

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXII

by Thomas Ice

“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 24:29

One of the original questions that the disciples ask Jesus at the beginning of this discourse was “what will be the sign of your coming?” He has been answering the question since verse 23. Having spoken of His coming in verse 27, Jesus now builds upon His previous point that He will not arrive clandestinely, but His return will be a clear, public event that will take place suddenly. Just such a glorious appearing is exactly what is described in verses 29 and 30.

THE SUN, MOON, AND STARS

Matthew 24:29 is not a new revelation by our Lord. Old Testament passages like Isaiah 13:9–10 and Joel 2:31; 3:15 also reference this “black out” and light show that will occur “immediately after the tribulation,” in preparation for Christ’s second coming as noted in Matthew 24:30. These Old Testament passages refer to the same future events that Christ describes in verse 29. In conjunction with the return of Jesus, Israel will be rescued from her tribulation by the Lord Himself (verse 31). We see the theme of rescue associated with the Lord’s return reinforced from the contexts of these Old Testament passages, especially Joel 2 and 3, especially 2:31 and 3:1–2.

It is clear that our Lord has quoted part of His declaration about the sun and moon in Matthew 24:29, “But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, . . .” from Joel 2:31. Both are speaking of the same time and events—the time immediately following the tribulation and in conjunction with Christ’s return. Thus, it is interesting to take note of Joel 3:1–2, which provides a “time text” saying that the “black out” (Joel 2:31) will occur “in those day and at that time” (Joel 3:1). In conjunction with this is described a time when the Lord will “restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem” (Joel 3:1). Not judgment, but deliverance, as in Matthew 24. This event is said to be a time when the Lord “will gather all the nations” (Joel 3:1) in the valley of Jehoshaphat just north of Jerusalem. Further, it will be a time in which Israel will have been regathered from among the nations (Joel 3:2). This will be the time in which the sun and moon will be darkened.

PRETERIST FOLLY

Of course, preterists believe that these events are connected to the first century. “Here we encounter remarkable cosmic disturbances that seem too catastrophic for applying to A.D. 70,” says Gentry. He believes that “this portrays historical divine judgment under the dramatic imagery of a universal catastrophe.”¹ How does he arrive at such a conclusion? “To understand it properly we must interpret it covenantally, which is to say biblically, rather than according to a presupposed simple literalism.”² It goes without saying that any passage in the Bible must be interpreted biblically. So, why does Gentry feel compelled to make such a statement? He does this because he is getting ready to put forth an un-biblical interpretation. He already admitted that it does not seem that these events happened in the first century. Since he

apparently cannot provide a textual interpretation, he has to bring in his preconceived theology as the real basis for his understanding of the text. He is not interpreting the passage biblically, but theologically. Dr. Gentry uses his preconceived preterist notion as the true basis for his “interpretation” at this point. This is obvious to any attempting to handle the text from the proper perspective of the literal, grammatical, and contextual approach. Only those who are already committed to preterism, no matter what the text says, will fall for Gentry’s equation of *covenantal* interpretation with a proper *biblical* approach.

Dr. Gentry believes that verse 29 “draws upon the imagery from Old Testament judgment passages that sound as if they are world-ending events.”³ I have already noted such a relationship. This point is not a matter for debate, however, Gentry is typical of how preterists mishandle the recognized Old Testament relationship.

Since Gentry admits that this passage sounds like it did not occur in the first century. This is why, by his own admission, he must introduce his theology (if *covenant* were a true synonym for *biblical*, why must he tell us?) as a factor for interpreting this text. While those following the normal canons of *sound* hermeneutics—the historical, grammatical, contextual approach—cannot find Dr. Gentry’s view taught from the passage. Dr. Gentry must employ a historical, grammatical, and theological hermeneutic to (mis)explain the passage. Since the preterist erroneously believes that these events had to occur in the first century they are forced to views that are not supported by the words, phrases, and context of the passage. If anyone is allowed to subjectively introduce their theology as part of the hermeneutical process, then it should not be surprising to find that the text supposedly teaches what is presupposed. But that is not true exegesis, but it is a widely practiced form of eisegesis. Dr. Robert Thomas’ recent comment about Dr. Gentry’s interpretative approach is on the mark when he says, “Gentry’s use of symbolism is inconsistent and self-contradictory. A factoring of preunderstanding into the interpretive process inevitably leads to unimaginable extremes in hermeneutical abuse.”⁴ The same could be said for all preterist approaches to Matthew 24 and much of Scripture.

HANDLING FIGURES OF SPEECH

When I study the Old Testament figures that preterist say speak of the passing of a great political power, I wonder how they know what the original figures mean? I do not see a textual basis for their understanding either in the Old Testament or in Matthew 24. There are no biblical passages that establish the preterist use of these figures. In 1857 Rev. D. D. Buck made the following hermeneutical points about interpreting Matthew 24:29, which are still valid in our own day:

(1.) The use of metaphoric language implies a knowledge or idea of what would be understood if such language were applied literally. No one ever uses figures without having in view the literal things from which the figures are derived. . . . If we say Christianity is the sun of the world, it implies that we have a previous understanding of the nature and fact of the sun.

(2.) Now, whence did this ancient figurative use of the darkening of the luminaries arise? How did it happen that it was so common for the prophets to speak of ordinary, limited judgments, in language which all admit would, if used literally, apply to the general judgment? How became it so common to speak metaphorically of the darkening of the sun, moon, and stars, and the passing away of the heavens? Figures are the shadow of the literal. Where is

the substance that originates the shadow? Metaphors are borrowed from literal speech. Where is the literal speech, and the revelation of the literal idea, of the blotting out of the bright heavens, and the downfall of the world?

(3.) This question is to be settled by those who seize upon every reference to these great events, and pronounce them figurative. Will they please to tell us where there is a spot in all the Bible where the literalist may plant his feet, and stand up in defense of orthodoxy, and give a philosophical explanation of the commonness of such language as appears to refer to the day of Judgment?⁵

COMPARING SCRIPTURE WITH SCRIPTURE

Luke 21:24 says, "and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." This text provides an outline of the history of Jerusalem from the time of the destruction of Jerusalem until Israel's redemption at the second coming (Luke 21:25–29). The time in which the sun and moon will be darkened will follow the end of "the times of the Gentiles," according to Luke 21:25. The fact that the blackout of Matthew 24:29 is to come at the end of the times of the Gentiles, "immediately after the tribulation of those days," makes it clear that it could not have happened in the first century since, according to Luke 21:24, the Roman destruction of the Holy City would commence that time which has gone on now for almost 2,000 years. This event must be future and in conjunction with a time in which the Lord will deliver His people, not judge them (as in A.D. 70).

If the preterist interpretation of this passage is left to stand then it creates tremendous contradictions between the text and the historical records of the Roman siege. Rev. Richard Shimeall explains the preterist problem as follows:

Historically, therefore, the state of the case amounts to this:

(1.) The high-priest of the Jewish nation and many of his associates had been murdered, and the whole body of the priesthood overthrown; and, if there were any religious services, they were conducted by such wretches as the robbers saw fit to appoint.

(2.) Their temple was changed into a citadel and stronghold of an army of the vilest and most abominable robbers and murderers that ever disgraced the human race.

(3.) Their "holy houses" (synagogues) throughout the land had been pillaged and destroyed by the ruthless and bloody Sicarii.

(4.) Their judiciary and temple officers had either fled for their lives to the Romans, or had been murdered by the robber-gangs of the city, while their nobles and men of-wealth perished by myriads. And finally,

(5.) Whether within the capital or throughout the borders of Judea, east, west, north, and south, the *ecclesiastical* and *civil* institutions of the nation were exterminated, and the country conquered and laid waste by the Romans, or ravaged by organized banditti.

And thus, reader, it continued to the end. These, we repeat, are the *historical facts* of the case. And yet, our commentators have trusted the interpretation of some of the most important parts of the Bible to the theory, the principal argument to sustain which lies in the assumption that the Jewish

ecclesiastical and civil governments were destroyed "*after*" the destruction of Jerusalem!

What shall the writer say more? He claims to have settled the question by *undeniable* historic facts. If anything, let it be in the form of the following appeal to logic:

1. If by the heavenly luminaries be meant the ecclesiastical and civil States and rulers of the Jews, and the darkening of them refers to their destruction; and if this was effected by the Roman legions, it follows that it must have occurred either *before* or *during* the tribulation that resulted in their ruin.

2. But, inasmuch as the *object* of the war was to reduce the nation to obedience, or to bring it to ruin, it could not have *preceded* it.

3. It must therefore have occurred *during* the war. Recollect we are now speaking of the darkening of the sun, moon, and stars, as denoting the so-called *Jewish tribulation* at the hands of the Romans. We repeat, then, it must have occurred during the war. Now, it is undeniable, that that war did not cease until its object was effected. It is also undeniable, that the nation was in ruins *before* the war was ended. And it is a fact, also, that the predicted tribulation continued undiminished, if indeed it did not increase in severity, *to the last*.

It is, therefore, we submit, settled—historically and logically settled—that it was during, and *not* after, that time of trouble, that the so-called Jewish luminaries were darkened. And, what is decisive of this point, are those notable words of Christ, "*Immediately after* tribulation of those days, the sun shall be darkened," etc.; which shows conclusively that our Lord was not speaking of *that event* in the 29th verse of this chapter.⁶

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Kenneth Gentry in Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), p. 55.

² Gentry in Ice and Gentry, *Great Tribulation*, p. 55.

³ Gentry in Ice and Gentry, *Great Tribulation*, p. 56.

⁴ Robert L. Thomas, "New Evangelical Hermeneutics and Eschatology," A paper presented at the 12th Annual Pre-Trib Study Group, (Irving, TX, December 8, 2003), p. 32.

⁵D. D. Buck, *Our Lord's Great Prophecy* (Nashville: South-Western Publishing House, 1857), p. 229.

⁶Richard Cunningham Shimeall, *Christ's Second Coming: Is It Pre-Millennial or Post-Millennial?* (New York: John F. Trow and Richard Brinkerhoff, 1866), pp. 157–59.