Matthew 24:45–51 — The Faithful and the Evil Servant

The Parenthetical Section, My Lord Delayeth His Coming, the Protracted vs. Present Hope, and Two Sets of Elect

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Scripture Reading: Matthew 24:45–51; 25:1–13

> *"Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing.*
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> *"But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to smite his fellowservants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; the lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, and shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

The Structure: A Parenthetical Section Between Matthew 24 and 25

The material from Matthew 24:45 through Matthew 25:30 is parenthetical in character. The first part of Matthew 24 deals with the Jewish situation — the elect of those tribulation days, the gospel of the kingdom going out, the abomination of desolation, the great tribulation. Then this long parenthesis addresses the Christian testimony and its responsibilities. Then at Matthew 25:31, the prose resumes, dealing with the living nations and how they received or rejected the king's brethren. Jew, the assembly, and Gentile nations — each has its own section as the Lord looks into the future.

The parenthetical character is confirmed by textual evidence. The phrase about the Son of Man cometh in verse 44 of chapter 24 and again in verse 31 of chapter 25 — both outside the parenthesis — bracket it. The term Son of Man in Matthew always carries a distinctive dispensational flavor: it refers to the appearing in glory. Textual criticism shows that the closing phrase in Matthew 25:13 about the Son of Man cometh is not in the best manuscripts — and that is fitting, because the parable of the ten virgins belongs to the parenthetical section about the heavenly company, for whom the Lord comes as Bridegroom, not as Son of Man in the distinctively Matthean sense. Within the parenthesis the Lord is called the Bridegroom and the Lord, not the Son of Man.

Post-tribulationists who take the parable of the ten virgins as applying to the Jewish remnant going through the tribulation have invented a serious confusion. The elect of Matthew 24 are going through unparalleled trial — they do not go to sleep in the middle of it all. To then say the parable of the virgins and their sleeping is about that same remnant is senseless. The solution to the apparent difficulty is simply to see the parenthetical structure: the virgins are the Christian testimony during the whole interval of the Lord's absence, not the Jewish remnant in the tribulation.

My Lord Delayeth His Coming: A Heart Condition

Verse 48 does not describe a man who is merely ignorant of the pre-tribulation rapture. He knows of the Lord's coming. He says in his heart: my Lord delayeth his coming. He likes that idea. It is in the heart — the seat of affections and desires — not merely in the mind. Just as the fool has said in his heart, There is no God — not as a theoretical position but as a practical preference, repeated until the man convinces himself of it — so this man says in his heart, My Lord delayeth. He pushes the day of accountability away from him because his lifestyle and his self-indulgence depend on it being pushed away. The flesh likes this idea.

Proverbs says: keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life. As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. The heart condition here produces the outward conduct: smiting his fellow servants, eating and drinking with the drunken. The evil servant's conduct is a consequence of his heart condition, not the cause of it. The cause is that the expectation of the Lord's coming has been pushed away from the heart, and self-occupation has filled the space.

J.G. Bellett observed that truth gets into the soul via the conscience. The ear and the mind are gates for truth, but the conscience is the great gate into the soul. If truth does not come through the conscience — if the conscience is not engaged — it is merely intellectually entertained. The woman at the well in John 4 shows the Lord engaging her conscience step by step until she says, I perceive that thou art a prophet. That is when truth settled in her soul. This man has no conscience at work. He is therefore in the opposite position: the Lord will come on a day when he does not expect him, in an hour he is not aware of.

The Protracted Hope and the Loss of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture in Church History

The parable is showing a state that had arisen in Christianity. The going to sleep in the parable of the ten virgins that follows immediately is the effect of that state. Then is the first word of Matthew 25:1 — then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened to the ten virgins. The then follows the development of the condition given in this parable. A heart that says my Lord delayeth his coming produces a church that goes to sleep with respect to the any-moment coming of the Lord.

The historical record bears this out. The apostolic fathers went post-tribulationist first, then amillennial. That progression is traceable in the writings of those early centuries and accessible in the Ante-Nicene Fathers collection. When the any-moment hope is lost, what replaces it is a protracted hope: one must wait for the rise of the Antichrist, the three-and-a-half years, the middle of the week, all

the signs. And once signs are required, the posture of constant expectation is impossible. It is structurally impossible to be in immediate expectation if you believe in post-tribulationism. The New Testament, by contrast, presents the Lord's coming in a way that is always formulated to inculcate present expectation — within a lifetime, within a single growing season, as if it could be today.

Two Sets of Elect: Earthly and Heavenly

Matthew 24:22 mentions the elect — except those days be shortened, there should no flesh be saved, but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened. Those are the earthly elect: the Jewish elect of the tribulation days. They are distinct from the heavenly elect, who are foreknown in Christ before the foundation of the world (Romans 8:29, Ephesians 1:4). The foreknowledge of God spoken of in connection with Christians in Romans 9–11 is not his general omniscience or prescience. It is a distinct and discriminatory action upon those who are placed in Christ. Old Testament saints were not in Christ in that sense; neither will millennial saints or the saved Jewish nation be in Christ in that sense.

The distinction carries through to the way Scripture phrases things. Heavenly blessings and the church's election are consistently stated as from before the foundation of the world. Earthly blessings and Israel's election are stated as from the foundation of the world. These phrases are not interchangeable. Scripture uses each precisely for the category it belongs to — the heavenly for the heavenly people, the earthly for the earthly people. God's promises to Abraham about the earthly seed began from the foundation of the world; the promise in Christ Jesus was from before the world began (2 Timothy 1:9).

The Hypocrites: A Constitutional Category

The evil servant is appointed his portion with the hypocrites. Some in the Scofield school teach that such things mean merely missing kingdom blessings — that the person is the Lord's but suffers loss of reward. This is a false doctrine designed to protect some other point. The hypocrite in New Testament usage is not a believer who has acted inconsistently; it is a constitutional description of one who is not the Lord's at all but maintains a profession. The hypocrisy is of the essence, not of the conduct. A Christian can act in a hypocritical manner, but he is not constitutionally a hypocrite. The hypocrites are appointed their portion where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth — which is eternal, not the temporary loss of a prize.

The outer darkness and the weeping and gnashing of teeth describe nothing less than what Jude speaks of: the gloom of darkness reserved forever for those who crept into the Christian profession. It is not a comfortable corner of the outer court where one sits out the millennium. Nor does hell hold company in the sense that men comfort themselves with the thought that they will have plenty of company there. The weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth is not fellowship.

Blessed is that servant whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing.