

## AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XV

by Thomas Ice

*“for then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall.”*

—Matthew 24:21

Our Lord’s prophetic discourse continues dealing with mid-tribulational events. He says that the second three and a half year period will not only be “tribulation,” as noted of the first half (Matt. 24:9), but a time of “great tribulation.” In fact, it will be the greatest time of tribulation since the beginning of creation (cf. Mark 13:19), or will ever be. The focus of this time of tribulation will revolve around the Jewish people and their land of Israel.

### THE TRIBULATION

This verse starts with a reference back to the preceding section. Ed Glasscock explains: “Verse 21 offers an explanation (*gar*) for the illustrations of urgency just presented and uses the temporal adverb *tote* (“then”) to connect the previous statements with the prediction of the worst tribulation every.”<sup>1</sup> This tells the Jewish remnant in Jerusalem and Judea why they need to immediately head for the hills when they learn of the abomination of desolation event (Matt. 24:15) has taken place. “Evidently, this will be the last possible moment for escape,” notes James Gray. “If they do not escape, they will be caught in this great and terrible trouble. It will come so suddenly that they do not have time to get their things together to get out.”<sup>2</sup>

Previously, we have seen that the word “tribulation” was used to refer to the first half of Daniel’s seventieth week (Matt. 24:9). Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost provides an excellent statement of the usage of “tribulation”:

the term *tribulation* is used in several different ways in Scripture. It is used in a non-technical, non-eschatological sense in reference to any time of suffering or testing into which one goes. It is so used in Matthew 13:21; Mark 4:17; John 16:33; Romans 5:3; 12:12; 2 Corinthians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 1:4; Revelation 1:9. It is used in its technical or eschatological sense in reference to the whole period of the seven years of tribulation, as in Revelation 2:22 or Matthew 24:29. It is also used in reference to the last half of this seven year period, as in Matthew 24:21.<sup>3</sup>

The tribulation period is not exclusively a New Testament doctrine. The tribulation period is a topic that has a rich Old Testament background and the events of this time are directed toward and involve the nation of Israel. The Old Testament speaks of a time of tribulation that Israel is destined to endure (in the latter days), but when this period is past it will result in national repentance and the nation in a right relationship with the Lord. Note some of the following key passages:

- “When you are in *distress* [i.e., tribulation] and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and listen to His voice.” (Deut. 4:30)
- “Alas! for that day is great, there is none like it; and it is the time of Jacob’s *distress* [i.e., tribulation], but he will be saved from it.” (Jer. 30:7)
- “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* [i.e., tribulation] 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.” (Dan. 12:1)

In addition to these specific tribulation passages noted above, there is the general theme dominate in the Old Testament of individuals and the nation crying out to the Lord when in a time of distress and tribulation. For example this is a major theme in Psalm 107. Verse 6 says, “Then they cried out to the LORD in their *trouble* [i.e., tribulation]; He delivered them out of their distresses.” Note the following passages that have a similar pattern: Gen. 35:3; 1 Sam. 10:19; 26:24; 2 Sam. 4:9; 1 Ki. 1:29; 2 Chron. 15:4; Psa. 20:1; 25:22; 34:17; 46:1; 50:15; 81:7; 86:7; 107:6, 13, 19, 28; 116:3; 120:1; Isa. 33:2; Jer. 14:8; 16:19; Jonah 2:2; Nahum 1:7.

In fact, Paul writes about Israel’s deliverance from tribulation in Romans 9—11. Romans 10:11-15 tells us that one day Israel will call upon the name of the Lord and be saved. This redemption will occur one day to national Israel, but it will come during the tribulation period—the great tribulation.

### GREAT TRIBULATION

Matthew 24:21 speaks about the great tribulation. What is the great tribulation? The great tribulation is the last three and a half year period of the tribulation, which will culminate in the second advent of Christ. Dr. John Walvoord says:

The great tribulation, accordingly, is a specific period of time beginning with the abomination of desolation and closing with the second coming of Christ, in the light of Daniel’s prophecies and confirmed by reference to forty-two months. In Revelation 11:2 and 13:5, the great tribulation is a specific three-and-a-half-year period leading up to the second coming . . .

That the period would be a time of unprecedented trouble is brought out clearly in Revelation 6—19. . . . Putting all these Scriptures together, it indicates that the great tribulation will mark the death of hundreds of millions of people in a comparatively short period of time.<sup>4</sup>

The New Testament uses the term “great tribulation” in three other places, in addition to Matthew 24:21. While Acts 7:11 does not refer to the last half of a future seven-year period, the other two do as follows:

- “Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into *great tribulation*, unless they repent of her deeds.” (Rev. 2:22)
- “And I said to him, ‘My lord, you know.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the ones who come out of the *great tribulation*, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’” (Rev. 7:14)

The “great tribulation” is said by Jesus in Matthew to be the greatest since the world began, or ever will be for the Jewish people. Mark 13:19 is even clearer where our Lord says, “For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created, until now, and never shall.” “Since the beginning of the creation” makes it very clear that this time period will be the greatest time of tribulation for the Jewish people in all history. John MacArthur says

No time or event in the history of Israel fits the description of the holocaust Jesus is here speaking of. The horrifying time is further described in some detail in Revelation 6—16, where the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments exhibit the escalating intensity of God’s wrath upon sinful, rebellious mankind. Both the books of Revelation and of Daniel make clear that the Antichrist will tyrannize the

world for “a time, times, and half a time” (Dan. 7:25; 12:7; Rev. 12:14), that is, a year, two years, and a half year, or three and one half years (Rev. 11:2; 13:5). Clearly, the events described by our Lord, by Daniel, and by John must refer to the same great holocaust at the end time, just before the millennial kingdom is established on earth.<sup>5</sup>

Christ is clearly using the language of Daniel 12:1, which says, “And there will be a time of *distress* [i.e., tribulation] such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people.” Joel 2:2 also employs similar language when it says, “A day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness. As the dawn is spread over the mountains, so there is a great and mighty people; there has never been anything like it, nor will there be again after it to the years of many generations.”

It is significant that in both of these passages, the time of tribulation results in the redemption of the Jewish remnant. Just such a redemption is described in Matthew 24:29-31 where it says, “But immediately after the tribulation of those days . . . And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.”

### **PURGING THE REBELS**

As I have been saying, the purpose of the tribulation, especially the great tribulation, in relation to the nation of Israel is to prepare her for final redemption. This is taught in the passages cited above about her deliverance from tribulation. We also find in passages, like Ezekiel 20 and 22, the Lord providing an overview of Israel’s entire history. Often the prophet recounts the nation’s past history of disobedience and then predicts that there will come a time in the future when the nation will finally become obedient to the Lord. Usually this will come after the nation has gone through a time of great trial and tribulation as we see in Ezekiel 20:33-38. But the significant thing is that at the end of this process the nation is brought into “the bond of the covenant.”

• “As I live,” declares the Lord GOD, “surely with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out, I shall be king over you. And I shall bring you out from the peoples and gather you from the lands where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out; and I shall bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I shall enter into judgment with you face to face. As I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you,” declares the Lord GOD. “And I shall make you pass under the rod, and I shall bring you into the bond of the covenant; and I shall purge from you the rebels and those who transgress against Me; I shall bring them out of the land where they sojourn, but they will not enter the land of Israel. Thus you will know that I am the LORD.” (Ezek. 20:33-38)

Zechariah 13—14 records a similar scenario as we have seen in many of the Old Testament passages noted above. This passage speaks of all the nations of the world sending armies to surround Jerusalem, yet through this time of tribulation, the Israel is converted and rescued through the personal return of Christ. The following passage from Zechariah 13 speaks of God purging out two-thirds of Israel, but saving the remaining third.

• “And it will come about in all the land,” declares the LORD, “that two parts in it will be cut off and perish; but the third will be left in it. And I will bring the third part through the fire, refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are My people,’ and they will say, ‘the LORD is my God.’” (Zech. 13:8-9)

## CONCLUSION

Matthew 24 is similar to these Old Testament passages in that Christ predicts the nation will pass through the time of great tribulation (verse 21), but when these events have transpired, Jesus will return and rescue the elect remnant (verses 29-31). Christ's prophetic sermon as recorded in Matthew follows the well-established pattern found in the Old Testament. Since Matthew 24 speaks of tribulation followed by immediately by rescue (verse 29), then His prophecy has to be future to our time since the Jewish people have never gone through anything like that in past history. Maranatha!

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Ed Glasscock, *Matthew: Moody Gospel Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), pp. 470-71.

<sup>2</sup> James R. Gray, *Prophecy on The Mount: A Dispensational Study of the Olivet Discourse* (Chandler, AZ: Berean Advocate Ministries, 1991), p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 170.

<sup>4</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 188.

<sup>5</sup> John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 24—28* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), p. 44.