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MATTHEW 24:31: RAPTURE OR SECOND COMING?

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

Many non-pretribulationists contend that Matthew 24:31 teaches a posttribulational rapture. All agree that this passage teaches Christ's second coming. This means that the question revolves around whether Matthew 24:31 (Mark 13:27 its parallel passage) is a reference to the rapture or not. I contend that the rapture is not in view in this passage. The text reads as follows:

“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, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. (Matthew 24:29-31)

POSTTRIBULATIONAL POSITION

Popular posttribulational radio personality, Irwin Baxter, believes that the rapture and the second coming “are the same event” in Matthew 24:31.¹ “Matthew 24:29 teaches that the coming of the Son of man and the rapture are the same event,” contends Baxter. He arrives at this conclusion by comparing Matthew 24:29-31 to Christ's return in Revelation 19. In the discussion cited, Baxter does not refer to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, the undisputed rapture passage, as a baseline for defining the rapture.

Posttribulational rapture scholar, Dr. Robert Gundry, also equates the rapture with the second coming in Matthew 24:31. “Posttribulationists,” contends Gundry, “equate the rapture with the gathering of the elect by angels at the sound of the trumpet (Matt. 24:31).”² Unlike Irwin Baxter, Dr. Gundry does interact with the rapture passage (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). He says, “If we define the rapture strictly as a catching up, only one passage in the entire New Testament describes it. That passage is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.”³

DEFINITION OF THE RAPTURE

As noted earlier, Baxter does not even attempt to define the rapture. Apparently this allows Baxter flexibility to find the rapture in Matthew 24:31. As noted above, Dr. Gundry includes in his definition of the rapture “a catching up” from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Dr. Gundry wants to “broaden the definition to include a gathering or reception” from Matthew 24:31, etc.⁴ Since the present debate is whether or not Matthew 24:31 is a rapture passage, it would beg the question to include Matthew 24:31 in an a priori definition of the rapture.

1 Thessalonians 4:17 is the only undisputed passage describing the rapture event. Only in this passage is the Greek word *harpazô* (“caught up”) used, from which the word

rapture descends. Whatever else the rapture may include in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, it clearly consists of a translation of living believers and the simultaneous resurrection of dead saints.

COMPARISON OF 1 THESSALONIANS 4:17 AND MATTHEW 24:31

In an attempt to equate Matthew 24:31 and 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as referring to the same event, Dr. Gundry notes “parallel terminology in Paul’s Thessalonian discussion of the Church’s rapture, where we read of a trumpet, clouds, and a gathering of believers just as in the Olivet Discourse.”⁵ Indeed, there are some similarities between the rapture and the second coming. There are also some similarities between Christ’s first advent 2,000 years ago and His second advent. But all agree that they are not the same events. We know they are not the same because of the differences. In the case of comparing Matthew 24:31 and 1 Thessalonians 4:17 it is the differences that are important. Enough differences exist between the two passages to clearly conclude that they must be separate events.

Dr. Steven McAvoy points out that “the differences between Paul’s Thessalonian statements and Matthew 24:30-31 far outweigh any alleged similarities.”⁶ Dr. McAvoy continues:

Sproule asks,

Where does Paul mention the darkening of the sun (Matt. 24:29), the moon not giving its light (Matt. 24:29), the stars falling from the sky (Matt. 24:29), the powers of the heavens being shaken (Matt. 24:29), all the tribes of the earth mourning (Matt. 24:30), all the world seeing the coming of the Son of Man (Matt. 24:30), or God sending forth angels (Matt. 24:31)?⁷

Feinberg also notes the dissimilarities between the two accounts:

Notice what happens when you examine both passages carefully. In Matthew the Son of Man comes on the clouds, while in 1 Thessalonians 4 the ascending believers are in them. In Matthew the angels gather the elect; in 1 Thessalonians the Lord Himself (note the emphasis) gathers the believers. Thessalonians only speaks of the *voice* of the archangel. In the Olivet Discourse nothing is said about a resurrection, while in the latter text it is the central point. In the two passages the differences in what will take place prior to the appearance of Christ is striking. Moreover, the order of ascent is absent from Matthew in spite of the fact that it is the central part of the epistle.^{8 9}

In addition to the above differences, the order of events are different between the two passages. In 1 Thessalonians 4 believers are gathered in the air and taken to heaven, while in Matthew 24 they are gathered after Christ’s arrival to earth. “In order for Gundry to establish his view that Matthew 24:31 refers to the rapture, he must reconcile the dissimilarities; not simple point to a few similarities.”¹⁰ Thus, the

differences in the two passages support the pretribulational contention that they are speak of two distinct events.

WHO ARE THE ELECT?

I believe the elect in Matthew 24 is a reference to the Jewish remnant who will come to faith in the Messiahship of Jesus during the tribulation period. Commentators generally recognize that “elect” “may refer to Israel, to the Church, or to both.”¹¹ The context is the determinative factor in any attempt to discover which nuance the author intended. The contextual usage of Matthew supports the elect as a reference to Israel because of the Jewish orientation of the passage. “Such terms as the gospel of the kingdom (24:14), the holy place (24:15), the Sabbath (24:20), and the Messiah (24:23-24) indicate that Israel as a nation is in view,”¹² observes Dr. Stanley Toussaint. Dr. Renald Showers provides a more focused explanation:

The elect are the faithful, believing Israelite remnant in contrast with the unbelieving sinners within the nation. In Isaiah 65:7-16 God drew a contrast between these two groups and their destinies. In verse 9 He called the believing remnant “mine Elect,” and in verses 17-25 He indicated that in the future Millennium His elect remnant of the nation will be blessed greatly on the earth.¹³

Since the term “elect” is used three times in Matthew 24 (verses 22, 24, 31; see also Mark 13:20, 22, 27), it is most likely that the author uses it to refer to the same entity all three times. Dr. McAvoy says, “The rule of context precludes understanding ‘elect’ in 24:22, 24 as referring to Israel and then nine verses later as referring to the church. Without some indication of transition from one intended meaning to another ‘elect’ in 24:21 must mean the same as it does in 24:22, 24.”¹⁴

THE ANGELIC GATHERING

To me, the most convincing reason why Matthew 24:31 is not a rapture statement is found in the fact that this verse includes citations from Old Testament passages, specifically Deuteronomy 30:4. These references clearly support the notion that this angelic gathering, which was predicted in the Older Testament, references a regathering of saved Jews who need to be returned to the land of Israel in which they will live for a thousand years during Christ’s Kingdom. Instead, of using El Al airlines, the Lord will use angelic carriers to transport His people back to their land. What is the support for this view? Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum tells us the following about the use of Old Testament citations in Matthew 24:31:

The Matthew passage is a rather simple summary of all that the prophets had to say about the second facet of Israel’s final restoration. Its purpose was to make clear that the world-wide regathering predicted by the prophets will be fulfilled only after the second coming.¹⁵

Dr. Renald Showers has done an excellent job collecting evidence and arguing for this view.¹⁶ After noting that “from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other” means that “the elect will be gathered from all over the world at Christ’s coming,”¹⁷ Dr. Showers provides three lines of proof for his view as follows:

First, because of Israel’s persistent rebellion against God, He declared that He would scatter the Jews “into all the winds” (Ezek. 5:10, 12) or “toward all winds” (Ezek. 17:21). In Zechariah 2:6 God stated that He did scatter them abroad “as four winds of the heavens.” . . . God did scatter the Jews all over the world.

Next, God also declared that in the future Israel would be gathered from the east, west, north, and south, “from the ends of the earth” (Isa. 43:5-7). We should note that in the context of this promise, God called Israel His “chosen” (vv. 10, 20).

. . . Just as Jesus indicated that the gathering of His elect from the four directions of the world will take place in conjunction with “a great trumpet” (literal translation of the Greek text of Mt. 24:21), so Isaiah 27:13 teaches that the scattered children of Israel will be gathered to their homeland in conjunction with the blowing of “a great trumpet” (literal translation of the Hebrew). . . .

Gerhard Friedrich wrote that in that future eschatological day “a great horn shall be blown (Is. 27:13)” and the exiled will be brought back by that signal. Again he asserted that in conjunction with the blowing of the great trumpet of Isaiah 27:13, “There follows the gathering of Israel and the return of the dispersed to Zion.”

It is significant to note that Isaiah 27:13, which foretells this future regathering of Israel, is the only specific reference in the Old Testament to a “great” trumpet.

Although Isaiah 11:11-12 does not refer to a great trumpet, it is parallel to Isaiah 27:13 because it refers to the same regathering of Israel. In its context, this passage indicates that when the Messiah (a root of Jesse, vv. 1, 10) comes to rule and transform the world as an “ensign” (a banner), He will gather together the scattered remnant of His people Israel “from the four corners of the earth.”¹⁸

What Jesus describes in Matthew 24 and Mark 13 is the Jewish ingathering that will fulfill the prophetic aspects of the Feast of Trumpets for the nation of Israel. In fact, a prayer for this regathering of the children of Israel appears to this day in the Jewish Daily Prayer Book.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

It is quite clear that since the church is not mentioned in Matthew 24, then verse 31 cannot be a reference to the rapture of the church. Instead, as one studies the context and Old Testament references that our Lord alludes to, it becomes quite clear that He

speaks of an end time regathering of elect Israel in order to return them to the land for the Millennium. At Christ's first coming he wept over Jerusalem and expressed His desire to gather Israel to Himself "the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37). At His second coming, elect Israel will look upon Him whom they have pierced (Zech. 12:10) and say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!" (Ps. 118:26; Matt. 23:39). Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ This information is taken from the web site of Irwin Baxter at www.endtime.com, under the Question and Answer section dealing with the rapture. All subsequent quotes from Baxter are from the same source.

² Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), p. 135.

³ Robert H. Gundry, *First the Antichrist: Why Christ Won't Come Before the Antichrist Does* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), p. 71.

⁴ Gundry, *First the Antichrist*, p. 71.

⁵ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 135.

⁶ Steven L. McAvoy, "A Critique of Robert Gundry's Posttribulationism," Th. D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986, p. 136.

⁷ John A. Sproule, "An Exegetical Defense of Pretribulationism," Th. D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1981, p. 53.

⁸ Paul D. Feinberg, "Response: Paul D. Feinberg," in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Posttribulation?* by Richard R. Reiter, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 225.

⁹ McAvoy, "Critique of Gundry," p. 137.

¹⁰ McAvoy, "Critique of Gundry," p. 138.

¹¹ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 135.

¹² Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold The King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah, 1980), p. 277.

¹³ Renald Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come!* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel, 1995), p. 182.

¹⁴ McAvoy, "Critique of Gundry," pp. 140-41.

¹⁵ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah* (San Antonio: Ariel Press, 1982), p. 299.

¹⁶ For more information supporting this view see Showers, *Maranatha*, pp. 181-84.

¹⁷ Showers, *Maranatha*, p. 182.

¹⁸ Showers, *Maranatha*, pp. 182-83.

¹⁹ For this prayer see Showers, *Maranatha*, p. 183.