

The A.D. 70 Prophecy from Jesus in Matthew 24

Part II

Matthew 24:29-51

In this two-part study, we are examining Matthew 24 verse by verse. Once again, I give credit to Sam Storms, my long-time friend from Bridgeway in Oklahoma City. In Part I, we covered 1-28. In Part II, we'll cover from v. 29 to the end of Matthew 24. This entire chapter deals with the end of the Old Covenant.

Matthew 24:29-31

The issue that must next be addressed is the problem posed by vv. 29-31. Here it appears that Jesus says His coming will occur "immediately after" the tribulation just described in vv. 15-28. Mark renders it, "But in those days, after that tribulation" (13:24). The problem is this: if vv. 15-28 refer to the events of A.D. 70, why didn't Jesus return at that time? Several possible answers have been suggested:

- 1) Dispensationalists insist that vv. 15-28 do not refer to the events of A.D. 70. They refer to a yet future tribulation period immediately preceding the second coming of Christ. This period is usually identified with the 70th week of Daniel's prophecy, hence 7 years in duration.
- 2) Liberal theologians have concluded that Jesus was mistaken about the time of His return.
- 3) Some interpret "the tribulation of those days" (v. 29) as a description of the events of A.D. 70 and to *this entire present age between the two comings of Christ* (D.A. Carson).
- 4) Others, who embrace full preterism, insist that "the Second Coming" (including resurrection of the dead) occurred in A.D. 70 in the judgment against Israel, but not a visible return to the earth. J. S. Russell put it this way: "We are compelled, therefore, by all these considerations, and chiefly by regard for the authority of Him whose word cannot be broken, to conclude that the Parousia, or second coming of Christ, with its connected and concomitant events, did take place, according to the Savior's own prediction, at the period when Jerusalem was destroyed" (The Parousia 1887, 549).
- 5) Finally, a somewhat more moderate version of the *preterist* view, is that vv. 29-31 are not a literal description of the coming of Christ to consummate His Kingdom (eternity), but a symbolic description of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. It was a "coming" of Jesus in judgment. Unlike full preterists, partial-preterists believe in a yet future "coming" of Christ *to consummate the redemptive purpose of God*. See the commentary on Matthew by R. T. France, as well as the writings of N. T. Wright, Peter Walker, David Chilton, Kenneth Gentry and Gary DeMar. This is the view that I will now seek to explain and defend.

The "A.D. 70" Interpretation of Matthew 24:29-31

R. T. France represents a growing number of scholars (as noted above) who insist that vv. 29-31 do not refer at all to the second coming of Christ at the end of age but rather to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. He and others make the following interpretive points:

1. As already shown, Matthew 24:3-15 describe the events connected with the siege of Jerusalem but without describing the actual fall of the city. "This leads one to expect a further section which will complete the prophecy by stating that the city will actually be destroyed and mentioning the significance and effects of this destruction. When one begins to read [Mark 13] verse 24 – 'But in those

days, after that tribulation,' – the impression is virtually irresistible that one is about to be introduced to the catastrophe to which [Mark 13] verses 14-22 have been leading up. The Matthean addition of 'immediately' only strengthens the impression that Mark 13:24-27 and Matthew 24:3-15 refer to anything other than the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70" (*Jesus and the Old Testament*, 232).

2. When one reads Matthew 24:29-30, and in particular v. 29, one may at first glance have difficulty seeing it as reference to the destruction of Jerusalem. This is due, in part, to the fact that Matthew's language is compressed. It is also because his language sounds like what most people believe will occur at the second coming. Phenomenal events involving sun, moon, stars and the powers of heaven don't sound to the 21st century mind like a description of what happened in A.D. 70. The reason for that is because we mistakenly seek to interpret and understand prophecy by reading the *New York Times* or *Newsweek* or watching the evening news rather than by reading the Bible.

Remember: Jesus was speaking to a people saturated by Old Testament language, concepts, and imagery. From the earliest days of their lives they memorized and were taught the OT. Thus, when Jesus spoke to them of things to come, Jesus used the prophetic vocabulary of the Old Testament which they would instantly recognize. Consequently, if we are to understand the meaning of Matthew 24:29-30 and its parallel in Luke 21:25-26, we must read and interpret them through a *Biblical* (i.e., OT) lens. Luke refers to "signs" in the sun, moon and stars. Matthew says, "the sun will be darkened, the moon lose its light, and the stars will fall from the sky." Are these literal, physical, astronomical events that one might see with the naked eye? I don't think so. In the OT, such language was used to portray *not what is going on in the heavens but what is happening on the earth*. Natural disasters, political upheaval, and turmoil among nations are often described figuratively through the terminology of cosmic disturbances.

Astronomical phenomena are used to describe the upheaval of earthly dynasties as well as great moral and spiritual changes. As one author has put it: "In prophetic language, great commotions upon earth are often represented under the notion of commotions and changes in the heavens" (Clarke). As we shall see, when the sun and moon are darkened or the stars fall from heaven, the reference is to the disasters and distresses befalling nations on the earth (see Isa. 60:20; Amos 8:2-9; Zeph. 1:4,15; Isa. 5:30; Jer. 23,28; 13:16; Joel 2:10). "*The stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises, and the moon will not shed its light*" (Isaiah 13:9-10 – Babylon).

Concerning the destruction of Egypt: "*I will cover the heaven, and make the stars thereof dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee, and set darkness upon the land . . . I shall make the land of Egypt desolate*" (Ezekiel 32:7-15). The destruction of Edom: "*And all the host of heaven will wear away, and the sky will be rolled up like a scroll; all their hosts will also wither away as a leaf withers from the vine, or as one withers from the fig tree. For My sword is satiated in heaven, behold it shall descend for judgment upon Edom, and upon the people whom I have devoted to destruction*" (Isaiah. 34:4-5).

In Matthew 24:29, Jesus isn't predicting strange astronomical events will occur; He's predicting God's judgment on the Jewish nation." N.T. Wright: "The days of Jerusalem's destruction would be looked upon as days of cosmic catastrophe. The known world would go into convulsions: power struggles and *coups d'état* would be the order of the day; the *pax Romana* [peace of Rome], the presupposition of 'civilized' life throughout the then Mediterranean world, would collapse into chaos. In the midst of that chaos Jerusalem would fall. The 'Son of Man' would thereby be vindicated. That would be the sign that the followers of this 'Son of Man' would now spread throughout the world: His 'angels', that is,

messengers, would summon people from north, south, east and west to come and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of YHWH" (*Victory*, 362-63).

3. I believe that a mistranslation of v. 30 has contributed to a misunderstanding of what Jesus said.

Literally, v. 30 reads as follows: "And then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven, and then will mourn all the tribes of the land and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." In other words, Jesus was not telling his disciples that *He* would appear in the sky. Rather, "He told them that they would see a *sign* that proved He was in heaven, sitting at His Father's right hand (Acts 2:30-36). Those who would witness Jerusalem's destruction would see the sign of Jesus' enthronement when they saw Jerusalem's destruction" (Gary Demar, 159). In other words, *the "sign" of the Son of Man being enthroned and vindicated in "heaven" is the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple "on earth"*. It is the *sign* that appears, not the *Son* of Man.

4. This "coming" of Christ to God the Father (in heaven) by which He is vindicated and His authority established, will be greeted by the "*mourning*" predicted in Zechariah 12:10-14. All *the tribes of the earth* is better translated 'all the tribes (families) of the land', for in Zechariah the mourning is explicitly restricted to the families of Israel. This isn't a so much a world-wide lamentation, but the response of Israel when they see the vindication of 'Him whom they pierced.'

Two important interpretive points need to be made: 1). The word translated "tribes" (*phule*) has Israel in view. France points out "that the reference in Zechariah 12:10-14 is explicitly to a mourning of the tribes of *Israel*, the tribes of David, Nathan, Levi and Shimei being specified, and a final 'all the families that are left' extending the scope to the whole *nation*" (237)(2). The Greek noun translated "earth" (*ge*) can refer generally to the tangible ground, the earth, or more specifically to a particular land area. Often in the NT *ge* refers particularly to the "land" of Israel, i.e., Palestine. This "coming" is not a visible, physical appearance by which Jesus returns to earth (although that will most assuredly occur at the end of history). Rather, they will "see" Him in the sense that they will "understand" or spiritually *perceive* that He is the vindicated and enthroned King. For "seeing" = "understanding" (see John 12:40; Isaiah 6:10; Acts 26:18). In the destruction of the Temple, the rejected Christ is vindicated as the ascended Lord.

5. The word "angels" (v. 31) literally means "messengers" and refers to *human preaching of the gospel* throughout the world. In the Greek version of the OT (the Septuagint), the Greek word *angelos* is often translated as "messenger" (see James 2:25). Gentry contends that "even if we apply this to angels. it would then refer 'to the supernatural power which lies behind such preaching.' God's angels attend to our faithful proclamation of God's Word" (Gentry, 63).

6. The reference to the "trumpet" is perhaps an allusion to the means by which the OT Jubilee was announced: "Then you shall cause the trumpet of the Jubilee to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement you shall make the trumpet to sound throughout all your land" (Lev. 25:9). The point of its use here is to declare that with the destruction of the Temple the *ultimate* Jubilee Year has arrived. That is to say, "by employing imagery from the typological Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25, the Lord here speaks about the final stage of redemption, which is finally secured as the temple vanishes from history" (Gentry, 61). Jesus Himself announced the fulfillment of the Jubilee law in His ministry when He quoted from Isaiah 61 in His synagogue sermon (Luke 4:17-21). The ultimate deliverance of God's people and liberation from all "indebtedness" has come in the person of Christ.

7. The "gathering together" (v. 31) of God's elect is not a reference to the end-time harvest, but "to the world-wide growth of the church" (France, 345) that is on-going throughout this present age. It includes

both the gathering of the saints into local assemblies or churches (Heb. 10:25; James 2:2) and the universal assembling of the saints into the body of Christ, the universal church (see Matt. 22:7-13).

Matthew 24:32-35

Still at the center of attention is the question the disciples had asked Jesus back in v. 3: a) When will "these things" be, i.e., the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple as prophesied in 23:35-36,38; 24:2? b) When will you return and consummate the age? The disciples thought the two events would be simultaneous. Jesus says, "No, the destruction of Jerusalem will be in your lifetime. I'll even give you a sign that will warn you of its nearness. But the day of my second coming will not be preceded by signs. It will come only after a period of delay of undetermined duration. Everyone of this present generation will be aware of when Jerusalem will fall, but not even I know when the second coming will occur."

34. Verily I say unto you, "This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled."

A generation to the Jews was 40 years. The GENERATION did not pass, 40 years did not pass, until everything Jesus said came to pass. "Verily I say unto you, there are some standing here, who shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in His kingdom (Matthew 16:28).

Matthew 24:35-51

Question: "Did Jesus provide any information at all of what the last days of the Old Covenant would be like?" Yes. He does describe some of the features of that time.

Humanity will be immersed in the routine affairs of life. It will be like it was in the days of Noah. The world will be caught completely off-guard by the coming of Christ. People will be engaged in normal, routine occupations of life: farming, fellowship, marriage, etc. (Cf. Luke 17:28-30).

Judgment came upon Israel at a time of widespread indifference, normalcy, materialistic endeavors, when everyone was thoroughly involved in the pursuit of their earthly affairs and ambitions. Christ may come again to judge the world in a similar manner, but the context of Matthew 24 is the end of the Old Covenant. See vv. 40-41. When does God come in our lives? *At a time when His coming is the farthest thing from people's minds!* **Jesus uses two illustrations of this in Matthew 24:42-51**

- 1) Vv. 42-44 - Has a thief ever called your home to tell you when he planned on breaking in? Did he say, "Hey, I'm coming to steal everything you've got at about 3:30 a.m. Be sure you leave your back door unlocked!" Of course, Jesus is not comparing himself to the character of a thief but to the *coming* of a thief. Both a thief in the night and Jesus' coming are unannounced and unexpected: so be ready!
- 2) Vv. 45-51 - Watching does not mean sitting quietly and passively as you gaze into the skies. It means serving, being diligent to help others, obeying God. N.T. Wright contends that "being 'taken' in this context means being taken *in judgment*. There is no hint here of a 'rapture', a sudden 'supernatural' event which would remove individuals from *terra firma*. Such an idea," says Wright, "would look as odd, in these synoptic passages, as a Cadillac in a camel-train. It is a matter, rather, of soldiers coming in the night, or of enemies sweeping through a village or city and seizing all they can. If the disciples were to escape, if they were to be 'left', it would be by the skin of their teeth" (*Victory*, 366).

This completes our look at Matthew 24.