

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XVIII

by Thomas Ice

“Then if anyone says to you, ‘behold, here is the Christ,’ or ‘there He is,’ do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect, I have told you in advance.”

—Matthew 24:23-25

In the midst of the greatest time of upheaval and chaos in the history of the world, Jesus reminds his disciples that even then the most important thing in life is one’s relationship with Christ. As this passage moves into the events of the second half of the tribulation, the number one priority is to avoid deception.

It is important to avoid deception during the latter half of the tribulation because this is the time in which the antichrist (also known as the beast in Revelation) begins his global rule and requires all to take the mark of the beast in order to buy or sell (Rev. 13:17). This is such an important time in history that God sends angelic messengers to specifically preach the gospel to the entire world and warn them of the consequences of accepting the mark of the beast (Rev. 14:6-13). This is an important time because individuals alive at this time will determine their eternal destiny on the basis of their response to the gospel and antichrist appeal to take his mark.

Matthew 24 and Mark 13 are generally parallel to one another on this passage, while Luke 21 totally omits this text. Matthew and Mark speak of a future tribulation, while Luke’s focus is primarily on first century events. What is Jesus saying?

Jesus is saying in verses 23-25 two major points about false Messiahs. First, the false Messiah will not be visible and out in the open. Second, the false Messiah will do miracles in order to mislead and deceive many.

LOOKING FOR MESSIAH IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

Verse 23 reports on hearsay about the impending appearance of the Messiah. Here, our Lord is setting up a contrast between the false and the true. The false program of antichrist will be laden with rumor and innuendo, but the genuine coming of Messiah will be clear to all (see verse 27). Why does Jesus come back to a warning about deception in this passage after having already addressed the issue in verses 4, 5, and 11? I think that the answer is in the wording of His warning. Dr. Thomas Figart explains as follows:

Following the evacuation of Judea, the false messengers of Satan will find it necessary to attempt to infiltrate those who have fled to the mountains. First, they will claim that Christ has already appeared, saying “*Lo, here is Christ, or there*” (24:23). In order to bolster such claims, they “*shall show great signs (semeia) and wonders (terata)*, two words that are used of Christ’s miracles in Acts 2:22; so that their counterfeit ministry “*if possible*” might deceive the very elect. Obviously this will fail, yet the attempt will be made.¹

“The central point in verses 23-28 is that believers are not to be deceived by false prophets who claim to have special information about the whereabouts of the **Christ**,”² notes Robert Mounce.

Such an understanding fits into the flow of the passage. In verse 15 Jesus tells his disciples to head for the hills when they see the abomination of desolation take place in Jerusalem’s rebuilt Temple. It is shortly after this that antichrist requires the mark of the beast during the second half of the tribulation. As events unfold during the second half of the tribulation, the antichrist (i.e., the Beast in Revelation) attempts to entice the elect, Jewish

remnant out of their wilderness hiding by saying that the Messiah is clandestinely in Jerusalem, thus, they should come and see Him. However, Jesus has warned his disciples in advance not listen to such propaganda.

This passage is parallel to Paul's writings in 2 Thessalonians 2 and John's words in Revelation 13. Both passages speak of Antichrist's deceptions. While Matthew 24:26 says that the elect will not be deceived, 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 says that the non-elect will be deceived. "The one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness" (2 Thess. 2:9-12). "Not alone will the apostate part of the Jewish people be deceived by these lying wonders," explains Arno Gaebelein. "But also the apostate part of Christendom, left behind after the rapture of the church has taken place, will be deceived and swept away in the great judgments of that coming day."³ Interestingly Jesus says concerning these false announcements: "Do not believe!" This demonstrates that a Believer should not just believe anything that comes down the pike, but it does matter what you believe.

FALSE CHRISTS AND FALSE PROPHETS

Just as there are true prophets who prepare the way for the true Messiah, so also, Satan will have false prophets to prepare the way for his false Messiah often known as the antichrist. In fact, it is often said that the term "antichrist" only appears in 1 John (2:18; 4:3). This is true. However, the use of "false Christs" in verse 24 is similar to the language for antichrist in 1 John. Robert Govett says, "From the word 'false Christ' being equivalent to 'Antichrist' (1 John ii.18; iv.3), we see the meaning of the preposition *anti*. By 'Antichrist' is not meant 'one in opposition to Christ,' but '*a false Messiah resembling the true.*'"⁴ This is expounded upon in Revelation 13, where the first part of the chapter (1-10) describes the first beast or the antichrist, while the second part (11- 18) explains the role of the false prophet. Here we see the traditional marriage of religion being used to support the political. It is the false prophet who uses his religious office to advocate loyalty to the beast and to take his mark of allegiance on the right hand or forehead. This is why Jesus warns of false signs and wonders in Matthew 24.

The "false Christs" clearly is a reference to the antichrist, who is also known as the beast (Dan. and Rev), the man of sin and the man of lawlessness (2 Thess. 2). The reference to "false prophets" would certainly include the false prophet of Revelation 13:11-18. Revelation 19:20 summarizes the career and destiny of the false prophet as follows: "And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image; these two were thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone."

Preterists like Gary DeMar say that these verses were fulfilled through events leading up to, and including, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70.⁵ They can cite a few examples of false prophets, since there have been false prophets since the writing of the New Testament (2 Pet. 2:1). However, there is consensus that there were not false Messiahs or Christs until till around A.D. 130. In fact, preterists do not even attempt to cite examples of false Christs. Apparently there were none in the first century to reference. H. A. W. Meyer explains:

We possess no historical record of any false Messiahs having appeared previous to the destruction of Jerusalem (Barcochba did not make his appearance till the time of Hadrian); for Simon Magus (Acts viii. 9), Theudas (Acts v. 36), the Egyptian (Acts xxi. 38), Menander, Dositheus, who have been referred to as cases in point (Theophylact, Euthymius Zigabenus, Grotius,

Calvinus, Bengel), did not pretend to be the *Messiah*. Comp. Joseph Antt. Xx. 5. 1; 8. 6; *Bell.* li. 13. 5.⁶

Jesus is looking toward a time that has not yet taken place in history. He is looking forward to the time of the tribulation where the Jewish remnant will have fled to the hills at the site of the abomination of desolation. The false prophets and Messiahs attempt to draw them out of their hiding, but true believers (the elect) will not fall for it, because Jesus is warning them ahead of time about this tactic.

FALSE SIGNS AND WONDERS

Here we have the same words (great signs and wonders) that are used to describe the miracles of Christ and His apostles, however, these works are preformed by false prophets and false Messiahs. Does this mean that Satan is merely deceptive, in that, “he makes men think that they see a genuine miracle?”⁷ Or, should this be understood as “happenings that cannot be understood on the basis of merely human powers?”⁸ I prefer the second view; that these are genuine miracles. I favor that view because every time there are statements about these false miracles the language used is that they actually do these things, as we have in this passage “will show great signs and wonders.” I don’t know of an instance where the language of appearance is used to describe these miracles. In other words, if they were just tricking people into thinking that they were doing miracles with smoke and mirrors, it would seem to me that scripture would have used language that indicates this. Instead it uses words and phrases that say that they are actually doing these things.

For example, look at some of the satanic miracles performed by the false prophet in Revelation 13. “And he performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men” (verse 13). “And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who had the wound of the sword and has come to life” (verse 14). “And there was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast might even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed” (verse 15). These are the words of actual events, not slight of hand.

If appears that God grants temporary power to these false prophets and Messiahs so that they will be used of God to attract all unbelievers to themselves in unbelief. This is what is meant in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 when it says, “the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved” (verses 9-10). Paul tells us the reason is that “God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.” However, His elect will not be deceived, because Jesus has warned them in advance to watch out for these false miracles. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Thomas O. Figart, *The King of The Kingdom of Heaven: A Commentary of Matthew* (Lancaster, PA: Eden Press, 1999), p. 446.

² Robert H. Mounce, *New International Biblical Commentary: Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 1991), p. 225.

³ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), p. 505.

⁴ Robert Govett, *The Prophecy on Olivet* (Miami Spring, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing, [1881] 1985), p. 56.

⁵ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), pp. 122-23; and *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Nelson, 2001), pp. 89-91.

⁶ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879), vol. 2, p. 128.

⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), p. 944.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p.607.