
Please explain Christ's saying, "Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together."

Actually, Christ spoke at least twice about the body attracting eagles. His words are recorded in Matthew 24:28 and in Luke 17:37. In both cases, He spoke about His return to this earth. However, we might note a few distinctions, as we look at His statements more carefully.

Let us review His sayings one at a time.

In Matthew 24:26-28, Christ says: "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."

The Greek word for "carcass" is, "ptoma," which "denotes, lit. a fall (akin to pipto, to fall); hence, that which is fallen, a corpse" (W. E. Vine, Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words).

The Nelson Study Bible comments to Matthew 24:28: "This sweeping statement conveys an image of the horrible carnage that will take place in the judgment at the coming of the Son of Man."

The Broadman Bible Commentary offers a similar explanation for Matthew 24:28. It says: "When the Son of Man comes at the end of the age there will be no secrecy about it. His coming will be as apparent as the lightning that flashes across the sky. Further, his coming in judgment is as inevitable as is the gathering of the vultures where there is a carcass. Eagles is the literal Greek word, and there may be, but probably is not, a veiled reference to the coming of the Roman 'eagles' upon Jerusalem.

The Greek word ptoma normally designates a corpse or carcass, not a living body. The word for the coming of the Son of Man is Parousia, an apparent reference to his coming at the end of the age."

These explanations as to Christ's sayings in Matthew 24:28 seem to be correct. Christ is indeed speaking about the MANNER of His return at a time of GREAT DESTRUCTION on this earth. As eagles descend on a carcass, so the destruction of this world and the manner of Christ's return will be VISIBLE to everyone. Christ is not coming in secret--nor is He coming at a time of peace. Christ said that "there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved [alive]; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened" (Matthew 24:21-24). God the Father will shorten these days of utter destruction by sending His Son Jesus Christ to this earth. And Christ will be "coming with clouds, and EVERY EYE WILL SEE HIM" (Revelation 1:7).

When turning to Christ's sayings in Luke 17:37, He seems to be emphasizing here a SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT ASPECT regarding His coming. However, most commentaries fail to see the distinctions in Matthew 24:28 and Luke 17:37, and give the same identical explanation for both passages. Note, however, what Christ is saying in Luke 17: 24-37. Although He is addressing in this passage the general time of His return (verses 24, 30), He also introduces the thought that at that time, "...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'" (verses 36-37).

As mentioned, most commentaries state that the meaning of both sayings in Matthew and Luke is identical. The German commentary, Rienecker, Kommentar zur Bibel, refers to parallel expressions in Ezekiel 32:3-5 and Habakkuk 1:8, comparing God's judgments with eagles descending on world powers to devour them. Regarding Matthew 24:28 and Luke 17:37, Rienecker concludes that Jesus

used this picture for His return, which--like eagles descending on a carcass--will be sure, sudden and obvious.

Vine's gives a similar explanation: "In Matt. 24:28 and Luke 17:37... the meaning seems to be that, as birds of prey gather where the carcass is, so the judgments of God will descend upon the corrupt state of humanity. The figure of the eagle is used in Ezek. 17 to represent the great powers of Egypt and Babylon, as being employed to punish corrupt and faithless Israel (Cp. Job 39:30 [In referring to eagles, see Job 39:27, the passage continues in Job 39:30: "Its young ones suck up blood; And where the slain are, there it is."]; Prov. 30:17...)." "

The Ryrie Study Bible comments that Luke 17:37 is a "reference to the carnage of Armageddon (Rev. 19:17-19)."

The Nelson Study Bible and the Broadman Bible Commentary agree with this interpretation of Luke 17:37, but they add some additional thoughts regarding Christ's statements that some would be "taken," while others would be "left" behind.

Commenting on Luke 17:34-37, the Nelson Study Bible states: "'Taken' here suggests judgment, such as when the soldiers took Jesus to crucify Him. Verse 37 makes it clear that those who are taken are taken to final judgment... On that day, the Son of Man will divide humankind into two groups: those who are taken to judgment and those who are left to live and reign with Christ. Other commentators suggest the opposite. The righteous will be taken into God's kingdom. Either way, Jesus is clearly saying that a person's eternal destiny is not determined by being close to those who are righteous. Each person stands before God alone... When the disciples asked where Jesus' return would take place, Jesus did not answer directly... The term for eagles here refers to vultures that gather over dead animals. When the judgment comes, it will be final and terrible, with the stench of death and the presence of the vultures everywhere. No one will need to look for the place of judgment; the presence of the birds will reveal where the carcasses are."

Regarding Luke 17:37, Broadman points out: "When the end comes, it will cut across the closest relationships of this world order. The coming is pictured as taking place toward the end of the last watch (cf. 12:38), that is, when the fainthearted have given up hope. The men are still in bed, but the women are already in the initial stages of the arduous task of preparing bread for the day. 'Will be taken' means to be taken into salvation by God, probably by His angels. The disciples are still asking where. The reply is another case of those difficult sayings to which no dogmatic interpretation can be given. [Some identify] eagles as Roman standards, whose emblem was the eagle. It is taken as a reference to the conquest of Jerusalem by the Roman army. But it seems better to relate the passage to the Parousia [Christ's Second Coming]. The eagles (perhaps vultures) are symbols of judgment. There is no answer to the questions of time and place. Jesus simply affirms that judgment is inevitable and that it will take place when in God's purpose the time has come."

Many of those comments are worthwhile contemplating--ESPECIALLY IF APPLIED TO MATTHEW 24:28. Still, it must be noted that all these commentaries, as quoted above, fail to point out and consider an OBVIOUS DISTINCTION between Christ's words in Matthew 24:28 and in Luke 17:37.

While the Greek word for "carcass" in Matthew 24:28 designates, in fact, a DEAD body, this is NOT the case in Luke 17:37, where the Greek word is "soma." This word does not have to describe a dead body. In fact, in most cases, it refers to a LIVING body. Vine's explains: "soma is the body as a whole, the instrument of life, whether of a man living, e.g. Matt. 6:22, or dead, Matt. 27:52; or in the resurrection, 1 Cor. 15:44..."

Matthew Henry's Commentary seems to have seen this distinction. As a consequence, it gives a slightly different explanation for Luke 17:37, stating two possible ways of understanding this passage:

"(1) Wherever the wicked are, they shall be found out by the judgments of God; as wherever a dead

carcase is, the birds make a prey of it. The judgments of God shall fasten upon them, as the eagles do upon the prey. (2) Wherever the godly are, who are marked for preservation, they shall be found happy in the enjoyment of Christ. Wherever Christ is, believers will flock to him, and meet in him, as eagles about the prey, by their instinct of the new nature. WHEREVER THE BODY IS, WHEREVER THE GOSPEL IS PREACHED, thither will pious souls resort, there they will find Christ. Wherever Christ records his name he will meet his people, and bless them."

With these comments, Henry seems to be referring to CHRIST'S CHURCH AS THE BODY. In other words, it is Christ's Church, the body, which will be preaching the gospel (compare Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20). This seems to be a correct way of understanding this passage. The Greek word "soma" refers in many cases to the living body of Christ--the Church (compare Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23). While the statement in Matthew seems to be addressing the ACTUAL EVENT of Christ's return, Christ might have had SOMETHING ELSE in mind in Luke. Although He is describing events leading up to His return, the fact that some will be taken, and some may be left behind, could be a reference to a short time span of 3 1/2 years JUST PRIOR to His Second Coming, when His Church will be taken to a place of safety here on earth, to be PROTECTED from the terrible things to come (Revelation 3:10). We note that God's protection is many times associated with eagles, or eagle's wings. God will give His Church, often pictured as a "woman" or "virgin," "two wings of a GREAT EAGLE, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time [3 1/2 years], from the presence of the serpent [Satan the devil]" (Revelation 12:14).

In similar ways, God protected ancient Israel when they left Egypt. Please note Exodus 19:4: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on EAGLES' WINGS and brought you to Myself." Isaiah 63:9 identifies the "eagles' wings," as follows: "In all their affliction He was afflicted, And the ANGEL of His Presence saved them; In His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He

bore them and carried them All the days of old."

We note that the Bible does at times refer to angels as "eagles," or that certain angels are described as having characteristics of eagles (Ezekiel 1:10; 10:14; Revelation 4:7).

It is therefore possible that Christ was addressing, in Luke 17:37, a SUPERNATURAL PROTECTION of God's Church, through ANGELIC involvement, at a specific place of safety here ON THIS EARTH, just PRIOR to His Second Coming. Those who qualify for such a protection will be "taken" to this place, while others, who are not considered worthy, will be left behind. Christ admonishes us in Luke 21:36: "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass [by escaping to the place of safety on this earth], and to stand before the Son of Man [when He returns]."

We are NOT told HOW, exactly, God will bring those whom He considers worthy to the place of safety. We do know, however, that He will do so SUPERNATURALLY, WITH SUPERNATURAL PROTECTION (Revelation 12:15-16). Ancient Israel left Egypt BY FOOT. Similarly, we read that Christ asks us to pray that our FLIGHT would not happen in winter or on the Sabbath (Matthew 24:20). This seems to indicate that SOME will go to the place of safety "by foot" or by means of physical transportation. But even then, supernatural protection during this "flight" will be guaranteed, in the same way as God protected ancient Israel on their exodus out of Egypt.

At other times, God protected human beings by SUPERNATURALLY TRANSPORTING them--or "taking them"--to another place on this earth (as in the case of Enoch and Elijah, please read Updates #128 and 130. Compare, too, Acts 8:38-40 for another supernatural "transport" of one of God's disciples). So, it appears that some might, in some way, "physically" flee to a place of safety, while others will be taken there supernaturally. In any event, they all will have angelic protection.

We therefore conclude that Christ described, in Matthew 24:28 and Luke 17:37, EVENTS

LEADING to His coming (including the physical protection of His worthy disciples), as well as His ACTUAL coming and the terrible CONDITIONS of this world at, AND THE MANNER of, His coming:

Eagles or angels will be gathered together to protect Christ's body--the Church, as implied in Luke 17:37. And as everyone can observe when eagles or vultures descend on a carcass, so Christ's actual return to this earth, as implied in Matthew 24:28, will be obvious and visible to all. Since eagles can refer to angels, it is even possible that Christ's picture of descending eagles in Matthew 24:28 (and not only in Luke 17:37) refers to angels, in the sense that God will send symbolic eagles or angels to descend on the dead body or the carcass of this spiritually dead world, to render punishment and judgment on those who do not know or obey God.

We read that God will "give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven WITH HIS MIGHTY ANGELS, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).

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