

Understanding COVID-19 birth-pangs' theological responses and the promised Parousia of Jesus

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Jesus in Matthew 24 presaged to his disciples about the eschatological birth-pangs that would be occurring in the world in the interim of his departure and his promised Parousia and the end of this age. It is a theological concern how the disciples of Jesus in every era are to be responding to eschatological birth-pangs in the light of Jesus' promised Parousia. This study is based on the existential reality that many Nigerian professing Christians do not understand how they are to be responding to an eschatological birth-pang like coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in relation to the promised Parousia of Jesus. How then are the elects in Nigeria to be responding to eschatological occurrence like COVID-19 and as well be preparing for the Parousia of Jesus? Therefore, using redaction criticism approach of conducting biblical exegesis, this study focusses on theologically interpreting the context of Matthew 24:15–51, to unveil and recommend pragmatic theological Christian responses that underline how Nigerian Christians are to be righteously responding to the COVID-19 pandemic as an eschatological birth-pang, and as well be preparing for the promised Parousia of Jesus.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: In the Olivet-discourse, Jesus in advance informed his disciples how they are to be responding to the birth-pangs, and also be preparing for his Parousia. This study explored Matthew 24:15–51 and unveils how the church in Nigeria is to be responding to the COVID-19 pandemic as an eschatological birth-pang in the light of Jesus' promised Parousia.

Keywords: Matthew 24:15–51; eschatology; Parousia; COVID-19 pandemic; church; Nigeria.

Introduction

The advent of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Wuhan, China, in 2019, and the fast rate with which many contacted it in other countries of the world, persuaded many Nigerian theologians, pastors and some lay Christians to relate the COVID-19 pandemic to be an eschatological event (Ossai 2021:48), instead of the eschatological birth-pang Jesus presaged it to be (Ukeachusim 2023:3–4). The author of Matthew's gospel has a special interest in eschatology. Hence, Matthew had theological reasons for which he redacted the sources he used to address the lack of understanding of his Christian community on how they were to be responding to eschatological birth-pang in relation to Jesus' promised Parousia (Mt 24:1–51). Therefore, using redaction criticism method of analysing bible texts (Chinwokwu 2015:43), to unveil the theological motifs of the author of the text under study in redacting and applying the eschatological teaching of Jesus to his Christian community, this study exegetically explores Matthew's eschatological Didache in Matthew 24:15–51 and in the light of Jesus' promised Parousia unveils how Nigerian Christians are to be responding to COVID-19 pandemic as an eschatological birth-pang. The study argues that Jesus' hortations, advance warnings and commands in the Olivet discourse unveil how Christians are to be responding to eschatological birth-pangs as they are living in the interim militantly waiting for his Parousia. Just as the Olivet discourse was relevant to the early church, similarly, the teachings of Jesus concerning how the church should be responding to the unfolding eschatological birth-pangs in relation to the promised Parousia of Jesus will ever be relevant to the church of every age, even this modern age.

Exegesis of Matthew 24:15–51

In Matthew 24:1–3, the disciples showed Jesus the magnificent buildings of the Jerusalem *ἱεροῦ* (temple). Jesus responded to the temple they had shown him by presaging to his disciples about the destruction of the Jerusalem *ἱεροῦ* in the future. Jesus' prophecy about the Jerusalem *ἱεροῦ* aroused

his disciples' curiosities to ask him eschatological questions that have been bothering them. Jesus' disciples were curious to know when his eschatological sayings will materialise, and the σημεῖον [sign] of Jesus' promised return and the end of this age. The disciples being obsessively curious could expose them to be vulnerable to be πλανήση [deceived] (Mt 24:4). Hence, Jesus answering their questions, first intimated them about the eschatological ὠδίνων [birth-pangs] that would herald his παρουσία [second return] (Mt 24:5–9), and the eschatological events and the σημεῖον [sign] that would immediately precede his παρουσία and συντελείας [end] of the world (Mt 24:29–31), and the need for them to prepare for his promised Parousia (Mt 24:32–51). However, by the implication of προείρηκα [foretell or tell beforehand], Jesus was personally concerned on his disciples being foretold (Mt 24:25) about eschatological birth-pangs and how they are to be responding to them in relation to his promised Parousia; so that they will not be deceived (Mt 24:4). Also, he in advance told them that the εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας [gospel of the kingdom] would be preached in all the world to serve as a witness unto all nations (Mt 24:14), their salvation being the focal point (Mt 24:13, 22). The advance information is to pre-arm his disciples on how they are to be responding as eschatological birth-pangs will be unfolding in the interim of his departure and his second return (Mt 24:15–51).

Therefore, in the light of the convulsive impacts of ὠδίνων [birth-pangs] and the need for Jesus' disciples to be ready for his promised Parousia, Matthew's Jesus pre-arms his disciples. Jesus uses 'hortations', 'advance warnings' (Mt 24:25) and commands to prepare his disciples to be alerted and to know how they are to be responding to the eschatological birth-pangs as they would be unfolding in the light of his promised Parousia. By the theological implication of the verb imperatives ἀναγινώσκων νοεῖτω [Let him that reads understand], Jesus wants his disciples to be responding to the eschatological birth-pangs by seeing, reading and understanding the eschatological birth-pangs (24:15) as they will be unfolding as they were divinely orchestrated and presaged (24:8). What should be read is the scripture, and it should be understood (Mt 24:15) and its hortations, warnings and commands should be applied as guides on how Christians are to be practically responding during the realities of the unfolding of the eschatological ὠδίνων.

The ὠδίνων listed in Matthew 24 were divinely allowed to be persuading the people of the world to repent and access both realised and futuristic salvation. Consequently, to access realised salvation, from verses 16–18, Jesus uses the Greek verbs in their imperative present active moods: 'φευγέτωσαν' (Mt 24:16) to flee to the mountains, 'μὴ καταβάτω' not to get the things out of the house (Mt 24:17); 'μὴ ἐπιστρέψατω' let him who is in the field 'not turn back to get his cloak' (Mt 24:18) to command his disciples on how they are to be responding to the paroxysmal impacts of eschatological birth-pangs. Jesus hereby consolidates security and survival means of responding to the unfolding eschatological birth-pangs as his disciples will be in the interim in preparedness waiting for

his promised return. These exhortative commands are rated to be authentic saying of Jesus and they make reality sense (Keener 1999). In order to survive during the destruction of Jerusalem that occurred in AD 70, many of the then Christians fled to Pella (Pritz 1988). Keener (1999) explains that:

[T]he admonitions to leave the rooftop without entering the house (Mt 24:17) and to leave the field without returning for one's cloak (Mt 24:18) indicate that life matters more than even its' basic necessities which might later be replaced. (pp. 647–648)

This is typified that as essential as this outer cloak was, Jesus implies that the exigency of running at the news of impending destruction was more urgent.

By the implication of the interjection 'οὐαὶ' [woe] which is used to express grief or denunciation (Mt 24:19), in this context implies that some classes of people will be more vulnerable as ὠδίνων listed in verses 6–8, and as θλίψις [oppression, affliction, tribulation] mentioned in verses 9, 21 and 29 will be unfolding. In this context, ἐνγαστρι ἐχούσας the pregnant women and θηλαζούσας those who are still breast feeding their babies will be most vulnerable (Mt 24:19). The righteous pragmatic responses Jesus advanced in this context are the commands to προσεύχεσθε (pray) (Mt 24:20) and adhering to safety measures (Mt 24:16–19).

In verse 22, the adjective pronoun ἐκλεκτοὺς is used in its accusative masculine plural form from ἐκλεκτός, ἐκλεκτοῦς literally means the 'elects', 'chosen ones' or the 'selected ones'. ἐκλεκτοῦς is the Greek technical word for the church (Mt 24:22, 24, 31). It is for the elects' sake that the days of tribulation referenced in verses 9, 21, and 29 shall be shortened, for if the tribulation is divinely allowed to protract, no life would be ἐσώθη [saved] (Mt 24:22). In the midst of the birth-pangs and the tribulation occurrences, ψευδόχριστοι [false-Christ] and ψευδοπροφήται [false prophets] will increase (Mt 24:5, 23–24). Many of the ψευδόχριστοι and ψευδοπροφήται will have high tendencies of deceiving many; because of the numerous σημεῖα [signs] and τέρατα [wonders] that they will be performing in the ὄνομα [name] of Jesus. There will be some declaring that 'here or there' is the anointing of Christ. By the implication of μὴ πιστεύσητε [do not believe him] being used in its verb subjunctive aorist active second person plural mood from πιστεύω [I believe]; the response Jesus advises his disciples here, is that they should choose 'not to believe' those who claim that the Christ is here or there (Mt 24:23, 26). They will perform σημεῖα [signs] and τέρατα [wonders] to the point that even τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς [the elects] may be misled (Mt 24:4, 24). Jesus afore prepares his disciples, so that they will be saved and not be deceived by informing them on how they are to be practically responding to the eschatological birth-pangs that will be unfolding in the interim of his departure and promised return.

In verse 25, the imperative interjection 'ιδού' is used to emphasise to the disciples the theological importance of them being 'advanced-informed'. ιδού calls to 'see', 'witness' that he has informed them in advance and hence be on guard that they will not be deceived. The verb 'προείρηκα' is used

in its indicative perfect active first person singular form from *προεἶπον* to imply 'foretell', or 'tell beforehand'. In this context, it means prophetic utterances from Jesus (the founder and the Lord of the church) to his disciples identified as the elects.

From verse 27, Jesus began to describe the mysteriousness of his answers to his disciples' question in verse 3 concerning the sign of his second coming and pinpointing the sudden occurrence of Parousia as one of the major reasons they are to be faithful in righteously responding to eschatological birth-pangs as he has warned, exhorted and foretold them. Παρουσία (Mt 24:27) is an expression that only Matthew among the gospel writers employs in his redacted gospel to describe 'the second coming of Jesus' (Glasson 1963:66). Jesus describes that his promised Parousia will occur as the lightning that comes out from the ἀνατολῶν [east] and shines even unto the δυσμῶν [west] (Mt 24:27). From the east rises the stars and it is at the west that the sun sets. Jesus in this verse uses east and west to refer to the horizontal ends of the world (Mt 8:11, Mt 24:27). Jesus implies that his coming will be sudden (Mt 24:37), his appearance will be felt in the whole world (Mt 24:27). The use of πτώμα [corpse] in a proverbial form (Davies & Allison 1997:355) in verse 28 could imply that 'Jesus' coming' will be as obvious as vultures gathered around corpses (Meier 1980:286). Jesus will not return in some 'nonphysical' or 'spiritual' sense (Best 1977:278) immediately after τὴν θλίψιν [the tribulation] of the end times (Mt 24:9, 21, 29). The eschatological events and the sign (Mt 24:29–31), and not birth-pangs (Mt 24:5–9), that would immediately precede the Parousia of Jesus were listed by Jesus to include: the sun darkening, the moon not giving her light, the stars falling from heaven, and the powers of the heavens being shaken (Mt 24:29). It is immediately after the occurrences of these eschatological events that Jesus would be visibly seen coming from heaven with power and great glory (Mt 24:30). Παρουσία is referring in this context to the future visible return of Jesus from heaven as he promised his disciples. By the implication of ὄψονται [to see], when, the σημεῖον [sign] of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, every eye shall see him (Mt 24:30). This answers the disciples' question about the σημεῖον [sign] of Jesus' second coming. According to Gundry (1982:488) the 'sign' of Jesus' second coming is that Jesus as the Son of man in glory will suddenly appear in the sky (Mt 16:27; Mt 24:30). The σημεῖον of Jesus appearing in the sky will come with the corollary of all the φυλαί [tribes] of the earth being thrown into κόπονται [mourning]; because they rejected Jesus, the message of the kingdom which contains the need for repentance, righteous living in Jesus and faithfully waiting for the fulfilment of his promised return. The promised Parousia of Jesus considerably demands for preparation in repentance and acceptance of Jesus as the anointed Messiah on the part of the people of the world (Ladd 1967:92). The nations will κόπονται [will mourn] (Mt 24:30) during Jesus' 'second coming' because no longer would the time of grace be given to them to repent and accept him when he finally appears (Keener 1999). Those who rejected Jesus while they lived in the interim will not rejoice at his second coming. With terror and fear, they will respond to eschatological birth-pangs and with mourning

to Jesus' coming. But as it relates to the future salvation, the 'elect' that will be gathered from the four corners of the earth are only those who would be saved because they remained faithful till the end (Mt 24:13).

Matthew's Jesus employed the use of many parables to explicate his future coming (Mt 24:32–25:46) (Jeremias 1972:92–93). In the parable in Matthew 24:32–33, Jesus implies that his disciples should see these pre-destined birth-pangs and discern or recognise that his promised Parousia is near and at the door. Jesus stresses categorically that these predestined birth-pangs he in advance-informed his disciples will take place or be fulfilled in this generation in which all the prerequisites for his return (Mt 24:5–28, 34–35) would be fulfilled (Carson 1984:507). Schaser (2021) elucidates that:

[W]hen Jesus says that his own generation will not pass away before his arrival, he points to the new creation that God will work through resurrection at the end of the day. (p. 1)

Jesus' λόγοι [words] will not fail to come to fruition (Mt 24:34–35). Based on this, many of Jesus' contemporaries made attempts to capitalise on eschatological birth-pangs to predict the end materialising (Mt 24:6–8) and some Jewish futurists began to set dates when the end shall materialise (Bonsirven 1964:178). This could inform why Matthew's Jesus was categorical in stating that τῆς ἡμέρας [the day] and ὥρας [hour] of Jesus' second coming is not known by anyone, not even the angles of heaven nor the Son, only the πατήρ [Father] knows (Mt 24:36) (Cullmann 1950:43). This authentic saying of Jesus (Bultmann 1968:159) in this verse highlights the warning that aims to prevent those who are suffering any form of birth-pang in the interim from building up undue expectation of the time of the Lord's coming, so that they will not be exploited (Mt 24:4, 5, 23–27) (Keener 1999). But, Jesus may have 'proclaimed only potential imminence' which is supposed to function to minimise the problem of the delay of Parousia (Witherington 1992:48). Though, many then were thinking that the Parousia is delaying, however, they did not know that the second Parousia of Jesus is divinely orchestrated to happen suddenly and that it would impose unexpected judgement on those who rejected Jesus. Consequently, the coming of Jesus will be likened to the days of Noah (Mt 24:37–38) in which many will be enjoying themselves by eating, drinking, marrying and giving to marriage until when the day Noah entered the ark (Mt 24:38). The worldly will keep thinking that events like 'τρώγοντες καὶ πίνοντες' [eating and drinking] would continue as 'life as usual' and or 'business-as-usual' (Keener 1999); hence, like in the days of Noah, the worldly were not concerned about Noah and his divine mandate to build the ark, for the safety of those who would believe and identify with his message. But the worldly, as 'outsiders' did not 'see' or 'understand' the sign before them, until the flood came and swept them all away. The same is likened to how the παρουσία [the second coming] of the Son of Man shall be (Mt 24:39). The disciples of Jesus were being informed in advance, so that they would see the birth-pangs theological signs, and understand their theological implications, and respond righteously as they would be unfolding, not just to

be saved from the birth-pangs' convulsive impacts, but to be saved at the coming of Jesus.

Because of the theological significance of 'understanding' the scriptures, prophecies, and birth-pangs signs, it was repeated throughout the gospel tradition in general with special reference in Matthew (Mt 13:19; 15:10; 24:15, 39). Following this, Matthew in verse 39 repeatedly 'echoes the damnable folly of the outsiders' (Keener 1999), for they did 'not understand' οὐκ ἔγνωσαν and will not recognise the theological implications of the birth-pangs and signs unfolding before their eye; until Jesus as the Judge of all, who will punish and reward people according to their acceptance or rejection of him, would appear suddenly to their uttermost dismay (Mt 24:27, 39). This consolidates that the day of the Lord's Parousia will catch unawares the outsiders who did not know and accept Jesus and his kingdom's message (Mt 24:36–44).

To describe how some people will be caught unawares and some will not be caught unawares, in verses 40–41, Jesus presaged that then, there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken παραλαμβάνεται and left ἀφίεται and two women will be grinding at the mill; παραλαμβάνεται [one will be taken] and one will be ἀφίεται (Mt 24:40). This portend, describes how Jesus during his παρουσία would select his elects from those who are not (Mt 24:40–41). Jesus having foretold his disciples about the birth-pangs and immediate events and sign of his παρουσία [his second coming], by the implication of verb imperative 'γρηγορεῖτε [watch]' used in its present active second person plural mood; categorically commands his disciples to be watching for they do not know which ἡμέρα [day] the Lord would be coming (Mt 24:42).

Jesus in verse 42 presupposes stationary watchmen that existed in the then Mediterranean cultures (Keener 1999). Matthew does not present 'watch' to mean 'look for' or 'anticipate immediately', rather, he likens it to the image of a night watchman at his post. It is the indefiniteness of the time that warrants the need; motivates Jesus to command his disciples therefore Γρηγορεῖτε [to keep watch] (Mt 24:42; 25:13) (Ladd 1974:208). In verse 43, Jesus advances imperatively by the implication of 'advance warning', that if a good man was foretold the ὥρα [hour] the thief would come, he would have been on alert and watching so that he would not allow his house to be burgled. The disciples having been given advance information are therefore commanded γίνεσθε ἔτοιμοι [to be ready] for Jesus is coming at an hour when they would not think he would (Mt 24:44). On the importance of waiting faithfully in the interim for the Parousia, Jesus stresses the need for individual disciples to keep being faithful and remaining prepared for his Parousia (Mt 24:44–45). The wise servants are known by their readiness to be consistently faithful (Mt 24:44–46). It is decisive for disciples to always be ready; consequently, there is always a warning to stay ready and be prepared till the end. In being prepared, each individual disciple is literally to be acting as a watchman whose duty it is to remain alert and awake at his or her duty post (Mt 24:42; 26:41).

Though it seems that the Lord of the church is delaying his promised return (Mt 24:48), the disciples are not supposed to just be banqueting; rather, they are to be watching. πιστὸς δούλος [faithful servant] is rated as being 'φρόνιμος' [sensible] (Mt 24:45). It is the wise, steadfast servant that would be blessed and would be put in charge of all his lord's owns. The wise servant is blessed because when his lord comes suddenly, he finds him being consistent in being faithful (Mt 24:46–47). By the implication of κακὸς [evil] (Mt 24:48), evil is the servant that says in his heart, the Lord is χρονίζει [delaying] his coming (Mt 24:48), and begins to be beating his fellow slaves, eating and drinking with drunkards (Mt 24:49). As the κακὸς δούλος [evil servant] will be presuming that his lord is delaying in returning, and then his lord will come on a day when he would not expect him and at an hour which he does not know (Ladd 1974). As his lord comes upon him unawares, he shall cut him asunder, appoint him his portion with the hypocrites, where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 24:50–51). By this saying, Jesus in Matthew denounces exploitative leaders in his fold who would be exacting force and harshness on their fellow servants (Keener 1999). Jesus consolidates that ministers in his fold in these last days are called to serve their fellow servants and that those who exploit the flock for ulterior motives will be judged and punished in the same manner as the unbelievers, if they would not repent (Mt 24:50–51).

Matthean Olivet: theological responses to eschatological birth-pang events and the Nigerian church's expected COVID-19 eschatological birth-pang in relation to Jesus' promised Parousia

In the first century era, some members of the Matthean Christian community did not know or understand how they were to be responding to eschatological birth-pang events (Mt 24:1–14) in relation to the promised Parousia of Jesus (Mt 24:15–51). Matthew used his redacted Olivet discourse to address the situation of his Christian community that lived during the earliest eschatological era. Matthew modelling from Jesus knew the theological implications of disciples of Jesus not having theological understanding of how they are to be responding to eschatological birth-pang events in relation to being ready for the promised Parousia of Jesus. Hence, he redacted the eschatological teachings of Jesus and applied Jesus' Didache to the unfolding eschatological birth-pangs experienced by his Christian community.

COVID-19 pandemic convulsive impacts in Nigeria have been proven to have manifested characteristics that are typical to the eschatological birth-pangs Jesus listed in his eschatological prophecies, advance warnings and teachings, in the Olivet discourse (Ukeachusim 2023:3–4). How many professing Christians in Nigeria responded and have continued to be responding to COVID-19 showed and has continued to show that, they like many members of the first century Matthean Christian community, lack theological understanding on how they are to be responding to eschatological birth-pangs

(Ukeachusim 2023:3–4), in relation to the promised Parousia of Jesus. Therefore, below is discussed how many professing Nigerian Christians manifested and have continued to be manifesting tendencies of not knowing the theological stance on how they are to be responding to eschatological birth-pangs and also being ready for the promised Parousia of Jesus; and how they are to be responding to eschatological birth-pang event like COVID-19 in relation to the promised Parousia of Jesus.

Watching, seeing and being vigilant response

Before, during and currently that the COVID-19 pandemic has subsided, many Nigerian Christians are sound asleep in regard to the coming of Jesus Christ (Ukeachusim 2023:3–5). COVID-19 is a merciful wake-up call to every Christian to be ready for the second coming of Jesus (Piper 2020). There is therefore a consistent need for followers of Jesus in Nigeria and all over the world to be willing to be seeing and understanding the eschatological birth-pangs and their underlying signs as they are unfolding in this generation (Mt 24:15). The commands to see, watch, stay awake, and be vigilant are to be taken seriously by every Christian (Mt 24:33, 42–43; Mt 26:41). In relation to the promised Parousia, Jesus gives it as a command to his elects in every age to ‘watch and to see’ the theological implications of the eschatological birth-pangs as they will be unfolding (Mt 24:42–43). ‘To watch’ metaphorically means to give strict attention to eschatological birth-pangs and their underlying signs as they would be unfolding as Jesus’ sayings, teachings and parables presaged. It means being discerning and cautiously doing what Jesus commands and to desist from lawlessness and being ready for Jesus’ promised Parousia. As eschatological event like COVID-19 is ravaging the world, some Christians are not watching while some are watching but not discerning (Ukeachusim 2023:5). The elect in Nigeria and elsewhere should heed the command to be consistent in being vigilant for they know not the hour the Lord of the church would come.

The responses of not believing false prophets, fake signs and wonders (Mt 24:4, 11, 24–26)

Before and during the COVID-19 pandemic many acclaimed plenipotentiaries of God have been busy advertising themselves as being called by God to be performing signs and wonders. Many false plenipotentiaries advertise themselves as having the anointing to perform signs and wonders of curing those infected with COVID-19 and other illnesses (Ojo 2020). Some church leaders and founders were prophesying and dishing out preaching to advance their personal and theological opinions (Ayokunle 2020b), and conspiracy theories (Jolley & Lamberty 2020) to explain COVID-19. During the peak of COVID-19, many Nigerians were deceived by their fake prophecies, fake miracles and unfounded preaching. Then, the federal government of Nigeria warned churches in Nigeria to ‘stop exhibition of

reckless confidence’ (Onyedika-Ugoeze 2020) motivated by the deceptive preaching, fake prophecies and fake miracles. In advance, Jesus categorically stressed that in the last days many false prophets will arise to deceive many (Mt 24:11, 24). False prophets perform false miracles, signs and wonders to mislead the genuine seekers and superficial followers of God by trying to predict when the world would end (Omotayo 2020) and when Jesus would come (Orjinmo 2020). In relation to accessing both realised and future salvation, Nigerian Christians are to respond righteously to the eschatological birth-pang like COVID-19 by not identifying with false prophets and believing their unfounded preaching, opinions, fake signs and wonders (Mt 24:23).

Being ready response

Currently, many Christians and non-Christians are experiencing diverse forms of crises in the world. Because of the increasing intensities of crises, many Christians are responding to these crises by being indifferent to their faith and hence not getting ready for the promised Parousia of Jesus (Vicini 2021:116). However, this crises ridden-era is the time for Christians to pay attention and keep getting prepared for the promised Parousia of Jesus (Hooser 2011). With many crises that are ongoing, of which COVID-19 is only a part (Ukeachusim 2023:7), Christians are called ‘to be ready’ (Piper 2020). While actively waiting in the interim in the last days as the eschatological sorrowful events are unfolding, the followers of Jesus are commanded *γίνεσθε ἕτοιμοι* (to be ready), for they do not know the exact hour when the Lord of the church would come (Mt 24:44). However, many modern Nigerian Christians are watching without being ready as COVID-19 as a typical of other eschatological birth-pangs (Ukeachusim 2023:3–4) has impacted and will continue impacting the world. The exact time of Jesus’ second coming is not for any man or angels to know. Neither would COVID-19 as an eschatological sorrowful event pin-point the exact day or hour of Jesus’ Parousia. Beyond the convulsive impacts of eschatological birth-pang like COVID-19, the reason why the Nigerian elects need to be ready (Ayokunle 2020a; Ayokunle 2020b) is because they do not know when the Lord would come.

Understanding response (Mt 24:15, 32–33)

During the time COVID-19 was announced and its ravaging was highly convulsive, many Nigerian Christians lacked knowledge and understanding on how they were to be responding to it in relation to the promised Parousia of Jesus (Ukeachusim 2023:3). Jesus’ teachings, encapsulated in the parables (Mt 24:32), categorical sayings, Old Testament allusions and prophecies about eschatological birth-pangs need to be understood by those who are the direct recipients and those who would read or experience eschatological birth-pangs later (Mt 24:15). The disciples of Jesus in Nigeria and in other parts of the world need to see eschatological sorrowful events and understand the sign behind them in relation to biblical eschatological prophecies (Mt 24:32–33). Jesus wants his Nigerian followers to know and understand

(Hooser 2011) the eschatological sorrowful-events as they are unfolding as they have been predestined to be happening. Jesus wants his disciples to relate what they see, what they read, and what they had been in advance informed with theological understanding (Mt 24:15, 32–33). Having proper discernment (Mt 24:4) and understanding will predispose them to apply the consolidated theological responses to eschatological birth-pang occurrence like COVID-19 that comes with its varying degrees of convulsing effects on the Christians, and the rest of the people of the world. Having a balanced theological understanding will predispose true follower of Jesus not to be gullible and easily deceived, not to fear, and worry. Rather, with balanced theological understanding they will be equipped by the Holy Spirit's illumination to be wise servants who would remain steadfast in righteously responding and adhering to the theological commands on how they are to be responding to each eschatological birth-pang in relation to the promised Parousia of Jesus.

Prayer response (Mt 24:20)

Nigerians as religious and solution-oriented people resort to any means they feel that will guarantee them quick access to the solution to their problems caused by COVID-19 and other crises they are confronting (Ukeachusim 2023:5). *προσεύχεσθε* as used in Matthew 24:20 is an imperative present middle second person plural verb from *προσεύχομαι* [I pray]. On many occasions, Jesus in Matthew taught his disciples how to pray (Mt 5:44; 6:5–7). On many occasions, he himself prayed to God. Prayer consolidates one's relationship with God. Because of the theological significance of prayer, Jesus on many occasions commands his disciples to always watch and pray (Mt 24:20; Mt 26:41). In relation to confronting and responding to eschatological birth-pang events like COVID-19 and others, Christians 'should hope for his return, expect his return and pray for his return' (Hooser 2011). In these last days, praying or being prayerful is an activity which every follower of Jesus in Nigeria and elsewhere must consistently be fervently doing. In the chaotic world with the ravaging effects of COVID-19 and other eschatological birth-pangs, Christians are to pray and keep praying (Mt 6:5–7; Mt 24:20). As the followers of Jesus would live militantly in the interim waiting in preparedness for the Parousia, they are to keep watching and praying.

Response of not saying that the Parousia is delaying and be seeking for signs (Mt 24:48)

Because of the failed eschatological predictions (Cole 2013) and the occurrences of COVID-19 and other eschatological birth-pangs, which some erroneously thought would lead to the end of the world (Ukeachusim 2023:4); which however did not result to the end of the world; and because the promised return of Jesus has not materialised, have persuaded many professing Nigerian Christians to be seeking for eschatological signs and advancing that the Parousia of Jesus is delaying. To defend or to mock the promised Parousia of Jesus, many

theologians, pastors and laities have proposed many opinions and conspiracy theories (Ukeachusim 2023:4) to respond to the so-called 'delayed Parousia'. Though COVID-19 and other eschatological birth-pangs are occurring as Jesus prophesied, many professing Nigerian Christians assume and live their lives consolidating that Jesus will not literally return to the earth, even though he repeatedly promised he would; or that he will return in some manner different from what he presaged to his disciples (Hooser 2011). Some who assume that Jesus' second coming is delaying, live their lives wounding and exploiting their follow-servants, making merchandise of the gospel and making merriments (Mt 24:49). As implied by the Matthean Jesus, it is evil Nigerian Christians that say in their hearts that the Parousia is *χρονίζει* [delaying] (Mt 24:48). Piper (2020) notes that 'even though the history of the Christian church is littered with failed predictions of the end of the world, it remains true that Jesus Christ is coming back'. That no one knows the day and hour when Jesus will come, does not mean that his coming is delaying (Mt 24:36, 42, 50). That the Parousia will not happen when human beings think, does not mean that Jesus' promised Parousia is delaying. That the coming of Jesus appears to be taking time to happen does not mean that Jesus' Parousia is delaying. God works with his own timing and not the human timing (Mt 24:36). The Parousia of Jesus in power and glory will not materialise when human beings think (Mt 24:44). Professing Nigerian Christians who think, say and live as they like while believing that Jesus' Parousia will not happen or that it is delaying will mourn when they would see Jesus appearing in heaven, coming in his power and great glory (Mt 24:31), to reward those who believed in him and to punish those who rejected his ontological and functional natures. It is in this eschatological era of grace, that all that Jesus said will be fulfilled (Mt 24:34), and it will happen as it happened in the days of Noah (Mt 24:37–39). Consequently, genuine Christians in Nigeria and elsewhere are to be steadfast in believing that Jesus' teachings, parables, categorical sayings and Old Testament allusions about his second coming will truly come to pass (Mt 24:34–35). True Christians watch, see, read and understand the unfolding of the eschatological sorrowful occurrence like COVID-19 from theological viewpoints, and thereby become consistent in responding to the birth-pang events the way God had foretold, warned and commanded them. The promised Parousia of the Lord of the church is not delaying; rather, everything is working out as they are predestined according to God's will and timing.

Fear not response

The rumours and news about eschatological birth-pang like COVID-19 consolidates fear and worries (Wahi-Jorgensen 2021) to some Nigerian Christians and non-Christians, and to some other people in other parts of the world. Most people of the world fear dying because of the occurrence of a pandemic like COVID-19, but they do not fear or consider the danger of dying without being saved when Jesus returns as he promised. COVID-19 and other eschatological sorrowful occurrences have been predestined to be consolidating convulsive effects as listed in Matthew 24

(Ayokunle 2020a; Ayokunle 2020b). The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as every other eschatological birth-pang are predisposed to be shaking the world as they are eschatologically heralding the nearness of the end of this age and the promised return of Jesus in power and glory. As the eschatological birth-pangs are intensively unfolding with their rumours consolidating fears, worries, depression (Cordero 2021), hunger and hardship (Kalu 2020), traumas and deaths of many (Vicini 2021); in the interim, militant Nigerian Christians are to keep adhering to the command that they should not be troubled (Schilling, Gamble & Gamble 2020). It is difficult not to be troubled in the face of the convulsing pandemic like COVID-19, which consolidates fear and worries. However, Jesus has equipped his elects by informing them in advance about the last days' eschatological birth-pang events, and the theological need for them to access both realised and future salvation. With advance information, Matthew's Jesus persuades Christians to know that eschatological sorrowful events are occurring as they have been predestined to be happening. Nevertheless, eschatological birth-pangs would not pinpoint that the end has come (Mt 24:6), they are merely the beginning of sorrows and that they should focus on being saved (Mt 24:13). Christians' response to eschatological distressful event like COVID-19 and the fear and sorrows they consolidate is that they should see the occurrences with balanced theological discernment and not become troubled (Mt 24:6); and rather, focus on accessing both realised and future salvations.

Faithfulness response (Mt 24:45–47)

The COVID-19 pandemic and its corollaries of convulsive brunt adversely impacted many professing Nigerian Christians. Many Nigerians experienced phobia, anxiety, depression, hopelessness and hardship (Ukeachusim 2023:5). Some became vulnerable and lost their faith in God and some became indifferent to their Christian faith. Though the COVID-19 era is convulsive, the faithful and wise servants of God, however, should always be actively and not passively ready for Jesus' use and for his promised Parousia (Hooser 2011); for no one knows when Jesus would come (Mt 24:44). The COVID-19 era is to be seen as a wake-up call to professing Nigerian Christians to be faithful disciples of Jesus (CDN Givecloud 2020). Christians are to be wise and faithful servant in these last days in which eschatological sorrowful occurrences are more intensively unfolding as they have been divinely presaged. Nigerian Christians are to be obeying the principles of the kingdom, while they are to be actively expecting the Lord's return. Nigerian Christians should not be assuming that the Lord's Parousia is delaying. They should not be smiting their follow-servants by wounding their consciousness when they are weak, thereby sinning against God and other Christians (Mt 24:49). The πιστός [faithful], and φρόνιμος [wise], δούλος [servant] are the Christians who would serve in the interim to feed others with spiritual nourishment in due season. Jesus demands his disciples in Nigeria and elsewhere to be faithful and wise servants (Mt 24:45, 47). The faithful and sensible Nigerian Christians are being and would be blessed

by God because they will remain faithful in adhering to Jesus' commands till he comes and meets them doing so (Mt 24:46–47).

Do not be offended response (Mt 24:10)

The COVID-19 pandemic, like other eschatological birth-pangs consolidates crises of faith (Vicini 2021), offences (Merkle 2004:1212) and betrayals (Osadebamwe 2020). COVID-19 influence made many Christians in Nigeria and elsewhere to question the existence of God, the saving power of God, and the miraculous power of God. In nursing these questions, many who were infected and those who lost their beloved ones, began to disapprove of God and showed tendencies to withdraw their faith in God they once trusted (Mt 24:10). Many Christians based on the existential situations, in co-servant-hood and fellowships have been offended by other seeming servants and brothers-in-Christ who refrained from welcoming visitors and entertaining others for the phobia of contacting COVID-19. Because of social distance, exclusion and rejections, many were offended or wounded the consciousness of their fellow brethren (Mt 24:49). Nigerian Christians should have a theological understanding that the convulsing effects of an eschatological birth-pang like COVID-19 and other eschatological birth-pangs have been predisposed to be making many to become offended and to be tended to betray one another (Mt 24:10). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is now a great falling away; many refrain from going to church and many now have damped spirit towards the things of God. Glaringly, a lack of genuine compassion was and is still being displayed by many individual Christians and some Christian groups. As eschatological grief-stricken occurrences consolidate offences and betrayals, Christians are not to be offended. Nigerian Christians should not be offended with God, and others, and or betray one another because of the convulsive effects emanating from eschatological birth-pangs (Mt 24:10) as they will be preparing for the Parousia of Jesus.

Love response (Mt 24:12)

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as an eschatological birth-pang are predisposing some Christians' love for God and love for their neighbours to wax cold. Currently, in Nigeria, brotherly love, affection, goodwill and benevolence are existentially lacking in the body of Christ as Jesus presaged in the Olivet discourse. Rather, lawlessness, indifference, ulterior motivations, selfishness and individualism have set in the church and in the Nigerian larger society (Dabang & Ukomadu 2020). The love that is required in these last days is agape-love that manifests deep love for God, and that persuades the elect to be consistent in consolidating genuine affection and goodwill for others. Lack of genuine vertical and horizontal love yields the corollaries of iniquities increasing and rise in crimes rate. Christians are not to grow weary in showing and

consolidating agape-love to themselves and to other people in the world (Valerio & Heugh 2020:3), since they are still in the interim when they were theologically commanded to be active in preparedness waiting for the Parousia.

Enduring to the end to be saved response (Mt 24:13)

COVID-19 as an eschatological birth-pang consolidated crisis of faith (Vicini 2021). Many professing Nigerian Christians who could not endure suffering (Cordero 2021) became offended with God for allowing the convulsive impacts of COVID-19 to befall them (Ukeachusim 2023:5). Some because of suffering and starving (Young 2020) that they were confronting became vulnerable by indulging in vices; gullible, and indifferent to their faith in Jesus. However, as Matthew said to his Christian community confronting eschatological birth-pangs, similarly it implies that, it is Nigerian Christians and every other Christians elsewhere in the globe, who stood their ground by enduring to the end; holding tenaciously to their faith as they are being traumatised by the convulsive impacts of eschatological birth-pangs that would be saved. Jesus, while preparing his disciples in advance about the sorrowful birth-pangs that would be convulsing the world as they would be in the interim preparing for his Parousia, did not mention repentance because he was addressing those who have been 'called-out', his 'chosen ones' who have forsaken the world to follow him. Jesus did not directly emphasise on repentance; rather, he stressed the need for *ὑπομένω* (endurance) which is connected to being saved (Mt 24:13). Jesus consolidates the need for endurance because they are already having the theological perquisites and preconditions for salvation. However, they would have to preserve the kingdom principles they have received through Jesus' discipleship. Relevantly, the Nigerian Christians in these last days are to remain resolute in these trying and perilous times, holding fast to their faith till the end. Breaking away from the faith would predispose them to receive the same judgement that would be adjudicated to the world inhabitants who wilfully refused and have continued to refuse to accept and identify with the person and works of Jesus for their eternal salvation. Christians in Nigeria are not to recede from their faith in Jesus because of the offensive and convulsive last days' birth-pang like COVID-19 and others.

Unbelievers, the hypocrites and wicked Christians and the repentance response (Mt 24:51)

Before and during the time of the occurrence of the convulsive impacts of COVID-19 pandemic and currently, that some impacts of the COVID-19 are still being felt, many professing Nigerian Christians, were and are still solution-oriented (Ukeachusim 2023:5), and are thereby synchronising worldly values with the principles of the kingdom of God. Professing Nigerian Christians being syncretic (Onah et al. 2021), are hypocrites and evil servants who live in danger of damnation when Jesus returns. Considering the convulsive effects of

COVID-19; call and persuade both the syncretic, hypocrites that are professing to be Christians and the unbelievers in Jesus to repent (Tolmie & Venter 2021). With the fulfilments of eschatological sorrowful events, unbelievers, hypocrites, and evil Nigerians professing to be Christians are called to repent, so that when Jesus comes in glory and in power when no one knows (Mt 24:48), they will be redeemed and not be among those who will be apportioned where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 24:51).

Preaching the gospel response (Mt 24:14)

During the peak of the convulsive impacts of COVID-19, many Nigerian Christians had what they could describe as justified reasons for which they refrained from preaching the gospel to the unbelievers. Because of the social distance, ban on high-density gathering (Xinhua 2020), and lockdown (Krippahl 2020) that were set in place as some of the ways for containing the spread of COVID-19, many Christians leveraged on these and withdrew from carrying on the mission mandate of the church in Nigeria. The disciples of Jesus are called to 'keep doing God's work' (Hooser 2011) even as the disciples of Jesus carried on the mission mandate of the church when they were confronting eschatological birth-pangs and thereby were preparing themselves for the promised Parousia of Jesus. However, before, during the peak of COVID-19 and currently that COVID-19 is subsiding, many Nigerian Christians in the interim waiting for the Parousia are passive or indifferent concerning God's mission of restoring human beings to their original place in God's creation plan. In this crisis-ridden era, 'many are looking towards Christian scripture for comfort and answers' (Kettley 2021) and 'COVID-19 pandemic gives the church an opportunity to reconsider what the centre of God's mission is' (Tetty & Nel 2021). It is a command for genuine follower of Jesus to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God in deeds and in words (Mt 10:27; Mt 24:14). Because of the theological emphases on the need for universal focus of the gospel aimed at the conversion that aims at achieving both realised and future salvation of the souls of humankind, Christians are to be active in mission participation. Christians in Nigeria and elsewhere are to daily carry on the preaching of the gospel *εὐαγγέλιον* of the kingdom even in the crisis era of COVID-19 (Corzine 2020:1) and other eschatological birth-pang events.

Response of adhering to restrictions, security measures, health tips and protocols

During the peak of the convulsive impacts of COVID-19, many churches were providing 'essential emotional and spiritual supports to the people' (Olonade et al. 2021); and many individual Christians being influenced by their religiousness were and are still exhibiting reckless confidence over the COVID-19 pandemic by not adhering to safety

measures and tips (Onyedika-Ugoeze 2020). Directly or indirectly, some religious groups played significant roles in the spread of the virus by neglecting the preventive health measures for COVID-19 (Olonade et al. 2021). Though the disciples of Jesus while being confronted by eschatological birth-pang events are to focus on being saved by Jesus, they however, are also to be conscious of security measures, so as not to expose themselves to dangers that are the corollaries of each eschatological birth-pang. Hence, Jesus used 'fleeing into the mountains' and 'not coming down from the housetop' (Mt 24:16–17), to imperatively recommend that his disciples should adhere to security measures that will be put in place for peoples' safety during the occurrences of eschatological birth-pang events. Following from this, Nigerian Christians are to respond to COVID-19 pandemic (Ayokunle 2020) by adhering to the many safety measures, movement restrictions, drug and vaccination policies, health tips (Haynes 2022) and policies put in place by the government and also the COVID-19 hygienic protocols (WHO 2019) to halt the spread and possibly contain the pandemic.

Conclusion

The eschatological prophecies of Jesus concerning the eschatological birth-pangs (Mt 24:1–15); and immediate events, and signs of his promised return, and the end of this age (Mt 24:16–51), still stir Nigerians and other people of the world to be anxious; hence, they draw questions that need applications. Typical of COVID-19 pandemic, every convulsive event in the world arouses curiosities about Jesus' presages about eschatological birth-pangs; immediate events and signs of his promised Parousia and that of the end of the world. In relation to eschatological curiosities, this study unveiled how Christians are to be responding to the unfolding eschatological birth-pang events with special reference to the COVID-19 pandemic and to focus on being saved by preparing for Jesus' promised return. The eschatological questions of the disciples and the theological significances for which Matthew as a theologian, by way of redaction, merged discoursing how Christians are to be responding to eschatological birth-pangs with the theological commands for the disciples of Jesus to be ready for the promised Parousia of Jesus are ever relevant. On accessing both realised salvation and future salvation, prophetic exhortations and commands of Jesus in the context of Matthew 24 are not peculiar to the first-century members of Matthean community. Jesus does not want his church in Nigeria and elsewhere in the globe to be obsessively preoccupied with questing to know about the signs that would precede the Parousia and end of the world; or Christians attempting to pinpoint the exact day and the hour the Parousia and the end of the world would occur. Christians in the world and elsewhere in the globe are to be focussed on accessing both realised salvation and future salvation. The prophecies, answers and commands of Jesus as they relate to accessing realised and future salvations are still trustworthy guides for Christians of every age who are in the interim preparing for the Parousia. Christians are to

be righteously responding to eschatological birth-pang events, bearing in mind that they are to focus on being saved (Mt 24:13). Jesus has in advance prepared his disciples on how they are to be responding to the predestined eschatological birth-pangs that would be heralding his Parousia and; how and why they are to focus on being saved. Therefore, Nigerian Christians are thereby to learn from the theological exhortations and commands in Matthew 24; and thus be equipped on how they are to be responding righteously to eschatological birth-pang like COVID-19 and focus on being saved. Though Nigerian Christians are to be knowledgeable about Bible presages about the last days' birth-pang events and on how they are to be responding to them, they however, are to be focussed on being faithfully ready for Jesus' Parousia. Nigerian Christians are to be faithfully ready by seeing, reading and understanding the eschatological implications of the signs, and times; and by responding righteously to every unfolding eschatological birth-pang, and focussing on being saved; for Jesus' second coming which would be sudden, would come with rewards for the elects and punishment for those who rejected him.

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