

Matt. 24 & 1 Thess. 4 Compared

By Joseph Canfield (Kingdom Counsel, Nov. 1989)

The Great Council of the Church, in Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 15 is usually discussed only in relation to the “Tabernacle of David” and its prophetic significance. 1. Some things about the Council are overlooked especially as they relate to the interpretation of some important Prophetic Scriptures. At the Council, Paul (one born out of due-time- I Cor. 15:8) met and spent time with the men who had been face to face with our Lord during His ministry. Of particular concern, he must have heard right from their lips the account of the Olivet Discourse” as they vividly recalled the Lord’s statement as about future events. We need to remember that the One who spoke those words was the One who would bring it to pass.

We believe, along with the late Edgar J. Goodspeed that Matthew’s Gospel was the first to be written. 2. Matthew had not yet departed for Ethiopia, India and points south and east when the Council was held. But, he must have had with him manuscript copies of the Gospel. One copy could well have been given to Paul. In fact, Matthew’s Gospel could have been one of the books which Paul asked Timothy to bring to him from Troas (II Tim. 4:13). So it is quite possible Paul was very familiar with Matthew’s Gospel, especially the portions we now designate as chapters 24 and 25.

Paul had a very special and close relationship with the Risen Lord. Paul’s relationship, referred to several times in his letters, was much closer than that of most twentieth century fundamentalist preachers. This relationship, including its special aspect called Inspiration, is evident in what he taught and wrote. Paul thus had three ways in which he could have been exposed to the “Olivet Discourse” (other Christian teachers at the Jerusalem council, Matthew’s gospel and direct inspiration), and therefore must have understood the purpose behind the Olivet Discourse.

Thus it should surprise no one that the prophetic discourse which Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica was written against the backdrop of the Olivet Discourse. Obvious as that may seem, the point is usually overlooked in the community known as “dispensational.” Yet, Paul wrote as if he was very familiar with Jesus’ statements in Matt. 24-25. Paul’s statements in I Thess. 4-5 show such a close resemblance to those statements that these conclusions seem unavoidable.

The comparison chart below establishes this point vividly. No only are the principle features of “Olivet” in Paul’s account, but even the order is substantially the same.

Event	I Thess. 4-5	Matt. 24-25
1. Christ Himself returns	4:16	24:30
2. from heaven	4:16	24:30
3. with a shout	4:16	24:30 (in power)
4. Accompanied by angels	4:16	24:31

5. With trumpet of God	4:16	24:31
6. Believers gathered	4:17	24:31, 40-41
7. In clouds	4:17	24:30
8. Time Unknown	5:1-2	24:36
9. Will come as a thief	5:2,4	24:43
10. Unbelievers unaware of impending judgment	5:3	24:37-39
11. Judgment comes as travail upon expectant mother	5:3	24:8 (RV)
12. Believers not decided	5:4-5	24:4 ff.
13. Believers to watch	5:6	24:42
14. Warning against drunkenness	5:73	24:49

J. Sidlow Baxter said: "Yet the remarkable feature, which must surely impress all but those who simply will not see, is the singular correspondence between the phraseology here (Matt. 24:30-31), and ... I Thessalonians 4:15-18 . . . Then what kind of Bible interpretation is it which can take exactly the same phrases and symbols in I Thessalonians 4:15-16 and say that there they teach a secret coming! . . . Nothing can disguise to an honest eye the parallel between Matthew 24:30-31 and I Thessalonians 4:15-18." 4.

W.E. Bell notes in his (unfortunately unpublished) thesis: ". . . when one turns to Paul's first eschatological writings in I and II Thessalonians he finds that Paul describes the second coming in almost precisely the same way that Jesus did in the Olivet Discourse, using terminology and sequences so strikingly similar to those of Christ that one could hardly imagine a closer parallel apart from direct quotation. Furthermore, an exegetical study of the two epistles makes it abundantly clear that Paul knew nothing of any second coming, but everywhere speaks of the rapture as being coincident with the destruction of the wicked generation generally and of Anti-Christ specifically."

The commonality between Matt. 24-25 and I Thess. 4-5 is too close for it to be passed off as just similarity of language. They are speaking of the same time period and the same events.

Note especially in the table above the comparison of 1 Thess. 4:16, 17 with Matt. 24:30, 31. Many dispensationalists will agree that the Olivet Discourse up to about verse 36 does apply to the Destruction of

Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Yet, just as they divide Daniel's 70 weeks, they divide "Olivet," placing the rest of the chapter at some future time, always in advance of the time one is either speaking or writing. But the link of I Thess. 4:16 with Matt. 24:30, 31 means that the "Rapture" verse is linked to events which among several schools must apply to the 7th decade of the First Century.

Neither Baxter, nor Bell were aware of the growing belief that New Testament prophecy was written before and looks forward to the events of A.D. 70. This school of interpretation which has some very sound Biblical basis would thus mean that the rapture (which Fundamentalists still believe is future) took place by the time Jerusalem fell in 70 A.D. This, of course, means that a "Rapture" (like dispensational sensationalists believe in, with a terrible mess of wrecked and abandoned autos on Freeways of Dallas and Los Angeles) is entirely off-base.

But, you say, nothing like the Rapture occurred in A.D. 68-70. There was no crashing of chariots on the Appian Way. The only contemporary eye-witness report of what happened is the account of Josephus, who, writing as a non-believer, related only what he saw and heard at the time on the level of natural man. Josephus was not writing by inspiration. The substantial dearth of Christian writings in the period from A.D. 70 into the early days of the next century means that we have no Christian account of the destruction. All we have are the Words of Jesus himself that a gathering of some kind would occur before Jerusalem fell, augmented with parallel statements by Paul (esp. in Thessalonian letters) and the other NT writers. Since the rest of "Olivet" was fulfilled, why try to place Matt. 24:30, 31 (and by implication I Thess. 4:16, 17) into the future?

Now the natural vision of Josephus confirms the fulfillment of those parts of the prophecy which he could understand with his natural mind. Why is it unreasonable to hold that the parts, not seen by the unredeemed vision, but prophesied by the One who brought things to pass did occur. We walk by faith and not by sight.

It seems likely that Lacunza, Margaret MacDonald, J.N. Darby, W.E. Blackstone, John Walvoord, Hal Lindsey and Edgar Whisenant are trying to make a past event occur in the future. But this is inconsistent with Scripture and can only mislead the Church. The coming of Our Lord from outside time into our time-bound existence has spiritual significance far beyond the materialistic concepts of dispensationalists, premils and other futurists. Marana-tha is past! To God Be The Glory!

Footnotes/References:

1. There is no record of a Great Council at Jerusalem since that recorded in Acts 15 (see Rushdoony's "The Foundation of Social Order" While there have been extravagant religious gatherings, we suggest an application of John 4:21.

2. Goodspeed, Edgar J., "Matthew, Author and Evangelist" Winston, 1959, Goodspeed Matthew as the first Gospel written and suggests composition of the others in the order they are now placed in the Bible. This contrasts with the idea that inspiration stopped when the manuscripts were finished and the books arranged by some helter-skelter shuffling.

3. For these comparisons in his unpublished thesis, we credit and thank Wm. Everett Bell, Jr..

"A Critical Evaluation Of The Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine In Christian Eschatology" 1967, New York

University School of Education. When Bell wrote, the movement away from Premillennialism had not reached the pace of today. Some of Bell's comments and conclusions might have been more negative today.

4. Baxter, J. Sidlow, *Explore The Book* Vol VI, p. 219, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London 19. Baxter is quoted by Bell on his p. 250 (Footnote 5) Bell, p. 323