

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXXII
by Thomas Ice

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.”

—Matthew 24:35–36

Jesus said in verse 34 that “this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” Now, in verse 35, He tells us about one thing that will pass away and another thing that will not pass away. The passing away in verse 34 would not happen *until* “all these things take place.” In verse 35 Christ does not mention *until* but issues a pronouncement concerning a couple of items—“heaven and earth,” and “My words.”

HEAVEN AND EARTH WILL PASS AWAY

Verse 35 begins with the word pair “heavens and earth.” There can be no doubt that this phrase refers back to Genesis 1:1, which says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Allen Ross explains:

What God created is here called “the heavens and the earth,” a poetic expression (merism) signifying the whole universe. Other examples of this poetic device are “day and night” (meaning all the time) and “man and beast” (meaning all created physical beings). “Heaven and earth” thus indicates not only the heaven and the earth but everything in them. Genesis 2:4 also uses this expression in a restatement of the work of creation throughout the six days.”¹

The Greek word for “pass away” is *parerchomai* and has the general meaning of “come up to;” “pass by;” “pass away.”² In this context it clearly has the connotation of “pass away.” What does this mean? Ed Glasscock tells us:

Once the unveiling of this “great tribulation” (v. 21) begins, that generation will not pass away until everything is brought to completion. To add weight to what He had just said, the Lord added the proclamation that His words were more lasting than even the universe itself. The heaven and the earth will be taken away, but what He has proclaimed will last eternally.³

The verb “pass away” and the double negative *ou me* both occur in 24:34 and carry the same force in both references.

PRETERIST FOLLY

Amazingly, in spite of such a clear statement by our Lord, many full preterists⁴ teach that heaven and earth will not pass away. Rarely does a radio program go by where full preterist John Anderson does not say something like, “the world will last forever, it will never be destroyed.”⁵ So what do they do with passages like Matthew 24:35? Full preterist Don Preston says:

When he spoke of his coming on the clouds with power and great glory, Jesus was not using literal language. He was, in the established manner of Israel's prophets, using hyperbole to describe the coming judgment on Israel. And in light of the consistent figurative application of the passing of heaven and earth to the destruction of a nation, we can better understand that when Jesus said "heaven and earth will pass" Mat. 24:35, he was responding to the disciples' questions about *the destruction of Jerusalem*, Mat. 24:2. The focus was on the *world of Israel*, not on material creation.⁶ (italics original)

Even if it can be established that (in general), Old Testament prophets used language as Preston claims, which is debatable, there is no basis for using it as he says in the specific instance of Matthew 24:35. In fact, I don't think it can be demonstrated lexically that there is a single instance where "heaven and earth" is ever used in a hyperbolic, non-literal way, as claimed by Preston. Preston's conclusion is the product of mere assertion and not exegesis. The only motive for taking such a view is not a consequence of the study of the biblical text but is driven by his preterist assumption.

When one examines the 36 uses of "heaven and earth" in the entire Bible, there is not even one possible instance of it occurring as a "figurative application of the passing of heaven and earth to the destruction of a nation." Every use of "heaven and earth" refers to God's physical creation as in Genesis 1:1,⁷ with four exceptions (Deut. 4:26; 30:19; 31:28; Jer. 51:48). These other four instances use "heaven and earth" as angelic and human witnesses. For example, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, . . ." as in Deuteronomy 30:19. This is clearly nothing like the allegorical understanding that Preston suggests.

Since the basis for saying that "heaven and earth" do not have a physical understanding in Matthew 24:35 has no lexical basis, nor support from the context, the full preterist view should be rejected as erroneous, in fact, in serious error. The preterist interpretation not only nullifies the actual meaning of this passage, but would also distort parallel passages (Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33), but also similar passages like Matthew 5:18 and Luke 16:17. If the preterist misunderstanding of this passage were true, Luke 16:17 would read as follows: "But it is easier for *the world of Israel* to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail." This is such an absurd view that it is clear that the preterist mythology cannot stand in light of an actual exegesis of the text itself.

CHRIST'S WORDS WILL NOT PASS AWAY

This passage clearly states that, "heaven and earth *will* pass away" one day, but in contrast to that Christ's words "shall not pass away." In order to strengthen the emphasis upon the absolute impossibility of His words passing away, Christ uses not one, but two Greek words that mean "not," (grouped together), to say that something will not happen. "The double negative *ou me* with the subjunctive is the usual form for the emphatic negation," notes Randolph Yeager.⁸ Lenski agrees and says that *ou me* is used "all-inclusively" and calls it "the strongest negation."⁹

Since Jesus speaks in such an authoritative way, He identifies Himself with Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah (40:8) and Zechariah (1:1-6). Christ's statement of the certainty of the fulfillment of His prophetic word can only mean that He has the stamp of God's approval on His ministry. Arno Gaebelein elucidates as follows:

Yeah heaven and earth may pass away but *His Words* will not pass away. How solemn this is! Here we read still the same great and mighty Words, which were hated by thousands of God's enemies in the past; words which have been attacked and denied. And still the old enemy of the written Word is at it, and through his chosen instruments (alas! many of them in the midst of the professing church) attacks and belittles these Words. They stand! They are as eternal and divine, as infallible and true, as He, the eternal Son of God, is from whose lips they came.¹⁰

THE DAY AND THE HOUR

At least six passages (eight if parallel passages are included) specifically warn believers against date setting in relation to the second coming and the rapture. First of all, it is clearly impossible to date-set the time of the rapture since it is a signless, yet imminent event. How can anyone even come up with a scheme for date-setting the rapture since we are told to always be waiting for Christ any-moment return in the air? This explains why rapture date-setters have never used rapture passages as a basis for their date-setting schemes, since there is zero-basis in actual rapture passages to attempt what is forbidden. These speculators invariably go to passages related to Israel (rather than the church), or passages that confuse the second coming with the rapture.

It is enough for something to be stated only once in the Bible for it to be true, but when God says something many times the emphasis should make such assertions even clearer. I am listing the specific passages below so that we can readily see these important biblical admonitions:

- **Matthew 24:36** *"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. Mark 13:32 is an exact parallel.*
- **Matthew 24:42** *"Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.*
- **Matthew 24:44** *"For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.*
- **Matthew 25:13** *"Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour. Mark 13:33-37 is a parallel passage.*
- **Acts 1:7** *He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority;*
- **1 Thessalonians 5:1-2** *Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.*

These passages are absolute prohibitions against date setting. They do not teach that it was impossible to know the date in the early church, but in the last days some would come to know it. They do not say that no one knows the day or the hour, except those who are able to figure it out through some scheme. No! The date of Christ's coming is a matter of God's revelation and He has chosen not to reveal it even to Christ in His humanity during His first advent (Mt. 24:36).

The Bible teaches that God's Word is sufficient for everything needed to live a life pleasing unto Christ (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3-4). This means that if something is not revealed for us in the Bible then it is not needed to accomplish God's plan for our lives. The date of Christ's return is not stated in the Bible, therefore, in spite of what some may say, knowing it is not important for living a godly life. The Lord told Israel "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to

our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). The date of Christ's coming has not been revealed, thus it is a secret belonging only to God.

CONCLUSION

At least two things always occur when one mishandles a biblical text: First, the passage at hand is distorted and one does not learn the lesson intended by the author. Second, a wrong understanding produces a false teaching that would not surface, but for the incorrect handling of a given passage. This we know from this passage: that heaven and earth will one day pass away, or as a friend of mine used to say, "its all going to burn." We also equally know that God's Word is inerrant, infallible and trustworthy. It will most certainly come to pass. This is the basis upon which prophecy is built and for that all Bible-believing Christians can be grateful. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), p. 106.

² Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, editors, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), vol. 3, p. 38.

³ Ed Glasscock, *Moody Gospel Commentary: Matthew* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), p. 475.

⁴ Full preterists teach that all Bible prophecy has been fulfilled in the past and there will be no future second advent of Christ.

⁵ See the following website: <http://www.lighthouseproductionsllc.com/broadcast.htm>

⁶ Don K. Preston, *Into All The World: Then Comes The End* (Armore, OK: Don K. Preston, 1996), pp. 90-91.

⁷ Based upon searching the computer program *Accordance*, version 6.4, the following references to the physical creation as in Genesis 1:1 are as follows: Gen. 1:1; 14:19, 22; Ex. 20:11; 31:17; 2 Sam. 18:9; 2 Ki. 19:15; 2 Chron. 2:12; Ezra 5:11; Psalm 69:34; 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 146:6; Isa. 37:16; Jer. 23:24; 32:17; 33:25; Haggai 2:6, 21; Matt. 5:18; 11:25; 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 10:21; 16:17; 21:33; Acts 4:24; 13:15; 17:24; Rev. 14:7.

⁸ Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament*, 18 vols. (Bowling Green, KY: Renaissance Press, 1978), vol. 3. p. 322.

⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Matthew's Gospel*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943), p. 953.

¹⁰ Arno C. Gaebelien, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, [1910] 1961), p. 514.