

## Where The Eagles Are Gathered

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Woven throughout Jesus' parables and prophecies are numerous descriptions of the end times, as well as the significant things His followers need to be aware of as they await His return. He warns of increasing deception and false messiahs. He also cautions us about what we might call "false returns," where rumors fly that the Messiah has returned secretly. We may not have personally seen much of this, but the fact that Christ made these warnings means that we have foreknowledge that will help keep us from being swept away in the deceptions of the end time.

Amidst other signs in the Olivet Prophecy is this particularly obscure one:

“Therefore if they say to you, ‘Look, He is in the desert!’ do not go out; or ‘Look, He is in the inner rooms!’ do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. *For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.* (Matthew 24:26-28; emphasis ours)

Here is verse 28 in *The Amplified Bible*: “Wherever there is a fallen body (a corpse), there the vultures (or eagles) will flock together.” The birds described here belong to a family known as Old World Vultures, which includes eagles, buzzards, kites, and hawks. When vultures gather to eat a carcass, it is known as a “wake.”

Vultures seldom attack healthy animals, but they have a keen sense for when one is wounded or sick, often killing an unhealthy animal rather than waiting for it to finally succumb. Their digestive systems are so acidic that they can ingest rabies, cholera, botulinum toxin, and even deadly anthrax without harm. They perform a grisly but necessary job in disposing of flesh that would otherwise encourage the spread of disease.

As Christ says, where a carcass is, a wake of vultures is imminent. This tells us little, aside from the fact that it is in response to the disciples' question about the sign of His coming and the end of the age (Matthew 24:3). Combined with the reference to lightning, it implies that His return will be highly visible.

### **Taken and Left**

Matthew 24:36-44 contains more relevant information that is linked to the corpses and vultures of verse 28:

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what

hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

This passage provides another concrete description of the circumstances surrounding Christ's return, emphasizing that His return will be at an unexpected hour. We can tie this to His warnings about becoming caught up in the cares of the world, so that end-time events commence when we are spiritually unprepared (Matthew 25:13; Mark 13:35; Luke 12:39-40; 21:34).

Verses 40-41 describe two men working in a field and two women grinding at a mill. In each case, one is taken and the other is left. Subscribers to the theory of a secret rapture use these verses as support, though the only "secret" part of Christ's return will be the timing—the event itself will be visible to all. Rapture advocates also assume that *taken* here means "snatched up to heaven." However, in the 49 New Testament usages of this Greek word (*paralambano*), nowhere does it contain that idea.

The only verse that even approaches that sense is John 14:3, but even it does not actually support the idea of being taken off to heaven: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive [*paralambano*] you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." Notice that He says He will come again—to earth—and receive His followers to Himself there, not in heaven. Earth is where His Kingdom will be established.

Thus, Matthew 24:40-41 speaks of a divine distinction between peoples in the future: Some will be received near to Christ and associated with Him in a familiar or intimate way. The word can even imply they assume an office.

Those under judgment, however, will be left and not allowed to accompany Christ. This "being left" may be what happens to the foolish virgins who are left outside the wedding feast (Matthew 25:10-12); to the "sons of the kingdom" who will be "cast out into outer darkness" instead of entering into the Kingdom (Matthew 8:11-12); and to others who are found to be unworthy to enter the Kingdom (see Matthew 24:48-51; 25:30; 25:31-46).

In Luke's account, the same descriptions found in Matthew 24:36-44 are linked with the eagles being gathered together, showing they are part of the same context:

Then He said to the disciples, "The days will come when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, 'Look here!' or 'Look there!' Do not go after them or follow them. For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day." (Luke 17:22-24)

Here is the same general warning against being deceived by a false return. But the prophecies are clear that, when He returns, it will be unmistakable!

Following this, in Luke 17:26-32, Jesus draws on the stories of Noah and Lot to warn that, even though life seems to be relatively normal, when God brings the judgment, it will be sudden and complete. Because God is just, there will be indicators and warnings. But when He decides that the time is ripe for Him to intervene, it will happen with breathtaking speed. If we are warned to flee, we dare not linger or look back, like Lot's wife.

## “Where, Lord?”

Then, Luke 17:34-37 contains the parallel account of the corpse and vultures:

“I tell you, in that night there will be two [people] in one bed: the one will be taken and the other will be left. Two women will be grinding together: the one will be taken and the other left. Two men will be in the field: the one will be taken and the other left.” And they answered and said to Him, “Where, Lord?” So He said to them, “Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.”

The disciples’ question, “Where, Lord?” appears to be about *where* all of this would be taking place—including His return, which would initiate the judgment—rather than about where His followers would be taken. Recall that in Matthew’s account, their original question was about the signs of Christ’s coming and the end of the age, so what appears to have been on their minds were the specifics of His return rather than the location of those “taken.”

As is His pattern, He does not answer their question directly. Instead, His answer applies on multiple levels. In the two accounts, the disciples ask about *when* and *where*, since we humans want a specific date and location so we can gauge how these things will affect us personally. God, however, gives principles.

We will consider two ways to understand Christ’s answer. The first explanation is that a wake of vultures is an indicator of *God’s judgment for rebellion*. In the blessings and curses given to Israel, God warns them, “Your carcasses shall be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and no one shall frighten them away” (Deuteronomy 28:26). It is a judgment of great shame, one that has been fulfilled in type in the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem (Psalm 79:1-3).

Under this curse, the Israelites would have no dignity in their deaths; they would have no one to bury them. It symbolizes the height of defeat, disgrace, and personal insignificance, when no defenders are left to keep the scavengers from tearing a human body apart just as they would a dead animal. When God cleans His creation in this way, a person becomes nothing more than a meal for one of the most despised creatures.

But Israelites are not the only ones to receive this shameful judgment. The same fate is prophesied for those fighting against Christ at His return:

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, “Come and gather together for the supper of the great God, that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them, and the flesh of all *people*, free and slave, both small and great.” And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army. . . . And the rest were killed with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse. And all the birds were filled with their flesh. (Revelation 19:17-19, 21; see also the prophecy against Gog in Ezekiel 39:17-20)

The followers of the Beast and False Prophet will be killed, and God will specifically call the carrion birds for this gruesome feast. Any alleged return of the Messiah that does not involve this judgment on God’s enemies is a lie. These are grisly descriptions but necessary reminders of His view of sin,

disobedience, and rebellion against Him. Christ will return at a time when the opposition to Him will have reached a peak and to a place where human governments will have assembled against Him. Moreover, there will be a gathering of scavengers as a sign of God's judgment of shame.

### **Unclean and Hated Birds**

There is still another way to understand Christ's answer about the wake of vultures, something we can see happening right now: A gathering of vultures indicates *a diseased spiritual condition*. In Revelation 18:2, Babylon the Great is described as being "a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird."

Vultures are undoubtedly at the top of the list of unclean and hated birds! End-time Babylon is the focal point of demonic spirits, which are likened to unclean birds. Both of them prey on the sick and the injured, and they gather where death is.

This is where it becomes relevant to us. Our greatest threat is not the Tribulation at the end! As bad as it will be, far worse is being spiritually unprepared when Christ returns and being judged as unworthy to enter the Kingdom. This is what the Parable of the Ten Virgins and the Parable of the Wedding Feast describe. This is the substance of the warnings about Christ's return being like a thief in the night—coming when He is completely unexpected. This is why He warns us against neglecting so great a salvation and against being led astray by the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the pleasures of life. Jesus warns us to keep us on the path of life, so that we do not fall to the birds of prey that stalk the spiritually dying.

We are given the charge to come out of Babylon, so we do not share in her sins or in her judgment (Revelation 18:4). If we have a discerning heart, we should have a good idea of what will attract the vultures, as it will be giving off the smell of spiritual death. God gives us that discerning heart, so we can make good choices.

We have read the scriptures about the swiftness of Christ's return, but do we really believe them? It is easy to look at world events and compare them to our understanding of prophecy; we know that things are bad and getting worse—but the end still seems to be just over the horizon. Because it is not here yet, it is easy to conclude, even subconsciously, that there is no need to become serious just yet.

However, this conclusion is filled with assumptions. One is that our understanding of end-time events is correct! A second assumption is that, even if we do have correct understanding, we will never lose it through deception. A third is that our faith will remain constant until the end. A fourth is that, when we do decide to get serious, that we will have ample time to build character, take on the image of God, and complete our sanctification. A fifth is that our Creator will go along with our agenda of pushing Him off until the last minute.

These are a lot of assumptions! If we are misjudging these things, we may hear those terrible words, "I never knew you; depart from Me" (Matthew 7:23)!

If we are delaying the time to start seeking God, the vultures may be eyeing us as ones who may not spiritually survive what lies ahead. Perhaps all of us have seen this happen to people we care about. If we are spiritually sick or injured, there is no time like the present to seek our Healer and Protector to beat off the hated birds!

## **Foolish Virgins**

In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the foolish ones thought they had more time. They were probably aware that their reserves of oil were not as full as they could be, but they may have assumed that they could always attend to that later. They did not count on falling asleep. They did not count on life happening, that something would prohibit them from taking care of preparations they had put off.

A lesson we can draw is that, if we are not putting everything we have into our calling *right now*, how much time is left does not matter. If that is the case, we may find ourselves, like the foolish virgins, suddenly awake and realizing we cannot get ready in time. What we claimed we wanted will have slipped through our grasp, one day at a time.

Judgment is coming on the world, but it is on the house of God right now (I Peter 4:17). A gathering of eagles—a wake of vultures—is a symbol of God's judgment on those who stubbornly resist coming into alignment with Him. Vultures will literally gather for those who rebel against God in the final battle, and they are metaphorically already circling those who cannot tear themselves away from Babylon—those who are on such good terms with the world that they are giving off the scent of spiritual death.

The multitude of warnings and prophecies means that it is a possibility for us, because it is a certainty for some. Yet, with all that God makes available, there is no good reason for that judgment to fall on us.