

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XVI

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

In the previous installment I surveyed some of the biblical teaching on the great tribulation. It will not come as a surprise to most of you that many do not see the tribulation as a yet future time. Historicists and preterists believe that much, if not all of the tribulation has already occurred. Therefore, if one denies the futurity of the tribulation then it produces a great distortion of biblical prophecy.

HISTORICISM

Historicism teaches that the events of the tribulation, as noted in the book of Revelation, have been occurring throughout the entire 2,000 years of the current church age. Historicist, Steve Wohlberg, says, “Historicism is the belief that the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation find fulfillment *throughout the history of Christianity*.”¹ They usually teach that the six seal, six trumpet and seven bowl judgments are cyclical of seven major judgments throughout the history of the church. Generally, they believe that we are awaiting the breaking of the seventh seal, which will complete the judgments of revelation (i.e., the tribulation), lead to the events of Armageddon and then the second coming. Thus, according to historicism, the time of the tribulation is equated with what has been thus far about 2,000 years of church history, with only Armageddon and the second coming still in the future.

The historicist scheme will not work if the prophetic events of the tribulation are taken literally. Historicists have to allegorize many details of biblical prophecy in order to make their system appear to explain Scripture. For example, they turn 1260 days (Rev. 11:3; 12:6) into 1260-years, the antichrist is not a person but the papal system of Roman Catholicism and entities like angels (the three angelic witnesses of Revelation 14) turn out to be humans what have lived in the past during the current church age. Historicists generally regard the belief that the tribulation and most Bible prophecy still awaits a future fulfillment as a Roman Catholic plot implemented by the Jesuits in the sixteenth century.² Historicism says that we are in the tribulation now, even though most of it has already passed. Such a view is not supported by Christ’s explanation of the great tribulation in Matthew 24.

PRETERISM

Modern preterists go even further than historicists and say that the entire time of the tribulation is totally past and that it was entirely completed by A.D. 70. Preterist, Dr. Kenneth Gentry says, “I hold that the Tribulation occurs in our distant past in the first century; . . . I hold that the Tribulation closes out the Jewish-based, old covenant order, and establishes the new covenant (Christian) order as the conclusive redemptive-historical reality.”³ “This statement of Christ is indisputably clear—and absolutely demanding of a first-century fulfillment of the events in the preceding verses, including the Great Tribulation (v. 21),”⁴ declares Dr. Gentry. So how does Dr. Gentry take Matthew 24:21? He says, “This is prophetic hyperbole.” He further explains: “Clearly, the unique-event language is common parlance in prophetic literature. We must not interpret it in a woodenly literal manner.”⁵

What does he mean by “prophetic hyperbole”? Dr. Gentry cites Exodus 11:6, Ezekiel 5:9; 7:5–6, and Daniel 9:12⁶ as examples of other passages using similar language. Further, Dr. Gentry argues that the Flood of Noah was a worse judgment than described in Matthew 24 since it “destroys the entire world except one family.”⁷ I believe there are a

number of errors in Dr. Gentry and preterist thinking at this point. First, they generalize many of the specifics of a given text that limit the scope of these absolute descriptions. These passages that preterists cite are all limited in scope, not simply the greatest disaster of any time, place, or thing. A few years ago I wrote Hebrew Christian scholar, Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum and presented these same arguments made by Dr. Gentry's fellow preterist Gary DeMar a few years ago. Here is Dr. Fruchtenbaum's able response:

As for Exodus 11:6, the focus here is specifically on one country, which is the nation of Egypt. Furthermore, the verse is not saying that what happened with the ten plagues was the worst judgment that Egypt will ever experience and, therefore, the correlation between 14 million and 55 million is irrelevant. The text is saying that there was not such a great cry in all the land of Egypt in the past, nor will there be such a great cry in the land of Egypt in the future. The emphasis is not on the judgment itself but on the Egyptian response to the judgment. The first-born son of every Egyptian family died, but the remainder of the family was spared, so every single family was affected. In the tribulation, there is no need to assume that every family will be affected and, furthermore, rather than merely one or two members of the family, whole families might be destroyed; and if whole families are destroyed, there will be no one to mourn for that particular family. Another point is the Bible says that one quarter of the world's population will be destroyed, but mentions the world population in general and does not apply that exactly twenty-five percent of the Egyptian population will be destroyed. In other words, whether we speak of twenty-five percent or seventy-five percent of the earth's population destroyed, most of it is among the nations outside of the Middle East and, therefore, will not effect Egypt to the same degree as it would affect, let's say North America or Europe. Therefore, there might be a lot less death in Egypt than there would be elsewhere, and it still might be less than those who died in the tenth plague. In other words, Exodus 11:6 simply does not present such a great problem.

Finally, concerning Ezekiel 5:9-10, . . . There are two implications. The first implication is that what happened in A.D. 70 was far more severe than what happened in 586 B.C. That point is true. But the point of Ezekiel 5:9 is that God, in this case, is going to perform a judgment of the type that He has not done before and will not do again, and the type of judgment was that one third will die by plague and famine, one third will die by the sword, and one third will be scattered to the four winds. It did not happen that way in A.D. 70, and it will not happen that way in the tribulation. What Ezekiel is describing is something that happened uniquely in the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem when the inhabitants were equally divided into thirds with two thirds dying in two different ways, and one third surviving but under divine judgment were scattered. No such three-fold division equally happened in A.D. 70. Even the tribulation where it does mention in Zechariah 13:8-9 that two thirds will die and one third will survive, it does not say that the two thirds will die in an equal two halves by sword and by famine. Furthermore, the remaining surviving third is not under divine judgment and remaining surviving third is not under divine judgment and scattered, but rather, they are saved and regathered. So, Ezekiel's words can be taken as literally true; what he said did happen to Jerusalem and was unique to the Babylonian destruction.

The second implication is his statement under point 4: "The flood was obviously a greater tribulation." This is true as far as tribulation in general. However, here we are dealing specifically with the Jewish people and Jerusalem. The focus of the flood was not on the Jewish people, since Jewish history had not begun as yet. Nor was the focus on Jerusalem since that city had not existed yet. The Noahic flood destroyed the world in general and was the

worst flood that ever was or will be. But Ezekiel's prophecy focuses specifically on the Jewish people and Jerusalem which was not or will not be destroyed by flood. And while God will once again destroy the mass of humanity, according to Isaiah 24, it will not be by means of water but by means of fire.

So, none of these "problems" that Gary DeMar is presenting are in any sense a great problem. They are all solvable if we remain with their own context and we move carefully through the actual words and to what they are referring.⁸

These issues are not a problem if one follows the context that governs the words of these passages. It is quite clear that if the plain meaning of the text is allowed to stand then a first century interpretation is precluded. Preterists must revert to sophistry in order to say why the text does not mean what it says so they can suggest a meaning in support of their view. Interestingly, they tend to only take this approach with given passages that do not appear to support their thesis, but take verses plainly that appear to support their views, even when figures of speech are embedded in the text. No, the great tribulation has not yet happened, but the world is now being prepared for this future time (2 Thess. 2:6–7).

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

In Matthew 24:21 Christ speaks of a yet future time that will be the worst time in the history of the world for the Jewish people. Nevertheless, He will deliver those who come to faith in Him as their Messiah from this terrible time (Matt. 24:31). These things must take place in order that God's plan for history to work out issues of good and evil. How do we know this? Matthew 24:21 is a quote by Jesus from Daniel 12:1.

The entire context of Daniel 12 provides further information about what Christ has said in Matthew 24:21. Daniel's response is not surprising to the revelation of the tribulation as we see in Daniel 12:8: "As for me, I heard but could not understand; so I said, 'My lord, what will be the outcome of these events?'" This is often a question that comes into our mind when we read of the events of the tribulation. God's answer through the angel is as follows: "And he said, 'Go your way, Daniel, for these words are concealed and sealed up until the end time. Many will be purged, purified and refined; but the wicked will act wickedly, and none of the wicked will understand, but those who have insight will understand.'" (Dan. 12:9-10)

God's purpose of the tribulation, especially the great tribulation (last three and a half years), is to purge out those unbelieving Jews through the events of this time and to bring to faith the elect Jewish remnant. We know that the events described in both Matthew and Daniel have not yet in the past lead to the mass conversion of the Jews as these passages indicate. That the conversion of the Jews is yet to occur, no Christian would doubt. Since the tribulation precedes and gives rise to their conversion, there is no doubt that it too lies in a time future to our own day. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Steve Wohlberg, *The Antichrist Chronicles: What Prophecy Teachers Aren't Telling You!* (Fort Worth: Texas Media Center, 2001), p. 86. (Italics original)

² See Steve Wohlberg's chapter called "The Evil Empire of Jesuit Futurism," in *The Left Behind Deception: Revealing Dangerous Errors About The Rapture And The Antichrist* (Coldwater, MI: Remnant Publications, 2001), pp. 58-74.

³ Kenneth L. Gentry Jr. in Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), p. 12. This is a book in which Dr. Gentry and I debate whether the tribulation is past or future. For a more extensive rebuttal of many aspects of the preterist position see

Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, editors, *The End Times Controversy: The Second Coming Under Attack* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2003).

⁴ Gentry, *Great Tribulation*, pp. 26-27.

⁵ Gentry, *Great Tribulation*, p. 52.

⁶ Gentry, *Great Tribulation*, pp. 55-56.

⁷ Gentry, *Great Tribulation*, p. 56.

⁸ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, personal letter to Thomas Ice, dated September 16, 1994.