

## AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XVII

by Thomas Ice

*“And unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short.”*

—Matthew 24:22

In our journey through the Olivet Discourse, the passage at hand has a number of interesting issues with which I will deal. They include: the cutting short of days, no life would be saved, and who are the elect? I shall proceed to deal with them.

### THE CUTTING SHORT OF DAYS

Three-quarters rapture advocate, Marvin Rosenthal, says “The Lord is teaching that the Great Tribulation will be cut short.”<sup>1</sup> He continues: “The shortening of the Great Tribulation to less than three and one-half years is one of the most important truths to be grasped if the chronology of end-time events is to be understood.”<sup>2</sup> Does this text teach that the Lord will cut short the number of days prophesied elsewhere from 1260 days (Rev. 11:3; 12:6)? Will the Great Tribulation be less than 1260 days? Simply put, no! What does it teach?

First of all, only Mark (13:20) has a parallel passage to Matthew, while Luke does not. Luke’s omission of this verse is perhaps due to the fact that his focus is upon A.D. 70,<sup>3</sup> thus this statement relating to the future tribulation would not be appropriate. Mark tells us specially that it is “the Lord” who had cut short those days. Otherwise, there is no significant difference in the two passages.

The Greek word for “cut short” has the core meaning “to cut off,” or, when applied to time “to cut short.”<sup>4</sup> Dr. Randolph Yeager notes that the verb used both in Matthew and Mark means “lopped off, ‘mutilated.’ To shorten. Always in the New Testament in a chronological sense—Mt. 24:22, 22 Mk. 13:20, 20.”<sup>5</sup> It is significant to note that both verbs (in Matthew and Mark) “are all in the aorist tense and indicative mood with the augment,” declares Dr. Renald Showers. “Aorist tense verbs have no time significance except when they are in the indicative mood with the augment. That form is used to express past time.”<sup>6,7</sup> What does this mean?

Dr. Showers tells us that “a number of scholars have concluded that since the two verbs in Mark 13:20 are in that form, they are expressing action in the past and therefore have significant bearing on the meaning of Jesus’ statement.”<sup>8</sup> What is that bearing? It is that the “aorist tenses are prophetic pasts: God has already decided about the future,”<sup>9</sup> as one scholar explains. Another says, “The future tense interprets the preceding ‘had been shortened’ as having a future reference (like the Hebrew ‘prophetic perfect’).”<sup>10</sup> This means that the cutting short, spoken of by our Lord in both Matthew and Mark, is some thing that has already taken place in the past when God’s plan for history was put forth before the creation of the world. “The aor. Tenses put this action in the past,” concludes Ezra Gould. “The language is proleptic, stating the event as it already existed in the Divine decree.”<sup>11</sup>

Marvin Rosenthal’s conjecture that these passages support his mistaken view that the Great Tribulation will be cut short of its Divinely decreed 1260 days does not hold up under scrutiny of the biblical text. Dr. Showers explains as follows:

Jesus was teaching that God in the past had already shortened the Great Tribulation. He did so in the sense that in the past He determined to cut it off at a specific time rather than let it continue indefinitely. In His omniscience, God knew that if the Great Tribulation were to continue indefinitely, all flesh would perish from the earth. To prevent that from happening, in the past God sovereignly set a specific time for the Great Tribulation to end.<sup>12</sup>

Said another way, God, in His omniscience, knew that if He let the Great Tribulation go 1320 days (an arbitrary number for the sake of illustration), then all flesh would be wiped out. Therefore, in eternity past when God was planning this time of history, He cut it short to 1260 days, so that the elect would in fact be saved.

### **NO LIFE WOULD HAVE BEEN SAVED**

We have already seen previously that for Satan and the Antichrist their goal for these events is to destroy the Jewish people. Why does the Devil want to do that? He believes that if he can destroy the Jews, then He will be able to prevent the second coming, since Christ's return is a response to the converted Jewish remnant's request for physical deliverance. Satan believes that if he can prevent a key event in God's predestined plan for history from occurring then he will have defamed God and proven his slander that God is not worthy of His exalted position. He cannot succeed because God is faithful to fulfill His word.

So what does the phrase "no life would have been saved" (lit. "all flesh would not be saved") mean in light of Christ's prophetic sermon? There are two views that I think are worthy of consideration and they revolved around the meaning of the term "no life." Does it refer to the Jewish remnant, which is destined for salvation during this time, or does Christ have in mind all humanity? First, I agree with the general consensus among commentators that salvation in this context refers to physical deliverance and not salvation from one's sins (i.e., justification), because the danger in this context is physical, not spiritual.<sup>13</sup>

Before studying and writing this current commentary, I held the view that "no life," or "no flesh" was a reference to Israel. I have changed my mind and now think that this phrase refers to all humanity. Why have I changed? I have changed my mind primarily because of the lexical data (i.e., how a word or phrase is used in other instances). Dr. Stanley Toussaint explains:

BAG<sup>14</sup> take *pasa sarx* to mean *every person, everyone*. With the negative they take it to mean *no person, nobody* and list Matthew 24:22 and Mark 13:20 as instances of this meaning. The expression *pasa sarx* comes from the Septuagint which in turn looks at the Hebraism *kol basar* "all flesh." Gesenius<sup>15</sup> says this Hebrew construction means "all living creatures . . . especially *all men*, the whole human race . . ." Therefore, to interpret "all flesh" in Matthew 24:22 and Mark 13:20 as referring to Jews living in Judea in A. D. 70 is too limiting. "All flesh" describes all humanity.<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Craig Evans concurs:

reflects Semitic idiom (e.g., Gen 9:11: "never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood", Isa 40:5: "all flesh shall see it together"). . . . the warning that the period of tribulation will be so severe that unless shortened it will extinguish human life argues that the prophecy portends more than the Jewish war. . . . but the fate of the whole of humanity did not hang in the balance.<sup>17</sup>

It appears that Satan's effort to destroy the Jews would result in the total annihilation of all humanity, were not for Christ's intervention at the second advent. This fact provides us with further insight into the purposes of Christ's return.

### **WHO ARE THE ELECT?**

The term "the elect" is uttered three times by Jesus in the Olivet discourse (Matt. 14:22, 24, 31; also in Mark 13:20, 22, 27). I believe that all three uses must refer to the same entity in each instance. They clearly refer, in context, to some group of believers during the tribulation. Since the church has been raptured, it cannot refer to her. Thus, does "the elect"

reference saved Jews and Gentiles, or only the Jewish remnant? I believe that this term refers to the Jewish remnant, primarily because of contextual factors.

While it is true that the term “the elect” is used in the New Testament Epistles of church age believers (i.e., both Jews and Gentiles) (see Rom. 8:33; Col. 3:12; 2 Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1), it is also true that this term is used in a variety of other ways. Note multiple uses as follows: Rufus, a choice man (Rom. 16:13); elect angels (1 Tim. 5:21); of Jewish believers (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:9); Christ a choice building stone (1 Pet. 2:4, 6); a chosen lady (2 John 1); a chosen sister (2 John 13). In the Old Testament the term “elect” is used in the following references to Israel: Isaiah 42:1; 43:20; 45:4; 65:9; 65:15; 65:22; Psalm 89:3; 105:6, 43; 106:5; 1 Chronicles 16:13. The verbal form of “to choose” is used dozens of times in relation to Israel in the Old Testament (i.e., Deut. 7:6). Even though a majority of the biblical occurrences refer to Israel, usage must always be determined by how it is used in a specific context. “In this context, it is most likely used regarding the nation,” concludes Dr. Ed Glasscock. “Daniel identifies this time as ‘decreed for your people and your holy city,’ indicating that Israel, not the church or mankind in general, will be the center of the Tribulation suffering.”<sup>18</sup>

We have seen that the term elect has a fairly wide range of usage. “Out of every dispensation there will be some gathered of God’s mere mercy and sovereignty. These are ‘the elect’ of that dispensation,” explains Robert Govett. “Therefore the term has as many special meanings as there are dispensations.”<sup>19</sup> But since the focus of this passage is upon Israel it is not mystery that Christ has them in mind. William Kelly says, “the evidence unmistakably points to a converted body of Jews in the latter day, not standing in church light and privilege, but having Jewish hopes, and while awaiting the Messiah.”<sup>20</sup> The term “the elect” is most likely used because Christ looks forward to those belonging to the Jewish remnant, though not yet saved, they are chosen to such a destiny—the elect. Maranatha!

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

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), pp. 108-09.

<sup>2</sup> Rosenthal, *Pre-Wrath Rapture*, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> See Alan Hugh M’Neile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: MacMillan, 1915), p. 350.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, a translation and adaptation by William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 442.

<sup>5</sup> Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament*, 18 Vols. (Bowling Green, Ken.: Renaissance Press, 1978), vol. 3, p. 301.

<sup>6</sup> H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 193.

<sup>7</sup> Renald Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1995), p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Showers, *Maranatha*, p. 51

<sup>9</sup> 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, p. 351.

<sup>10</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, second edition, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 484.

<sup>11</sup> Ezra P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to St. Mark*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1896), pp. 247-48.

<sup>12</sup> Showers, *Maranatha*, p. 51

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<sup>13</sup> See Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), p. 316.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, a translation and adaptation by William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957).

<sup>15</sup> William Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, including the Biblical Chaldee*, 13<sup>th</sup>. Edition, Translated from Latin by Edward Robinson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1882).

<sup>16</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, "A Critique Of The Preterist View Of The Olivet Discourse," unpublished paper presented at The Pre-Trib Study Group, Dec. 1995, no page number.

<sup>17</sup> Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* in *Word Biblical Commentary*, 34b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), p. 322.

<sup>18</sup> Ed Glasscock, *Moody Gospel Commentary: Matthew* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), p. 472.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Govett, *The Prophecy on Olivet* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing Co., [1881] 1985), p. 54.

<sup>20</sup> William Kelly, *Lectures on The Gospel of Matthew* (Sunbury, PA: Believers Bookshelf [1868] 1971), p. 492.