come back with Christ when He returns. Both "the dead in Christ" and "those who are alive who remain" will be caught up in the clouds to meet Jesus in the air. As it seems that this rapture includes all believers, when does it take place? It would not be the early "first fruits" rapture, as that rapture takes only a portion of the living believers from the earth. This passage speaks of the general harvest when most of the grain is finally ripe. At the time of the general harvest we see the Son of Man sitting on a cloud (Rev. 14:14), and in this passage we see the believers caught up to the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. This passage also speaks of a trumpet and the archangel. In Matt. 24:30-31 we also see a gathering of the elect, which happens "after the tribulation of those days" (Matt. 24:29):

²⁹ "But immediately after the tribulation of those days . . . ³⁰ And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. ³¹ "And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other." (Matt. 24:29-31)

This rapture, or gathering, of the saints at this point in time would be all of the remaining saints, those still on the earth (or dead in Christ), after the first fruits rapture. The idea of some believers remaining on the earth after the first fruit rapture may be indicated by the unusual phrase "who remain," or "who are left" to further describe those alive at the time of this final gathering. This phrase is used twice and seems redundant, unless the Holy Spirit is including it specifically for clarity. Two versions (American Standard Version and English Standard Version) translate the word as "left" instead of "remain." In other words, this phrasing may well mean that those who are alive at that time are those who have been left behind on the earth following an earlier rapture.

"For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep." (1 Thess. 4:15, ESV)

"Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." (1 Thess. 4:17, ESV)

Would there also be gleanings? This passage in 1 Thess. 4 seems to indicate that this gathering includes all living believers (and this may include gleanings), but some gleanings may be indicated by Rev. 16:15, seemingly at a point in time later than the general harvest in Rev. 14:14-16.

3

“You too, be ready” Luke 12:35-48

For the sake of space, I will not reproduce this long passage here in print, but will ask the reader to open his Bible to the passage. This passage may be broken down into two parts:

- 1) Jesus' admonition to be ready for His coming (vs. 35-40).
- 2) The question to Jesus by His disciples about the parable (v.41), with His answer being in two parts: a) application to leaders or shepherds in the church (vs. 42-46); b) application to all believers in general (47-48).

In the first part, Jesus illustrates the need for readiness for His return. The slaves of the master are to be so eager for the master's return that they are alert even late into the night (the second or third watch, covering 9:00 P. M. until 3 A. M.), ready to instantly open the door when the master returns. His return is the desire of their hearts and they are paying much expectant attention to the master's return even as they go about their work. This description of the slaves longing, waiting for and looking for their master should have much to teach us. Is this our attitude towards the Lord's return, or is His return just some doctrine to us? Does His imminent return grip our heart and our longings each day, or do we give it only a passing thought on occasion? We should check our heart in this matter and see where we are. The Lord promises here that there is a blessing upon the slave who is watching in this way for the master. The amazing promise also includes a picture of the Lord Himself serving those who so wait for Him (v. 37).

Verses 39 and 40 are crucial:

"But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect." (Lk. 12:39-40)

If the head of a house knew when a thief was coming, he would have been prepared, so as not to suffer a loss. Not only is there a blessing to gain in being prepared for Jesus' coming, but there is also loss to be avoided by being prepared. Here Jesus warns us that we must be ready at all times in order to avoid loss because no one knows the exact hour of His coming.

God's dealings with the shepherds and leaders

Right after this warning Peter asked Jesus: "Lord, are you addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?" (v. 41) The Lord answered Peter by another parable. Verses 42-46 make it clear that Jesus intended this new story to apply to leaders or shepherds in the church, those who would be like household stewards taking care of feeding the household staff. Thus, in this parable he was speaking of the need to be ready as it applied to Peter and the apostles, and in principle to all leaders or shepherds in the church. A local overseer (or shepherd) is called God's steward (Tit. 1:7). The steward, or leader, who is faithfully feeding the other slaves is shown to be blessed when Jesus returns, and is given more responsibility (vs. 43-44). This blessing of more responsibility would be a positive reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ, which would follow the rapture of the faithful steward. Verse 45, however, shows that this same steward can act wrongly and mistreat his fellow slaves (fellow believers) and focus on eating and drinking and getting drunk. These wrong actions are connected to a wrong inner attitude: "My master will be a long time in coming." This means that once a leader loses sight of the imminent return of the Lord Jesus (which includes accountability for his believers) he can begin to mistreat fellow

believers and be caught up in this world system (“getting drunk” pictures overindulgence in the pleasures and desires of this world).

What will happen to such a failed servant of God, one who thinks the Lord’s coming is delayed and begins to mistreat believers and live in self-indulgence? Verse 46 makes it clear that such a one is going to experience a severe judgment from God:

“the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect *him* and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers” (Lk. 12:46).

To “cut in pieces” is a figure of speech derived from an ancient method of punishment (“sawn in two,” Heb. 11:37). This figure of speech pictures a severe judgment by Christ upon a spiritual leader who has failed in this way. We do not know with certainty the exact nature of this future punishment. This punishment and the Lord’s assignment to a place with unbelievers are connected by the word “and.” This indicates that they are connected, but the severe punishment seems distinct from the placement with unbelievers. Being severely punished, as well as being assigned a place with the unbelievers, does not mean that a leader who fails in this way will go to hell for eternity, which would negate salvation by grace. However, the strong language of this warning indicates that God requires utter faithfulness in leaders who act as His stewards, and with such great responsibility the real possibility of severe punishment exists for failure (1 Cor. 4:1-5; Jas. 3:1). One strong possibility is that this punishment of being “cut in pieces” refers to a judgment of physical death. If these failed ones are killed by Christ when He suddenly comes, then they will be brought before His Judgment Seat and further judged by being placed with the unbelievers, here meaning outside of the glory of Christ’s coming millennial kingdom. More will be said about such millennial kingdom loss later.

On the other hand, if this judgment of being “cut in pieces” is something severe besides physical death, then we must consider an alternative understanding of being assigned a place with the unbelievers. Where will the unbelievers be when the Lord suddenly returns? They will be here on the earth to experience the time of great tribulation and many judgments upon the earth. In this alternative case this passage is warning us that those stewards of God who are alive at Christ’s return, and who have not been faithful, will not only be severely judged, but will also be left with the unbelievers here. Whether the severe judgment here of “cutting in pieces” is death, or something less, we must realize that God can render severe judgment now, prior to the time of the Judgment Seat (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; 11:28-32; Heb. 12:4-10). It is very possible that we may see more open judgment by God upon disobedient Christians at the end of this age, as there was in the early church (Acts. 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; 11:28-32). A severe judgment from God awaits those leaders who are found unfaithful when Christ comes to take the overcoming saints. The severity of this warning of punishment should not be missed, and it should not be reduced to simply being a “rebuke.” It follows naturally that those leaders who have died before Christ’s return in such a condition of failure will also receive severe judgment at the coming Judgment Seat of Christ.

The fact is this: today there are many preachers, teachers, and leaders among God’s people who are born again, but are not looking for the Lord’s return. Since He has not yet come in almost 2,000 years they feel that He is not likely to come soon, especially at any moment. In line with this, they have little concern about their accountability before Him. This lack of realization in turn causes them to be unwatchful as respects how they treat fellow believers, and it causes the love of this world to creep into their lives. They begin to feed on some of the same pleasures and desires as the unbelievers of the world. They may desire a more comfortable lifestyle instead of being willing to sacrifice all in order to be utterly faithful to God and to every truth of His word. The awful temptation of the “pride of life” can also influence preachers, causing them to seek fame through a wider “ministry” by adopting the world’s ways and methods. “For Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica” (2 Tim. 4:10). Let us not suppose that Demas left the faith. Nor let us think that he necessarily left being active in “ministry.” He only left Paul. Paul stood for the narrow way of the cross and lived in light of

Christ's coming in judgment (2 Tim. 4:1, 8). This was too strict for Demas. He wanted to live in a way that was not so narrow, leaving room for what pleased him.

God's dealings with every believer

In the next two verses the Lord goes on to touch a general principle applying to every slave, every believer (not just "leaders").

"And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know *it*, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more." (Lk. 12:47-48)

In these two verses Jesus continued his teaching on being ready for the Lord's return. He begins here by adding something, as noted by the word "and." What He adds is a general principle applying to every "slave," meaning every child of God, not just leaders. Also, this principle is not tied to potential dealings by the Lord solely to those alive at the time of Christ's arrival. It will also apply to those many believers who have died over the centuries. Those who do not prepare for the Lord's coming, or who do not act according to God's known will, shall be disciplined with many lashes. There will be some slaves (believers) who do not know God's will well, yet still violate it. For these, the discipline is less. Then follows the principle that for those who have been given much from the Lord (this may be in gifts, or enlightenment or assignments of responsibility), there will be a matching expectation of service. The "lashes" speak of a whipping given to a slave who did not carry out his duties. This discipline of "lashes" for a failed slave of the Lord is not literal, but gives us a real picture of God's dealing in judgment upon those who do not do God's will or carry out required responsibilities of service. What the actual "lashes" are is not known.

“The coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah”

Matthew 24:36-51

This passage, part of a long section in Jesus' talk on end-time events, contains three admonitions to watch, or be on the alert, and be ready (24:42, 44; 25:13). The context of these three admonitions will give us much understanding for our need, as disciples, to be on the alert and be ready for Christ's return. Remember, the audience for these words was strictly His disciples (specifically four apostles per Mk. 13:3), so we must take these warnings as directed to the church. Since this is a lengthy section, for the sake of space all of this text will not be reproduced here. Please open your Bible to this portion and follow it as we look at this most important passage.

Let us first look at the important section where the Lord tells us that His coming will be just like the days of Noah:

³⁶ “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. ³⁷ For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. ⁴⁰ Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women *will be* grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. ⁴⁴ For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think *He will.*” (Matt. 24:36-44)

“One will be taken and one will be left”

From this passage we see that the days of Noah consisted of three phases: 1) the time before the flood, which was characterized by the normal activities of man, 2) the entry of Noah (and those with him) into the ark, 3) the coming of the flood that swept away the people. The coming of the Son of Man will be like this (v. 39). The next verses tell us about two men in the field and two women at the mill. The work in the field and at the mill portrays the normal activity of life, just as in Noah's day before Noah entered the ark. Then suddenly something happens to one of the men and one of the women. They are taken away while the others are left in the field or at the mill. This picture is immediately followed by the Lord's warning: “Therefore, be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.” The Lord's warning is definitely connected to the taking of one person and the leaving of the other person. Does it not naturally follow the picture of Noah that the one taken is like Noah who went into the ark, leaving the others behind? The ark pictures a place of safety and escape from the flood of judgment that came upon the world. Jesus is admonishing His disciples to be spiritually alert and prepared. In verse 43 He shows that if the head of the house knew when the thief was coming he would have been prepared and not have suffered loss. Then, He immediately says, “For this reason you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.” This is the same warning we saw in Luke 12. The line of argument is that if you are not prepared, you will suffer loss. Since we do not know the hour of the Lord's return we must then be constantly prepared, spiritually ready for His return. What is the loss? The loss here is to be left on the earth during the time of tribulation. The one “taken” is the one who escapes (by rapture) the

scene of judgment, as did Noah. The one “left” is left at the scene of judgment.⁵ Scripture tells us that Noah took heed to the warning of impending judgment and prepared for escape: “By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household” (Heb. 11:7a).

“Who then is the faithful and sensible slave”

Immediately following the Lord’s warning that we must be ready (v. 44), Jesus states: “Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master will put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time?” It is clear that Jesus is here telling his apostles (and other spiritual leaders) how they are to be ready. “Who then” indicates a connection between believers being “taken” or “left” and the responsibility of the slaves who carry out stewardship to feed the saints. These leaders must be faithful and sensible slaves who feed and care for the believers, laboring to help them be ready for the coming of the Lord (see this truth also in 2 Tim. 4:1-2). The section on the faithful and sensible slave (vs. 45-51) exactly parallels what we have already covered in Lk. 12:42-46. The teaching is that the slave (or “steward” in Luke) must be faithful to carry out his responsibilities to care for the other slaves. If instead he thinks in his heart that the master’s coming is delayed and begins to mistreat his fellow slaves and live in self-indulgence, then he will be severely judged by the master at his return. There are some slight differences between this verse on judgment in Luke, and this verse in Matthew, which states:

“and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt. 24:51)

Whereas Luke says that the steward will be placed with the “unbelievers” (the Greek word is Strong’s #571), Matthew uses the word “hypocrites” (Strong’s #5273). “Hypocrite” means actor, one wearing a mask and playing a role. This word in the NT was almost exclusively applied to the religious Jews who practiced their religion outwardly, but whose heart was not right with God (Matt. 15:7-8). If the penalty of being cut in pieces equals physical death, then after that death the failed leader would appear at the Judgment Seat of Christ, which will be set up during this period. Luke notes the placement with unbelievers, which would be outside the glory of the millennial kingdom, as exemplified by unbelieving Jews in Matt. 8:5-12, who miss this coming kingdom participation even though God had intended them to possess it. Matthew notes a placement with the hypocrites, which would signify a more severe judgment beyond that of not possessing the coming millennial kingdom of Christ.⁶

⁵ Those who hold to the pre-tribulation rapture of the whole church teach that the one “taken” is taken in judgment and the one “left” is left to enter the millennial kingdom. They say that this passage deals with Israel and the two people are already living in the tribulation period. We must question the logic of such statements. The warning of being on the alert in order not to suffer loss is clearly linked to these people and the context of the escape of Noah from the flood of judgment. The sudden coming of the flood here is clearly intended by Jesus to picture the sudden onset of the coming tribulation era, so these people are not in the tribulation before one is taken and one is left. The admonition to be on the alert can only be given to people who have the spiritual capacity to be spiritually alert - believers. Why would there be a warning to the church here if the context has nothing to do with the church? If the ones “left” are “tribulation” saints (who are “saved” after the whole church is raptured according to the pre-tribulation teachers), who are destined to endure the period of tribulation and then enter the millennial kingdom, of what benefit is the warning to them? Some of the same teachers who take this view also teach that the admonitions to be alert and be ready in Matt. 24 and 25, Mark 13 and Luke 12 are indeed exhortations to watchfulness for the church. This is utterly inconsistent with their interpretation that the two men and the two women have nothing to do with the church and that Matthew 24 only pertains to Israel.

⁶ Matt. 24:51 notes that the failed slave would be placed with the “hypocrites.” The Jewish leaders in Matt. 23 were “hypocrites” (v. 29), whom Jesus said would not escape the judgment of *gehenna* (Matt. 23:33). Unfortunately, the Greek word *gehenna* is mistranslated as “hell” in most

If the “cutting in pieces” is a severe judgment other than death, then we must note that hypocritical Jews at the end of the age are left on the earth to endure the trial of great tribulation, which will surely be the time of Jacob’s (Israel’s) trouble (Jer. 30:7). We should observe that this judgment is certain upon any failed servant who fits this description. There will be no chance to change one’s status through repentance once the Lord suddenly comes. These failed slaves will experience “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The “weeping” indicates profound sorrow and regret over one’s loss, and the “gnashing of teeth” indicates self-blame over one’s failure.

versions. This word specifically refers to a valley outside of Jerusalem that was used for a garbage dump. The highest court of the Jews sometimes issued a judgment that called for the body of an executed criminal to be cast into this valley. The use of this word simply pictures a severe judgment. Throughout Scripture *gehenna* was a place for judgment upon God’s people, not the nations, and in the future era of judgment it belongs to the millennial age, not eternity. The eternal judgment of hell for men is described by different terms: “the eternal fire” (Matt. 25:41) and “the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14, 15). For further study on this complex subject please refer to Chapter 8 of the author’s book entitled, “*Worthy of the Kingdom*,” located at the following website: www.seekersofchrist.org.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

Matthew 25:1-13

¹ “Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. ⁵ Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and *began* to sleep. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet *him*.’ ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the prudent, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the prudent answered, ‘No, there will not be enough for us and you *too*; go instead to the dealers and buy *some* for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the other virgins also came, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open up for us.’ ¹² But he answered, ‘Truly I say to you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.” (Matt. 25:1-13)

Several times the Lord Jesus gave parables concerning the kingdom of heaven, indicating by the stories certain conditions, activities or principles that pertain to the kingdom, the reign of God over men. These parables were often prophetic in nature, forecasting future things of the kingdom. Here Jesus uses ten virgins in a marriage procession to illustrate a fundamental truth about His coming. The parable begins with “then,” which refers to the time of Jesus’ return, the topic already under discussion. The pivotal event of the parable is the coming of the bridegroom (v. 6).

To understand this parable we must know some truths regarding the Jewish marriage customs. Firstly, the future bride and groom became betrothed (engaged), which agreement for the future marriage was sealed with a gift from the groom to the bride. Then, the bride remained at her house for a period of time preparing for the future wedding. That preparation included the making of her wedding garment and her heart preparation to leave her family and begin a new life as a wife. The marriage ceremony itself took place at the house of the groom’s father. The groom would often surprise the bride by coming at night at an unknown time to bring the bride to the house of the groom’s father. For this reason, lamps had to be ready for the procession back to the father’s house. The bride was accompanied by female companions on this procession. Once they arrived at the house, then the marriage ceremony would take place with just a few invited guests. Seven days of celebration followed the ceremony and then a marriage feast occurred at another place where numerous guests were invited (like in John 2). The New Testament uses only one Greek word for both the wedding itself and the later marriage feast, which challenges the Bible reader to use carefulness in distinguishing the two matters (the word is *gamos*).

The overall theme of the parable concerns the need of the individual believer to be spiritually prepared for the coming of the Lord. If we see this one consistent theme, then interpretation becomes easier. To “overcome,” or be victorious spiritually, is needed in order for the believer to be positively rewarded by the Lord at His return. All rewards are an individual matter, based upon the individual believer’s works (Matt. 16:27; 2 Cor. 5:10; all the positive rewards to the believers in the seven churches in Rev. 2 and 3 are to “he who overcomes”).

The prudent and the foolish virgins

The ten virgins represent believers in the church who fall into two classes. The bride (a single corporate entity) is not specifically mentioned because Jesus is using the parable to teach on the individual believer's responsibility to be prepared. The ten virgins, close companions of the bride, are used to represent believers in the church who may or may not be positively rewarded. The figure of a virgin is used in the New Testament as a believer betrothed to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2). A chaste virgin is never used as a figure for an unbeliever. As the bride is given a gift to seal the betrothal, so the believer is given the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14).

Matt. 25:1 tells us that all of the virgins took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. This means that all believers know that they are on a spiritual journey to leave this world and meet Jesus, who is coming again. The virgins are broken down into two categories: the prudent and the foolish (v. 2). All ten virgins (vs. 7-8) have lamps which are lit, which means that their spirits have been born again by the Holy Spirit, who is now the oil within them (Pr. 20:27; Jn. 3:6-7; 1 Cor. 6:19). Oil in the Scriptures speaks of the Spirit of God (Zech. 4). Besides the lamps, the virgins in the marriage procession were also to carry a flask of oil to refill their lamps when the oil was running out and the flame diminished. The extra oil in the flask marks the difference between the prudent and the foolish virgins. The prudent virgins with the extra oil were prepared for the procession to the wedding, and thus gained entrance to the wedding.

The Jewish bride of the first century awaited the sudden coming of her bridegroom and used that time to prepare herself as his bride. In the same way, while Jesus is away from this earth we believers are to be preparing for His return! Although we have been justified and born again, there is the great need for us to be growing in sanctification or developing in the character of Christ (Rom. 6:19-22; Gal. 4:19; 2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Thess. 4:1-7; 5:23; Tit. 2:11-14; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:14-16; 2 Pet. 1:5-8). Matt. 25:9 indicates that the extra oil is gained at a price. The prudent virgins were willing to pay the price for the extra oil. In the same way, for us to be sanctified in our living we must pay a price by doing things such as seeking after God and living by faith (Heb. 11:6), spending time in His word (Jn. 17:17); cleansing ourselves from defilement (2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Jn. 1:9), putting to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13); denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus in obedience (Lk. 9:23), and being filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). To have the extra oil signifies gaining, or experiencing, the Holy Spirit in the actual living of the believer.

There have been many long centuries of waiting for the Lord and His coming seems delayed (v. 5). But suddenly the cry will come that He is here. It is for this that we must be ready. The foolish virgins were not ready for the procession, and when the groom came it was too late for them to prepare! The prudent virgins had been preparing all along, day by day paying a price to keep their flasks filled with oil. Because the foolish ones were not ready, they could not go into the wedding and the door was shut! What does this mean?

The bride of Revelation 19 and her preparation

This entry into the "wedding feast" here (v. 10) would be the wedding ceremony at the house of the groom's father. To understand this we must look at some passages in the book of Revelation.

⁷ Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, **for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.** ⁸ **It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.** ⁹ Then he *said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, "These are true words of God." ¹⁰ Then I fell at his feet to worship him. But he *said to me, "Do not do that; I am a fellow servant of yours and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus; worship God. For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." ¹¹ And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who

sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. ¹² His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. ¹³ He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴ **And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses.** ¹⁵ From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. (Rev. 19:7-15)

In the passage above we see the marriage of the Lamb in heaven, and we see that the bride has made herself ready. Her bridal garment is composed of the righteous acts of the saints, not the imputed righteousness of God given to us by initial faith. To be part of the bride in this marriage ceremony requires a life of righteous doings on the part of individual saints. This verse matches exactly the picture of the virgins associated with the bride. While the groom is away, the bride must prepare her wedding garment. So while Jesus is away, we must cooperate with the Holy Spirit so that righteousness is lived out in our lives. The Scripture shows that after the wedding the Lord Jesus leads His armies (the overcoming saints in fine linen) in heaven to fight against the rebellious nations and the Antichrist at the end of the age. "And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies assembled to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army" (Rev. 19:19).

Rev. 17:14 confirms that **the overcoming believers** are those who are with the Lord in this final battle:

"These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and **those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful.**" (Rev. 17:14)

Here the saints are identified as those who are "called and chosen and faithful." The calling and choosing here is not the election and calling to eternal salvation (Rom. 8:30). Rather, it is the call to the believer to overcome for reward. In the matter of eternal salvation all those who are elected are also called. But as respects reward, not all who are called are chosen, or selected, by the Lord to receive a positive reward. Matt. 22:1-14 contains the parable concerning the wedding feast given by the king for his son (and this may speak of the wedding feast on earth, at the onset of the millennium, which follows the wedding ceremony and dinner at the house of the groom's father in heaven in Rev. 19). In that parable we again see that a proper garment is needed to participate in the feast. When the king sees someone there without the proper garment, he commands that this person be removed from the feast and states: "For many are called, but few are chosen" (v. 14). In this case (unlike the calling to salvation in Rom. 8), all those called are not necessarily chosen, or approved, for participation in the feast, signifying the reward associated with the coming 1,000 year Kingdom age (more about this shortly). What is needed for this reward is our actions, our cooperation. That is why in Rev. 17:14 it notes that those who are included in the bride and the wedding at that time (Rev. 19:7-9), are also described as "called and chosen **and faithful.**" To be faithful is to follow the Lord in obedience, to do the righteous things He wants us to do. It is a matter of our choice and our cooperation. It is not automatic. We can live for ourselves, even as believers, or we can deny what we want and live unto God and His will. There is a daily battle between the "flesh" (the old life within) and the "Spirit" (the new life within). We must fight this battle in faith to overcome. Those who are living unto God are those prudent virgins who are preparing their garments now to be ready for His coming so that they can be rewarded to be part of the bride in that day.

Now, I am sure that many of you are wondering how "the bride" of the Lamb could possibly be anything less than the whole church. Firstly, we must understand that the term "bride," as used for our relationship to Christ, is a figure of speech. A figure of speech is used to create an

impression and does not strictly follow the literal meaning of the word or words used. Thus, a figure of speech is not bound by all of the exact details of the literal words. The overcoming bride will not be a real female wearing a veil and walking down an aisle on the day of the “wedding.” In fact, the gown she wears is not literally of real fine linen – it is one consisting of the “righteous acts of the saints!” Therefore, we cannot press the figure of the bride so as to be governed by literal aspects of a real bride, such as having to be one person who cannot be divided and must be altogether at one place at one time. The bride in Rev. 19 is not defined as all the members of the body of Christ, but the bride here is defined as those who have made themselves ready through the righteous acts of their living. This definition cannot possibly fit every believer, as the New Testament records believers as including those who are living in sin and carnality (some examples: Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 3:1-4; 5:1-5, 9-11; 6:6-8; 11:28-31; 15:34; 1 Tim. 1:19; 4:1-3; 5:14-15; 2 Tim. 2:16-18; 4:10; 1 Jn. 5:16; Rev. 2 and 3 – failures among the seven churches).

The picture of a bride and a marriage does present at least one important truth. On the day of the wedding the bride and the groom are brought into an experience of intimate union that they had not known with each other before. The fullness of the marriage union only happens after the stage of betrothal. We are now only betrothed to Christ, so the fullness of union is yet future (2 Cor. 11:2).⁷ We see this fullness of union with Christ and His church in Eph. 5:25-32 where the great mystery is that these two become one. Also, in Eph. 5 we see that Christ sanctifies the church in experience in order that He might “present” her to Himself as a spotless bride. The word “might” is here to indicate the verb for “present” is in the subjunctive mood. This mood indicates some uncertainty about the action. The sanctification in this passage is not “positional,” that is, something already accomplished by Christ’s actions alone on the cross (Heb. 10:14). The sanctification (our being set apart to God) here is something practical and in our experience “by the washing of water with the word” (Eph. 5:26b). This means that as Christ speaks to us and we obey Him, then we are being more and more sanctified unto Him. When a stage of maturity is reached then we corporately are spiritually prepared to be “presented” (as a bride) unto Christ, being glorious, “having no spot or wrinkle . . . holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:27). Such sanctification is a process which requires our cooperation. Just as Esther prepared herself through a process of beautification before being presented to King Ahasuerus (Est. 2:12-16), so now those in the church must prepare themselves. But, such a process does not automatically happen. It requires the cooperation of the individual believer (notice the conditionality also in Col. 1:22-23).

Recompense and separation of believers

Although the church is spiritually a unity, there are definite possibilities of separation among the believers. For example, we who are alive now are practically separated from those believers in the church who have now passed on, or who have not even been born. Those who are excommunicated from an assembly are separated from the rest (1 Cor. 5). We are all on the same level by grace for eternal salvation. However, another great principle of “reward (recompense) according to works” will prove to be a separating factor among believers when Christ returns.

According to the grace principle, our works are not counted and all of us will be in eternity with God because of grace. But according to the “reward” principle Christ’s return will bring about a separation among God’s people for the period of the millennial kingdom where Christ openly rules. There are examples of such separation among God’s people in the Bible. A significant example concerns the Exodus generation of the Israelites. They were all the people of God, but there came a point when there was a separation among them because of their own actions. In Num. 13 and 14 we see where the whole nation was to go into the good land, but most of them rebelled against the Lord’s command to go in. The result was that all of those who refused

⁷ This fullness of union with Christ is probably also pictured in Scripture as a special portion of the enjoyment of “eternal life” (Jn. 17:3) promised to the overcomers during the millennium (Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30; Rom. 2:6-7).

received a penalty from God for their disobedience. God spoke concerning those who disobeyed - "have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice" - that their corpses would fall in the wilderness and they would not come into the good land (Num. 14:22-23; 29). On the other hand, because Joshua and Caleb had been faithful, they were allowed to enter the land (Num. 32:11-12). So we see this clear separation among God's people based upon their cooperation with God.

"For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will **then repay every man** according to his deeds" (Matt. 16:27). He will decide which believers are qualified for inclusion in the bride in Rev. 17:7-9. That bride will be the bride at that time, receiving a marvelous reward of participating in the wedding feast and enjoying a special fullness of union with Christ, as well as going with Him to fight against the Antichrist. There is no doubt that these overcomers will also reign with Christ in His millennial kingdom. However, that bride (that company of overcomers) will not be equal to the "wife" for eternity. After God's period of special reward is over, at the end of 1,000 years, then eternity will begin. The New Jerusalem in eternity will include all of the redeemed (Rev. 21:10-4). All believers in Christ are with God in eternity because of the gift of eternal salvation by grace, not of works (Jn. 3:16; 5:24; Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8-9). The Scripture shows us the New Jerusalem as the bride after the 1,000 years, where there is a transition from the bride of Rev. 19 to "the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:9). This final bride is pictured as one who is made ready for that point in time, and God is able to finish this preparation.

"And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband." (Rev. 21:2)

"Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." (Rev. 21:9)

It is interesting to note that the Scripture says of the bride in Rev. 19: "His bride has made herself ready" (Rev. 19:7b). The verb used there is in the active voice, indicating that the bride is the one active in the process of her preparation (she is pursuing sanctification to be ready). In distinction from this is the bride in Rev. 21, where the Scripture says that the bride there is "made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2b). The voice of the verb in this verse is passive, emphasizing God's acting in the preparation of this final bride.

If we see that the "reward" (recompense) principle applies to us, as well as the grace principle, then we can see that there is a separation among believers when Christ comes back to recompense us. Indeed, that is what the whole parable of the ten virgins is telling us. Those who are prudent, being faithful to prepare, are ready to go into the wedding feast and God allows it. But, those who have not prepared, the foolish virgins, will be excluded - "the door was shut" (Matt. 25:10). These foolish virgins wanted the groom to give them entry, but he declares unto them, "I do not know you" (Matt. 25:12). To know here means to know intimately. The foolish ones are those believers who have not allowed the Lord to develop a close fellowship with them, where they listen to His voice and learn from Him.

The Lord Jesus concluded the parable with a word of admonition based upon the spiritual truth presented in the parable: "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour" (Matt. 25:13). His point is that there is the need for constant preparedness, like that of the five prudent virgins, in order to be ready for the imminent coming of the Lord at an unknown hour. I see this as a word given to the church and applying to all believers over the course of time since the Lord has left the earth. While He is away, even while He seems to be delaying His return (v. 5), there is the constant need to be ready! This is a word of warning not strictly related to rapture and escape from the coming time of tribulation (like in Matt. 24), but a warning related to being in the wedding feast and part of the bride of Rev. 19:7-9. This company of overcomers will consist of those believers throughout the ages who have faithfully prepared in the manner shown by the prudent virgins.

The Parable of the Talents

Matthew 25:14-30

This parable is connected to the final word of warning given in Matt. 25:13 about being ready, because this parable begins as follows: "For it is just like a man *about* to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them " (Matt. 25:14). So in this parable Jesus is again going to give a story which will illustrate truths relating to His coming back. Once again we must remember that His audience is His disciples and the lessons here are to be applied to them.

The story line is simple. A man about to go on a long journey first entrusts certain possessions to his slaves, expecting them to utilize these to gain some profit for him while he is away. When he returns after a long absence he calls his slaves to himself and examines their stewardship. The slaves who received the five talents (a "talent" is a specific weight of precious metal used for commerce) and the two talents produced a profit and were positively rewarded. The slave who had received one talent of money was not faithful and he was negatively recompensed.

The man in the story who leaves for a journey refers to Christ, who left for heaven at His ascension and will return. The man's entrustment to his slaves of his possessions while he is away describes things given to Christ's believers in expectation of them producing a spiritual "profit" for Him in the kingdom of God. While He is away, He expects His believers to "Do business with this until I come back" (Lk. 19:13). These possessions are given in accordance with the abilities of the believer (Matt. 25:15), but the effort to put these possessions to work should always be by means of the grace of God (His enablement), not by our own natural strength (1 Cor. 15:10). The "possessions" which Christ gives to His believers at least include spiritual gifts (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12, Eph. 4), special opportunities arranged by God's sovereignty (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:10), and material possessions also arranged by God's sovereignty (Lk. 16:9, 10; 1 Tim. 6:17-19). The main point of the parable is that we must be faithful to use what God has given us. If we are faithful, then increased responsibility and stewardship will be granted to us in Christ's future kingdom.

Stewardship and the Judgment Seat of Christ

All the slaves in the story belong to the man. Believers are indeed Christ's slaves (Eph. 6:6). Nowhere in the New Testament do we see God giving gifts to unbelievers and expecting them to exercise stewardship and produce a profit for Him! Yet, the Scripture does show believers as serving ones entrusted with stewardship (1 Cor. 4:1-2; 9:17; Eph. 3:2; 4:12; Col. 1:25; Tit. 1:7; 1 Pet. 4:10). Therefore, we must be clear that all three slaves in the story are examples of genuine believers. The difference between the two slaves who produced a profit and the one who did not was their faithfulness in stewardship, not their genuineness as believers.

Matt. 25:19 reads: "Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them." This verse speaks of the Judgment Seat of Christ where what we have done in our Christian lives (not pre-conversion) will be manifested and recompensed (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10-12). The recompense (repayment) to the believer there is "according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). In other words, we can receive a positive recompense or a negative one⁸. The two profitable slaves in the parable received a positive recompense, but the

⁸ It is difficult for believers to understand how there could be a negative judgment upon them when Jesus took the penalty for our sins on the cross. However, we must distinguish between eternal forgiveness, related to our unchanging relationship with God through our union with Christ (Eph. 1:3-7), and fellowship forgiveness, related to our daily fellowship with God (1 Jn. 1:5-9).

failed slave received a negative recompense. Concerning sins we commit after we are born again, we need not fear that such sins will necessarily result in some negative judgment upon us at the Judgment Seat of Christ. We can avoid such a judgment through sincere confession of our sins, which includes our intention to forsake such sin. "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion" (Pro 28:13). To "confess" literally means to "speak the same thing." We should be exceedingly sensitive to the voice of God in our conscience. When we realize that He has spoken to us that we have sinned, then we should confess that, agreeing with God that our action, attitude or words are to be judged as sin. "But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged" (1 Cor. 11:31).

Positive and negative recompense

The two profitable slaves had been faithful in a few things so the master (the Lord) gave them increased responsibilities and they entered "into the joy" of your master." This speaks of responsibility given to believers in the coming 1,000 year Kingdom of Christ. In the parallel parable in Luke 19 the Bible shows that the profitable slaves are to rule over cities (Lk. 19:17, 19). This rulership is also noted in the Lord's talk to His disciples about the reward that would be given to them "in the regeneration," meaning the time of restoration of the earth in the Messiah's 1,000 year Kingdom (Matt. 19:28). We must note that this promise of reward is given to faithful disciples who leave everything to follow the Lord (Matt. 19:27-29). Again, this promise of sharing in Christ's reign is noted in the promise of reward to the overcomer in the church of Thyatira: "He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS" (Rev 2:26). Crowns, which are gained by believers due to their faithfulness, also signify that these overcomers will rule with Christ in the Messiah's Kingdom of 1,000 years (1 Cor. 9:24-25; 1 Thess. 2:19; Jas. 1:12; 2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Pet. 5:4).

On the other hand, the slave who received the one talent was deemed "wicked" and "lazy" because he put forth no effort to carry out his stewardship. As a result, he was penalized and his stewardship was taken away from him (v. 29). In addition, he was thrown into "outer darkness," a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (v. 30). Believers who have failed in stewardship will be so judged by Christ at the Judgment Seat. Instead of reigning with Christ, they will have no stewardship. Instead of entering into the joy of the master, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So, what is "outer darkness?" If we compare many other Scriptures, which we cannot go into fully in this writing, we will see that this "outer darkness" means a loss of sharing in the bright glory of

The great Bible teacher of the 1800s, C. H. Mackintosh, also made this important observation: "These, and numberless other Scriptures in the Old Testament, as well as many similar passages in the New Testament, unfold to us the deeply important subject of God's moral government. Now, to be merely a subject of God's government is one thing; to be a subject of His unchangeable grace is another. We should never confound them. To elaborate this point, and to refer to the various passages which illustrate and enforce it, would demand a volume: we would here only add our full persuasion that no one can understand the Word of God who does not accurately distinguish between man under government and man under grace. In the one case he is looked at as walking down here, in the place of responsibility and danger; in the other, he is looked at as associated with Christ above, in the place of inalienable privilege and eternal security" (*The Mackintosh Treasury*, p. 650). That God does subject believers to temporary penalties for sin is made plain in the NT (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; 11:27-31). This principle will remain for believers at the Judgment Seat and carry into the next age of 1,000 years prior to eternity (1 Tim. 5:19-25). For further study in this area please see the following articles on the author's website: "*Understanding Forgiveness with God*," "*A Letter on the Judgment Seat*." The website address is www.seekersofchrist.org.

Christ in His millennial reign.⁹ We may not be able to fully understand all what this means, but that should not keep us from accepting this picture of truth that God has given us in His holy word. Christ's millennial reign is one particular future phase of God's eternal kingdom. As such it is often referred to as "the kingdom of God." Thus, it is the blessings of this "kingdom of God" which can be gained by faithful believers in the next age, the "age to come," the millennium (Matt. 19:27-30, Mk. 10:28-30; Lk. 18:28-30). The "age to come" is not the eternal age, because the Bible makes it clear that there are yet "ages to come" (Eph. 2:7). It is this "kingdom" (the glorious millennium) which can be lost as a potential inheritance (a "possession") by believers due to their unfaithfulness (1 Cor. 6:7-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-5).

Reigning with Christ in glory

The following two verses succinctly show the possibility of reigning with Christ in His future kingdom glory (in the millennium), or the possibility of not sharing in this glory:

"If we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us." (2Tim. 2:12)

"and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and **fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.**" (Rom 8:17)

This verse in Romans 8 tells us, if we look closely at the Greek, that there are two inheritances based upon two different factors. We become heirs of God simply by being His children. But, being fellow-heirs with Christ, when He inherits (possesses) His coming kingdom, is conditional upon our suffering with Him in order to be glorified with Him (in that kingdom). The suffering here points to the disciple's willingness to deny the self, take up his cross, and follow Christ.

The loss of sharing in the kingdom glory and reign will produce profound sorrow, regret and self-blame over the believer's failure and loss: "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:30). A believer should never minimize this potential loss by thinking, "If I don't reign with Christ in His glory that is no big deal. I still belong to Him and will be with Him in eternity." This loss will be very significant and those who suffer this loss will be greatly affected with sorrow, and regret. The Lord is warning us that we must be ready when He comes at an unknown time, being faithful in our stewardship! There will be an accounting for each of us at the Judgment Seat of Christ!

⁹ For more study on these truths about the coming 1,000 year Kingdom and potential penalties such as "outer darkness," please refer to the author's book entitled, "Worthy of the Kingdom," which is found at the website address of www.seekersofchrist.org.

A Final Word

Why it is imperative to watch and be ready

Let us recap why it is imperative for the believer to heed the Lord's warnings to be spiritually alert and ready for His coming. Our Lord desires us to gain all that we may gain by being obedient and faithful to Him. Also, our Lord desires that His children not have to suffer loss.

Firstly, by being prepared, if we are alive when He comes for the first fruits in rapture, we will escape the terrible tribulation that is coming upon this world in the final years of this age. Do you wish to be left on the earth to endure the greatest time of trial the world has ever witnessed? If you truly believe the Lord's warnings, then you will want to be utterly serious about obeying God, maturing in Christ, and serving Him.

Secondly, there is the matter of participation in the blessings of the coming Kingdom age (1,000 years) when Christ rules over the earth from His throne in Jerusalem. This reward is available to all generations of believers, not just those who are alive at His coming. Do you desire to be a partner with Him in this rule? Do you wish to enter into the joy of this Kingdom? Do you wish to be part of the bride that has prepared herself? Or, do these things mean little to you? Those who now believe that these things are of little importance will be enlightened when He returns. They will see how momentous these positive rewards truly are. Once they realize that they will miss out on what they could have gained, they will weep with deep regret and self-blame.

Thirdly, there is a distinct warning given to Christian teachers and shepherds (and perhaps other "leaders") concerning possible severe judgment upon them if they fail to exercise proper stewardship. This warning indicates that their failure begins with an attitude that the Lord's coming (which includes accountability) is delayed.

Today the ministry of many churches (at least in the West) is focused on meeting the "felt needs" of the believers. There are messages on topics like how to have a successful marriage and family life, how to overcome feelings of loneliness and disappointment, or cope with other pressures of daily life. It is not that we do not need some ministry to help people with these daily issues. But, the focus of most believers has become an improved life in this world, not preparation for the next. There is almost no understanding by many of today's believers of the very real need to love Christ's appearing and to be purifying one's life for the coming day of judgment. In fact, if believers would realize the necessity of being ready for Christ's return many would change their ways and their attitudes and family life would improve. Some of the seemingly huge problems of daily life would also become much smaller in perspective.

All of us must deal with the trials and pressures of daily life, and we must lean on the Lord and trust in Him during such trials. Yet, if we see the monumental importance of the coming of Christ, the Judgment Seat of Christ, the marriage of the Lamb, and the glory of the 1,000 year kingdom, we must learn to daily lift our eyes beyond the issues of today and be those who are truly "looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (Tit. 2:13). O, that the coming of the Lord Jesus would once again capture the hearts of God's people!

God has purposely arranged this life as a test of the faithfulness of His believers. Those who decide to be fully faithful to Him at the cost of self-denial will be richly rewarded. Those who refuse to value the rewards and choose to live in some measure of self-indulgence will be denied a positive reward and may undergo some discipline from Christ. The Lord's return may begin at

any moment with the first fruits being reaped. The Judgment Seat of Christ is coming. The hour is late. The results of our choices in light of these things are profound. Let us be wise in our choices.

Signs of the Times

As we think about the coming of the Lord we should also consider what Jesus said about the need for men to recognize the signs of the times:

¹ “The Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Jesus, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. ² But He replied to them, “When it is evening, you say, “*It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.*” ³ And in the morning, “*There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.*” **Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot *discern the signs of the times?*”** (Matt. 16:1-3)

This passage indicates that the Jews in Jesus’ day should have recognized that what they saw happening at that time indicated the presence of the Messiah. In the same way, with much prophecy given to us in Scripture, we should be able to recognize when the time of Jesus’ return is drawing near. In fact, when Jesus gave His great prophecies on Mt. Olivet He said: “Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, *right at the door*” (Matt. 24:32-33). Included in “these things” would be the sign of the fig tree itself coming back to life. The fig tree is a symbol for the nation of Israel, and in 1948 this nation came back to life and its growth is continuing.¹⁰ **This is the greatest sign that Jesus’ return to earth is very near.** Yet, if we have spiritual insight we can also see other signs. God is doing something in the Middle East. The rise of radical Islam is giving much credence to the view that a prophesied Islamic-led invasion of Israel belonging to the end-time is drawing near (Ezek. 38, 39). The turmoil beginning in 2011 among Middle Eastern nations is changing things dramatically, no doubt in line with God’s plan for end-time events. The nations of the world are becoming more anti-Israel, including the United States. Apostasy is becoming more evident among traditionally sound church groups. The world seems on the verge of a currency and/or sovereign debt crisis, which may lead to significant changes on the world scene.

With these things in view, it is most reasonable to conclude that **the Lord’s coming again is not only imminent, but near.** With this in mind, and considering the counsel of the Scriptures presented in this writing, what should we do? I believe **it is time for a renewed seriousness about being prepared for the coming of the Lord.** It is time for us to live in a heightened anticipation of His return! **It is time for us to learn what it really means to look for the blessed hope, to be sober for the purpose of prayer, to love one another, and to love His appearing** (Tit. 2:13, 1 Pet. 4:7-8; 2 Tim. 4:8). May God grant us strength to do this hour by hour.

For help on living a victorious Christian life in preparation for Christ’s return, please see the author’s lesson series entitled, “*The Victorious Christian Life*” on the following website: www.seekersofchrist.org.

¹⁰ For more study on this parable of the fig tree and its significance to the timing of Jesus’ return, please see the author’s booklet entitled, “*The Return of Jesus is Near – Now Learn the Parable of the Fig Tree.*” This booklet may be viewed or ordered (free) at the website address of www.seekersofchrist.org.