

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part VIII

by Thomas Ice

Now that I have looked into the first half of Matthew 24:7, I will consider the second half of the verse. The passage says, “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs” (Matt. 24:7–8). So what about famines and earthquakes?

FAMINES AND EARTHQUAKES

First, I have previously noted and defended that Matthew 24:4–14 covers the first half of the seven-year tribulation period. Since we know that the “abomination of desolation” (Matt. 24:15) occurs in the middle of the seven-year period (Dan. 9:24–27), thus, events prior to verse 15 will take place in the first half of the tribulation. This is further confirmed by the correlation of the major events of Matthew 24:4–8 with the first four seal judgments of Revelation 6:1–8. This would mean that the famines and earthquakes of Matthew 24:7 speak of a future time, which Revelation 6:5–8 expounds upon, not of any events that have occurred during the last 2,000 years nor of anything in our present day.

There have been, no doubt, earthquakes and famines in the first century and during every generation since. “It is hardly necessary to add to this that not only false Christs and false prophets, wars and rumors of war, earthquakes and famines occur in every age throughout the history of the church,” declares William Hendriksen, “but so do also persecutions and defections, to which Jesus refers in verses 9, 10, 12, and 13.”¹ The context of this passage is that of a time of future tribulation in which these events will occur as part of God’s direct wrath and judgment. The earthquakes and famines of today and during the first century did not fulfill this prophecy since the context of this passage is of a still future time period. Now let us look together at the passage.

FAMINES

The Greek word for famine is *limos* and simply means “hunger,” and, thus, when used of “dying of hunger,” connotes “famine.”² This word is also used in Revelation 6:8.

If Christ is referencing a time during the first half of the tribulation, to what is He referring? I believe that Revelation 6:5–6 is a parallel passage. “And when He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, ‘Come.’ And I looked, and behold, a black horse; and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard as it were a voice in the center of the four living creatures saying, ‘A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine.’” Even though the word “famine” is not used, the passage is an apt description of such and it is one of the earliest judgments of tribulation period. Arno C. Gaebelein says, “And the third seal reveals a rider upon a black horse and he has a balance in his hand and what he saith indicates clearly that he brings famines (Rev. vi:5–6).”³

Both famines and earthquakes are governed by the phrase “in various places.” Lenski says, “The distributive *kata* means, “from place to place.”⁴ Leon Morris also explains: “In many places means that the disasters in question will be widespread.”⁵ This global perspective fits a future understanding of the passage and cannot be limited to the first century and the area of Israel alone.

Robert Gundry says, “The putting of famines before earthquakes may indicate that famines result from the ravages of the warfare just mentioned (cf. Rev. 6:3–6).”⁶ If we follow the order from Revelation, then it is clear that famine is the result of war, as is usually the case.

Predictably, preterists believe that Christ’s prophecy of famine was somehow fulfilled in A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed the Temple and Jerusalem. Speaking of famines,

Kenneth Gentry declares, "We may easily apply this also to the first century scene."⁷ Fellow preterist, Gary DeMar cites the following as evidence for a first century fulfillment of famines:

Beginning with the book of Acts, we see that famines were prevalent in the period prior to Jerusalem's destruction in A.D. 70: . . . The famine was dramatic evidence that Jesus' prophecy was coming to pass in their generation just like He said it would. . . .

Contemporary secular historians such as Tacitus, Suetonius, and Josephus mention other famines during the period prior to A.D. 70.⁸

Are preterist claims true? Since famines occur in every generation, one can find some examples of famines. Just as those who believe that this is a prophecy for our own day cite numerous contemporary examples. Craig Evans says, "Again, events in the decades immediately preceding the Jewish revolt only roughly parallel this part of Jesus' prophecy."⁹ With famines always occurring, it seems to blur somewhat the precision of such events as a distinct fulfillment of past prophecy. Meyer rebuts the preterist notion as follows:

Nor, again, is this feature in the prediction to be restricted to some such special famine as that which occurred during the reign of Claudius (Acts xi.28), too early a date for our passage, and to one or two particular cases of earthquake which happened in remote countries, and with which history has made us familiar (such as that in the neighborhood of Colossae, Oros. Hist. Vii. 7, Tacit. Ann. Xiv. 27 and that at Pompeii).¹⁰

Like the details of the other items that we have examined in this context, the famines of Matthew 24 have yet to occur. They will take place during the first half of the tribulation. These famines will take place at various places all over the world, likely as a result of the preceding warfare.

EARTHQUAKES

Earthquake in the original Greek is *seismos*. The basic sense of the word is "shaking." It can refer to the shaking of a storm on a sea. However, it mostly occurs in the New Testament when speaking of an earthquake.¹¹ Our English word seismograph is derived from this Greek root.

For the same reasons noted earlier, I do not think that these earthquakes that will take place at various places all around the world have already taken place in the past, nor are they occurring today. Just like the famines that have preceded them, the earthquakes in this passage are parallel to the ones described as the fourth seal judgment in Revelation 6:7–8. "And when He broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, 'Come.' And I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him. And authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth." Gaebelien further explains when he says, "The fourth rider of the fourth seal is upon a pale horse. His name is 'Death.' He takes the fourth part of the earth away. This corresponds to the Lord's announcement that there will be 'pestilences and earthquakes in divers places.'"¹²

Luke 21:11, a parallel passage to Matthew 24:7 says, "there will be great earthquakes." So these are not ordinary earthquakes that our Lord forecasts, but great or huge ones. So great, that they cause a great number of deaths worldwide.

Preterists Gentry and DeMar also believe that this sign was fulfilled in the first century. DeMar said, "The historical record of earthquakes that occurred before Jerusalem was

destroyed in the first century fulfills Jesus' prophecy to the letter. . . . Three earthquakes are mentioned [in Acts] prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70."¹³ Gentry adds:

A particularly dreadful quake shakes Jerusalem in A.D. 67. . . . Tacitus mentions earthquakes in Crete, Rome, Apamea, Phrygia, Campania, Laodicea (of Revelation fame) and Pompeii during the time just before Jerusalem's destruction."¹⁴

Once again, since there are these kinds of earthquakes mentioned by preterists that occur in the lifetime of every generation, it is only with great difficulty that one could cite this as a past fulfillment. As I have been going through these early parts of the Olivet Discourse, we have found that there is little basis for many of the claims made by preterists. When taken together with the other signs of Matthew 24— earthquakes—as cited by the preterists, prove nothing. Morison notes the following:

Scholars have busied themselves, and with wonderful success, in hunting up historical notices of the earthquakes that occurred before the destruction of Jerusalem, just as they have laboured to find out records of famines and wars. . . . But there is no special significance in such records, or in the occurrences recorded. The role of wars and famines and earthquakes is not yet finished.¹⁵

THE BEGINNING OF BIRTH PANGS

I have already dealt with this passage in a previous installment.¹⁶ Based upon the Old Testament use of birth pangs in Jeremiah 30:6–7, it appears that Jesus picks up on that theme in Matthew 24, as does Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:3. Birth pangs were a clear expression in rabbinic Judaism for the tribulation. Thus, the time of birth pangs commences with the beginning of tribulation period and culminates with the second coming of Christ. Therefore, the events of Matthew 24:4–7 are described as events that will take place during the first part of the tribulation and do not signal the end, which is the second coming of Jesus (Matt. 24:27–31).

CONCLUSION

Two important characteristics of the first part of the tribulation will be the occurrence of famines and earthquakes, which will likely follow a time of global wars between nations and kingdoms. These cannot be references to past or present events. As Gaebelein notes:

Fearful have been the famines, pestilences and earthquakes of the last twenty-five years. But these are insignificant in comparison with those to which our Lord refers here, the mighty events which tell all the earth that the day of wrath is rapidly approaching.¹⁷

John MacArthur echoes Gaebelein's sentiment when he said, "The world has witnessed many earthquakes, famines, plagues, and even some heavenly signs, but those will be nothing compared to the calamities of the end times. They will occur **in various places** and apparently simultaneously."¹⁸

Even though there have been famines and earthquakes in the past, they are just a warm-up for what God will bring about during the future time of tribulation. When these miraculous events occur, there will be no doubt about the fulfillment of the details of Matthew 24. We are building toward that day when God will judge and remove evil so that He can establish His righteous rule for a thousand years. May that day come soon! Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ William Hendricksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 853.
- ² William F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 476.
- ³ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, [1910] 1961), p. 483.
- ⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), p. 931.
- ⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p.598.
- ⁶ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, second edition, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 478.
- ⁷ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), p. 49.
- ⁸ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 79.
- ⁹ Craig A. Evans, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27—16:20*, Vol. 34B (Dallas: Word Books, 2001), p. 308.
- ¹⁰ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879), vol. 2, p. 131.
- ¹¹ Arndt and Gingrich. *Lexicon*, p. 753.
- ¹² Gaebelein, *Matthew*, p. 483.
- ¹³ DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, p. 80.
- ¹⁴ Gentry, *Perilous Times*, p. 50.
- ¹⁵ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), p. 459.
- ¹⁶ For an explanation of this passage see *Pre-Trib Perspectives*, June 2002, Vol. VII; Num. 3; Part IV.
- ¹⁷ Gaebelein, *Matthew*, p. 483.
- ¹⁸ John MacArthur, *The New Testament Commentary: Matthew 24—28* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), p. 21.