

The Rapture Happens Next

Matt 24

Intro. This morning our study of Matthew's Gospel brings us to **chap. 24 & 25** and to what is called the Olivet Discourse. In these chapters Jesus gave a detailed answer to several questions asked by His disciples. Keegan read the passage for us, but let me simply draw your attention again to v. 3. **As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"** The way Jesus responded to the disciple's questions in these two chapters forms the centerpiece of Bible prophecy. Yet these verses have become the object of endless speculation, confusion and debate. So this morning, I want to set the stage for what I believe to be the correct interpretation of **Matt. 24, 25** and then consider what to happen expect next for believers. To do this we need to consider a few rules for interpreting prophecy correctly. I've called these rules *guard rails*.

1. Interpretive guard rails for understanding Bible Prophecy – II Tim. 2:15 - Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. People have always been curious about the future...what to expect / what to plan for / how will life as we know it end? The Bible answers these questions! But to understand Bible prophecy we must **correctly handle the word of truth**. This is where certain guard rails are important. I'll only mention four...there are others.

a. God is sovereignly in control - At the foundation of our understanding is the fact that world events are not spiraling out of control. God's plan has been pre-determined and pre-announced. As we said last time, "history is really His-story." This means that nothing takes God by surprise, not hurricanes / sunami's / election results / ISIS / Russian aggression / or climate change! It means that no power in heaven or on earth can stop or even interrupt what God has planned. The fact that God is sovereign means Jesus will triumph and His kingdom will be established on earth. We can be sure because God has decreed it. The final stage of God's plan will culminate when Jesus returns and takes control of His creation. **I Cor. 15:24 - Then the end will come, when He (Jesus) hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.**

b. God has distinct plans for Israel and the Church – **Rom. 9-11**. We believe the Bible is clear in presenting God's plan for the future of the Church and the future of Israel. Though these plans are distinct, they tend to intersect and overlap. As we've been saying all along, Matthew's Gospel was written for the Jewish people. The Holy Spirit inspired Matthew to write this treatise to prove that Jesus is their Messiah. But Matthew's Gospel was also written to tell how Jesus was rejected which explains why their kingdom wasn't established in the first century. In light of its Jewishness, the word **kingdom** appears 51x's in Matthew while the word **church** appears only once. In **Matt. 16:18** Jesus said, **I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.**

c. The disciples didn't understand all of God's plan immediately – In **Jn. 13:7** - Jesus told them, **"You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."** Jesus didn't overwhelm His disciples. He didn't make them drink truth from a fire hose. Instead, He revealed things to them only as they were able to grasp it. And isn't that the patient way His Spirit teaches us? In light of the progressive way Jesus taught His disciples, here are several of questions to consider:

- At this point in Matthew's narrative, do you think the disciples even knew what Jesus meant by the phrase, **my Church**? I don't think so.
- Did they understand that after Jesus was crucified and ascended to Heaven God would temporarily suspend His program with Israel and offer salvation to the Gentiles?
- Could they possibly know that Jews and Gentiles who believe in Christ would constitute one new spiritual entity? The first Christians didn't get this worked out until years later!

- Did they realize there would be at least a 2,000 year interval between Christ's ascension and His return to establish His kingdom at which time the nation would say, "**Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.**"
- Did they know anything at all about the rapture of the church? Nothing at all!

The answer to these questions is No! Jesus hadn't taught them anything about these developments. We see glimpses in the parables, but they were not subjects the disciples could comprehend at this point in time. They had all they could do to wrap their minds around Christ's promise to rise from the dead. These subjects they didn't know about are called **mysteries** in the NT letters because they were truths previously unknown. They represent spiritual realities that could only be known by the new information given to the apostles and passed on to us from Acts to Revelation.

So here's the point...We shouldn't look for the church or the rapture in **Matt. 24, 25**...they're not there. Bible interpreters go off the rails when they say here Jesus was talking about the future of the Church when in fact, He was talking specifically about the future of Israel. I'll support this conclusion when we get into our study of these chapters. But I believe **Matt. 24 & 25** are entirely futuristic. As we'll see, they harmonize perfectly with OT prophecies / the prophetic teachings in the Gospels and NT letters / as well as the chronology of **Rev. 6-19**. They present things which have not yet happened.

d. The prophetic Scriptures must be consistently interpreted literally. When Jesus came the first time, He fulfilled over 300 OT specific prophecies. From His birthplace in Bethlehem to His virgin birth and the manner of His death, every detail was literally fulfilled with absolute precision. Prewritten history defies human explanation. It's explained only by God's eternal omniscience. **Isa. 46:10** says, **I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.** Interpreting literally means we assign words of Scripture the same basic meaning they had in normal conversation at that time. We don't spiritualize or allegorize. The Euphrates River means the Euphrates River. The 200 million man army from the East is probably the Chinese army that today exceeds 200 million. Of course the Bible contains passages where symbolism / parables / and analogies are employed. But these instances can be identified by the context or by use of the similes **like** or **as**. But here's the point...words have meaning and we should expect prophecies of Christ's second coming to be fulfilled just as literally as were the prophecies of His first coming. And remember, the disciples were ordinary working men...their critics called them **unschooled Galileans**. They weren't scholars or seminarians. The Lord spoke to them and through them using terms that for the most part, were literal, concrete and understandable.

2. Not your mail...but informative reading – Matt. 24, 25

When these guard rails are observed, a cohesive understanding of **Matt. 24, 25** is helped as we consider what the disciples and the average Jewish person expected based on their understanding of the OT prophecies and rabbinical teachings. A brief summary appears in **Lk.19:11 - While they (the disciples) were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because He was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once.** As the Jews read the OT prophecies they recognized only one coming of their Messiah, not two. The miracles / the excitement at His Triumphal Entry / His cleansing of the Temple and rebuke of the religious leaders and prediction of the Temple's destruction...all fueled the feverish notion that Jesus was about to manifest His messianic glory / subdue the nations / and establish His kingdom. The disciples were itching to know **when** this would happen. **When**...isn't that what we'd all like to know? This question was still on their minds after Jesus was raised from the dead. **Acts 1:6 - So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"** Even then they didn't get it. They knew nothing about the church age or God's plan to bring Jews and Gentiles together in Christ on an equal footing in one body.

They knew nothing about the rapture of the Church until Jesus revealed it in the Upper Room. The Olivet Discourse of **Matt. 24, 25** provided only a prophetic outline of God's program for Israel and the unsaved world.

So what I'm saying is this...the teaching of **Matt. 24, 25** is not our mail! Its informative details about the Great Tribulation that will follow the rapture of the Church, but these chapters are not about the Church. Does that mean they has nothing to offer us? No, I didn't say that. **II Tim. 3:16** says, **All Scripture is... profitable.** Though not addressed specifically to the Church, the mail isn't sealed, its wide open. These chapters contain valuable lessons we can benefit from. But a correct understanding of God's plan for the future goes off the rails when we start reading the Church into these chapters. Having laid that foundation, let's turn **Jn.14** and that scene in the upper room.

3. This mail's for you...it's essential to be read and believed - Jn.14:1-3

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

This conversation over supper took place just before the feast of Passover. **(13:1)** It's Thursday evening, the night before Jesus was crucified. The disciples have gathered with Jesus in an upper room in Jerusalem. Jesus had told them, **"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death... and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" - Matt. 20:18, 19** So, here they are in Jerusalem having supper. But so much of what Jesus foretold was terribly troubling for the disciples. Jesus told them He would suffer and die / that one of the Twelve was a traitor / that Peter would disown Him / that Satan was at work against all of them / and that each disciple would desert Him. How do you think they felt hearing words like these? Each prediction was cause for alarm but the disciples were especially troubled to hear that Jesus was about to leave them. They anxiously wondered what fate awaited them?

To calm their troubled minds, Jesus said, **"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me."** Just as these men trusted the OT Scriptures...the words of God, Jesus urged them to trust His words and trust His love...a love He just demonstrated when He washed their feet.

It's significant to remember who these men were. Though one among them was a traitor, the other eleven were true believers...true followers of Jesus. As Jewish men, they represented the righteous in their nation. But they also represented the Church Jesus promised to build...in fact, they would become its founders. Later, when writing to the Gentile church in Ephesus, Paul wrote, **...you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people (the Jews) and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. – Eph. 2:19, 20**

Remember I said the plan of God for Israel and His plan for the Church sometimes intersect and overlap. That's what we find in these apostles. They were Jewish by birth but members of the Church by faith in Christ. In Christ, every national and racial distinction disappears. So in **Matt. 24, 25** Jesus revealed to them the program He has for Israel and the world. But here in **Jn. 14** Jesus revealed the special plan He had for them as members of the Church He promised to build. This intersection and overlapping of programs is explained in **Rom. 9-11**. There Paul said that Gentiles believers are like wild olive shoots, that have been grafted in among the Jewish olive branches and that both draw their blessing from God who is their source.

Not only does God's plan for the Jews and the Gentiles intersect...it collides so the unthinkable happens...the two people groups become one in Christ! So Jesus was speaking to men wearing two hats. The disciples were representatives of their nation and representatives of the Church which consists of everyone who trusts Jesus Christ...for everyone who is saved by grace.

Understanding their distress, Jesus said, **Do not let your hearts be troubled.** What follows are words of comfort. If you survey Matt. 24, you won't find much comfort there...just prophecies and warnings of impending judgment and catastrophes so severe they have no parallel in all of human history. Before Christ returns these judgments will claim the lives of ½ of the earth's population! Jesus said in **Matt. 24:21 - For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equaled again.** This is a sobering verse that needs to be taken very literally. The Great Tribulation will be entirely unique. The outpouring of God's wrath on the unbelieving will be worldwide and without mercy. People in the Tribulation will prefer death rather than suffer one more day of torment. Here Jesus echoed the words of Daniel who prophesied the same unique severity 600 years earlier. **"At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people--everyone whose name is found written in the book--will be delivered.- Dan. 12:1** Just make a note of something while we're looking at this verse in Daniel. Twice the angel told Daniel that this coming time of distress would have a special relation to **your people**...this can only mean Israel.

So the prophecy of **Matt. 24** and the promise of **Jn. 14** are distinct and quite different in a number of ways. In **Matt. 24** the disciples are wearing Israeli hats and in **Jn. 14** they're wearing Church hats. Here in **Jn.14**, Jesus revealed something brand new...something He never told them previously and something never mentioned in the OT. Because their heads were spinning...Jesus kept His promise simple and basic. First, He said, *"Don't let your hearts be troubled...trust Me."* Here is the universal Christian antidote for anxiety and fear. Mark it down. Jesus said, "Trust Me." He then said, *"Here's the plan. All hell is going to break loose on earth for seven years and if you can hang on to the end you'll be saved."* NO! He didn't say that! He said - **In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.**

Jesus said, *"My Father's house in heaven has many suites."* His words evoke the idea of a first century wealthy home with many additions. Like Asian culture, extended families lived together in the first century. When a son married, a new wing or addition was added to the Father's house to accommodate them. So Jesus said, **I am going there** (to His Father's House in heaven) **to prepare a place for you.** God's has planned for His children to live with Him. Construction began after His ascension and has continued for 2,000 years. As believers are added to the family of God, living accommodations are prepared. Think of it, the Master Carpenter is building you a home in heaven.

If His plan was otherwise or **if it were not so**, Jesus said, **I would have told you.** If believers are destined to live through the 7 horrific years of the Great Tribulation, don't you think Jesus would have told us to build shelters / stock pile food and water / weapons / and all sorts of stuff necessary to survive and make it to the end? And don't forget the sunscreen! But never once did Jesus or the apostles after Him offer that sort of survivalist counsel. So Jesus said, **If it were not so**, (that is, my plan to come for you first) **I would have told you.**

Instead of a *"how to survive"* manual, Jesus said, **And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.** Jesus said, I'm going there, which He did and the disciples saw Him go up...they witnessed His ascension. **Acts 1:9-11** **After he said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.**

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." The angel here repeated the promise Jesus made in the upper room. With no reference to when it would happen Jesus said, **I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.** The verb **take you** describes the event we call *the rapture*. And as believed by many students of Scripture, the rapture is the next event on God's calendar. That's why I'm preaching about it before we open **Matt. 24**. In real time, the rapture will happen before the events of **Matt. 24, 25** when God resumes His plan for Israel. In **Matt. 24:3** the disciples asked, "**When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?**" But unlike **the end of the age** when Christ returns to set up His kingdom, no signs will precede the rapture. The rapture is imminent which means it could happen at any moment since Jesus made this promise. Paul said its **nearer now than when we first believed. (Rom. 13:11)**

Like the word *trinity*, *rapture* never appears in our Bibles. But the *rapture* idea is here in **Jn.14** as well as several other NT passages. The English word *rapture* comes from the Latin word, *rapturo* which is equivalent to *harpazo* in the Greek language. *Harpazo* means to seize or snatch away; to remove something very quickly. In **I Thess. 4:17** *harpazo* is translated **caught up**. It signifies the sudden and powerful removal from earth to Heaven of all who are **in Christ**.

Years ago when Mark Pasma was with us, he provided me with a funny illustration of what *harpazo* means. Mark had a dollar bill that was connected to a retracting gizmo by some thin fishing line. He would sit at a booth in Halo Burger and drop the bill on the floor a few feet outside his booth. When some unsuspecting customer would bend over to pick it up, Mark would push the button. Faster than the human eye could see, the bill would vanish. This was great entertainment for a Dutchman like Mark. The funny part was watching the people who were sure they saw a buck lying on the floor. But where did it go? The departure of Christians will be just that sudden...our transformation will happen in the twinkling of an eye. *Harpazo* means to seize or snatch away, to remove something very quickly. I like to think of the rapture as an airlift. One moment we'll be down here, the next we'll be with the Lord.

Now it's sad to say, but teaching about the rapture has fallen on hard times. The emphasis in the Church today is to not be too specific about the timetable of future events. I mean, there are so many opinions out there, how can anybody know for sure? Besides it seems so far out. But in contrast with **Matt. 24**, this promise is **the blessed hope** of every believer! (**Titus 2:13**) And did you know that the idea of a rapture isn't wild or new to the NT? The Bible reports several raptures that have already happened. Concerning Enoch, **Gen. 5:24 says, Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.** What happened to Enoch is prophesied to happen to the church. One moment the old boy was walking with God on earth. The next moment he was walking with God in heaven. He was snatched to heaven from earth without the services of an undertaker!

Later in the OT, Elijah never died. But he too was supernaturally transported from earth to Heaven. **II Kings 2:11 says, As they (Elijah and Elisha) were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.** And as we read a moment ago Jesus also experienced rapture when He ascended to heaven. - **Acts 1:9**

What's new about the rapture of the Church is Christ's promise to resurrect and rapture millions of dead and living believers at one time. Is this hard for God? I'm thinking no! If God can put the stars in place without working up a sweat, he can certainly transport a Church of no-stars from earth to Heaven. And raptures don't end when the Church is caught up to heaven before the Tribulation.

Rev. 11:11, 12 prophesies the resurrection and rapture of the two witnesses. **But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.** So the concept of rapture isn't new or unique in the Bible. It was illustrated as far back as Enoch the seventh from Adam...and as recent as the Apostle Paul who was caught up to the third heaven. (**II Cor. 12:2**) So Jesus shared this sacred secret with His disciples in the upper room the night before He was crucified. For the next 20 years, this promise provided **hope and comfort** for believers who were instructed to wait for God's Son from heaven. (**I Thess. 1:10**) Until a more detailed explanation of the rapture was given to Paul, this promise was all the first Christians knew about what to expect next. And so I say again, still today, it's the next event on God's prophetic calendar.

In this simple promise, Jesus announced His plan for every person who trusts Him for salvation. He promised He would return to either resurrect us if we died or airlift us from where we are to the place He has prepared for us. Is this promise far out? Yes? Does everybody believe it? No. Has it happened before? Yes! Will it be difficult for God to pull off? No! Should this promise have any bearing on our lives here and now. Absolutely! Some hint of the blessings that await us should energize and purify our lives everyday! **I Jn. 1:3** says, **Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.** We are people going somewhere. For us the best is yet to come. Time only allows me to read two other passages which fill in a few blanks with regard to the rapture event. **I Cor.15:51,52 - Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.** This instantaneous change from mortal to immortal is mentioned again in **Phil. 3:20, 21 - But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body.**

God's promise to every person who trusts Jesus is that He will save us from the wrath we deserved because of sin. Wrath is the key word that describes the Tribulation everywhere it's mentioned...it's a time when God pours out His holy anger on a world that has rejected Him. But listen to **Rom. 5:9 - Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!** Add to that, **I Thess. 5:9** which says, **For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.** God has planned to snatch away His children before the holocaust because He loves us and because He never punishes the righteous with the unrighteous. Noah and Lot are examples of that. According to God's redemption plan, Jesus went to the cross in our place. As the perfect man, He became our substitute by dying the death we deserved. By that death He opened the way for us to be made righteous and fit for heaven. Say, are you ready for this? Have you personally trusted Jesus to save you?

Communion – Communion is a sacred occasion when we should allow God to test and compare what we say we believe with how we actually live. It's a time of thankfulness, but it's also a time to contemplate the facts of our salvation. Let me suggest two things to consider:

1. Return of Jesus is imminent (at any moment) 4'x in Revelation, Jesus says, **"I am coming quickly."** There will be no advance notice besides the promises we read this AM. Are you ready? **II Cor. 5:9 - ...we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.**
2. Are those nearest you...those you love...are they ready? Are you praying for their salvation? Each of us who believe should have a list of unsaved relatives, neighbors and friends we pray for regularly. Are you **living your life in a way that helps them see who Jesus is?**