

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XII

by Thomas Ice

“And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come.”—Matthew 24:14

As our Lord’s discourse approaches the mid-point of the seven-year tribulation, verse 14 raises a number of interpretive issues. What exactly is meant by “the gospel of the kingdom?” Is this proclamation still a future event? What does “a witness to all nations” mean? What is meant by “then the end shall come?”

THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

Simply put, some believe that “gospel of the kingdom” is the gospel or the message about forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ, as preached in the New Testament epistles. Others, like myself, believe that it is more of a technical term that describes the coming of Christ’s kingdom, which we know as the millennium.

The Greek word “gospel” is a compound word made up of “good” and “message.” “It meant originally the reward given to the messenger, but came to be used for the good news he brought.”¹ The word by itself simply means “good news.” Good news about what? Well that depends upon what is being talked about. Here the phrase would mean good news about the kingdom.² Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost explains:

During the time that the politico-religious system of the beast is in absolute control, the gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world (Matt. 24:14). The gospel of the kingdom was preached by both Jesus and John (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). This was the announcement of the good news that the kingdom was near. This message had both a soteriological and an eschatological emphasis. . . . The gospel of the kingdom as preached in Tribulation will have two emphases. On the one hand it will announce the good news that Messiah’s advent is near, at which time He will introduce the messianic age of blessing. On the other hand it will also offer men salvation by grace through faith based upon the blood of Christ.³

The word “kingdom” is used 51 times in Matthew. It is a major theme in Matthew’s Jewish gospel. Dr. Stan Toussaint has done an exhaustive study of how “kingdom” is used in Matthew and has concluded as follows: “Every time the term *kingdom* is used theologically in Matthew it refers to the same thing, the kingdom yet to come on this earth inaugurated and governed by the Messiah.”⁴ Specifically Dr. Toussaint has the following comments on Matthew 24:14:

What is this “gospel of the kingdom?” It must be the same good news as was described in 3:2; 4:17, 23; and 9:35. Entrance into the coming kingdom was based on repentance; that was and is the gospel of the kingdom. In the context, however, it would also portray the nearness of the kingdom during the Tribulation period.⁵

FULFILLMENT TIMING

There are three basic views of when this passage will be fulfilled. They are past, present and future. Of course, preterist believe that it was fulfilled by A.D. 70. Historicists believe that this passage relates to the fulfillment of the Great Commission during our current church age. Futurists believe that it will be fulfilled during the seven-years of the tribulation.

Preterist

“Matthew 24:14 clearly shows that the gospel would be preached throughout the Roman Empire before Jesus returned in judgment upon Jerusalem,”⁶ insists preterist Gary DeMar. He further claims:

The word translated “world” in 24:14 is the Greek word *oikoumene* . . . It is best translated as “inhabited earth,” “known world,” or the “Roman Empire” (Acts 11:28; 17:6). . . . This translation helps us understand that Jesus was saying the gospel would be preached throughout the Roman Empire before He would return in judgment upon Jerusalem. In fact, this is exactly what happened, and that is what the Bible says happened.⁷

This passage has not been fulfilled in the past,⁸ as I shall show later. This is primarily true because the context of Matthew 24 is futuristic, as I have been demonstrating throughout the exposition of Matthew 24.

Historicist

The historicist takes Matthew 24:14 as fulfillment of the Great Commission during our present church age. A. Lukyn Williams says, “So in the present age we are not to expect more than that Christian missions shall reach the uttermost parts of the earth, and that all nations shall have the offer of salvation, before the final appearance of Christ. The success of these efforts at universal evangelization is a mournful problem.”⁹ This verse is often used at missions conferences as a motivation for becoming a missionary. The Great Commission is sufficient, because this passage relates to evangelism during the tribulation, not for our current church age.

Futurist

I believe that this passage will be fulfilled in the future, not during the current church age, but during the tribulation. Basically, this is true because the context supports a future fulfillment, since Christ’s discourse has not yet been fulfilled.

THE MEANING OF WORLD

While it is true that “world” *oikoumenê* is used in the New Testament to refer to “the Roman Empire of the first century,” its basic meaning is that of “the inhabited earth.”¹⁰ This compound word contains the prefix from *oikos* that means “house,” thus the “inhabited” or “lived-in” part of the world. The inhabited world could refer to the Roman Empire if supported by the context (for example Luke 2:1) since Roman arrogance thought that nothing of significance existed outside of their realm. However, this word was earlier “used of the Greek cultural world.”¹¹

Since the core meaning of *oikoumenê* is “inhabited world,” then the scope of its meaning has multiple possibilities depending upon the referent. If the contextual referent is Roman, then it will mean the Roman Empire as in Luke 2:1. However, if its referent is global, then it must include the entire world as in Acts 17:31, which says, “He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness.” Surely this speaks of the whole globe since not a single individual will escape God’s judgment. Clearly *oikoumenê* can be used globally, even though it may have a more restricted use. The deciding factor is the context. Thus, if Matthew 24:24 was fulfilled in A.D. 70 then it would have a localized meaning as noted by DeMar. However, if it will be fulfilled in the future, then it has the meaning of the entire inhabited world at some future date, which would clearly include much more than the old Roman Empire.

ANGELIC EVANGELISM

I believe that Revelation 14:6-7 is a parallel passage to Matthew 24:14. Both speak of global evangelization during the seven-year tribulation, leading up to the second coming of Christ to planet earth. John MacArthur says,

Just before the bowl judgments are poured out and the final great holocaust begins, and just before the increasingly rapid birth pains issue in the kingdom, God will supernaturally present the gospel to every person on earth. He will send an angel with “an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people,” saying, “Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters” (Rev. 14:6-7).¹²

Interestingly both passages are mentioned around the middle of the tribulation. This will likely occur at that time because it is at the mid-point of the seven years that the beast will require the number—six hundred, sixty-six—on either the right hand or forehead of every human being in order to buy or sell (Rev. 13:16-18). Thus, it is important to know that the witness of the gospel is given to every individual in which they are given the opportunity to trust Christ before they take the number. In addition to that, the third angel announces to each individual in the world that there are consequences to taking the number of the beast. “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or upon his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone . . . forever and ever” (Rev. 14:9-11).

It appears that the tribulation period will be the greatest time of evangelization the world will ever see. There will be normal evangelism, like that which we have today. Then there will be the evangelism of the 144,000 Jewish witnesses (Rev. 7:3-10; 14:1-5), the two witnesses (Rev. 11:3-13), and the angelic evangelism already mentioned. David Cooper explains: “The purpose of preaching the gospel during the Great Tribulation is twofold: first, to give all honest-hearted truth-seekers an opportunity of accepting the Lord Jesus Christ and salvation through Him; secondly, to prepare for judgment those who will not receive a love of the truth in order that God might be just in bringing upon them the terrific plagues foretold in Revelation.”¹³

THEN THE END SHALL COME

Earlier Jesus said, “for these things must take place, but that is not yet the end” (Matt. 24:6). Now He says, that after the successful preaching of the gospel of the kingdom to the entire planet, “then the end shall come.” “In the background is the OT motif of the nations’ end-time conversion to Yahweh (Cf. Isa. 2:2-4; 45:20-22; 49:6; 55:5; 56:6-8; Mic. 4:1-3). Here that conversion heralds the end.”¹⁴ The end spoken of here is not the end of the end. It means the end of the age of the tribulation through the second coming of Christ (Matt. 24:27-31). The final end will occur one thousand years later as the millennial kingdom of Christ comes to its end.

CONCLUSION

Since Matthew 24:14 is a future event, then the gospel will be preached across the globe as described in Revelation 14:6-7. Both passages are set in contexts that tell us that this global evangelization will take place just before the middle of the seven-year tribulation. Craig Kenner says, “Jesus’ claim in 24:14 does not imply that all peoples will be converted, but that the kingdom will not come in its fullness until all peoples have had the opportunity to embrace or reject the King who will be their judge (25:31–32).”¹⁵ This passage was no more fulfilled during the nativity of the church than was the Great Commission. The prophecy of Matthew 24:14, like all of those in that context, awaits a future fulfillment, specifically during the future tribulation. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), f. n., 67, p. 88.
- ² The exact phrase, “gospel of the kingdom,” is only found in Matthew’s Gospel in the entire New Testament (4:23; 9:35; 24:14).
- ³ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ: A Study of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 400-01.
- ⁴ Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Kingdom and Matthew’s Gospel,” in Stanley D. Toussaint & Charles H. Dyer, *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), pp. 19-20.
- ⁵ Toussaint, “The Kingdom and Matthew’s Gospel,” p. 33.
- ⁶ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 88.
- ⁷ Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Nelson, 2001), pp. 82-83.
- ⁸ I have dealt more extensively with this matter in Thomas Ice, “The Global Proclamation of the Gospel,” *Pre-Trib Perspectives* (March 2002), pp. 4–5.
- ⁹ A. Lukyn Williams, “St. Matthew” in H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, ed., *The Pulpit Commentary*, 23 vols, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1974), vol. 15, p. 434.
- ¹⁰ William F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 563.
- ¹¹ Horst Balz & Gerhard Schneider, editors, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), vol. 2, p. 503.
- ¹² John MacArthur, *The New Testament Commentary: Matthew 24–28* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), p. 29.
- ¹³ David L. Cooper, *Future Events Revealed: According to Matthew 24 and 25* (Los Angeles: David L. Cooper Publishing, 1935), p. 63.
- ¹⁴ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), vol. 3, p. 344.
- ¹⁵ Craig S. Kenner, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 572.