

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXV

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

The final phrase of verse 29 says, “the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” Is this phrase to be taken literally, like the three previous phrases, or should one apply speculative exegesis to say that it means something other than what it says? Do powers of the heavens refer to angelic entities or to the physical universe?

POWERS OF THE HEAVENS

The same basic phrase is used in all three accounts of the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:29; Mark 13:25; Luke 21:26). The phrase “powers of the heavens” most likely has the idea of “the sun, moon, and stars, spoken of in summary fashion,” as they have been specifically mentioned earlier in the verse. Leon Morris says, “The word for heaven is singular in the reference to the stars, but plural where the powers are spoken of.”¹ “Thus the Lord describes the astronomical bodies being shaken as the earth is in an earthquake.”² The specific phrase “powers of the heavens” is never used of angelic beings in the Bible,³ nor does the context support such an understanding. Since the first three phrases relate to the entities that fill the sky, this final expression is a summary of the collective. “Jesus is saying that, whatever the powers of the heavens may be, they are subject to God, and that at this time, that of the return of the Son of man to this earth, their power will be disturbed.”⁴ These “powers of the heavens” also appear to include God’s decree of stability by which these celestial objects currently function with regularity. John MacArthur explains:

All the forces of energy, here called **powers of the heavens**, which hold everything in space constant, will be in dysfunction. The heavenly bodies will careen helter-skelter through space, and all navigation, whether stellar, solar, magnetic, gyroscopic, will be futile because all stable reference points and uniform natural forces will have ceased to exist or else become unreliable.⁵

A HEAVENLY SHAKING

The verb “shaken” is used about 15 times in the Greek New Testament. The verb is sometimes used as a metaphor, as in 2 Thessalonians 2:2: “that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure.” However, most of the time it refers to a physical shaking, as in Acts 16:26: “suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken.” A physical shaking of the heavens is what our Lord intends in this context.

Preterists, like Ken Gentry, however, believe that this phrase does not reference a physical shaking. Gentry says the following:

Consequently, we may legitimately apply Matthew 24:29 to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Christ draws upon this imagery from Old Testament judgment passages that sound as if they are world-ending events.

And in a sense it is “the end of the world” for those nations God judges. So it is with Israel in A.D. 70.⁶

Most commentators recognize that the shaking of the heavens in this passage is an allusion from Haggai 2:6 which says, “For thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land.’” What does this passage mean? We have a divine New Testament commentary that we can look to in Hebrews 12 that tells us what it means.

And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.” And this expression, “Yet once more,” denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe (Heb. 12:26–28).

In this fifth warning passage, the writer of Hebrews contrasts the first shaking of the earth, a physical one, at the Exodus with a future shaking, which will include the heavens as well. He too has in mind Haggai 2:6. The future shaking will be much greater than the past shaking since it will include the heavens as well. Since the first shaking at the Exodus was physical then it follows that the second shaking will also be a physical one, just as Christ describes in His prophetic sermon of Matthew 24. “The discourse is entirely plain,” notes amillennial interpreter R. C. H. Lenski, who understands this as a future physical event. “The whole sidereal world shall collapse. . . . This is made plain by the last ‘the powers of the heavens shall be shaken’ or dislocated. All that hold the heavenly bodies in their orbits and enables sun and moon to light the earth will give way.”⁷ “This convulsion in the *heavens*, previous to the Messiah’s descent *therefrom*, is not as yet to be regarded as the *end of the world*, but only as a prelude to it,” notes H. A. W. Meyer. “*The earth* is not destroyed as yet by the celestial commotion.”⁸

SIGNS IN THE HEAVENS

Matthew and Mark do not record Christ’s statements about the human response to these great events, but Luke does. William Kelly says, “It is Luke only who mentions the moral signs of men’s anguish spite of the deceits and pretensions of that day.”⁹ In what is clearly the same context that we find in Matthew and Mark, Jesus says:

“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth dismay among nations, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Luke 21:25–26).

Luke is the only one to call the activity in the sky involving the sun, moon and stars a sign. Robert Stein says, “the signs associated with the Son of Man’s coming are cosmic, whereas those associated with Jerusalem’s fall are terrestrial, so that Luke kept these two events distinct.”¹⁰

One of the purposes to which God gave in His creation of the sun, moon, and stars would be for “them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years” (Gen. 1:14b). Who would these signs be for? They will be signs to those upon the earth. When one ponders great events down through history, in no other event would signs in the heavens be so appropriate than for the second coming of Christ from heaven to earth.

LUKE'S ACCOUNT

Clearly, Luke 21:20–24 refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. The second half of verse 24 says, “and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.” Equally clear is that the last half of verse 24 is descriptive of a period of time that commenced after the Roman vanquishing of Jerusalem in the first century. That phrase has a beginning point, which began after A.D. 70. It has a time interval described by the expression, “Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles.” That verse also provides an ending point when it says, “until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.” There is no way that this event has already been fulfilled and it looks to a time when events that took place in A.D. 70 will be reversed.

Verse 24b provides a textual transition from A.D. 70 to events just before the second coming of Christ. Even a renowned preterist such as F. W. Farrar recognizes the shift from A.D. 70 in verses 20–24 to the second advent, or what he calls “the Last Coming” in verses 25–28.¹¹ E. H. Plumptre tells us the following:

From this point onwards the prophecy takes a wider range, and passes beyond the narrow limits of the destruction of Jerusalem to the final coming of the Son of Man, and the one is represented in St. Matthew as following “immediately” on the other, by St. Mark as “in those days.” No other meaning could have been found in the words when they were first heard or read.¹²

At this point in Luke 21 we have an example of what Tim LaHaye and I call “The Mountain Peaks of Prophecy” in our book *Charting The End Times*.¹³ Plumptre has provided an excellent explanation of this in the following statement:

As men gazing from a distance see the glittering heights of two snow-crowned mountains apparently in close proximity, and take no account of the vast tract, it may be of very many miles, which lies between them; so it was that those whose thoughts must have been mainly moulded on this prediction, the Apostles and their immediate disciples, though they were too conscious of their ignorance of “the times and the seasons” to fix the day or year, lived and died in the expectation that it was not far off, and that they might, by prayer and acts, hasten its coming (2 Pet. iii. 12).¹⁴

Clearly, in Luke 21, Christ sees two different events. One in the first century (21:20–24) and the other, still future to our time (21:25–28). However, neither Matthew 24 nor Mark 13 relate in any way at all with the A.D. 70 event, since neither the destruction of the Temple or Jerusalem is mentioned in them. Instead, the Matthew and Mark account of the Olivet discourse clearly speak of the rescue of the Jewish people, rather than their judgment as happened in A.D. 70. Most preterists do not even deal with this issue, let alone provide a satisfactory answer to that problem.

In summary, we have seen that great supernatural events will accompany Christ's return to planet earth. Is that so hard to imagine or believe? Apparently for some it is. Nevertheless, Scripture (both in the Old and New Testaments) speaks of Israel being regathered in her land, in unbelief (her current status today), as a national entity. She will go through a time called the tribulation that will lead to the conversion of the remnant to faith in the Messiahship of Jesus. This will then precipitate the second coming of Christ for the purpose of rescuing a now converted nation, who calls for His protection against the armies of all the nations that have gathered in Israel to wipe her out. Instead, Christ destroys Israel's enemies and commences His reign in Jerusalem for a thousand years. That is what the Bible says. Since it teaches this, all Bible-believing Christians should say "amen." Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

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¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

² Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980).

³ Contrary to Robert Govett, *The Prophecy on Olivet* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle, 1881).

⁴ Morris, *Matthew*, pp. 609-10. For further reasons not to take this as an angelic reference see Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1879).

⁵ John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1989).

⁶ Kenneth L. Gentry in Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry, *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999).

⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1943), p. 947.

⁸ Meyer, *Matthew*, vol. 2, p. 149.

⁹ William Kelly, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke* (Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1971).

¹⁰ Robert H. Stein, *Luke, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992).

¹¹ F. W. Farrar, *The Gospel According to St. Luke, with Maps, Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: At The University Press, 1899).

¹² E. H. Plumptre, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, 12 vols., vol. 3, *Ellicott's New Testament Commentary* (London: Cassell & Company, n. d.).

¹³ Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting the End Times: A Visual Guide to Understanding Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001).

¹⁴ Plumptre, *Luke*, p. 345.