

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part VI

by Thomas Ice

After Christ's primary warning about religious apostasy (Matt. 24:4-5), He now turns His focus upon geopolitical events. Jesus says, "And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs" (Matt. 24:6-8). Since we have previously seen that verses 4-14 refer to the first half of the tribulation, it follows that these events will occur during that time, and will correspond with the seal judgments of Revelation 6.

FALSE MESSIAH'S

Before we deal with the next section I want to revisit the issue of false messiahs from verse 5. Preterists like to say "False messiahs made regular appearances in Israel."¹ Kenneth Gentry is more careful in his statement, but nevertheless says, "There are many examples of great pretenders who almost certainly make Messianic claims."² Gentry and DeMar are speaking of the first century. Gentry lists the following individuals as those whom he says made messianic claims: Theudas in Acts 5:36, Simon Magus in Acts 8:9-10, and "the Egyptian false prophet."³ DeMar adds to the list with the following: "Josephus tells of 'a certain impostor named Theudas . . .' Dositheus, a Samaritan, 'pretended that he was the lawgiver prophesied of by Moses.'"⁴ DeMar contends that these all made claims to be the Messiah. However, none of these actually claimed to be Messiah when examined closely.

Some of these could be described as false prophets, but not false Messiahs. These preterists are playing fast and loose with the data because they have such a large investment in their view that all this took place in the first century. H. A. W. Meyer clarifies the issue when he notes,

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, Calovinus, Bengel), did not pretend to be the *Messiah*. Comp. Joseph *Antt.* Xx. 5. 1; 8. 6; *Bell.* li. 13. 5.⁵

Another says, "The first and second centuries saw quite a few famous false prophets who made eschatological claims," as I have noted above. However, they further say, "That any of them (before Bar Kochba) said, in so many words, 'I am Messiah', is undemonstrated by the sources."⁶ Finally, Leon Morris tells us, "in this place the meaning is rather that they will claim for themselves the name *Messiah*, Jesus' own title." Morris explains:

This will surely be a reference to the last days, for there is little evidence that any of the turbulent men so active preceding the fall of Jerusalem ever

claimed to be the Messiah. Some claimed to be prophets, but that is not the same thing.⁷

“The statement that such persons will come, ‘in my name,’ means either that they will come using the name of Jesus or that they will come assuming the messianic of Jesus, as is spelled out in the explicit claim that follows,” says Donald Hagner. “The claim to be the Christ means here the claim to be the eschatological Messiah.”⁸

Even if some first century individuals did claim to be the Messiah—they did not—it would not fulfill this passage. This is one of the many reasons that it looks to the future tribulation and the coming of the beast of Revelation, popularly known down through Christendom as the antichrist.

WARS AND RUMORS OF WARS

Verse 6 begins with an interesting Greek word—*mellô*—which is usually not translated into English, but it carries the idea of “about to.” Since it is in the future tense, this opening phrase has the sense of “You are going to be about to hear . . .”⁹ This indeed is the case!

The Greek word *polemos* is a general word for war and connotes the “whole course of hostilities” rather than just the individual battles that comprise the larger war campaign.¹⁰ This is a reference to actual wars that will be taking place in reference to the future Jewish people. Meyer says that this phrase is a “reference to wars near at hand, the din and tumult of which are actually heard, and to wars at a distance, of which nothing is known except from the reports that are brought home.”¹¹

Here we have the future parallel to Revelation 6:4 and the red horse judgment, which is said “to take peace from the earth, and that men should slay one another; and a great sword was given to him.” The first seal judgment of Revelation 6:2 is the rider on a white horse, who is a counterfeit Christ, which correspond to verses 4–5 of Matthew 24. This means that antichrist begins the tribulation with a false peace that soon turns into multiple wars breaking out throughout the globe. There will be war that those in Jerusalem will see themselves and those further away that they will only hear about.

To whom is the Lord addressing His comments in this discourse? I believe that it is not to the church, but “to the Jewish disciples as they then were, and as they will be.”¹² William Kelly expounds upon this aspect:

the Lord is predicting about the Jewish remnant, . . . And this, because many things must yet be accomplished before the Jews can come into their blessing. But for Christians, all things are ours in Christ even now; the blessing is never put off, though we await the crown at His coming. Again, many parts of scripture speak of scenes of anguish before the Lord's coming; others make Christians to be expecting Christ at any time. These scriptures cannot be broken, nor can they contradict one another; and yet they must do so, if they be applied to the same people.¹³

These wars of the tribulation are described in verse 7 as, nation against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. This description depicts multiple struggles taking place on various levels; international conflict will be raging all around. Nations fighting nations, such as if the national entities of France and Germany fought one another. Kingdom

against kingdom, such as if NATO were to fight the former Warsaw pact nations. This is the kind of geopolitical conflicts depicted in Daniel and Revelation, which are within the context of a future tribulation. This is not what took place in A.D. 70. Rome was an empire that fought against Israel—a single nation. Such a first century situation does not resemble nation against nation and kingdom against kingdom. M'Neile notes, "The horrors described are not local disturbances, but are spread over the known world; nations and kingdoms are in hostility with one another."¹⁴

DO NOT BE FRIGHTENED

Jesus tells His disciples that they should not be frightened. The Greek word for frightened is only used here, in the parallel passage of Mark 8:15, and by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:2. A. T. Robertson says it "means to cry aloud, to scream, and in the passive to be terrified by an outcry." He renders this passage as follows: "Look out for the wars and rumours of wars, but do not be scared out of your wits by them."¹⁵

All three uses of this word are found within the context of the tribulation. Apparently this is going to be a very scary time for those who do not understand that God is in control of these things. Paul makes a similar statement in 2 Thessalonians when he says, "that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be *disturbed* either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come" (2:2). The Thessalonian believers thought that they were in the day of the Lord or the tribulation. Paul tells them not to be disturbed, because they were not in the day of the Lord.

Twice, once by our Lord and once by Paul, they describe a natural human reaction to thinking that one is in the tribulation as the temptation to cry out in pain. We can understand why one would think this way as we come to realize from the seal judgments of Revelation 6, that describe this specific time as a time in which over a quarter of the earth's population will be killed (Rev. 6:8).

What is the antidote to this frightening knowledge? Simply to know that, "those things *must* take place" (verse 6). Meyer says, "The reflection that it is a matter of necessity in pursuance of the divine purpose (xxvi. 54), is referred to as calculated to inspire a calm and reassured frame of mind."¹⁶ Believers are comforted to know that "if God says that something shall be, then it must be."¹⁷ Morris explains: "They have one thing going for them that the general public has not: they know that God is over all and that his purpose will in the end be worked out. This is the significance of *it is necessary*."¹⁸ This phrase lets us know that God is in control of what is seemingly out of control—His judgment.

Judgment is a necessary part of God's plan because there is evil in the world. Before the Lord can usher in His kingdom—since it will be a righteous kingdom—He must purge out evil through judgment. This can be a scary thing if one does not know God and His plan. Knowing the predetermined plan of God is one of the comforting aspects that prophecy provides for the people of God during a time of global upheaval. Judgment must happen because God is a righteous God who has limits to His patience.

CONCLUSION

James R. Gray has the following excellent summary of this passage:

Matthew 24:6 and Revelation 6:3–4 are parallel. The red horse symbolizes war. The purpose of the rider is "to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another" (Rev. 6:3). Many perceive the first half of the Tribulation as a time of great peace. That is not so. The Antichrist will be

perceived as a man of peace because of his great deceptive ability. The fact is he comes to power and stays in power because of war (Dan. 7:8, 24). The tribulation will bring war and more wars. The book of Revelation prophesies of many wars, not only in chapter 6, but also in 16:12–15, 17:14, 19:1 ff, and 20:8. These will not only be in invasions of Palestine (Daniel 9:26–27, 11:40–45, Zechariah 12:2–11, Revelation 12:9–17).¹⁹

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*, (Power Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 73.

² Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), p. 46.

³ Gentry, *Perilous Times*, pp. 46–47.

⁴ DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, p. 74.

⁵ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879), vol. 2, p. 128.

⁶ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), vol. 3, pp. 338–39.

⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p.597.

⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14–28*, Vol. 33B (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), p. 690.

⁹ Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament*, 18 vols. (Bowling Green, KY: Renaissance Press, 1978), vol. 3. p. 277.

¹⁰ Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1880] 1953), p. 322.

¹¹ Meyer, *Matthew*, vol. 2, p. 129.

¹² William Kelly, *Lectures on The Gospel of Matthew* (Sunbury, PA: Believers Bookshelf, 1971 [1868]), p. 482.

¹³ Kelly, *Matthew*, p. 483.

¹⁴ Alan Hugh M'Neile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: MacMillan, 1915), p. 346.

¹⁵ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, VI vols, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), vol. I, p. 189.

¹⁶ Meyer, *Matthew*, vol. 2, p. 129.

¹⁷ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, p. 349, f.n. 81.

¹⁸ Morris, *Matthew*, p.598.

¹⁹ James R. Gray, *Prophecy on The Mount: A Dispensational Study of the Olivet Discourse* (Chandler, AZ: Berean Advocate Ministries, 1991), pp. 29–30.