

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XI

by Thomas Ice

And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved." —Matthew 24:12–13

In Matthew 24:9–14, Jesus is talking about the spiritual condition of those during the first half of the seven-year tribulation period. It is not a pretty sight. Since believers will be persecuted and put to death, extreme pressure will be on believers, especially Jewish believers to flake out and fall away from serving Jesus the Messiah.

INCREASED LAWLESSNESS

The Greek word *anomia* is usually translated as “lawless” or “iniquity.” It carries with it the idea of deliberately disobeying a specific standard. In the context of this passage—God’s standard. Often the word “lawless” is used in apposition to “righteousness” or “good deeds” (Matt. 23:28; Rom. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:14; Titus 2:14; Heb. 1:9). Arno Gaebelein explains:

“Lawlessness shall prevail;” that is, complete anarchy will hold sway. This too is clearly seen in the breaking of the sixth seal (Rev. vi:12-17). The earthquake, the darkened sun, the blood-red moon, the falling stars, the rolled up heavens and the removal of mountains and island are all great symbols of startling political events, which will take place in the first three and one-half years. . . . the reign of terror and anarchy, worse than that of the French revolution and the Russian revolution of today, all classes of men, the kings, the wealthy, the rich and the poor, the bondman and the free, will be seized with terror. . . . This is the sixth seal, and it is precisely what the Lord saith: “Lawlessness shall prevail!”¹

This time of lawlessness is surely an unusual time in all human history. Leon Morris says that it is “a way of life that refuses to recognize any divine law, which is identical for Matthew with a way of life in which one’s neighbor no longer has any legal claim.”² Our Lord has been expounding upon the qualitative nature of the spiritual condition of unbelievers that will characterize the tribulation period, specially the first half. This description of lawlessness strikes a parallel to Paul’s description of the “man of lawless” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. This passage (Matt. 24) is building toward the abomination of desolation (24:15), which will be committed by the antichrist in the middle of the tribulation. Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 2, combines the man of lawlessness with the abomination of desolation when he says, “the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God” (2 Thess. 2:3b-4). Robert Govett tells us: “It is this abounding of lawlessness which gives to Antichrist his power both against the Jew and the temple.”³

What does the phrase “is increased” mean in this context. Commentators are in agreement that it means unusually rapid or exponential increase. Morris notes that “the thought is that in the days of which Jesus is speaking lawlessness will not simply increase a little: it will be multiplied.”⁴ James Morison observes that “all other passages where the verb (*pléthuno*) occurs, it is translated multiply.”⁵ This clearly fits the idea of future tribulation period where lawlessness will reach the highest levels in all of human history. We think it is bad today, cheer up it will be even worse during this unique seven-year period of history.

LOVE WILL GROW COLD

The result of lawless increasing will be that “most people’s love will grow cold.” There is a cause effect relationship in this passage. The phrase “most people” is literally “the many.” Morris tells us that in this context, “‘the many,’ indicates the majority; . . . ‘most of you.’”⁶ This is one of the reasons I think it is speaking of the unbelieving world, as opposed to believers. The rest of Scripture does not support the notion that most believers will be characterized by apostasy during the tribulation, instead, this is the state in which the world in general is characterized. “This seems more related to the general condition of the world,” says Ed Glasscock, “than to the followers of Jesus.”⁷

What does Jesus mean when he says, “love will grow cold.” The expression itself is clear: loss of love. The main significance is to see the cause/effect relationship between lawlessness and loss of love. Morris explains it well:

But real love is impossible for the lawless person. By definition the lawless person is motivated by personal, selfish concerns, not by any regard for others or for the rules that govern our intercourse with one another. So with the upsurge of lawlessness there is a cooling off of love. The one necessarily involves the other.⁸

It is in just such an environment that will facilitate the man of lawlessness of 2 Thessalonians 2 to set up his image in God’s rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. And, it is to just such an act that Jesus’ current discourse is moving (24:15).

END-TIME ENDURANCE

The exact meaning and implications of “the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved,” is a hotly debated passage. Some use this passage to teach a Christian doctrine known as the perseverance of the saints.” While others believe that it refers to a physical deliverance. I hold to the latter position, primarily because it is the only view that makes sense in this specific context.

The first issue that must be dealt with in this matter is the meaning of the term “saved.” Because the word “saved” is used in the New Testament to refer to the time when one becomes a Christian (the moment of justification as in), many just plug that meaning into this passage. The leading Greek lexicon of our days says that the basic meaning of this word is “save, keep from harm, preserve, rescue.”⁹ This word can be used in relation to the doctrine of salvation (Matt. 1:21; Acts 16:31; 1 Cor. 1:18; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:19; Titus 3:5, etc.), or it can simply refer to physical deliverance or rescue (Matt. 8:25; 14:30; 27:49; Acts 27:31; Heb. 5:7; Jude 5, etc.). The exact nuance is determined by its context. “The problem begins with the superficial hermeneutic of giving ‘saved’ the same meaning in every context, which is not true of any word,” declares Glasscock. “Words have no specific meaning apart from context. Here, ‘saved’ (*sozo*) means basically to ‘deliver’ or to ‘rescue’—from what and in what manner is dependent upon the context.”¹⁰

Many commentaries on this passage fail to consider the contextual factors before they start sermonizing on endurance in the Christian life. They make this into a passage that teaches the Christian doctrine of endurance, even though it is not supported by the specific factors in the text.¹¹ Truly, there is a Christian doctrine of endurance taught in the Epistles (Rom. 12:12; 1 Cor. 13:7; 2 Tim. 2:10, 12; Heb. 12:3, 7; James 1:12; 5:11; 1 Pet. 2:20). This doctrine teaches that one of the many character qualities that believer is to have is endurance. Why is this so? It is true because endurance under suffering produces character (Rom. 5:3-4). Yet, none of those references to the Christian doctrine of endurance speak of “enduring to the end.” Instead, passages that speak of enduring to the end all occur within the same context—the tribulation (Matt. 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13; Luke 21:19; Rev. 13:10; 14:12). John Walvoord explains:

The age in general, climaxing with the second coming of Christ, has the promise that those that endure to the end (Mt 24:13), that is, survive the tribulation and are

still alive, will be saved, or delivered, by Christ at His second coming. This is not a reference to salvation from sin, but rather the deliverance of survivors at the end of the age as stated, for instance, in Romans 11:26, where the Deliverer will save the nation Israel from its persecutors.¹²

Specifically this section is referring to the Jewish remnant, who, if they endure to the end, will be physically rescued by Christ at His second advent and they will go into the millennial kingdom in their mortal bodies (Matt. 25:21, 34). William Kelly explains: “It is evident that the language is only applicable in its full force to Jews—believing ones, no doubt, but still Jews in the midst of a nation judicially chastised for their apostasy from God and rejection of their own Messiah. . . . Thus there is a certain, defined period of endurance—an end to come, as truly as there was a beginning of sorrows.”¹³

PARALLEL PASSAGES

There are a number of parallel passages to Matthew 24:13 that support my understanding of this text. First, Daniel 12:1 says, “Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued.” Michael tells Daniel that this will be the time of tribulation in which the elect Jews will be rescued, which is the Hebrew word for saved.

Second, Mark 13:13, a direct parallel passage to Matthew 24:13 and says, “And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved.” The first half of Mark 13:13 is a summary statement of Matthew 24:9–12, which is followed by the endurance statement in both passages. Luke 21:18-19, also parallel says, “Yet not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.” This is the clearest of all when it reads: “you will gain your lives.” “Lives” is the normal word for physical life.

Third, Matthew 10:22, also within the context of the future tribulation says, “And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.” Once again we see an emphasis upon the physical deliverance of Jews during the tribulation after a time of persecution.

Finally, the two passages in Revelation (13:10 and 14:12) which speak of the “perseverance of the saints,” also are references to physical deliverance. Both references are clearly within a tribulational context and speak of physical deliverance when one endures to the end.

CONCLUSION

We have come to an end of a section in Christ’s discourse. Speaking specifically to Jewish believers during the tribulation (the remnant), He alerts them to the many dangers that will confront them during this unique period of history. Having told them of the great trials of this time, Christ promises that the ones who physically make it to the time of His second coming will be delivered into the Millennial kingdom which will come at the end of the tribulation period. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, [1910] 1961), pp. 484-85.

² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), f. n., 23, p.600-01.

³ Robert Govett, *The Prophecy on Olivet* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing Co., [1881] 1985), p. 29.

⁴ Morris, *Matthew*, f. n. 22, p. 600.

⁵ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), p. 461.

⁶ Morris, *Matthew*, f. n. 24, p. 601.

⁷ Ed Glasscock, *Moody Gospel Commentary: Matthew* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), p. 466.

⁸ Morris, *Matthew*, p. 601.

⁹ William F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 805.

¹⁰ Glasscock, *Matthew*, p. 466.

¹¹ An example of one who turns this passage into a sermon on Christian endurance is found in John MacArthur, *The New Testament Commentary: Matthew 24–28* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), pp. 28-29.

¹² John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 184.

¹³ William Kelly, *Lectures on The Gospel of Matthew* (Sunbury, PA: Believers Bookshelf, 1971 [1868]), p. 484.