Bible Study

One Will Be Taken and the Other Left: What Jesus Actually Meant

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Version 1.1

Introduction

According to Matthew 24:37-41, Two men stand in the same field under the same sun, working the same soil. Then one is taken. Most readers of Matthew 24 may think of "rescue," where a believer is taken to safety, or even raptured out of danger, while the other is left behind. That reading feels so natural that few pause to question it. Yet we need to examine this view by taking a careful look into it.

Note that Jesus frames the saying with the days of Noah:

> "For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left." (Matthew 24:37–41, ESV)

Notice the sequence. The flood "swept them all away." Noah was not swept away; he was the one left. The sinners were the ones removed. The disciples would have heard no break between the flood and the field. They heard one continuous thought: the flood took the unprepared, and then "one will be taken and one left."

John Middleton explains this well:

> "First, Jesus describes what life was like in the time of Noah, when people did not expect the flood. His point in verse 39 is that "they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and *took them all away*. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man." Note that the phrase *took them all away* describes judgment (it was Noah and his family who were *left* on the earth). Thus, when Jesus introduces the eschatological equivalent to the days of Noah (in verses 40-41) it is clear from the analogy he draws that the ones *taken* are the unrighteous, to judgment.
> If we doubt this interpretation, we need only turn to Luke's version of this text, for he follows the narrative of one taken and one left (in 17:34 and 36) with a question from the disciples in verse 37. "Where, Lord?" they ask. That is, where are they taken? Jesus replies, "Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather." This is clearly a reference to judgment; the image is certainly not of "heaven."" (John Middleton, "A New Heaven and a New Earth: The case for a holistic reading

> of the Biblical Story of Redemption," *Journal for Christian Theological Research*, Vol. 11 (2006), p. 95.)

Matthew 24 in Context

Matthew 24 opens with Jesus leaving the temple and stating that not one stone will be left upon another (Matthew 24:1–2). Later, on the Mount of Olives, they ask two questions: when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of His coming and of the end of the age (Matthew 24:3). Jesus spends most of the chapter answering the first question with visible signs: wars, earthquakes, false prophets, the abomination of desolation and so on. Then he announces:

> "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." (Matthew 24:36, ESV)

From this point forward the emphasis is no longer on signs that can be watched, but on readiness when the timing cannot be known. The Noah comparison should now be understood within this wider context.

Interestingly, Jesus omits the violence and corruption of Genesis 6, and focuses on the ordinary: eating, drinking, marrying or perhaps the perversions of wrong food and drink and wrong sort of marriages. The flood arrived in the middle of a world that assumed tomorrow would continue on (and sinning without penalty). Yet the warning was not hidden from humanity because Noah had been building the ark in plain sight and trumpeting a warning message for 120 years.

Peter later describes Noah as "a herald of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5, ESV). Noah was not scrambling when the rain began because he had already been faithful for decades while those around him treated the warning as 'noise' and probably an irritation. This warning message and the neglect to respond to it seems rather like the situation we are in today. Not unlike the world ignoring the end-time message being trumpeted today.

The Greek Verbs

In Matthew 24:39 the flood "swept them all away" uses the verb *airō* which means to *lift up*, to *remove by force*. In verse 40, "one will be taken" switches to *paralambanō*. The meaning of this has fuelled the debate for centuries. *Paralambanō* can be positive: Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain of transfiguration (Matthew 17:1); He promises to receive His disciples to Himself (John 14:3). Yet the same verb also appears when the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple (Matthew 4:5, 8) and when soldiers take Jesus into the Praetorium (Matthew 27:27). So the word itself does not decide the meaning; context does.

The Parallel in Luke 17

Luke records a nearly identical teaching and adds a second historical parallel:

> "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all—so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed…

> I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left."
> And they said to him, "Where, Lord?" He said to them, "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." (Luke 17:26–30, 34–37, ESV)

In both stories the righteous are preserved: Noah inside the ark, Lot walking out of the city, while those who remain in the ordinary (and sinful) routine are destroyed. What is removed is not the rescued party but the judged. Jesus' answer to the disciples' question "Where?" points to a corpse and scavenging birds. The image is one of aftermath and judgment, not of a joyful reception in the clouds after a rapture!

1 Thessalonians 4 and the Rapture Theory

A different passage is often brought into the discussion:

> "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, ESV)

Paul comforts believers with the promise of resurrection and reunion. The Greek *harpazō* ("caught up") carries the sense of being seized. This text teaches that believers will be gathered to Christ. However, the question is whether Matthew 24:40 is describing the same event in the same way. It should be noted that the two passages serve different purposes: Paul consoles while Jesus warns.

The Separation in Matthew 13

Matthew has already given the same pattern twice in chapter 13. In the parable of the weeds:

> "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. … Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:24–25, 30, ESV)

The weeds are gathered first. The wheat remains. In the parable of the net that follows, the bad fish are sorted out and thrown away; the good are kept (Matthew 13:47–50). At the moment of separation, what is to be judged is removed; what belongs to the kingdom remains. The field and the net are similar in which the good and the bad have grown side by side, indistinguishable until the sorting arrives.

Christ's Command

He ends with a command:

> "Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming … Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (Matthew 24:42, 44, ESV)

He illustrates the command with the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants (Matthew 24:45–51) and the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1–13). In both stories people look identical until the end. The unfaithful servant does not deny the master's existence; he simply lives sinfully as though the return is far enough away that it has little bearing. The foolish virgins carry lamps but no extra oil. The difference between them remains invisible until midnight.

Similarly in regard to the two men in the field. They share the same soil, the same sun, the same routine. Whatever separates them is not visible in the ordinary, but waiting to be revealed.

Conclusion

The clearest reading of Matthew 24:40, when evaluated within its immediate context - Noah, Lot, the corpse and the birds, the wheat and the weeds, the net full of fish - is that the one taken is removed in judgment and the one left is the one who remains under His care. The lesson is we can stand next to someone in the same field, doing the same work, undertaking the same routine and yet differ spiritually. It is about sin vs righteousness.

Noah did not earn his place in the ark when the flood arose – after all he had been faithful for decades while the world treated the warning as 'noise.'

The command remains the same: Watch. Be ready.

Table 1. Comparing the Scriptures Referred to above

Scripture	ESV Text (key portion)	Role in the Argument	How It Relates to "Taken / Left"
Matthew 24:37–41	"For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left."	Central text. Identifies the "one taken / one left" saying with the days of Noah.	The flood "swept them all away" (the unprepared). Noah was preserved/left. Parallel suggests the one taken is removed in judgment; the one left is preserved.
Luke 17:26–30, 34–37	"Just as it was in the days of Noah… the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot… fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all—so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed… I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the	Strong parallel. Adds the Lot/Sodom example and the disciples' "Where?" question.	Reinforces the pattern: the righteous (Noah, Lot) are preserved; the unprepared are destroyed/removed. The corpse + vultures image points to judgment, not rescue.

Scripture	ESV Text (key portion)	Role in the Argument	How It Relates to "Taken / Left"
	other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left." … "Where, Lord?" He said to them, "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."		
Matthew 24:28	"Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."	Closely related to the Luke parallel.	Judgment imagery. The gathering of birds marks the location of the dead after removal of the ungodly.
1 Thessalonians 4:16–17	"For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."	Contrast text. Often linked by rapture interpreters to Matthew 24:40.	Uses different word (*harpazō* = "caught up"). Serves a different purpose (comfort and reunion) than Jesus' warning in the Olivet Discourse. Not treated as the same event or meaning.
Matthew 13:24–25, 30 (Parable of the Weeds)	"…Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"	Pattern of separation.	The weeds (what is judged) are gathered/removed first; the wheat remains. Thus supports "taken = judged/removed."
Matthew 13:47–50 (Parable of the Net)	"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind… The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace."	Second separation parable in the same chapter.	Bad fish are sorted out and thrown away; good are kept. Again, the judged are removed.
2 Peter 2:5	"…if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly …"	Supports the Noah parallel.	Emphasises that Noah was preserved while the ungodly were swept away;
Matthew 24:36, 42, 44	"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. … Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. … Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."	Immediate context and conclusion of the teaching.	Shifts from visible signs to the need for constant readiness. The "taken/left" saying is part of this call to watchfulness.
John 14:3	"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will	Example of *paralambanō* used positively.	Shows the verb can mean positive reception, but context (not the verb

Scripture	ESV Text (key portion)	Role in the Argument	How It Relates to "Taken / Left"
	take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."		itself) determines meaning in Matthew 24.
Matthew 17:1	"And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves."	Another positive use of *paralambanō*.	Demonstrates that the same Greek verb can be used for taking someone in a beneficial sense.
Matthew 4:5, 8; 27:27	(Devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle/temple; soldiers take Jesus into the Praetorium)	Negative/forceful uses of *paralambanō*.	Demonstrates the verb is neutral in context which decides whether "taken" is positive or negative.

Table 2. Genesis 6 Parallels in the New Testament, version 2.0

Event	Days of Noah	Christ's Prophecies	Other Relevant Scriptures with Comments
Population explosion	Gen 6:1 "When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them…"		
Wrong marriages (inc homosexual and other perversions)	Gen 6:2–5 "the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. … The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."	Matt 24:38; "For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark…" Luke 17:26–27 "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all."	NB: Luke 17:28–30 – the situation was similar during the days of Lot Luke 17:28–30 "Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all—so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed." (cp. 2 Pet 2:6–10; Jude 1:7) 2 Pet 2:6–10 "if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked… then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment…" Jude 1:7 "just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual

Event	Days of Noah	Christ's Prophecies	Other Relevant Scriptures with Comments
			immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire."
Wrong foods		Matt 24:38; Luke 17:26–27 (see texts above)	Cp. Is 22:12–14 "In that day the Lord GOD of hosts called for weeping and mourning, for baldness and wearing sackcloth; and behold, joy and gladness, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine. 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.' The LORD of hosts has revealed himself in my ears: 'Surely this iniquity will not be atoned for you until you die,' says the Lord GOD of hosts."
Plague of wrong thoughts	Gen 6:5 "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."		2 Tim 3:1–5 "But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people." Is 59:2–8 "but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies; your tongue mutters wickedness. … Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths; they have made their roads crooked; no one who treads on them knows peace."
A very few	Gen 6:8		Heb 11:7 – "By faith Noah, being

Event	Days of Noah	Christ's Prophecies	Other Relevant Scriptures with Comments
find favour with God (a righteous remnant)	"But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord."		warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." 1 Pet 3:20 "…when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water."
Violence (inc wars)	Gen 6:11 "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence."		Rom 1:28–32 "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."
Warning ministry (120 years)			2 Pet 2:5 "if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly…"
Sudden destruction	Gen 7:11–13 "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights. On the very same day Noah and his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and	Matt 24:38–39 "For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man."	Luke 21: 34-35; 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3.

Event	Days of Noah	Christ's Prophecies	Other Relevant Scriptures with Comments
	Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons with them entered the ark…"		
Global destruction of the earth and its inhabitants	Gen 6:7, 13 "So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them…'" "And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth.'"	Matt 24:28 "Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." Luke 17:37 "And they said to him, 'Where, Lord?' He said to them, 'Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.'"	Ezek 14:13–22 (the chapter emphasises that even the presence of the righteous cannot stay judgment on a land filled with sin)
Remnant kept safe		Matt 24:40–41 "Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left." Luke 17:34–35 "I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left."	The one left is kept safe.
Watch		Matt 24:42 "Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."	Mark 13:33-37; Luke 21: 36.