

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XIX

by Thomas Ice

“If therefore they say to you, ‘Behold, He is in the wilderness,’ do not go forth, or, ‘Behold, He is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe them. For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.”

—Matthew 24:26–27

Previously, Jesus has been warning the Jewish remnant during the second half of the seven-year tribulation to watch out for spiritual deception. Jesus referenced “the elect” (verse 24) for the second of three times in which that term is used in this passage, which refers to the Jewish remnant who will come to Christ during the tribulation. Jesus continues His instruction and warnings to “the elect” in verses 26–28.

WATCH WHERE YOU LOOK

This passage (verses 26–28) from Christ’s Olivet Discourse is pretty much only found in Matthew’s account. Jesus is continuing His warning to the elect about how to not be misled. In essence He is saying that if someone comes to you during the tribulation and says that the Messiah is hide away privately somewhere then do not believe anyone’s account of this. Why? The reason for scepticism is because when the Messiah does return it will be of such a public nature that there will not be any doubt that He has arrived. It will be the false Christs and false prophets who will attempt clandestine, backroom appearances for the purpose of deceiving. Nevertheless, if the passage says anything, it shouts that the return to which Jesus speaks will be a bodily, physical and public advent.

It is interesting that the preterist view of how Christ comes in this passage is closer to the kind to which Jesus warns the elect to beware. If you want to see an example of obfuscation and sophistry at work note these two examples. Preterist, Dr. Kenneth Gentry, says the following about this passage:

Quite emphatically the Lord warns his disciples he will not come in a visible, bodily manner in those days. He twice states that any report of his physical presence would be erroneous: . . . Clearly these statements discourage their expecting any visible return in that day; he expressly declares that any command to look for Him in some limited particular location would be a mistake.

Yet there will be a “coming” of Christ in that day: . . . This, however, is a spiritual judgment-coming, rather than a bodily coming.¹

Fellow preterist, Gary DeMar, also adopts an anti-bodily coming view of Jesus’ predicted coming in this passage when he says the following:

Jesus would come “just as the lightning comes from the east,” that is, quickly and without warning. . . . What the people saw was the manifestation of the Lord’s coming even though they did not actually see Him. . . . Was God physically present? He was not. Did He come? Most certainly! . . .

Matthew 24:27 reveals that Jesus is somehow participating in Jerusalem’s destruction. This is exactly the point. . . .

Jesus came “like lightning” to set Jerusalem “aflake all around.” If you recall, it was Titus, as God’s representative agent, who set the temple on fire and leveled the edifice. . . .

In A.D. 70 Rome was sent by God to fulfill a similar task. “Our Lord forewarns His disciples that His coming to that judgment-scene would be conspicuous and

sudden as the lightning-flash which reveals itself and seems to be everywhere at the same moment.”²

The statements of these two preterists are examples of the kind of propaganda that Jesus is warning the elect to avoid during the tribulation. Matthew 24:27³¹ clearly is a reference to a still future second advent. I will now look at reasons why verse 27 does indeed reference Christ second coming.

A FUTURE EVENT

Both Gentry and DeMar attempt to spin this passage as if it were not teaching a bodily, physical return of Christ. This preterist view is one that only about 1% of interpreters (if that many) have taken on this passage down through church history. That Jesus speaks here of his bodily return is supported by the context. In contrast to Christ’s coming in verse 27 are the false Christs and false prophets of verses 23–24, who are clearly individuals that can be physically seen. Christ’s return is juxtaposed to them. Christ will not return and hide out in some back room in which an undercover agent will lead people to meet. No Christ’s return will be public and obvious to all. This cannot fit some “judgment-coming” through the Roman army. Regardless of what other biblical passages may teach in other contexts, the context of Matthew 24 only supports a bodily coming by Jesus, which has to be the future second coming.

Jesus specifically compares His coming in verse 27 to a lightning strike. I agree with DeMar that included in Christ’s imagery is the idea of suddenness. However, because the force of the context (verse 26) is whether He will appear privately (i.e. “inner rooms”) or publicly (i.e. like a “lightning” flash) it clearly argues for an emphasis upon appearance. Further, the Greek word for “flashes” has the core meaning of “to appear, to make visible, or to reveal.”³ Thus, when speaking of lightening that appears, it would be translated idiomatically as “flashes.” When referring to people it is always rendered “appear.” This is how it is used in verse 30: “then the sign of the Son of Man will appear.” In fact, “Wycliffe renders it appeareth”⁴ in verse 27. When this detail is combined with the fact that in both verse 27 and 30 the one appearing is called “the Son of Man,” which always emphasizes the human aspect of Christ, the clear conclusion is that Jesus is communicating His bodily return. Even preterists agree that He did not return bodily in A.D. 70. If the text intended to speak of an invisible return through the Roman army then Christ’s Deity would have been emphasized, not His humanity. Meyer says the following:

The advent of the Messiah will not be of such a nature that you will require to be directed to look here or look there in order to see him; but it will be as the lightning, which as soon as it appears, suddenly announces its presence *everywhere*; . . . what is meant is, that when it takes place, it will all of a sudden openly display itself in a glorious fashion *over the whole world*. Ebrard (comp. Schott) is wrong in supposing that the point of comparison lies only in the circumstance that the event comes *suddenly and without any premonition*. For certainly this would not tend to show, as Jesus means to do, that the assertion: he is in the wilderness, etc. is an *unwarrantable* pretence.⁵

In all his effort to say why “the coming of the Son of Man” in Matthew 24:27 was not a literal coming of Christ, Gentry fails to tell his readers that the Greek word *parousia* is used in this verse. Three of the four times that *parousia* is used in Matthew 24, Gentry admits that it refers to the yet future second coming.⁶ The Greek Lexicon, BAG says that *parousia* means “presence;” “coming, advent;” and “of Christ, and nearly always of his Messianic Advent in glory to judge the world at the end of this age.”⁷ BAG cites all four uses of *parousia* in Matthew 24 as a reference to Christ second advent. In fact, BAG does not even recognize Gentry or DeMar’s stated meaning as a possible category. It appears that the preterist mother is the necessity of invention in this instance. The mother of all Greek

word study tools, Kittle's Dictionary, in concert with BAG, tells us that the core idea of the word means "to be present," "denotes esp. active presence," "appearing."⁸ Kittle's describes *parousia* as a technical term "for the 'coming' of Christ in Messianic glory."⁹ Thus, *parousia* carries the idea of a "presence coming," contra the preterist notion of a "non-presence coming," an invisible coming. Our Lord's use of *parousia* demands His physical, bodily presence.

Toussaint provides further reasoning for the futurist understanding of *parousia* in this passage:

. . . "What will be the sign of your coming?" (Matt. 24:3). What does "coming" (*parousia*) mean? That term is filled with significance. This noun occurs four times in the Olivet discourse (the only times Matthew uses *parousia* and the only occurrence in the Gospels). The first occurrence is in the question asked by the disciples. Very interestingly, the remaining three are in identical clauses, "thus, shall be the coming of the Son of Man" . . . (Matthew 24:27, 37, 39).

. . . The problem with this interpretation is the meaning of *parousia* before verse 36 and after. If the coming of the Son of Man in Matthew 24:37, 39 is the Second Advent, one would expect *the identical clause* in 24:27 to refer to the same event. The word would also have the same meaning in 24:3. It must be the Second Advent in each case.

Furthermore, the word *parousia* as found in the New Testament is always used of an actual presence. It may be employed of the presence of persons as in 1 Corinthians 16:17; 2 Corinthians 7:6-7; 10:10; Philippians 1:26; 2:12 and 2 Thessalonians 2:9. In each of these above cases the person is *bodily* present. In all the other cases *parousia* is used of the Lord's presence at His second coming, cf. 1 Corinthians 15:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 8; James 5:7, 9; 2 Peter 1:16; 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28. The only occurrences in the Gospel of *parousia* are in Matthew 24. It would seem that they, too, refer to a yet future coming of Christ.¹⁰

Gentry attempts to say that the "lightning" description in Matthew 24:27 "reflects the Roman armies marching toward Jerusalem from an easterly direction."¹¹ It is hard to imagine that the time consuming march of the Roman armies is the true interpretation of this passage. Once again, I follow Toussaint's explanation of the text.

What then is Matthew 24:27 saying? It is simply saying people should not be misled by false teachers or counterfeit messiahs who make their deceptive claims in some wilderness or inner sanctum (24:26). They may even fortify their pretensions by fantastic miracles (24:24). The reason the Lord's followers should not be drawn aside is because the coming of the Lord Jesus will be so spectacular no one will miss seeing it. It will be like a bolt of lightning that streaks from one horizon to the other. This is why the Lord used the correlatives *hosper*. . . *houtos*; He is simply using an analogy or comparison. His Second Advent will be as obvious as a brilliant sky-spanning bolt of lightning. So will be the unmistakable and actual presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in His second coming to earth.¹²

Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), p. 71.

² Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), pp. 123–25.

³ William F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 859.

⁴ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), p. 475.

⁵ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879), vol. 2, p. 143.

⁶ Gentry in Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), p. 53.

⁷ Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 635.

⁸ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of The New Testament*, X vols., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), vol. V, p. 859.

⁹ Kittel and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary*, vol. V, p. 865.

¹⁰ Stanley D. Toussaint, "A Critique Of The Preterist View Of The Olivet Discourse," an unpublished paper presented to the Pre-Trib Study Group, Dallas, Texas, 1996, n.p.

¹¹ Gentry in Ice and Gentry, *Great Tribulation*, p. 54.

¹² Toussaint, "Critique," n.p.