



“What will be the sign of your presence and of the conclusion of the system of things?”

—MATT. 24:3.

HOW WOULD YOU ANSWER?

What parallels are there between the two fulfillments of Jesus’ prophecy about the great tribulation?

How does the parable of the sheep and the goats affect our view of the preaching work?

In Matthew chapters 24 and 25, to what time did Jesus refer when he spoke about his coming?

“TELL US, WHEN WILL THESE THINGS BE?”

JESUS’ ministry on earth was coming to an end, and his disciples were eager to find out what the future held for them. So just a few days before his death, four of his apostles asked him: “When will these things be, and what will be the sign of your presence and of the conclusion of the system of things?” (Matt. 24:3; Mark 13:3) Jesus answered by means of an extensive prophecy, recorded in Matthew chapters 24 and 25. In that prophecy, Jesus foretold many noteworthy events. His words have profound meaning for us because we too are keenly interested in knowing what the future holds.

² Through the years, Jehovah’s servants have prayerfully studied Jesus’ prophecy about the last days. They have sought to get a clearer understanding of the timing of the fulfillment of Jesus’ words. To illustrate how our understanding has been clarified, let us consider three “when” questions. When does the “great tribulation” begin? When does Jesus judge “the sheep” and “the goats”? When does Jesus ‘arrive,’ or come?—Matt. 24:21; 25:31-33.

WHEN DOES THE GREAT TRIBULATION BEGIN?

³ For a number of years, we thought that the great tribulation began in 1914 with World War I and that “those days were cut short” by Jehovah in 1918 when the war ended so that the remnant would have the opportunity to preach the good news to all nations. (Matt. 24:21, 22) After the completion of that preaching work, Satan’s empire would be destroyed. Thus, the great tribulation was thought to have three phases: There would be a beginning (1914-1918), the tribulation would be interrupted

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1. Like the apostles, what are we eager to find out?
 2. (a) Through the years, of what did we seek to get a clearer understanding? (b) Which three questions will we consider?
 3. In the past, what was our understanding of the timing of the great tribulation?

THE GREAT TRIBULATION AND BEYOND

MODERN FULFILLMENT

United Nations (“disgusting thing”) will attack Christendom (“holy place”) and the rest of false religion (Rev. 17:16-18)

Jehovah will “cut short” the attack on false religion; God’s people will be saved



THE LAST DAYS

DESTRUCTION OF FALSE RELIGION

OF UNKNOWN

CORRESPONDING EVENTS IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Roman army (“disgusting thing”) attacked Jerusalem and its temple (“holy place”)

Roman army cut short its attack; Christians in Jerusalem and Judea fled

“The disgusting thing . . . standing in a holy place” (Matt. 24:15, 16)
(See paragraph 6)

“On account of the chosen ones those days will be cut short” (Matt. 24:22)
(See paragraph 7)

(from 1918 onward), and it would conclude at Armageddon.

⁴ Upon further examination of Jesus’ prophecy, however, we perceived that a part of Jesus’ prophecy about the last days has two fulfillments. (Matt. 24:4-22) There was an initial fulfillment in Judea in the first century C.E., and there would be a worldwide fulfillment in our day. That insight led to several clarifications.^[1]

⁵ We also discerned that the first part of the great tribulation did not begin in 1914. Why not? Because Bible prophecy reveals that the great tribulation will start, not with a war among nations, but with an attack on false religion. Thus, the events that began in 1914 were, not

the beginning of the great tribulation, but the “beginning of pangs of distress.” (Matt. 24:8) These “pangs of distress” correspond to what took place in Jerusalem and Judea from 33 C.E. to 66 C.E.

⁶ What will signal the start of the great tribulation? Jesus foretold: “When you catch sight of the disgusting thing that causes desolation, as spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in a holy place, (let the reader use discernment,) then let those in Judea begin fleeing to the mountains.” (Matt. 24:15, 16) In the first fulfillment, the “standing in a holy place” occurred in 66 C.E. when the Roman army (“the disgusting thing”) attacked Jerusalem and its temple (a place holy in the eyes of the Jews). In the larger fulfillment, the “standing” will occur when the United Nations (the modern-day “disgusting thing”) attacks

4. What insight led to a clearer understanding of Jesus’ prophecy about the last days?
5. (a) What difficult period began in 1914?
(b) That period of distress corresponds to what time period in the first century C.E.?

6. What will signal the beginning of the great tribulation?

Jesus will judge people of all nations as sheep or goats (Matt. 25:31-46) (See paragraphs 12, 13)

Jesus will appoint the faithful slave over “all his belongings” (Matt. 24:46, 47) (See paragraph 18)

Destruction of the nations (Rev. 16:16)



LENGTH

INTERVAL

ARMAGEDDON

CHRIST'S
MILLENNIAL
RULE BEGINS

Jerusalem's
destruction

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days . . .” (Matt. 24:29-31) (See paragraph 8)

Christendom (which is holy in the eyes of nominal Christians) and the rest of Babylon the Great. The same attack is described at Revelation 17:16-18. That event will be the beginning of the great tribulation.

⁷ Jesus also foretold: “Those days will be cut short.” In the initial fulfillment, this happened in 66 C.E. when the Roman army “cut short” its attack. Then, anointed Christians in Jerusalem and Judea fled, allowing for their ‘flesh, or life, to be saved.’ (*Read Matthew 24:22*; Mal. 3:17) So, what can we expect will happen during the coming great tribulation? Jehovah will “cut short” the attack of the United Nations on false religion, not allowing true religion to be destroyed with the false. This will ensure that God’s people will be saved.

7. (a) How was ‘flesh saved’ in the first century? (b) What can we expect will happen in the future?

⁸ What happens after the initial part of the great tribulation has passed? Jesus’ words indicate that there will be a period of time that will last until the start of Armageddon. What events will occur during that interval? The answer is recorded at Ezekiel 38:14-16 and **Matthew 24:29-31**. (*Read.*)^[2] After that, we will witness Armageddon, the climax of the great tribulation, which parallels Jerusalem’s destruction in 70 C.E. (Mal. 4:1) With the battle of Armageddon as its climax, that coming great tribulation will be unique—an event “such as has not occurred since the world’s beginning.” (Matt. 24:21) When it has passed, Christ’s Millennial Rule will begin.

8. (a) What events will take place after the initial part of the great tribulation has passed? (b) At what point, apparently, will the last member of the 144,000 receive his heavenly reward? (See endnote.)

⁹ This prophecy about the great tribulation strengthens us. Why? Because it assures us that no matter what hardships we may face, Jehovah's people, as a group, will come out of the great tribulation. (Rev. 7:9, 14) Above all, we rejoice because at Armageddon, Jehovah will vindicate his sovereignty and he will sanctify his holy name.—Ps. 83:18; Ezek. 38:23.

WHEN DOES JESUS JUDGE THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS?

¹⁰ Consider now the timing of another part of Jesus' prophecy—the parable of the judgment of the sheep and the goats. (Matt. 25:31-46) Previously, we thought that the judging of people as sheep or goats would take place during the entire period of the last days from 1914 onward. We concluded that those who rejected the Kingdom message and who died before the start of the great tribulation would die as goats—without the hope of a resurrection.

¹¹ In the mid-1990's, *The Watchtower* reexamined Matthew 25:31, which states: "When the Son of man arrives in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit down on his glorious throne." It was noted that Jesus became King of God's Kingdom in 1914, but he did not "sit down on his glorious throne" as Judge of "all the nations." (Matt. 25:32; compare Daniel 7:13.) However, the parable of the sheep and the goats describes Jesus primarily as Judge. (**Read Matthew 25:31-34, 41, 46.**) Since Jesus

was not yet active as Judge of all nations in 1914, his judgment of people as sheep or goats could not have started in that year.^[3] When, then, will Jesus' judgment begin?

¹² Jesus' prophecy about the last days reveals that he will for the very first time act as Judge of all nations after the destruction of false religion. As mentioned in paragraph 8, some of the events that will occur during that time are recorded at Matthew 24:30, 31. When you examine those verses, you will note that Jesus there foretells events that are similar to the ones he mentions in the parable of the sheep and the goats. For example, the Son of man comes with glory and with angels; all tribes and nations are gathered; those judged as sheep "lift [their] heads up" because "everlasting life" awaits them.^[4] Those judged as goats "beat themselves in lamentation," realizing that "everlasting cutting-off" awaits them.—Matt. 25:31-33, 46.

¹³ So, then, what can we conclude? Jesus will judge people of all nations as sheep or goats when he comes during the great tribulation. Then, at Armageddon, the climax of the great tribulation, the goatlike ones will be 'cut off' forever. How does that understanding affect our view of our ministry? It helps us to see how important our preaching work is. Until the great tribulation begins, people still have time to change their thinking and start walking on the cramped road "leading off into life." (Matt. 7:13, 14) To be sure, people may now display

9. What effect does Jesus' prophecy about the great tribulation have on Jehovah's people?

10. In the past, what was our understanding of the timing of the judgment of the sheep and the goats?

11. Why could the judgment of people as sheep or goats not have started in 1914?

12. (a) When will Jesus for the first time act as Judge of all nations? (b) What events are described at Matthew 24:30, 31 and Matthew 25:31-33, 46?

13. (a) When will Jesus judge the people as sheep or goats? (b) How does this understanding affect our view of our ministry?



Until the great tribulation begins, people still have time to change their thinking
(See paragraph 13)

a sheeplike or a goatlike disposition. Nevertheless, we should remember that the final judgment of who are sheep and who are goats is during the great tribulation. Therefore, we have good reason for continuing to offer as many people as possible the opportunity to listen to and respond to the Kingdom message.

WHEN DOES JESUS ARRIVE, OR COME?

¹⁴ Does a further consideration of Jesus' prophecy reveal that our understanding of the timing of other significant events needs to be adjusted? The prophecy itself gives the answer. Let us see how.

¹⁵ In the part of his prophecy that is recorded at Matthew 24:29–25:46, Jesus focuses primarily on what will happen during these last days and during the coming great tribulation. There, Jesus makes eight references to his "coming," or arrival.^[5] Regarding the great tribulation, he states: "They will see the Son of man *coming* on the clouds." "You do

not know on what day your Lord is *coming*." "At an hour that you do not think to be it, the Son of man is *coming*." And in his parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus states: "The Son of man *arrives* in his glory." (Matt. 24:30, 42, 44; 25:31) Each of these four references applies to Christ's future coming as Judge. Where in Jesus' prophecy do we find the remaining four references?

¹⁶ Regarding the faithful and discreet slave, Jesus says: "Happy is that slave if his master on *arriving* ["having come," *ftn.*] finds him doing so." In the parable of the virgins, Jesus states: "While they were going off to buy, the bridegroom *arrived* ["came," *Kingdom Interlinear*]." In the parable of the talents, Jesus relates: "After a long time the master of those slaves *came*." In the same parable, the master says: "On my *arrival* ["having come," *Int*] I would be receiving what is mine." (Matt. 24:46; 25:10, 19, 27) To what time do these four instances of Jesus' coming refer?

14, 15. Which four scripture references apply to Christ's future coming as Judge?

16. Jesus' coming is mentioned in what other scriptures?

¹⁷ In the past, we have stated in our publications that these last four references apply to Jesus' arriving, or coming, in 1918. As an example, take Jesus' statement about "the faithful and discreet slave." (*Read Matthew 24:45-47.*) We understood that the "arriving" mentioned in verse 46 was linked to the time when Jesus came to inspect the spiritual condition of the anointed in 1918 and that the appointment of the slave over all the Master's belongings occurred in 1919. (Mal. 3:1) However, a further consideration of Jesus' prophecy indicates that an adjustment in our understanding of the timing of certain aspects of Jesus' prophecy is needed. Why so?

¹⁸ In the verses that lead up to Matthew 24:46, the word "coming" refers consistently to the time when Jesus comes to pronounce and execute judgment during the great tribulation. (Matt. 24:30, 42, 44) Also, as we considered in paragraph 12, Jesus' 'arriving' mentioned at Matthew 25:31 refers to that same future time of judgment. So it is reasonable to conclude that Jesus' arrival to appoint the faithful slave over all his belongings, mentioned at Matthew 24:

17. What have we stated about the arrival mentioned at Matthew 24:46?

18. A consideration of Jesus' prophecy in its entirety leads us to what conclusion about Jesus' coming?

46, 47, also applies to his *future* coming, during the great tribulation.^[6] Indeed, a consideration of Jesus' prophecy in its entirety makes it clear that each of these eight references to his coming applies to the future time of judgment during the great tribulation.

¹⁹ In review, what have we learned? In the beginning of this article, we raised three "when" questions. We first considered that the great tribulation did not begin in 1914 but will start when the United Nations attacks Babylon the Great. Then, we reviewed why Jesus' judgment of the sheep and the goats did not begin in 1914 but will occur during the great tribulation. Finally, we examined why Jesus' arrival to appoint the faithful slave over all his belongings did not occur in 1919 but will take place during the great tribulation. So, then, all three "whens" apply to the same future time period—the great tribulation. How does this adjusted view further affect our understanding of the illustration of the faithful slave? Also, how does it affect our understanding of other parables, or illustrations, of Jesus that are being fulfilled during this time of the end? These important questions will be considered in the following articles.

19. What adjustments in understanding did we consider, and what questions will be answered in the following articles?

ENDNOTES:

(To be read as footnotes with the corresponding paragraphs.)

Paragraph 4: [1] For more information, see *The Watchtower*, February 15, 1994, pages 8-21 and May 1, 1999, pages 8-20.

Paragraph 8: [2] One of the events mentioned in these verses is the 'gathering of the chosen ones.' (Matt. 24:31) Hence, it appears that all anointed ones who still remain on earth after the initial part of the

great tribulation has passed will at some point be raised to heaven before the outbreak of the battle of Armageddon. This adjusts what was stated on this subject in "Questions From Readers" in *The Watchtower* of August 15, 1990, page 30.

Paragraph 11: [3] See *The Watchtower*, October 15, 1995, pages 18-28.

Paragraph 12: [4] See the parallel account at Luke 21:28.

Paragraph 15: [5] The words "coming" and "arriving" translate forms of the same Greek verb, *er'kho-mai*.

Paragraph 18: [6] As noted, the Greek word rendered "on arriving" at Matthew 24:46 is a form of the same Greek verb that is rendered "coming" at Matthew 24:30, 42, 44.