

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THERE THE VULTURES WILL GATHER

Matthew 24:28

While His first coming was quiet, humble and obscure, the Lord Jesus tells us that His second coming will be dramatic, cosmic, and very obvious. The first advent was in the little town of Bethlehem. The second advent will happen in all the skies. He says in Matthew 24:27, *For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.* And then, in the following verse, we find this mysterious phrase, a phrase that does not seem to fit Jesus' discourse about the end time.

Matthew 24:28. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

This verse has given headaches to many commentators, but we will see that its meaning is not that hard to grasp. Once we understand how Jesus thinks and teaches, it becomes easier to have insight into His words. So in this lesson, we will study Matthew 24:28. *Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.* That is the translation of the NAS.

If you look at other versions, you might notice that the word 'vultures' is absent. Instead, you will find the word 'eagles.' For example, in the NKJ, we read, *For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.* Why two different words? This is explained by the fact that the Greek word *aetos* can mean either 'vulture' or 'eagle.'

Comparing parallel passages

In studying the Scriptures, it is always important to take into account the parallel passage when it exists. And the parallel passage to Matthew 24:28 is Luke 17:37.

Luke 17:37. 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."

When we compare these two passages, we observe some differences, but the differences are really minor. Matthew has 'wherever', whereas Luke has simply 'where.' Matthew has the word 'corpse' instead of 'body' in Luke. Concerning the words 'vultures' and 'eagles,' they seem to be used interchangeably by the translators. And for the verb 'to gather,' sometimes the passive tense is used, and in other times the active tense is used, depending on which translation we take. These differences do not affect the basic meaning of the two sentences. Intuitively, we feel that they mean pretty much the same thing, whatever that meaning is.

Now, if you know Greek, you will be surprised to see that the words are quite different. And you will also discover that the two sentences are very different in what they aim to say. The key to the difference of these two verses lies in Greek in the word 'body,' 'body' in Luke, and 'corpse' in Matthew.

The word 'body' in Greek is *soma*, a term that is familiar to us. We all know for example the term 'psychosomatic.' There you have the word '*psycho*', from the Greek word for 'mind,' and then you have *soma*, which means 'body.' 'Psychosomatic' expresses the influence of the mind on the body. When a doctor says that a symptom is psychosomatic, he means that it is caused by the mind or the spirit, rather than by a physical disorder.

So the word in Luke is *soma*, for 'body.' The word in Matthew is *ptoma*, for corpse. These are two very different words. Concerning the word 'body', the English language is not very precise because it does not tell you whether the body is alive or dead. It can refer to a living body as well as to a dead body.

But it is not so with the Greek language. *Soma*, in Luke, always refers to a living body. *Ptoma*, in Matthew, always refers to a dead body. That distinction is crucial. Unless we grasp this point clearly, this passage will remain a mystery to us.

This is important for our understanding of the communion for example. Remember Jesus' words, *This is My **body** (soma) which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me* (Luke 22:19). 'My *soma* is given to you.' Jesus is saying, 'What I'm giving you is a living body, not a corpse. If you eat this living body, you will live.' The same idea applies to the concept of the church. We are the body of Christ (1Corinthians 12:27), the *soma*, not the corpse. The church is meant to have the life of Christ, and this life is to be communicated to the world.

Now we are ready to see the vital difference between Matthew 24 and Luke 17. We should not think that Matthew and Luke are simply repeating each other. They complement each other but say something quite different. What do they say?

Two different birds

First we have to deal with the question of vultures. As we have mentioned earlier, the Greek word *aetos* can mean 'vultures' as well as 'eagles.' Vultures and eagles belong to the same family of birds, but they are very different animals. The most obvious difference is probably this. A vulture goes for the *ptoma*, for the corpse. The eagle does not take corpses. The eagle is interested only in *soma*, in living bodies. This is very important to keep in mind. When we understand that one passage talks about corpses and the other about a living body, then we also know that one talks about vultures and the other about eagles.

Everybody knows that there is a fundamental difference between these two birds. Eagles are birds of prey. Unless they are starving, by choice eagles do not eat corpses. They always go for living animals, like rabbits, raccoons, squirrels or marmots. With their sharp vision and their speed, they hunt for live prey. If they see a dead body, they will not go for it.

The vultures, on the other hand, are scavenging birds of prey. They go for dead bodies. They will not chase a living animal. Sometimes they might kill a wounded animal or wait patiently until it dies. And then, they go for it. But primarily, they are interested in carcasses.

Physically, there is a great resemblance between vultures and eagles. It is perhaps because of their close resemblance that the Greek language does not have a distinguishing word for the two. It has only one word for vultures and eagles. They are simply regarded as all members of the eagle family. But their instinct and their character are entirely different.

It takes spiritual discernment

Notice another point of resemblance. In a sense, the dead body and the living body look alike a lot. Both are bodies. You see a dead body and you might think it is asleep. If it is asleep, it is a living body. So in many ways, the living body and the dead body are alike, except for the big difference that one has life and other does not have life.

And because a dead body and a living body can be externally quite similar, it takes discernment to tell if the body of a person is alive or it is dead. It takes some close examination. You might need to check the pulse on the wrist or on the neck of the person. You might want to put your ear on his chest to verify if the heart is beating. You might have to put a mirror near his nose to see if there is condensation. So it takes a certain perception to know whether a body is a dead or whether it is alive. Here is the beauty of the Lord's language. He is telling us to beware of the striking resemblance of things which are nonetheless essentially different. The Christ and the antichrist might at first sight look very similar to each other. It can be very hard to tell whether a person is spiritually alive or whether he is spiritually dead.

What is the importance of these observations? And what is the corpse? What is the body? What are the eagles? What are the vultures? These are important questions and we will try to answer them.

Notice that this whole section, from Matthew 24:15 to v. 28, deals with the antichrist. In v. 15, we find the abomination of desolation (*Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation...*). Then in v. 24, it speaks about false christs and false prophets (*For false christs and false prophets will arise...*). Then v. 26 immediately brings it down to a single person again (*Behold, he is in the wilderness ... Behold, he is in the inner rooms.*). 'If you see him, don't believe him. He is not the true Christ. He is the antichrist. You have to exercise discernment in what you believe.' So the antichrist is the subject of this whole section. And this section ends with v. 28: *Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.* We are led to conclude that the corpse is the antichrist. The corpse represents the antichrist. And this antichrist gathers to himself the vultures.

In the last days, it will become increasingly difficult to tell whether a teacher is true or false, whether a prophet is from God or not. There will be many false christs, all of them trying to deceive the believers. When the antichrist comes, showing signs and wonders, manifesting great spiritual power, will we be able to tell whether that power is from God or not? That is where the deception comes in. It will take a great deal of spiritual discernment. That is the point of Jesus' words here.

Becoming a certain kind of person

Now when we see that one passage talks about a living body and the other about a corpse, one talks about eagles and the other about vultures, this is what we need to understand about spiritual discernment. The way to have spiritual perception is not a question of technique. Distinguishing a dead body from a living body might require the measurement of certain physiological parameters (blood pressure, oxygen saturation, electrical cardiac activity, etc.), but that does not apply to the spiritual world. It is not a matter of skills. 'In order not to be deceived,' the Lord Jesus tells us, 'you have to become a certain kind of person.'

We just saw that a vulture has a certain nature about it, a certain characteristic: it goes for the dead body. Its very nature is attracted to dead animals. The eagle, on the other hand, goes for what is alive. It is in his nature to be interested in living things.

The question of whether you will perceive the deception of the antichrist does not depend on whether you have developed a special method of discernment. It does not depend on how much you

know about theology. It depends on the nature of your being. In order not to be deceived, we must have a new nature, a nature that seeks what is alive, that seeks for life itself (God's life).

If you are a person with an 'eagle nature,' the antichrist will find it very hard to deceive you, because you are not interested in dead things. But if you are a person with a 'vulture nature,' the antichrist will have much more success in drawing your attention. He will appeal to you because your nature is already geared towards the things which are dead.

All mankind is divided into these two basic natures. You either go for what is alive or you go for what is dead. We find this principle in the Lord's teaching about the two roads in Matthew 7. Jesus said that there are two roads. One is the broad road which leads to destruction. The other is the narrow road which leads to life.

*Matthew 7:13. Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and **the way is broad that leads to destruction**, and many are those who enter by it.*

*14 For the gate is small, and **the way is narrow that leads to life**, and few are those who find it.*

Why do so many people go down the broad road of destruction? Because they have the vulture nature. They go for what is dead. They do not necessarily think that it is bad. They do not deliberately choose to be destroyed. But their nature inclines them into the direction of the broad road at the end of which is death.

The people who have the eagle nature choose the path of life. They are interested in the narrow road of life, even though it is a difficult road. You see how the nature of the person is the determining factor. Two different kinds of nature, two different kinds of mentality. The apostle Paul expresses it in this way in Romans 12:2.

Romans 12:2. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Seek the things which are alive

Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, Paul says. 'Your whole mentality has to be transformed. In the past, you went for dead things. Now, as Christians, your whole thinking should be renewed. Now you go for the things which are alive.'

In Colossians 3, Paul explains more specifically what it means to have our mind renewed. Colossians 3:1-2.

*Colossians 3:1. If then you have been raised with Christ, **seek the things that are above**, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*

*2 **Set your minds on things that are above**, not on things that are on earth.*

Here is how our thinking is to be changed. Paul said in Romans, 'Let your mind be renewed.' Well, renewed from what to what? He did not tell us directly in Romans. But he tells us here in Colossians. 'Before your mind was on the things of the earth. But now that you have been raised with Christ into a new kind of life, let your mind also be changed. Seek the things which are above, which are alive.'

Paul makes this additional point in 2Corinthians 4:18: *While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen (why do we do that?); for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.*

We look for the things that are not seen because the things that are seen are transient. What are the things which are seen? The material things and all the world values. The things that are on earth. Money, houses, cars, fame, power. The things which are seen are temporary. They last only for a limited time.

What are the things that are not seen? Love, righteousness, truth, goodness, mercy. These are the things that will last forever. These things are alive.

What we go after shows our mentality. If we have a vulture mentality, we will go after dead things, things that are seen. If we have an eagle mentality, we will go after living things, things that are not seen.

The Lord is saying, 'Where the corpse is, the vultures will gather there. Where the body is, the eagle will gather there.' Where you gather depends on what you are.

What excites a person in his thinking and in his conversation with others will tell us whether he is more of an eagle or more of a vulture. What are the things that delight his mind? What captivates his thinking? What causes him to get excited? That tells a lot about the spiritual nature of that person.

Let me ask you this question: where do you gather? What is your spiritual nature, that of an eagle or that of a vulture?