

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXIII

by Thomas Ice

“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 24:29

As I continue with an exposition of verse 29, it is important to note that we have already seen the great impossibility that this passage could have been fulfilled about 2,000 years ago in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. So to what does the darkening of the sun and moon and other astronomical events refer? Is Christ’s description that of a real, physical event, or is He merely using symbolic language in which He describes something else?

We must take note of the fact that Christ’s statement in this passage contains four descriptive phrases. First, the darkening of the sun; second, the moon not reflecting its light; third, stars falling from the sky; fourth, a shaking of heaven powers.

DARKENING OF THE SUN

We saw earlier that preterists like Dr. Kenneth Gentry believe that the reference to the sun in this passage is not to the literal, physical sun, but merely a symbol for something that occurred in the first century. He believes that “this portrays historical divine judgment under the dramatic imagery of a universal catastrophe.”¹ To what does he contend that this imagery is? “I will argue that this passage speaks of the A.D. 70 collapse of geo-political Israel. . . . of national catastrophe in terms of cosmic destruction.”² Of course, I contend that sun, in this context has to refer to the physical sphere that shines in the sky. If that is the case, then clearly the events being described in verse 29 have not yet happened in history and must refer to a future time.

Before we go any further, let’s examine how many of the 164 times that the word “sun” is used in the Bible as a symbol or figure of speech and not a reference to the physical sun. There are five possible uses of “sun” as a symbol in the Bible (Gen. 37:9; Psalm 84:11; Jer. 15:9; Mal. 4:2; Rev. 12:1). In Genesis 37:9 and Revelation 12:1 the sun is a symbol for Jacob, the father of Israel. Psalm 84:11 says, “the LORD God is a sun and shield,” comparing an attribute of God to the sun. Jeremiah refers to the death of a mother with seven sons by an invading army as, “Her sun has set while it was yet day” (15:9). Malachi describes the coming Messiah as One Who is “the sun of righteousness,” Who “will rise with healing in its wings” (4:2). As anyone can see, about 97% of the time “sun” refers to the physical sphere that shines faithfully in the sky. In five instances of symbolic use, none refer to “a universal catastrophe,” as suggested by Dr. Gentry. Dr. Gentry and preterists like him must transform Matthew 24:29, Isaiah 13:10 and Joel 2 and 3 into non-physical symbols since clearly such catastrophic events did not occur in God’s creation during the A.D. 70 event. There are no textual factors in Matthew 24 that support understanding the sun, moon, and stars as mere symbols of some other natural event. Instead, context supports the role of the sun, moon, and stars as physical phenomena accompanying our Lord’s return.

It makes sense that the heavens and earth are physically affected by man’s sin at the end of history, just as nature underwent physical change when man fell at the beginning of history. With the literal view, Genesis and Revelation recount the beginning and ending of history. Revelation notes the magnitude of the shaking of the

heavens and the earth in judgment. Noah's flood had physical effects, and so too will the judgment of the tribulation prior to Christ's return. Franz Delitzsch aptly puts it this way: "Even nature clothes itself in the colour of wrath, which is the very opposite to light."³

I believe that Dr. Gentry understands a number of similar, yet smaller in scale, incidents of biblical history to be literal. These other events do not put his preterism at risk. The question must be raised: Did the sun literally not shine over the land of Egypt while at the same time shine in the land of Goshen during the ninth plague (Exodus 10:21-29)? Of course it did! Did the sun literally stand still for half a day in Joshua 10? You bet it did! Did the Lord cause the sun to go backward 10 degrees in the days of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 20)? It most surely did! Similarly, during the crucifixion of our Lord, did darkness really fall over the whole land of Israel about the sixth hour until the ninth hour (Luke 23:44-45)? Sure it did! It was a pattern of the final darkness that will accompany the final judgment at the end of the world. "When He died, the sun refused to shine (Lk. 23:45). When He comes again it will not shine (Mt. 24:29)."⁴ Why shouldn't grandiose, supernatural phenomenon accompany the glorious return of our Lord? Only a naturalist mentality would say that a literal occurrence of Matthew 24:29 is impossible. After all, God said in Genesis 1:14 that one of His purposes for the sun, moon, and stars is to serve as "signs" in the heavens. It would be absurd to think that these references to the sun, moon, and stars are to be taken merely as symbols with no physical referent. Why should not the One who created the heaven and earth have the heavens reflect His global judgment upon a sinful world? Our Lord Jesus Christ demonstrates His actual rule over all His creation upon His return to planet earth, including over the sun, moon, and stars. Delitzsch says, "when god is angry, the principle of anger is set in motion even in the natural world, and primarily in the stars that were created 'for signs' (compare Gen. i. 14 with Jer. x. 2)."⁵ There may be objections in the minds of men to such heavenly displays, but no such problem exists in Scripture.

ISAIAH 13:10

Since necessity is the mother of invention, Gentry and other preterists must manufacture new meanings to words and phrases that cannot be sustained by any of the contexts. Dr. Gentry declares: "Isaiah 13 speaks of remarkably similar events accompanying Babylon's collapse in the Old Testament era."⁶ He is correct that Matthew 24:29 refers to Isaiah 13:10, something recognized by all commentators. He is also correct that Isaiah's prophecy speaks of Babylon's collapse. However, as is typically the case with preterists, he is wrong about *when* this prophesied event will occur in history. He believes it occurred during Old Testament times, while I, and most futurists, believe it will unfold within the context of future tribulation events.

Twice, in the immediate context, Isaiah warns that "the day of the LORD is near" (13:6) and that "the day of the LORD is coming" (13:9). The timing of the events in verse 10 relate to when the day of the LORD occurs in history. I believe Scripture indicates that the day of the LORD will occur in conjunction with the 70th-week of Daniel, also known as the seven-year tribulation.⁷ One's overall understanding of the day of the LORD will impact their understanding of the timing of the fulfillment of this and many other passages. Jesus refers to Isaiah 13:10 in Matthew 24:29 (also in Mark 13:24) and thus places it in very close proximity to the tribulation ("immediately after"). However, Dr. Gentry places the events of Isaiah 13:2-16, "in the Old Testament era," hundreds of years before the first coming of Christ. This creates a major conflict between when Dr.

Gentry's believes that Isaiah 13:2–16 was fulfilled and when our Lord said it would be fulfilled. I think I will side with Jesus on this one.

There are further problems with Dr. Gentry's understanding of Isaiah 13. Isaiah 13:10–11 says, "For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises, and the moon will not shed its light. Thus I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud, and abase the haughtiness of the ruthless." The phrase "the sun will be dark when it rises," in verse 10 demands a literal, instead of a symbolic understanding in this context. If this text is supposed to be symbolic about the fall of nation, then why would the prophet speak of the sun rising, although darkened. No, this is the language of real, solar movement and events.

The global events described in verse 10 make sense because verse 11 says that the Lord is punishing "the world for its evil." The Hebrew word for "world" is *tebel* and "conveys the cosmic or global sense . . . i.e., the whole earth or world considered as a single entity."⁸ "Instead of 'ereztz we have here *tebel*," notes Delitzsch, "which is always used like a proper name (never with the article), to denote the earth in its entire circumference."⁹ This passage (verses 2–16) is clearly global in scope, which would rule out Dr. Gentry's local, symbolic, and past interpretation and, thereby, demands a future fulfillment. "At this point this oracle of judgment on a great coming world-power begins to expand to cover the whole world," surmises G. W. Grogan while commenting on verses 9–13. "Matthew 24 shows Jesus, in similar fashion, relating a local judgment that was to fall on Jerusalem to the great events that would usher in his second advent and the end of the age."¹⁰

Verse 13 is a clear denotative statement supporting a non-symbolic intent for verse 10. "Therefore I shall make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken from its place at the fury of the LORD of hosts in the day of His burning anger." "I shall make the heavens tremble" looks back to our Lord's acts described in verse 10, which are in turn referred to by Jesus in Matthew 24:29. Grogan explains it as follows:

Verse 13 seems to go even beyond v. 10 in depicting the effects of divine judgment on the natural universe. There is to be a general convulsion of the whole created order (cf. 34:4). In this way the instability of the order of things since the Fall will be disclosed (as it is seen in so many of the signs of Christ's coming in Mark 13), thus revealing the need for the eternally stable order of the kingdom of God that Christ's coming will establish.¹¹

CONCLUSION

As we have examined the first of four statements in Matthew 24:29 concerning the Lord's return, we see that the overwhelming evidence comes down on the side of the futurist view of the passage. Frankly, preterists like Dr. Gentry do not have a leg to stand on. Not only does Matthew 24 not mean what they say it does, neither does Isaiah 13 to which they appeal. Dr. Gentry and others like him must fabricate from Isaiah 13 an alleged Old Testament genre, which is supported by nothing in the actual text. It is clear that if both Matthew 24 and Isaiah 13 are taken the way the author intended then futurism, and not preterism, is the teaching of the text. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Kenneth Gentry in Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), p. 55.
- ² Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), p. 77.
- ³ F. Delitzsch, "Isaiah," vol. VII in C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 299–300.
- ⁴ Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament* (Bowling Green: Renaissance Press, 1978), Vol. 3, p. 312.
- ⁵ Delitzsch, "Isaiah," p. 300.
- ⁶ Gentry, *Perilous Times*, p. 77.
- ⁷ For an excellent explanation and defense of my view see J. Randall Price, "Old Testament Tribulation Terms," in Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, editors, *When the Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), pp. 57–83. *Trumpet* is out of print, but *Return* is still in print. The same article is also found in Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, editors, *The Return: Understanding Christ's Second Coming and The End Times* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), pp. 2753.
- ⁸ Willem A. VanGemeren, Gen. Ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1997), vol. 4, pp. 272–73.
- ⁹ Delitzsch, "Isaiah," pp. 300–01.
- ¹⁰ G. W. Grogan, "Isaiah", *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), p. 101.
- ¹¹ Grogan, "Isaiah," p. 102.