

Thief in the Night: Rapture or Second Coming? (Part 2)

The purpose of this two-part article is to demonstrate that the thief-in-the-night metaphor in the New Testament refers to the rapture and not the second coming. The question is of critical importance, for it determines how we interpret the following parables:

- Parable of the Household Servants – [Matthew 24:42-51](#); [Luke 12:35-48](#)
- Parable of the Ten Virgins – [Matthew 25:1-13](#)
- Parable of the Talents – [Matthew 25:14-30](#)

If a thief in the night is an analogy of surprise at the rapture, then the characters in the above parables are all Christians, some of which are faithful and ready for the rapture, while others are unfaithful and shocked by the rapture.

In [Part 1](#) we considered the following: 1. The timing of the rapture is unknown, but the timing of the second coming is precisely prophesied and therefore predictable. 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. Let us now consider a third point.

3. Jesus teaches about the rapture, the tribulation, and the second coming in Matthew 24-25. Much of His teaching is parabolic, for the purpose of instructing believers how to live in light of the rapture.

Our western minds tend to think chronologically, while eastern minds tend more toward conceptual thoughts. We see that in Matthew 24-25, where Jesus is not speaking chronologically, but conceptually. Jesus gives the following survey of end times events in response to His disciples' questions (24:3): When shall these things be? What shall be the sign of thy coming and of the end of the world?

24:4-14 Description of the end of the present church age and the first half of the tribulation. Many of the events in this passage are already occurring in the present age, and will continue on with greater intensity in the first half of the tribulation. Certainly, we know that Jesus is speaking more broadly than the first half of the tribulation alone, for He had mentioned in vs. 1-2 the destruction of the Temple, and His disciples had just asked, "when shall these things be?" We know the Romans destroyed the Temple in AD 70, but that event was still future for them and was very much on their minds as Jesus is speaking about the present era. He comes back to the present era in v.32.

24:15-28 Description of the last half of the tribulation, starting with the abomination of desolation and ending with preparations for Armageddon.

24:29-31 Description of the second coming of Christ, preceded by signs in the

heavens.

24:32-36 Parable of the fig tree. Jesus now backs away from describing the events of the end times to return to the present era, and He uses a parable to make His point.

Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled ([Matthew 24:32-34](#)).

It is of utmost importance to remember: parables are not for an unbelieving audience with the intent of giving them the Gospel. Parables are for the express intent of concealing truth from those who have chosen unbelief and rejection of Messiah. They are for revealing truth to those who have received Him and need further instruction in discipleship. Jesus never concealed the Gospel in parables!

Parables are predominantly for teaching believers how to prepare for the kingdom (i.e., the millennial kingdom, a literal Messianic reign on earth, which would have been in the psyche of His audience). We should not be surprised then, to learn that, starting in v.32 (the parable of the fig tree), and continuing on to 25:30, Jesus turns to the subject of the rapture and the believer's readiness to meet Him unashamed. He starts with the parable of the fig tree, which helps believers see what conditions will be like in the final generation preceding the rapture.

The fig tree is a symbol of Israel's prosperity as a nation. In the case of the withered fig tree ([Matthew 21:19](#)), it pictures a nation living in blindness and unbelief, *until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in* ([Rom. 11:25](#)). Indeed, from the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the nation has also been scattered and not in possession of the land until very recently.

However, the parable of the fig tree in [Matt. 24:32-35](#) shows an entirely different tree, one having "tender" branches and leaves beginning to bud, a reference to the nation beginning to prosper again. Jesus uses this as a sign, of sorts, to signify that "all these things" are "near, even at the doors." When we see this sign, we are to know that "summer is nigh."

Summer is the time when figs bear fruit. Notice carefully the language. When we see the tree *starting* to bloom, we are to know that summer (harvest) is near, but not actually here yet. In the context of Israel and the end times, summer must be the millennial kingdom, when the nation is again thriving in the land. That will not happen again until after the return of Christ.

Some prefer to limit the phrase "all these things" to the immediately preceding verses (vs. 29-31, referring to Christ's second coming), but it is more natural, given Christ's use of the phrase "all these things," to apply it to His full discussion.

That being the case, what is Jesus saying to His disciples? In a nutshell, Jerusalem will be destroyed, the nation scattered (see also Luke 21), horrible things (tribulation) will happen on earth, and to the nation of Israel in particular, followed by the second coming of Christ and the gathering up of the “elect.” However, the timing of the nation’s blessing and ultimate return to the land in the Millennium will be near when we see the fig tree (i.e., the nation) *starting* to bloom again. When that starts to happen, then all the events of vs. 4-31 will come to pass in a generation (the average lifespan of a person), culminating in “summer” – Israel entering the millennial promise-land.

Israel re-formed as a nation in 1948, and was recognized by the United Nations. Since then, Israelis have been flocking back to the land of Canaan, as God prepares His nation for the end times. It is reasonable to say the fig tree is beginning to blossom. Could the rapture be nigh? We don’t know for sure, but signs of the times certainly point that way. Thus, it is appropriate for Jesus to tell His disciples at this point in the narrative:

But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only. (Matt. 24:36)

24:37-42 The rapture likened to Noah’s ark. Contextually, this verse appears to be a reference to the rapture, not the second coming. The passage that follows (vs. 37-42) also seems to be rapture-focused, even though some have interpreted otherwise.

The wicked conditions of Noah’s day are very similar to conditions in our present era. Noah’s ark is a beautiful picture of the rapture – salvation from the wrath to come (the tribulation). As the flood carried away the wicked, so the tribulation will carry away all those who reject Messiah. They will all be killed at the Battle of Armageddon. Just as the wicked were surprised at the arrival of the flood, so those who reject Jesus Christ will be surprised when Christians disappear and the unsaved are left on earth to endure the horrors of the tribulation.

The three parables listed at the beginning of this article are then shared by Jesus to illustrate the importance of rapture-readiness. A discussion of these parables is outside the scope of this article. Following these parables on the theme of rapture-readiness, Jesus drops the use of parables and returns to teaching about the second coming – the sheep and goats judgment (25:31-46).

Jesus wants His children to be ready for the rapture, and not to be caught by surprise, like those who are unsaved. His admonition to Christians is emphatic: *watch ... for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come (24:42)*. He warns His disciples in vs. 43-44 of the possibility of living in unfaithfulness, resulting in shock and surprise at the rapture, experiencing the Son of man’s coming in the clouds as a thief arriving in the night. Faithful servants are not taken by surprise. While they don’t know the hour, they are ready for the rapture, regardless.

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](#)).