

## AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XX

by Thomas Ice

*“Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”* —Matthew 24:28–29

After speaking of the suddenness and public visibility of His return in verses 26–27, our Lord now adds a parabolic idiom in verse 28. He says, “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.” This phrase is also found in a similar context in Luke 17:24. What does this mean and to whom does it refer? However, before that question is answered I want to make a final point concerning verse 27.

### GLOBAL, NOT LOCAL

We have seen in verse 27, which says, “For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be,” that it emphasizes a global coming. This verse is set in contrast to the false teachers of verse 26 who say that the Messiah has appeared locally; in a back room somewhere. We have seen that preterists like Gary DeMar and Kenneth Gentry taught that Jesus came locally, through the Roman army in A.D. 70. That view contracts verse 27 which teaches that the Messiah’s return will be global in nature. Randolph Yeager says of verse 27,

Thus we have Jesus’ reason for telling us not to believe the false teachers who will seek to localize Messiah’s coming. It will be universally observed. No one will find it necessary to go anywhere in order to see Him, any more than it is necessary to move to a better vantage point in order to see the flash of lightning is conspicuous—something impossible to overlook. Satan, the shining one fell from heave, with the speed of the lightning—(Lk. 10:18). Christ will come to earth with the universality of the lightning.<sup>1</sup>

We see that the teaching of this passage means that second coming of Christ will be something that no human being—not even the anti-Christ—will be able to fake it. It will be of such a nature that only God will be able to pull it off. It will be a global and miraculous event that does not in any way parallel the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. This will be an event that will not need to be reported in the news media, since God will accomplish this event in such a way that everyone will know what has happened. Thus, it *must* be a future event to our own day since nothing like this has yet to occur in history.

### THE MEANING OF THE PARABLE

There are two main interpretations of this passage. One holds that it speaks of judgment of the unsaved. The other view sees a continuation of the theme of the context denoting suddenness and universality. I believe that both ideas are intended in verse 28.

Our Lord speaks of a “corpse,” coupled with the expression of “eagles” or more precisely in this context “vultures.” This provides a picture of judgment. Thomas Figart notes:

Taken literally, it means that wherever dead bodies are, there the *aetoi* (either eagles or vultures) will descend upon them. From a physical point of view, the vast carnage will result in this very thing. Symbolically, it can be related to the parallel passage in Luke 17:37 when the disciples asked “*Where, Lord*” in regard to the separation of the believers from the unbelievers at that time. He

answered, “Wherever the body is, there will the eagles (*aetoi*) be gathered together.” This means that these two similar statements refer to the judgment to come upon the unbelievers who are not prepared to meet Him.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to a judgment warning in conjunction with the return of Jesus to earth, the grammar appears to require an emphasis upon the global suddenness of the event. Heinrich Meyer points this out as follows:

Confirmation of the truth that the advent will announce its presence everywhere, and that from the point of view of the retributive punishment which the coming One will be called upon everywhere to execute. The emphasis of this figurative adage is on *hopou ean ê* and *ekeî*: “Wherever the carcass may happen to be, there will the eagles be gathered together,”—on no spot where there is a carcass will this fathering fail, so that, when the Messiah shall have come, He will reveal Himself everywhere in this aspect also (namely, as an avenger).<sup>3</sup>

That this proverb includes a global and suddenness aspect is supported by the preceding context, which I have noted before emphasizes Christ’s sudden and public return.

#### **NOT A REFERENCE TO A.D. 70**

Preterists, not surprisingly, try to twist and turn this verse into a proverb that supports their first century fulfillment assumption. Dr. Kenneth Gentry declares:

This seems to speak of the dreadful devastation Rome wreaks upon Israel. The furious soldiers who cruelly ravage the people will destroy national, political Israel. Josephus often mentions the rage of the Roman troops: . . . The imagery is familiar enough to an agrarian people: the ugly, rotting corpse of an animal blanketed by bickering birds of prey.<sup>4</sup>

Fellow preterist Gary DeMar echoes Dr. Gentry’s view and says,

The Jerusalem of Jesus’ day, because of its dead rituals, was a carcass, food for the scavenging birds, the Roman armies. This is an appropriate description of Jerusalem’s acts of abomination. In addition, we know that tens of thousands (Josephus says over a million) were killed during the Roman siege. Even the temple area was not spared. The Idumean and Zealot revolt left thousands slaughtered in and around the temple. . . . There was no life in Jerusalem since the Lord had departed. As our High Priest, Jesus could no longer remain in the city because of its defilement. It had to be burned with fire for purification.

Just as there is little life left once the vultures have gathered, so with the destruction of the temple and the desolation of the city, the shadow of heavenly things is no more.<sup>5</sup>

I have already shown from the context that this passage in general refers to a future return of Christ. If the surrounding context teaches a future return of Christ, which it does, then this passage cannot reference a past event. Meyer rightly notes:

Others (Lightfoot, Hammond, Clericus, Wolf, Wetstein) have erroneously supposed that the carcass alludes to Jerusalem or the Jews, and that the eagles are intended to denote the Roman legions with their standards (Xen. Anab. I. 10. 12; Plut. Mar. 23). But it is the advent that is in question; while according to vv. 23-27, on *hopou ean ê* cannot be taken as referring to any one particular locality.<sup>6</sup>

Alan M’Neile echoes Meyer’s point and declares, “It does not describe . . . the eagles on

the Roman standards in the attack on Jerusalem; the last is not the subject dealt with either in Mat. or Lk.”<sup>7</sup> William Kelly summarizes the correct view of the passage when he states the following:

Applied to Israel, all is simple. The carcase represents the apostate part of that nation; the eagles, or vultures, are the figure of the judgments that fall upon it. It is not only, then, that there will be the lightning-like display of Christ in judgment; but the agents of His wrath shall know where, and how, to deal with that which is abominable in God’s sight.<sup>8</sup>

#### **AFTER THE TRIBULATION OF THOSE DAYS**

Having mentioned the second coming of Christ in verses 27–28 in reference to how He will appear (i.e., privately or publicly), in this next section (verses 29–31), Jesus describes His return. The first thing Christ says is that His return will take place “immediately after the tribulation of those days.” This means that the events described in the rest of verses 29–31 will occur *immediately* after the events of the tribulation. This seems obvious enough. However, not all seem to understand that.

Preterist Gary DeMar says that Christ’s coming was a “coming in judgment upon Jerusalem in A.D. 70.”<sup>9</sup> If the judgment events upon Jerusalem took place in verses 4–28 and occurred before verse 29, as DeMar teaches, then that would mean that he believes that verses 29–31 describe a second coming, different from the one spoken of in verse 27. This is exactly what preterists must do in order to maintain their twisted view of Christ’s prophetic discourse. DeMar admits, “Jesus’ ‘coming’ in judgment upon Jerusalem (Matt. 24:27) and His coming ‘up to the Ancient of Days’ (Dan. 7:13) were two events that occurred within the time span of the first generation of Christians. There is no future fulfillment of those events.”<sup>10</sup> Since DeMar is himself teaching multiple comings of Christ, it seems inconsistent that he could be so vocal against others, like pretribulationists, who also see several comings of our Lord. Yet DeMar heaps great disdain on what he calls “a two-stage coming.”<sup>11</sup>

Kelly rightly observes the following points about this bizarre preterist perspective:

One can hardly be asked to notice the old effort to apply these verses to the Roman triumph over Jerusalem. On the fact of it, could this be said to be “immediately after the tribulation”? or was it not rather the crowning of Jewish sorrow, not the glorious reversal of their sufferings by a divine deliverance? Whatever prodigies Josephus reports were rather during the tribulation he records; whereas the signs spoken of here, literal or figurative, are to follow “the tribulation of those day” (*i.e.*, the future crisis of Jerusalem).<sup>12</sup>

If the preterist view should be maintained, it would mean the disciples’ question about “what will be the sign of your coming?” (verse 3) would have to have multiple answers. Yet we find no such thing in Christ’s discourse. Should not the disciples’ question read: “what will be the signs of your comings?” It appears that since neither preterist return is a bodily, physical return, but instead are spiritual or non-physical comings, that one can have Christ coming and going all over the place. One could have Christ coming every day in some spiritual way, if coming does not refer to an actual physical event. These are the kinds of things that a preterist must do in their attempts to make their system appear to work to their little circle of followers. James Morison notes the following insights:

This word *immediately* has been a perfect rack of torture to such expositors as have lost their way in the interpretation of the chapter. . . . The whole difficulty arises from assuming that the tribulation of those days has reference to the tribulation that was to be experienced in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem. (See vers. 16–21.) There is not however the slightest necessity for

making such an assumption. There is every reason indeed for rejecting it, . . . This great mistake is founded on an unwarrantably narrow view of the Saviour's aim in His discourse in general, and on an inappropriately microscopic way of peering toward telescopic objects.<sup>13</sup>

Maranatha!

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

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament*, 18 Vols. (Bowling Green, Ken.: Renaissance Press, 1978), vol. 3, p. 308.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas O. Figart, *The King of The Kingdom of Heaven: A Commentary of Matthew* (Lancaster, PA: Eden Press, 1999), p. 447.

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879), vol. 2, p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Meyer, *Matthew*, p. 144.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Hugh M'Neile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: MacMillan, 1915), p. 351.

<sup>8</sup> William Kelly, *Lectures on The Gospel of Matthew* (Sunbury, PA: Believers Bookshelf [1868] 1971), pp. 493-94.

<sup>9</sup> DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of The Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Kelly, *Matthew*, p. 494.

<sup>13</sup> James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), pp. 477-78.