

Thief in the Night: Rapture or Second Coming? (Part 1)

In a previous article, entitled *Reward or Loss?* (see [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)), we explored the parable Jesus shares with His disciples in [Luke 12:35-48](#). In that passage we find four potential lifestyle choices a Christian could pursue while awaiting the Lord's return: faithful, rebellious, indifferent, or ignorant. Those who are faithful servants will not be surprised at the rapture for they are expecting their Lord's return. However, unfaithful servants will be ashamed at His coming, for the rapture will surprise them, as a thief in the night.

Jesus wants us to be like servants who are eagerly awaiting their Lord's return, ready to open the door immediately when He knocks. He will reward His faithful ones, but the unfaithful will be punished accordingly.

Some have wondered if the reference to Christ's coming like a thief in the night could be referring to the second coming rather than the rapture. If so, then Christ's judgment in the Luke 12 parable would seem more akin to the sheep-and-goats verdict in [Matt. 25:31-46](#) rather than the Judgment Seat of Christ.

If that is the case, then according to some interpreters, the faithful servants would be the only saved ones in the parable and the unfaithful servants would all be lost and condemned to hell, in spite of the fact that at least two of the punishments in Luke 12 (*beaten with many stripes* and *beaten with few stripes*) do not support this position. Other interpreters suggest that only the rebellious servant would be unsaved, while the indifferent and ignorant would be saved. In other words, how one interprets the parable dramatically changes the verdict!

The question of whether the thief-in-the-night metaphor refers to the rapture or the second coming can be resolved by carefully examining the parallel passages in Matthew 24-25. The objective of this two-part article will be to briefly analyze the Matthew text and demonstrate why the parable in question seems to be referring to the rapture and not the second coming. Proper interpretation is of critical importance, because the application of the parable depends upon it. To that end, I offer the following considerations:

1. The timing of the rapture is unknown, but the timing of the second coming is precisely prophesied and therefore predictable.

But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only. Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the

Son of man cometh ([Matthew 24:36, 42-44](#)).

Without taking the time to go into all the prophetic details, dispensationalists would typically be in agreement that Christ's second coming occurs 7 years after antichrist signs the treaty with Israel or, putting it another way, 3-1/2 years after the abomination of desolation. That is clearly spelled out in Scripture. [Matthew 24:29-30](#), for example, declares that *immediately after the tribulation of those days* (emphasis added) signs will appear in the heavens, including *the sign of the Son of man in heaven ... and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory*. According to the Bible, there is no secret as to the timing of Christ's second coming. It is precisely timed and will be preceded by clear signs in the heavens. This will especially be evident to those who are saved during the tribulation.

In an attempt to refute this, some point to [1 Thess. 5:2](#), *For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night*. They hold that the "day of the Lord" is the second coming. Nevertheless, the preponderance of Scripture points to the "day of the Lord" as including the tribulation. See, for example, [Zeph. 1:14-18](#) and [Zech. 14:1-4](#).

We can, therefore, conclude the apostle Paul is warning the church at Thessalonica that the tribulation will arrive as a thief in the night (generally speaking). Why is that? Because the rapture (which immediately precedes the tribulation) will come as a thief in the night (again, generally speaking). On that basis, Paul admonishes the believers not to let the rapture overtake *them* as a thief in the night ([1 Thess. 5:4](#)). As believers, we are not of the night or darkness; we are children of light (5:5). There is no excuse for believers to be surprised (because of unfaithfulness) at the rapture. Paul then admonishes sobriety (5:8), seeing that Christians are not appointed to wrath (i.e., not going to experience the tribulation – 5:9). What a comforting thought (5:11, also 4:18)!

Thus, Paul concludes, *Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober* (5:6,8). This admonition is perfectly consistent with Christ's admonition to His disciples in Matthew 24 and Luke 12 to be ready. Furthermore, it is contextual, for the verses immediately preceding [1 Thess. 5](#) are the classic passage on the rapture, [1 Thess. 4:13-18](#). Is there any question that the rapture is in question in chapter 5?

2. If the thief in the night metaphor does not refer to the rapture, then nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus teach His disciples about the rapture.

The parable in Luke clearly mentions (12:1,22) that Jesus is speaking with his disciples. Some would say, "but these are Jewish men; it is perfectly normal for Jesus to teach them about the tribulation and the second coming, which pertain to the Jews." Certainly! Yet if that is all He teaches them, how will they ever learn of the rapture, which was a mystery in the Old Testament? We must remember that the disciples are Jewish *Christians*, not merely Old Testament saints. Furthermore, they become the apostles, the foundation of the New Testament church ([Eph. 2:20](#))! They are given the

command to go and preach the gospel to every creature as our church-age predecessors.

I would argue – on Scriptural basis, I believe – that the apostles will be raptured and not treated as Old Testament saints to be resurrected after the tribulation. Yes, I realize the apostles will sit on thrones in the Millennium, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Jewish nation). What an exciting prospect – Christian Jewish leaders of the nation of Israel in the kingdom to come! Do not those who are called “the foundation” of the church need to know about the rapture they will be experiencing? We must not allow our dispensational understanding of Scripture to box us in a corner.

In the next article (Part 2) we will dig further into the Matthew passage to see whether it is referring to the rapture or the second coming or both. The point in all of this is that our Lord wants His children to be prepared for His return and not surprised and ashamed at His coming. *And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming (1 John 2:28).*