

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXI

by Thomas Ice

“Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”
—Matthew 24:28–29

Upon stating the fact of His sudden, bodily, and glorious return, Christ parenthetically comments upon the judgment aspect of this advent. Then, verses 29–31 provide a more extended description of His future return to planet earth. The statement of His return in verse 27 concludes a discussion in which Jesus contrasts the coming of false messiahs with His genuine return. When He returns, there will be no doubt. One will not have to have a subscription from a special news source that reports information the mainstream media leaves out. No media will be needed at Christ’s coming since His return will include a grand and glorious publicity feature.

CORPSES AND VULTURES

The phrase in verse 28 is also found in Luke 17:37, but not in Mark 13 or Luke 21. No doubt this is a judgment slogan of some kind. Interestingly in Revelation 19:17–19, we have a similar, though not verbatim, statement in conjunction with Christ’s return.

And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds which fly in midheaven, “Come, assemble for the great supper of God; in order that you may eat the flesh of kings and the flesh of commanders and the flesh of mighty men and the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them and the flesh of all men, both free men and slaves, and small and great.” And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies, assembled to make war against Him who sat upon the horse, and against His army. . . . And the rest were killed with the sword which came from the mouth of Him who sat upon the horse, and all the birds were filled with their flesh.” (Rev. 19:17–19, 21)

Revelation 19 clearly paints the picture of the birds coming to feast upon the corpses of those who are about to be slaughtered by Christ at His return. This is a clear judgment use of this terminology. Since the contexts are similar in Matthew 24 and in Luke 17, I think that consistency of context demands a judgment interpretation. Robert Gundry explains:

The preceding context determines that the saying be taken as a figure of judgment on the wicked when the Son of man has his day. The body stands for the wicked, the vultures for judgment, and the saying means that wherever the wicked are, the judgment will strike. They cannot escape; only the righteous will.¹

Taken in context, verse 28 completes the section (verses 23–28) by noting that when Jesus suddenly appears at His return, it will result in not just judgment upon the false

prophets and messiahs, but doom for all in opposition to His will. However, we should not be surprised to learn that preterists think differently.

THE ROMANS IN A.D. 70?

Preterists, like Gary DeMar and Kenneth Gentry, believe that this passage was fulfilled in A.D. 70. DeMar says, "The Jerusalem of Jesus' day, because of its dead rituals, was a carcass, food for the scavenging birds, the Roman armies."² Gentry agrees and declares, "This seems to speak of the dreadful devastation Rome wreaks upon Israel. The furious soldiers who cruelly ravage the people will destroy national, political Israel."³

This view is untenable because the context supports a still future event that did not occur in the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem—namely the bodily return of Christ. Alan M'Neile tells us that this passages "does not describe the Messiah descending from heaven upon the nation dead in sins, nor the false Messiahs and prophets making the people their prey, nor the eagles on the Roman standards in the attack on Jerusalem; the last is not the subject dealt with either in Mt. or Lk."⁴ Gundry further explains as follows:

Some have thought that [the vultures] refers to the eagles of the Roman legions swooping down on Jerusalem during the first Jewish revolt (A.D. 66-73); but the context in Luke has nothing about the destruction of Jerusalem, and Matthew focuses attention on the Son of man's coming rather than on the destruction of the city.⁵

Matthew 24:28 is surrounded, before and after, with a context of a future return of Christ, not an invisible coming through the Romans in A.D. 70. Thomas Figart aptly notes that, "This means that these two similar statements refer to the judgment to come upon the unbelievers who are not prepared to meet Him. They will be judged as swiftly and as surely as vultures pounce upon dead bodies."⁶

IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE TRIBULATION

As Christ's narrative transitions into a new emphasis, we move from events relating to the tribulation to an event that will follow the tribulation. Even though Jesus has already commented on the manner of His second coming in verse 27, He now focuses upon it in relation to the tribulation. He has been speaking previously about tribulation events (see verses 9, 21 and Mark 13:19), but now shifts to something that will take place "immediately" after the tribulation of those days. That event is the future, bodily return of Christ to planet earth, which is known as the second coming (verse 30). What Christ describes in a few verses (verses 29–31), John explains in greater detail (Rev. 19:11–21). So we see that the second-advent immediately follows the events of the tribulation.

Eutheos is a Greek adverb usually translated "immediately," as in the New American Standard Bible which I always use, or "straightway, at once, directly."⁷ Moulton and Milligan, in examples from the Greek papyri, emphasize that the use of this word means "at once."⁸ Since "an adverb usually modifies the verb closest to it,"⁹ immediately relates directly to the verb "to darken." Thus, the events of verse 29 will follow the tribulation immediately, at once, without any other events intervening, or without a time delay.

This would mean within the expanded chronology of the events of the tribulation

found in Revelation 4—19, that Matthew 24:29-31 will follow immediately the final bowl judgment found in Revelation 16:17-21. This explains the parenthetical warning in the next-to-the-last bowl judgment which reads as follows: “Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, lest he walk about naked and men see his shame” (Rev. 16:15). It won't be long from the time in which the sixth bowl judgment takes place, until Christ returns. Revelation 17—18 is an overview of the judgment upon Babylon, which surveys items that will take place throughout the tribulation and second coming. Thus, from a chronological aspect in Revelation, chapter 16 is followed in time by chapter 19.

Of further interest, is the fact that the word “immediately” is used in Luke 21:9 to say that during the events of the tribulation, “the end does not follow immediately.” It is only later, in Luke 21:27-28, when “they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory,” that they are “straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” This passage speaks of the physical deliverance that will occur for Jewish believers at the second coming. Physical deliverance will occur at Christ's return for all believers, but the context is speaking specifically to Jewish believers who are under great peril during the tribulation.

Of the parallel passages on the Olivet discourse, none have the word “immediately.” Luke 21 really does not have a parallel statement like verse 29 in Matthew. However, Mark 13 does have a parallel statement which reads as follows: “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory” (13:24–26). Mark drops out the pressing term “immediately,” for the less urgent phrase “in those days,” but then provides a similar statement to Matthew's in the things that follow. This demonstrates that both speak of a similar event and that event is the future second coming of Christ.

PRETERIST PROTEST

Preterists DeMar and Gentry do not explain how “immediately” in verse 29 relates to their first century fulfillment view. Gentry does not even deal with the term “immediately” in verse 29.¹⁰ DeMar spends over a page talking about “immediately” and then concludes that all the events of Matthew 24 had to take place in A.D. 70.¹¹ The reason this is important to the preterist interpretation is that preterists teach that Christ's coming in A.D. 70 was a “judgment-coming” that occurred through the Roman army as they assaulted and eventually destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. Gentry calls it “a spiritual judgment-coming, rather than a bodily coming.”¹² Gentry specifically links verse 30 with the overall judgment of the passage when he says the following: “Christ specifically applies that verse to the first century. . . . Christ comes in judgment upon Jerusalem in the A.D. 67-70 events.”¹³ So Gentry describes Christ coming, as specifically mentioned in verse 30, with the events of A.D. 67-70, which is their understanding of “the tribulation.”

Such a view creates a big contradiction with the text of Matthew 24 spoken by Christ Himself. When one reads the preterist interpretation of Matthew 24 it is discovered that they blend an event that is said by Jesus to take place immediately after the tribulation with those that were said to occur during the tribulation. If Christ's coming in Matthew 24:30 is a judgment-coming, as taught by preterists, then the judgment events would have had to have occurred during what Jesus called the tribulation part of Matthew 24 (verses 4–29). Yet, verse 30 is said by Christ to occur *immediately* after “the

tribulation of those days.” Randolph Yeager explains:

The attempt to show that Jesus’ prophecy had its fulfillment between A.D. 33 and A.D. 70, disregards vs. 29–31. None of these events took place (“immediately after”) the troublous times connected with Titus’ invasion and sack of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. . . . These drastic disturbances in the heavens will highlight the second coming of Christ. . . . How frantic the efforts of many commentators in dealing with this passage because they are prejudiced against a futurist view.¹⁴

In spite of the exercise of near genius imaginations by preterists and others, we have seen and will continue to see, as we progress through this passage, that Christ speaks here of yet future events. We will not have anyone rob the Church of our wonderful hope in the glorious return of Jesus Christ to this earth, as this passage so beautifully teaches. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, second edition, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 486.

² Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 127.

³ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), p. 74.

⁴ Alan Hugh M’Neile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: MacMillan, 1915), p. 351.

⁵ Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 487.

⁶ Thomas O. Figart, *The King of The Kingdom of Heaven: A Verse by Verse Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Lancaster, PA: Eden Press, 1999), p. 447.

⁷ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of The New Testament*, 3rd. ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), p. 186.

⁸ James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), p. 261.

⁹ Wesley J. Perschbacher, *New Testament Greek Syntax: An Illustrated Manual* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), p. 23.

¹⁰ See pp. 75–79 where he deals with the passage but not with the term “immediately” in Gentry, *Perilous Times*.

¹¹ DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, pp. 141-42.

¹² Gentry, *Perilous Times*, p. 71

¹³ Gentry, *Perilous Times*, p. 112.

¹⁴ Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament*, 18 vols. (Bowling Green, KY: Renaissance Press, 1978), vol. 3. p. 312.