

SHOULD PRETRIBULATIONISTS RECONSIDER THE RAPTURE IN MATTHEW 24:36–44?

Part 3 of 3

JOHN F. HART

Professor of Bible
Moody Bible Institute
Chicago, IL

I. INTRODUCTION

The previous two articles of this series have contended that Matthew presents Jesus' answer to the disciples' two questions (Matt 24:3) in a chiasmic structure. In vv 4–35, Jesus answered the second question, "What will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?" (v 3b). His answer revealed new prophetic truth about the future seventieth seven (week) of Daniel (vv 4–28). It is only after the Great Tribulation with all its telltale events that Jesus will be manifested to the entire world (vv 29–31). In vv 32–35, Jesus clearly taught that the nearness of His return to earth could be known in the same way that the spring budding of a fig tree is the announcement that summer is near. But the evidential happenings that lead to the Second Coming of Christ in Matt 24:29–31 cannot be harmonized easily with Jesus' description of His Parousia in Matt 24:36–44. The transitional nature of v 36 has been discovered to be the solution to this dilemma.

Beginning at v 36, the Lord addressed the first question of the disciples ("When will these things happen?" v 3a). Since v 36 is introduced by the specialized Greek phrase, *peri de*, the verse shifts the perspective slightly. Jesus now declared that the coming of "that day," the day of the Lord, could not be known. Jesus also paralleled His Parousia with the unexpected, sudden arrival of the flood (vv 37–39). Basing their prophetic understanding on the teachings of Jesus in the Olivet Discourse, Paul and Peter declared that the day of the Lord would come suddenly at a time of "peace and safety" (Paul's wording in 1 Thess 5:1–4). At the time leading up to the day of the Lord, scoffers will question the promise of Christ's return because they see no evidence of His coming

(2 Pet 3:3–4). Peter informed his readers that such mockers have purposefully forgotten the divine judgment of the flood (2 Pet 3:5–10). But believers will be rescued from the tribulation like Noah was delivered from the flood (2 Pet 2:4–9). Also, from Peter’s inspired typology of 1 Pet 3:20–21, it was concluded that Noah and the ark prefigure the church (and its rapture), not the rescue of the Jews (and/or Gentiles) at the close of the tribulation period.

II. WHO IS TAKEN (MATT 24:40–41)?

Most pretribulationist scholars understand the word “taken” (“one will be taken,” vv 40–41) to refer to people taken in judgment at the end of the tribulation, not people taken in rapture before the tribulation.¹ This conclusion is drawn from the preceding context that says, “the flood came and took them all away” (v 39). While these scholars recognize that the Greek word for “took” in v 39 (*airō*) differs from the Greek word for “taken” in vv 40 and 41 (*paralambanō*), they insist that the “taking” in both cases is for judgment. In their thinking, the only possible rapture in vv 40–41 would be a posttribulationist rapture, and a posttribulationist rapture must be rejected based on other clear passages.

Posttribulationists, on the other hand, have no problem finding a rapture in Matt 24:40–41. For them, however, the rapture in vv 40–41 must be one and the same with the Second Coming of Christ in vv 29–31, i.e., posttribulationist. But posttribulationist chronology of the Discourse overlooks the transitional nature of the *peri de* at v 36. If the transition is embraced, a pretribulationist rapture in these verses becomes theologically and exegetically reasonable. The events of vv 36–44 are separated logically and contextually from the events of vv 29–31.

It was Jesus, not Paul, who first revealed the rapture of the church. Kim demonstrates that the teaching of Paul in 1 Thess 4 originates with Jesus. “Just as Paul based the instruction now recalled in 1 Thess 5:2–7 (‘through the Lord Jesus’) on Jesus’ teaching, recognized by its many

¹ John F. Walvoord, “Christ’s Olivet Discourse on the Time of the End, Part IV: How Near Is the Lord’s Return?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (January–March 1972): 27–28; Paul D. Feinberg, “The Case for the Pretribulation Rapture,” in Gleason L. Archer et al., *Three Views on the Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulationist?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 230–31; Renald Showers, *Maranath: Our Lord Comes!* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1995), 179–80.

echoes of that teaching, so also in giving a new instruction in 1 Thess 4:13–18 on the fate of the Christian dead ‘in the word of the Lord,’ he bases it on Jesus’ teaching so that it too contains many echoes of that teaching.”² Besides the brief teaching of the rapture in John 14:1–3, Matt 24:37–44 contain the most likely teachings of Jesus on which Paul could have based his own doctrine about the pretribulational rapture.³

In light of the transition at v 36, the reasons put forward by posttribulationists for seeing a rapture in vv 40–41 can now be turned in support of a pretribulational rapture. Gundry states,

Two different words appear for the action of taking, *airō* (v 39) and *paralambanō* (vv 40, 41). The same word could easily have been employed had an exact parallel between the two takings been intended. Instead we have the employment of another word which only two days later describes the rapture (John 14:3) . . . The apostles would naturally have associated the two expressions. Jesus probably so intended, else He would have drawn a distinction . . . In light of this, the change from *airō* to *paralambanō* indicates a change in topic and connotation: the former term refers to judgment similar in unexpectedness to the Flood, the latter to reception of the saints at the rapture to be forever with their Lord (Cf. 1 Thess 4:17; John 14:3).⁴

It is generally agreed that *paralambanō* carries the meaning, “to take to or with [oneself].” The thought is always one of accompaniment, usually in a positive sense, i.e., for close fellowship.⁵ But of the forty-nine

² Seyoon Kim, “Jesus, Sayings of,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 477.

³ In Gundry’s view, the Olivet Discourse is the central portion of revelation on which his posttribulational doctrine is built. He argues that pretribulationists must look to other passages to demonstrate a pretribulation rapture. Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 129. This series of articles contends that the pretribulational rapture teaching of Paul can also find its central portion of revelation in the Discourse.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵ Gerhard Delling, “*paralambanō*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 4:13; B. Siede, “*lambanō*,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 3:751.

uses in the NT, Sproule has listed seven that may be used in an unfriendly way, five in Matthew (4:5, 8; 12:45; 27:27).⁶ Burer narrows the list of negative uses in Matthew to one. He observes that *paralambanō* is

used by Matthew sixteen times in his Gospel. It is used twice in chap. 1 to refer to the positive event of Joseph taking Mary to be his wife (1:20, 24) and four times in chap. 2 to mean “take to safety” (2:13, 14, 20, 21). Seven other occurrences have a neutral meaning of “take with/along” and refer simply to accompaniment (4:5, 8; 12:45; 17:1; 18:16; 20:17; 26:37). The sole reference that can be taken negatively is in 27:27 where the guards take Jesus into the palace to beat and mock him. It is within the general contours of Matthew’s use to see *paralambanō* as having a positive nuance here [Matt 24:40–41]. Thus those who are taken would be taken for salvation.⁷

Burer’s word study is helpful. But context must also be a determining factor. Some see the context in Matt 24:39–41 to be focused on judgment. But this is only partially correct. The Parousia is also mentioned in the context (vv 37, 39) and either the one taken or the one left could satisfy the stress on judgment. In fact *aphiēmi* (“to leave,” vv 40, 41) takes on the meaning of “abandon” in its recurrent use with personal objects in Matthew (Matt 4:11, 22; 8:15; 13:36; 19:29; 22:22, 25; 26:56, etc.).⁸ This impact of *aphiēmi* as it relates to personal objects is brought out in how a spouse might abandon his or her partner (1 Cor 7:11–13), how the Good Shepherd will not abandon His sheep (John 10:12), and how the Father has certainly not abandoned the Son (John 8:29). If these uses can be allowed to set the pattern, *aphiēmi* could hardly be used of what the Father or the Son do with believers at the final return of Christ to the earth.⁹ Other than Matt 24:40–41, there are no other passages in

⁶ The others are Luke 11:26; John 19:16; Acts 23:18; John A. Sproule, “An Exegetical Defense of Pretribulationism” (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1981), 60.

⁷ Michael H. Burer, “Matthew 24:40–41 in the NET Bible Notes: Taken for Salvation or Judgment?” posted August 4, 2004, http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=1587.

⁸ Cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:383.

⁹ Nolland remarks, “The potentially negative nuances of which ‘left’ (*aphiēmi*) is capable (‘left out’) make it more likely that being taken off to salvation is intended....” John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 994.

the NT that use *aphiēmi* to express what the Lord will do to or for believers (Jew or Gentile).¹⁰ Just two days after the Discourse, Jesus used *aphiēmi* of what He would *not* do to the disciples: “I will not leave [*aphiēmi*] you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18).

If the one “taken” is taken away for judgment, it is peculiar that a word characterized by personal accompaniment is employed while the one “left” to enter the kingdom is described with a word frequently used for the forsaken. Brown observes the use of *aphiēmi* in Matt 23:38 for the judgment of the temple. Drawing on this use, he concludes that the uses of the word in 24:40–41 serve to warn those who are unprepared like in the days of Noah that they will be forsaken in judgment like the temple.¹¹

A few pretribulationists have felt the weight of the natural sense of *aphiēmi* (“leave, abandon”) and *paralambanō* (“take along, take with”). Burer, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and assistant editor for the New English Bible, does not commit to a pretribulationist rapture in Matt 24. Nevertheless, he argues against the predominant pretribulationist persuasion regarding the one “taken” in 24:40–41.

This is a case where one English word overlaps in sense with two different Greek words. Since they are different words, similarity in English translation has to be carefully sifted for interpretive value. (b) The imagery itself lends the most

¹⁰ Merkle argues that in Matt 24 and Luke 17, Jesus employed judgment and exile imagery drawn from the OT prophets. He examines several OT passages (Isa 3:1–3; 4:2–4; 39:6–7; Jer 6:1, 11–12; Zeph 3:11–13; 13:8) where the one taken is taken in judgment to Babylon, and the one left behind is left in Israel for blessing. Accordingly, he concludes this imagery favors interpreting the ones “left behind” as those who receive salvation. Benjamin L. Merkle, “Who Will Be Left Behind? Rethinking the Meaning of Matthew 24:40–41 and Luke 17:34–35,” (paper presented at the 60th Annual Evangelical Theological Society, Providence, RI, November 19–21, 2008). Several obstacles work against this interpretation: 1) neither *paralambanō* or *aphiēmi* are used even once in these contexts of the LXX, making the interconnection unlikely; 2) the immediately preceding context of Matt 24:40–41 does not suggest a parallel with the exile judgments of Israel but with the flood event; and 3) righteous Israelites were among both those “taken” in judgment to Babylon (e.g., Daniel and his three friends) as well as among those “left behind.”

¹¹ Schuyler Brown, “The Matthean Apocalypse,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 4 (1979): 16.

credence to the interpretation that those taken away are taken for salvation. In the original narrative about Noah, God was gracious to save Noah from judgment by taking him off the earth and placing him in the ark. He was “taken away” from the place where God’s judgment was poured out to a place of safety in the ark. Thus the reference to Noah lends more credence to the interpretation that those taken are taken for salvation.¹²

Glasscock, also a pretribulationist, puts forward the thought that the ones taken are believers, both Jews and Gentiles, who are gathered by the angels at the Second Coming of Christ described in 24:31. The ones left behind experience the judgments yet to come on the earth.¹³ Where these believers are taken is not specified.

The first edition of the New English Translation notes on Matt 24:40 states, “If the imagery of Noah and Lot is followed, the ones taken are the saved. Those left behind are judged.” Then it adds a qualification: “The imagery pictures the separation of the righteous and the judged (i.e., condemned) at the return of the Son of Man, and nothing more.”¹⁴ This adheres to the natural sense of the verbs *aphiēmi* and *paralambanō* while remaining uncommitted concerning a rapture or resurrection in the verses. Once again, if the transitional nature of v 36 is allowed its full force, the one taken is not taken for salvation at the Second Coming of Christ. The simplest interpretation is to see in *paralambanō* (“taken”) a reference to the pretribulational rapture of church saints.¹⁵ Two days after Jesus taught His Discourse on the Mount of Olives, He used *paralambanō* to depict the taking of believers in a pretribulational rapture

¹² Burer, “Matthew 24:40–41 in the NET Bible Notes.”

¹³ Ed Glasscock, *Matthew*, Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 476–77. Glasscock cites as his source Pate’s treatment of Luke 17:26–37. C. Marvin Pate, *Luke*, Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 332. A similar view is held by the Dutch scholar Gijs van den Brink, *The Gospel according to Matthew: A Commentary Based on the New International Version* (Vijayawada, India: Yesupadam, 1997); see comments on vv 41–42, <http://www.elim.nl/eng/nt/matt/mat24.htm>.

¹⁴ Cited in Burer, “Matthew 24:40–41 in the NET Bible Notes.”

¹⁵ It is rather interesting that one of the sixteen uses of *paralambanō* in Matthew is found in the context of the mention of the church (18:16 with 18:17). But there seems to be no relevance of this observation for the present discussion.

(John 14:3).¹⁶ Why resist that inference in Matt 24:40–41? Those abandoned are the unbelievers.¹⁷ The judgments of the day of the Lord come on them and they do not escape (1 Thess 5:3).

III. THE THIEF IMAGERY AND WATCHFULNESS (MATT 24:42–44)¹⁸

A. THE THIEF IMAGERY

Matthew 24:42–44 contains a short parable concerning the thief (v 43), framed by two similar exhortations to readiness or watchfulness (vv 42, 44). Surprisingly, pretribulationists have not been consistent in interpreting the thief analogy in eschatological passages (Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess 5:2, 4; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; 16:15).¹⁹ Sometimes it is viewed as leading to Christ's Second Coming (Matt 24:43; Rev 16:15) and at other times as announcing the imminent day of the Lord that immediately follows or is coterminous with the pretribulational rapture (2 Pet 3:10; 1 Thess 5:2, 4).²⁰

¹⁶ Delling links *paralambanō* in Matt 24:40–41 with John 14:3, taking both uses as an “acceptance into the kingdom of Christ.” Delling, “*paralambanō*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4:13

¹⁷ Partial rapturists interpret both those taken and those left as believers. D. M. Panton, *Rapture* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle, 1988), 16–24; Robert Govett, *The Prophecy on Olivet* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle, 1985), 107–8. This hardly follows the parallel of the Lord's Parousia with the days of Noah (a separation of the righteous [believers] and unrighteous [unbelievers]).

¹⁸ It is possible to begin a new unit of material in the Discourse at verse 42. Matt 24:42–25:13 forms an *inclusio* and a separate unit since 24:42 and 25:13 both read, “be on the alert, [then] for you do not know which [the] day” Also, the phrase in 25:13, “the day nor the hour,” takes the reader back to 24:36 forming a double *inclusio*. Hodges, *Jesus, God's Prophet*, 33–34, 42–43.

¹⁹ Matt 24:43 marks the second time Jesus used the thief imagery. The first is recorded in Luke 12:39, given just over three months before the Olivet Discourse.

²⁰ Cf. John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 238.

Both pretribulationists²¹ and posttribulationists²² apply the Matthean passage to the Second Advent. The thief (at night) figure is found in several eschatological passages, 1 Thess 5:2–4 and 2 Pet 3:10 being of capital importance for this study.²³ If the source of Paul’s teaching about the day of the Lord and the pretribulation rapture is Jesus’ eschatological teachings in the Olivet Discourse, a case for a consistent interpretation between Matt 24:42–44 and 1 Thess 5:1–11 is warranted. Kim notes, “It is widely recognized that verses 2 and 4 [of 1 Thess 5] echo Jesus’ parable of the thief (Mt 24:43 par Lk 12:39), especially as the metaphor of thief is not applied in an eschatological context in the OT and Jewish literature.”²⁴

A convincing connection between Matt 24:42–44 and 1 Thess 5:1–10 may be found by looking at Luke 21:34–36, a synoptic parallel to Matt 24:43–44. In this passage, at least six terms are discovered to be identical with those in 1 Thess 5:3–7, including “suddenly” (*aiphnidios*), “come” (*ephistēmi*), “escape” (*ekpheugō*), “the (that) day” (*hē hēmera* [*ekeinē*]), “watch” (*gregoreō*), and “drunkenness” (*methē*, Luke) or “be drunk” (*methuō*, 1 Thess 5).²⁵ Since the NT uses *aiphnidios* in only these two passages, this interconnection of Luke 21:34–36 (par Matt 24:42–44) with 1 Thess 5 is strengthened.²⁶

²¹ Walvoord, “Olivet Discourse,” 28–29; Thomas Ice, “(Part 35) An Interpretation of Matthew 24–25,” *Pre-Trib Perspectives*, <http://www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=241>.

²² Douglas J. Moo, “The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position,” *Three Views on the Rapture*, 185; D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:510.

²³ Second Peter 3:10 adds in the majority text *en nykti* following *kleptēs* and therefore contains the identical phrase to that in 1 Thess 5:2. If this reading is accepted, Jesus (Matthew and Luke), Peter, and Paul all mention the thief-at-night figure.

²⁴ Kim, “Jesus, Sayings of,” 476.

²⁵ Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner, 1961), 123 n. 2. Perhaps the drunkenness of 1 Thess 5:6–7 may be found in the unfaithful servant of Matt 24:49. Waterman, “Source of Paul’s Teaching,” 111.

²⁶ Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture,” 185. Since Luke and Paul were traveling companions and well acquainted, this may explain their shared vocabulary and perspective in Luke 21:34–36 and 1 Thessalonians 5.

Concerning the thief analogy in 1 Thess 5, Showers notes, “A thief depends upon the element of surprise for success. He does not give his intended victims a forewarning of his coming. Paul’s point—the unsaved will be given no forewarning of the coming of the broad Day of the Lord—rules out any of the seals of Revelation as being forewarnings of the beginning of the broad Day [Daniel’s seventieth seven].”²⁷ One must ask why the thief imagery in Matt 24:43 cannot also be interpreted by the same logic that pretribulationists like Showers apply to the thief imagery of 1 Thess 5.

The Parousia of Matt 24:37, 39 cannot be preceded by any signs, not even the seal judgments of Revelation—or the signs of Matt 24:6–7, which parallel many of the seal judgments. There can be no forewarning if we are to honor the surprise element resident in the thief analogy in 24:43. A thief does not willingly signal his presence, but numerous tell-tale signs will precede Christ’s Second Coming at the climax of the tribulation.²⁸

Paul, Peter,²⁹ and John have based their figure of the thief on the parable of Jesus.³⁰ What is also interesting is that Rev 3:3 and 16:15 suggest Christ Himself comes as a thief, while 1 Thess 5:4 makes it clear the day of the Lord comes as a thief. The impression is that the two events are simultaneous. Similarly, 1 Thess 5 and its reference to the day of the Lord are juxtaposed with 1 Thess 4 and its discussion of the pretribula-

²⁷ Showers, *Maranatha*, 60.

²⁸ The Greek word *kleptēs* (“thief”) and the cognate verb *kleptō* (“to steal”) often can be distinguished from *lēstēs* (“robber”) in that the latter emphasizes violence while the former stresses secrecy. N. Hillyer, “Rob, Steal,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 3:377.

²⁹ Peter’s use of the thief imagery in 2 Pet 3 “is almost certainly related to the parable of the thief (Mt 24:43 par Lk 12:39), for the image of a thief is found only in early Christian writings.” G. M. Stanton, “Jesus Traditions,” *Dictionary of Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 570.

³⁰ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke (rev. ed., New York: Scribner, 1963), 50; Dodd, *Parables*, 133; J. K. Howard, “Our Lord’s Teaching Concerning His Parousia: A Study in the Gospel of Mark,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 38 (1966): 155.

tional rapture. The analogy of the thief equally points to the imminent day of the Lord and/or the imminent rapture of the church.³¹

Thomas is to be commended for his consistency in applying the thief imagery in all passages to the imminent return of Christ.³² He apparently sees the imagery as only illustrating Christ's coming in judgment for the unbeliever.³³ But any emphasis on judgment in the thief imagery is more adequately developed from the surrounding context rather than from the figure itself. After all, judging is not a primary design of thieves, whereas the element of surprise is.³⁴ Thieves do break in houses to steal, but the point of Jesus comparing Himself to a thief must be limited.³⁵ Nevertheless, according to the Lord's illustration if the homeowner had been alert, he "would not have allowed his house to be broken into" (v 43). The implication is that the believer who is unprepared for Christ's return will lose something of value (i.e., future rewards).³⁶

³¹ Turner writes, "There will be enough time before the end for the kingdom message to be preached throughout the world (24:14)." David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 572. If Matt 24:14 is not yet fulfilled (and it is not), then the verse becomes an added barrier to correlating 24:4–28 chronologically with the imminency described in 24:36–44.

³² "If one is to be ready for a thief's intrusion, one needs to be ready *all the time* (Matthew's language of the 'watch' draws into the field of imagery the possibility of 'night watchmen')" (italics added). John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1993), 702.

³³ Thomas, "Imminence in the NT." See also Thomas, "The 'Coming' of Christ in Revelation 2–3," 166–69.

³⁴ In Mark's parallel account (13:34–35), the thief analogy is replaced by the parable of a homeowner who unexpectedly returns from a journey. While the homeowner calls his servants to account, judgment is not the only possible focus. The homeowner can reward as well as punish.

³⁵ E.g., Jesus is not intending that we think of Him as a lawbreaker; Blomberg, "Matthew," 367. Beale, commenting on Rev 16:15, says, "More likely the thief metaphor from the Gospel tradition is used not to suggest burglary but only to convey the unexpected and sudden nature of Christ's coming." G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 837.

³⁶ Hodges, *Jesus, God's Prophet*, 35. This is confirmed by the fact that 1) the only other uses of the verb *dioryssō* ("break in, dig through [the mud wall of a house]," Matt 24:43) in Matthew are in the Lord's teaching about treasures in heaven (Matt 6:19–20) where it is combined with "thief" (*kleptēs*); and 2) in one

First Thess 5:10 establishes the fact that some genuine believers may not be prepared for the Lord's Parousia when the pretribulation rapture takes place. In the passage, Paul unequivocally declared that, "whether we are awake [*grēgoreō*] or asleep [*katheudō*], we will live together with Him." Edgar has shown the legitimacy of interpreting this as "whether we watch or fail to watch, we will live together with Him."³⁷ This harmonizes with the understanding that the coming of Christ as a thief has relevance for the believer as well as the unbeliever.³⁸ Unpleasant but true, the call for watchfulness (Matt 24:42–43) is a command that can be neglected by genuine Christians.

B. THE USE OF *GRĒGOREŌ*

The verb *grēgoreō* ("to watch, be alert, be awake") appears in the Discourse three times (24:42, 43; 25:13). These are the first canonical

of the parallel accounts (Luke 12:36–40), Christ precedes the discussion of His coming like a thief who breaks into a house (v 40) by teaching about future rewards (vv 33–34). In that teaching He also refers unmistakably to a thief ("an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near," v 34). The thief imagery in v 40 picks up the thief imagery of v 34. For the believer, there is the irreparable danger of losing future rewards at the rapture.

³⁷ Thomas R. Edgar, "Lethargic or Dead in 1 Thessalonians 5:10?" *Conservative Theological Seminary Journal* 6 (October–December 2000): 36–51. This article is a revised version of Thomas R. Edgar, "The Meaning of 'Sleep' in 1 Thessalonians 5:10," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (December 1979): 345–49. Cf. also Zane C. Hodges, "1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 and the Rapture," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 6 (October–December 2000): 31–32; Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Time Prophecy. A Comprehensive Approach*, rev. and expanded (Chicago: Moody, 2006), 267; Robert L. Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:285–86. An attempt to rebut this view is found in Tracy L. Howard, "The Meaning of 'Sleep' in 1 Thessalonians 5:10—A Reappraisal," *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (fall 1985): 337–49.

Citing 1 Thess 5:10 as his chief example, Lövestam incorrectly concludes, "Regarding the New Testament in this respect there may be places where *grēgorein* in metaphorical sense can hardly be interpreted in more ways than one." Evald Lövestam, *Spiritual Wakefulness in the New Testament* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1963), 6.

³⁸ Although it seems to be of little value, one of the central words for the rapture (*harpazō*, 1 Thess 4:17) is used elsewhere of a thief carrying away property (Matt 12:29).

uses of the word in the NT; Luke 12:37 is the first chronological use. There are twenty-three uses of the word in the NT.³⁹ Eleven of the twenty-three uses are in the imperative mood, with several other constructions implying a command.⁴⁰ Also, eleven of the uses are in contexts where “sleep” is the contrasting concept to “watch.”⁴¹ Since “those who sleep do their sleeping at night” (1 Thess. 5:6) and thieves break in at night, “night” is also a common theme found in contexts with *gregoreō*. This is not because the Lord will literally return in the rapture at night. Night in these passages is symbolic of the present evil age to which the Lord will return.⁴² Additionally, the nighttime helps express the element of uncertainty and surprise in the rapture. Lövestam insists that *gregoreō* is better understood by the English “wakefulness” because of its consistent con-

³⁹ Luke 12:39 in the majority text is included in the twenty-three uses in the NT; otherwise, there are twenty-two uses. Metzger reasons that the addition of *egregoresen an kai* (“he would have kept watch and . . .”) to Luke 12:39 was a scribal assimilation to Matt 24:43. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 161–62. But if this is an assimilation to Matt 24:43, one might expect the same scribe also to assimilate *touto de* (“but this”) to *ekeino de* (“but that”), *hora* (“hour”) to *phylakē* (“a watch [at night]”), *aphēken diorygēnai* (“to allow to be dug into”) to *eiasen diorychthēnai* (“to permit to be dug into”), and *ton oikon to ten oikian* (two different words for “house”), all in the same verse.

⁴⁰ E.g., the hortatory subjunctive is used in 1 Thess 5:6. Also, Mark 13:34 has *tō thyrorō eneteilato hina gregore* (“[he] commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert”). Revelation 3:2 employs a periphrastic imperative with the participial form of *gregoreō*. In Col 4:2, *gregoreō* is a participle modifying an imperative. Nützel says that the verb belongs mostly to exhortations: J. M. Nützel, “*Grēgorēō*,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:264.

⁴¹ Matt 26:38–45 (*katheudō* [“to sleep”] in vv 40, 43, 45; *gregoreō* in vv 38, 40, 41); Mark 13:34–37 (*katheudō* in vv 36; *gregoreō* in vv 34, 35, 37); Mark 14:34, 37–38, 40–41 (*katheudō* in vv 37 [2xs], 40, 41; *gregoreō* in vv 34, 37, 38); 1 Thess 5:6–10 (*katheudō* in vv 6, 7, 10; *gregoreō* in vv 6, 10). It may also be significant for Luke’s themes that the incident of Eutychus “sinking into a deep sleep” (*katapheromenos hypnō bathēi*) while listening to Pauline truth (Acts 20:9) is shortly followed by the warning of the Ephesian elders that they must “watch” (Acts 20:31) or keep alert for false teaching (20:29–30).

⁴² Cf. Lövestam, *Spiritual Wakefulness in the New Testament*, 85, 107.

trast to a spiritual “sleep” that surrenders to and is absorbed by the present age.⁴³ Nützel states that it means properly, “not sleep.”⁴⁴

Six of the twenty-three total uses address the need of the disciples in Gethsemane to stay alert to spiritual drowsiness in light of temptations soon to come (Matt 26:38, 40, 41; Mark 14:34, 37, 38). Four other uses call for vigilance against false teaching (Acts 20:31) or satanic attack (1 Pet 5:18), vigilance in prayer (Col 4:2),⁴⁵ and vigilance in general (1 Cor 16:13). The remaining thirteen uses (over half of the uses) are all set in eschatological contexts.⁴⁶ Apart from two Pauline uses (1 Thess 5:6,

⁴³ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁴ Nützel, “*Grēgorēō*,” *Exegetical Dictionary*, 264.

⁴⁵ Col 4:2 could be categorized with Acts 20:31 as a warning against the present danger of false teaching. “It is also tempting, particularly given the threat of heresy implied in Colossians 2, to interpret Paul’s exhortation as a call for spiritual vigilance against the inroads of false teaching.” James P. Sweeney, “The Priority of Prayer in Colossians 4:2–4,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (July 2002), 327. Alternately, it could be classed with 1 Pet 5:18 as a warning against impending satanic attack. The parallel passage to Col 4:2 is Eph 6:18, which employs the synonym *agrypneō* (“be alert, keep watch”) and climaxes the exhortation to put on the armor of God so as to fight against the devil (Eph 6:11–17).

⁴⁶ Other verses beside the thirteen may be considered eschatological. 1) First Cor 16:13 has the rapture teaching within its surrounding context (1 Cor 15:52; 16:22). But most see a more general admonition in 1 Cor 16:13. Cf. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 827; A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1336. 2) Some scholars understand *grēgorēō* in Colossians 4:2 to have eschatological overtones. E.g., James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 262. O’Brien goes so far as to say that although the immediate context of Col 4:2 is not about the Parousia, from other passages “it seems justifiable to assume that the concept of wakefulness had an eschatological character.” Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1982), 238. 3) Brown understands *grēgorēō* in Mark 14:34, 37, 38 to draw on the eschatological parable of Mark 13:34, 35, 37. The three exhortations to watch in Mark 13 parallel the three times Jesus returns to the disciples to find them sleeping in Gethsemane. Just as the crucifixion was Jesus’ final trial on earth for which He needed to watch, so either an imminent martyrdom or the Parousia will be the

10), all other eschatological uses (eleven out of thirteen) are found on the lips of Jesus, with seven uses in the Synoptics and three in Revelation (Rev 3:2, 3; 16:15). This is strong evidence that Paul borrowed the term from the Lord.⁴⁷ Ten of the thirteen eschatological uses show up in connection with the thief imagery. In the remaining three eschatological uses, where Matthew's Olivet Discourse has the unexpected thief, Mark's parallel account (Mark 13:33–37) employs the illustration of a homeowner who unexpectedly returns from a journey.⁴⁸

Imminence appears to be a common accompaniment to the use of *gregoreō*. In the case of Gethsemane, temptation was imminent for the disciples ("Behold, the hour is at hand," Matt 26:45).⁴⁹ In Acts 20:31 alertness was essential because Paul predicted that as soon as he would

disciples' final test for which they need to watch. R. E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1556–57.

⁴⁷ "In the Gospels, the Lord calls the disciples to shun 'sleep' by being 'alert' so that they do not fall into temptation (Matt. 26.40–41; Mark 14.37–38; Luke 22.45–46) and so that they may be ready because they do not know the hour of the coming of the Lord (Mark 13.32–37). The same complex of ideas appears in this section of 1 Thessalonians, which suggests that the source of the instruction is the teaching of Jesus himself." Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 238.

If Paul in 1 Thess 4–5 borrows from Jesus' eschatological teachings, including the Lord's teachings on moral watchfulness, then an even more convincing proof is made for taking *gregoreō* in 1 Thess 5:10 to describe faithful versus unfaithful Christians, not Christians who are physically alive versus physically dead (e.g., as held by F. F. Bruce, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word, 1982], 114). Cf. also footnote 37 above. BDAG list their final definition of *gregoreō* as "to be alive (opp. to dead...)." But 1 Thess 5:10 is the only verse from all of Gr. literature that they mention for this definition. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, trans. Walter Bauer, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. *gregoreō*, 207–8. This limitation is admitted by Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 244.

⁴⁸ Thomas also understands Mark 13:33–37 (a parallel to Matt 24:43–44) as teaching imminence. Thomas, "Imminence in the NT," 195.

⁴⁹ Nolland holds that the intended sense of *gregoreō* in Matt 26:38 is the same to that in 24:42, 43; 25:13, i.e., spiritual (not physical) watchfulness. Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 1098.

leave, false teachers would begin an attempt to infiltrate the Ephesian elders (vv 29–30). Peter instructed his readers to watch since Satan may attack at any moment (1 Pet 5:18). Similarly, there are no forewarnings to temptation in general, so vigilance is always an appropriate response (Col 4:2; 1 Cor 16:13). Therefore, there is a suggestion of imminence in most if not all the noneschatological uses of *gr̄egoreō* as well.

These factors lead to the logic of constructing a consistent and unifying use of *gr̄egoreō* in all thirteen eschatological passages. Ladd faults pretribulationists for applying the command for watchfulness sometimes to Jews of the Tribulation and Second Coming (Matt 24:43; Luke 12:37–39; 21:36), but other times to the church and the rapture (1 Thess 5). He argues that the commands to watch in Matt 24:43—agreed by pretribulationists to be a watching for the posttribulational return of the Lord—need to be used to interpret passages like 1 Thess 5:7–8.⁵⁰

Although reasoning from a posttribulational persuasion, Ladd is perhaps correct in calling for a consistent use of *gr̄egoreō*. If pretribulationists agree that 1 Thess 5 uses *gr̄egoreō* to instruct believers of the NT church to “stay alert” for the coming pretribulational rapture, then isn’t it logical that Jesus could have utilized the same word in the same way in the Olivet Discourse? If Paul in 1 Thess 4–5 has brought over from the Olivet Discourse Jesus’ teaching concerning other pretribulational matters, he has also brought over Jesus’ concern regarding alertness for His imminent (pretribulational) return resident in the verb *gr̄egoreō*.

The chart below depicts visually how the thirteen eschatological uses of *gr̄egoreō* coordinate with verses that mention the unexpected thief or the unanticipated return of the homeowner.⁵¹

Watchfulness and the Thief Imagery The Thirteen Eschatological Uses of <i>gr̄egoreō</i>		
Use of <i>gr̄egoreō</i>	Use of Thief Imagery	Use of Returning Homeowner Imagery

⁵⁰ George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 114–17.

⁵¹ “A connection exists between the imagery of the thief and the idea of watchfulness in the New Testament.” Lövestam, *Spiritual Wakefulness in the New Testament*, 95.

Matt 24:42, 43; 25:13	Matt 24:43	
Luke 12:37, 39	Luke 12:39	
Mark 13:34, 35, 37		Mark 13:34–35
1 Thess 5:6, 10	1 Thess 5:2, 4	
Rev 3:2, 3	Rev 3:3	
Rev 16:15	Rev 16:15	

A “pop quiz” is a good reason for a student to be ready (i.e., to “watch”) at all times. But what student prepares “at all times” for a final exam not scheduled to take place until after all class sessions are completed? In like manner, the imminence in the thief imagery cannot apply to the appearance of Jesus “immediately after the tribulation of those days” (Matt 24:29).⁵² “Watching” or “alertness” is more fully appropriate for an imminent, pretribulational return of the Lord than for a post-tribulational, nonimminent coming of Christ.⁵³

The regular use of *gr̄egoreō* with the thief imagery and the imminent return of a homeowner in eschatological contexts intimates the need for a consistency of interpretation. Since in most contexts and especially eschatological contexts *gr̄egoreō* stresses imminence, the use of *gr̄egoreō* is most appropriate for the pretribulational rapture of the church, not a post-tribulational return of Christ.⁵⁴

⁵² It is an interesting observation that in the sections of the Olivet Discourse describing the signs of the final coming of the Lord (Matt 24:4–35), the verb *gr̄egoreō* does not appear. There either the imperative of *horaō* (“See! Look at!” Matt 24:6; Luke 21:29) or of *blepō* (“Watch out!” “Be on guard!” Matt 24:4; Mark 13:5, 9, 23, 33; Luke 21:8) are used. In fact, Matt 24:4 marks the first use of the imperative of *blepō* in the NT and six of the ten uses of the imperative of *blepō* are found in the Olivet Discourse. However, *blepō* may be appropriate for either the rapture or the second coming (cf. Mark 13:33 where both *blepō* and *gr̄egoreō* appear in the warning about the imminent return of the Lord).

⁵³ The synonymous verb *agrypneō* (“be alert, keep watch”) used in parallel passages to the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13:33; Luke 21:36) is also used in contexts describing imminency.

⁵⁴ Besides Matt 24:42, 43, two other passages containing *gr̄egoreō* may be thought to appear in posttribulational (or nonimminent) contexts: Matt 25:13 and Rev 16:15. In Rev 16:15, the parenthetical nature of the remark together with the similarity of themes to chapters 2–3 suggest the apostle John is addressing the imminence of the coming hour of trial and pretribulation rapture in light of the final devastations of Armageddon. Cf. Thomas, *Revelation 18–22: An Exe-*

IV. OBJECTIONS TO A PRETRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE IN MATTHEW 24:36–44

A. THE OLIVET DISCOURSE IS FOUND IN THE GOSPELS

Some pretribulationists reason, “since the Olivet Discourse is found in the Gospels then it would be logical that passages such as Matt 24:37–44 . . . are not referring to the rapture; rather they are dealing with the second coming of Christ.”⁵⁵ Following this line of logic, John 14:3, a well-known reference to the rapture in the Gospels, should not exist. As a pretribulationist, Ware rightly concedes that the presence of the Discourse in the Synoptics cannot prove or disprove the church is in the Tribulation.⁵⁶ Neither can the presence of the Discourse in the Synoptics prove or disprove that the rapture is prophesied in the Discourse.

getical Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 267. However, Thomas maintains that the warnings surrounding the thief illustration in Rev 16:15 are used by Jesus to encourage believers to “make their calling and election sure.” Other explanations of the warnings are more likely, i.e., warnings about the loss of future rewards for the unfaithful Christian. “Exhortations to vigilance presuppose that Christians are always in danger of reducing their full commitment to God through Christ and of allowing themselves to be seized by things of lesser value.” Nützel, “*Grēgorēō*,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 265.

Regarding Matt 25:13, Lövestam writes, “The exhortation to keep awake, in v. 13, cannot be linked to the use of the sleep and wakefulness motifs in the parable (vv. 5–7). There it is said that all the virgins went to sleep, without this being presented as something blameworthy.” Lövestam, *Spiritual Wakefulness in the New Testament*, 121. Therefore, Matt 25:13 may reflect a similar perspective as Rev 16:15—an exhortation to the church about the rapture in light of a parable about the final coming of Christ. This may be supported by the double *inclusio* in the verse that takes the reader back to 24:42–43 and 24:36 (see footnote 17 above). Another option may be that the parable describes a general need for readiness at the Lord’s return, whether for the rapture or the Second Coming. The later seems to be held by Hodges, *Jesus, God’s Prophet*, 38–43.

⁵⁵ Ron Bigalke, “Consistent Pretribulationism and Jewish Questions of the End,” unpublished paper presented at the 2002 Pre-Trib Study Group, available at <http://www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=121>; cf. also Bigalke, “The Olivet Discourse: A Resolution of Time,” *Conservative Theological Seminary Journal* 9 (spring 2003): 111.

⁵⁶ Bruce A. Ware, “Is the Church in View in Matthew 24–25?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (April–June 1981): 162–63.

B. THE CHURCH IS NOT ADDRESSED IN THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

Pretribulationists have objected to a posttribulation or a pretribulation rapture in Matt 24 based on the fact that Israel, not the church, is addressed in the Discourse. But both posttribulationists and pretribulationists need to recognize that to find the rapture of church saints in Matt 24:36–44 does not require that the church will go through the tribulation or that the rest of the Discourse (e.g., Matt 24:4–28) describes the experience of the church.

Most of the arguments surrounding the presence or absence of the church in the Discourse are inconsequential and do not help decide in favor of a posttribulation or pretribulation rapture.⁵⁷ For example, it is not weighty to suggest that the repeated emphasis on how one should live in light of eschatological events proves that the church must be addressed in the Discourse.⁵⁸ Nor can it be argued that the Jewish elements in the Discourse are a description of Jewish church saints.⁵⁹ There are no exclusively church teachings in the Discourse.⁶⁰ Yet this too does not conclusively establish the absence of the church in the Discourse. All things being equal, pretribulationists must admit to a draw on such points. Ware concedes this: “Undoubtedly Jesus *could* have been addressing Christians [church saints] in His warning, but He could equally have been addressing Jewish nonchurch tribulation saints [original emphasis].”⁶¹

Pretribulationists also grant that the disciples could equally represent Israel or the church depending on the context.⁶² For example, in most pretribulation schemes, the disciples represent national Israel in the

⁵⁷ For arguments suggesting the church is present in the Discourse and will experience a posttribulation rapture, see Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 132–35. A response to Gundry is found in Ware, “Is the Church in View in Matthew 24–25?” 158–72. More recent posttribulation arguments for the church being addressed in the Discourse are presented by Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture,” 190–96. These are countered by Feinberg, “Pretribulation Rapture,” 229–31.

⁵⁸ Contra Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 569.

⁵⁹ Contra Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 132.

⁶⁰ Ware, “Is the Church in View in Matthew 24–25?” 164–65.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶² Larry D. Pettigrew, “Interpretive Flaws in the Olivet Discourse,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 13 (fall 2002): 180; John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 86.

Olivet Discourse, but two days later in the Upper Room Discourse, they represent the future members of the church.⁶³ Since the disciples can represent either, the issue must be settled by the Discourse content, paragraph by paragraph.⁶⁴

Many pretribulationists understand Matt 24:4–8 or 24:4–14 to prophesy the present interadvent age.⁶⁵ Under this interpretation, instructions in these sections like “See to it that no one misleads you” (v 4) would be addressed to the disciples as representatives of the church. To be consistent, any pretribulationist holding this position could not reject out-of-hand a reference to the church in vv 37–44. As mentioned above, to declare that the Discourse cannot pertain to the church because its focus is strictly Jewish is indeterminative. For most pretribulationists, 25:31–46 comprises a judgment or deliverance of Gentiles (or Gentiles and Jews) at the Second Coming. These exegetes do not reason that since Israel is the focus of the Discourse, Gentiles are excluded from 25:31–46. Consequently, it is also deficient to reason that the church is excluded from the Discourse because the Discourse concentrates on Israel.

As discussed in the first article in this series, some pretribulationists understand v 36 as addressing only the time up to the rapture. But after the rapture of the church, believers will clearly know the time of Christ’s coming.⁶⁶ If this interpretation is accepted, pretribulationists cannot exclude the church as nowhere addressed in the Discourse.

⁶³ E.g., Thomas, “Imminence in the NT,” 196.

⁶⁴ Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, 86.

⁶⁵ Understanding vv 4–14 as the interadvent age are David L. Turner, “The Gospel of Matthew,” *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, Philip W. Comfort, gen ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2005), 11:305, 308; Pettigrew, “Olivet Discourse,” 175. A sample of those who hold that vv 4–8 describe the present age but that Jesus turns to the future tribulation at v 9 are Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (repr.; Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1978), 5:120–25; Carl Armerding, *The Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24–25 and Other Studies* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing, 1955), 14–17. Walvoord holds that both the present age and the tribulation are described in general terms in the 24:4–14 unit. John F. Walvoord, “Christ’s Olivet Discourse on the Time of the End. Part II: Prophecies Fulfilled in the Present Age,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128 (July 1971): 209.

⁶⁶ See John F. Hart, “Should Pretribulationists Reconsider the Rapture in Matthew 24:36–44? Part 1,” *Journal of the Grace Theological Society* 20 (spring 2008): 63.

C. THE DISCIPLES COULD NOT HAVE UNDERSTOOD THE DOCTRINES OF THE CHURCH OR RAPTURE

It is traditionally held by pretribulationists that the disciples would not be able to understand the distinction between the pretribulational rapture and the posttribulational Second Coming.⁶⁷ Also, Jesus would not be answering a question that was not asked by the disciples (Matt 24:3). “But the point is that the disciples were not asking anything about the church or the rapture. They knew next to nothing about either one.”⁶⁸ But if Jesus is introducing new prophecy unrevealed in the OT, this objection is mitigated.

It is a questionable hermeneutical procedure to limit exegesis and divine authorial intent (especially in prophecy) to what the readers or hearers could have understood fully at the time of writing (cf. 1 Pet 1:10–11; Dan 12:4).⁶⁹ The apostle John makes several references to new truths that the disciples did not understand until after the resurrection (John 2:19–22; 12:16). Are there valid reasons for not applying this perspective to the doctrines of the church and the rapture as introduced by Jesus?

Surprisingly, it is Matthew alone among the Gospels that introduces the term “church” (Matt 16:18; 18:17). Since the disciples did not understand the new doctrine of the church yet they are introduced to it in Matt 16 and 18, could they not be introduced to the pretribulational rapture of the church in Matt 24 and yet not be expected to fully comprehend it until later?⁷⁰ In fact, only a few days later in the Upper Room Discourse,

⁶⁷ Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, 88

⁶⁸ Pettigrew, “Olivet Discourse,” 180.

⁶⁹ Fee and Stuart write, “A text cannot mean what it could not have meant to its [human] author or his readers.” Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 60. While there is some truth in this assertion, qualifications are necessary in light of passages such as the 1 Pet and Daniel references. Cf. Robert D. Culver, “The Difficulty of Interpreting Old Testament Prophecy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 (July 1957): 205.

⁷⁰ Walvoord feels this reasoning goes against seeing the rapture here: “[The disciples] did not even comprehend the concept of the church at this time, even though it had been announced. How could they be expected to understand the distinction between a pretribulation rapture and the posttribulational second coming....” Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, 88. But if the disciples did not comprehend the concept of the church even though it had been announced, why is it impossible that the Lord would introduce the concept of the rapture even though the disciples would not comprehend it at first? Perhaps the Lord did not expect

Jesus introduces the rapture to His disciples (John 14:1–3). Pretribulationists find no difficulty in accepting here a new revelation for the church, even though the disciples could not fully comprehend church truth at this time.

D. LUKE 17:37 CONFIRMS THAT THE ONE “TAKEN” IN MATTHEW 24:40–41 IS TAKEN FOR JUDGMENT

Luke 17:34–36 parallels Matt 24:41–42 about one who is “taken” and one who is “left.” But in Luke 17:37, the disciples ask the brief question “Where, Lord?” Jesus replies with the proverbial statement, “Where the body is, there also the vultures will be gathered.” Some pretribulationists believe this verse confirms their interpretation in the Olivet Discourse that the one taken from the field or bed is taken in judgment.⁷¹ As such, they read the question, “Where are they taken for judgment, Lord?”⁷² However, the question could just as easily be understood, “Where are they taken for deliverance, Lord?” or “Where are they left for judgment, Lord?” Commentators such as Nolland favor the former⁷³ and Geldenhuys the latter.⁷⁴

Without excluding a possible allusion to judgment, a better suggestion is that the disciples meant, “Where are You to be revealed, Lord?” This understanding of Luke 17:37 fits the parallel passage in Matt 24:28 where the proverbial saying applies exclusively to the Parousia (24:29–31). Marshall believes that Luke 17:37 refers back to v 23 (“Men will tell you, ‘There He is!’ or ‘Here He is!’”), not the immediately preceding

the disciples to understand at that moment. After all, Christ could not come again until He died, was resurrected and ascended, and the prophesied NT church (Matt 16:18) had begun. Then they would be expected to understand.

⁷¹ Pettigrew, “Olivet Discourse,” 188; Bigalke, “The Olivet Discourse,” 130. Cf. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), note at Luke 17:37.

⁷² John A. Martin, “Luke,” *Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 249; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1438.

⁷³ Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 862–63.

⁷⁴ Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 442, 445.

context.⁷⁵ Verse 37 acts as a climax for the whole sermon and appears to summarize the broad central theme of Christ's return.⁷⁶ As such, the proverbial saying about the vultures expresses the truth that "the world unmistakably will know...where the Son of Man returns."⁷⁷ While the idea of judgment may be included in the disciples' question of Luke 17:37, the verse and its context do not confirm unequivocally that the one who is taken is taken in judgment.

V. CONCLUSION

It is the contention of this study that pretribulationists should indeed reconsider the rapture in Matt 24:36–44. All pretribulationists agree that according to John 14:3, Jesus was the first to predict the surprise snatching away of the church. If the proposal of this study is exegetically and theologically sound, then it is time that pretribulationists credit the Lord of the Parousia with a more extensive role in originating and predicting the "blessed hope" than we have given Him.

⁷⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 669.

⁷⁶ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary, David S. Dockery, gen. ed., vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 441.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Cf. also Pate, *Luke*, 333.