

# Posttribulationism Today

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 1

### The Rise of Posttribulational Interpretation

[John F. Walvoord, President, Dallas Theological Seminary, Editor, *Bibliotheca Sacra*.]

#### Eschatology As A Developing Science

In the history of the church, systematic theology has been a developing science. In this historical development, controversies in various areas of theology have followed, to some degree, the major divisions of systematic theology. In the early centuries the most important theological controversy related to the Scriptures themselves. Some in the postapostolic period, like the Montanists, claimed to have the same inspiration and authority as the apostles who wrote the Scriptures. The early church quickly recognized this as a heresy, and at the Council of Laodicea in 397, the canon was considered closed even though some apocryphal books were later recognized by the Roman Catholic Church.

With the establishment of the Scriptures as the basis of systematic theology, attention soon turned to the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Trinitarian controversies occupied the center of the stage. In 325 the approval of the Nicæan Creed, recognizing the full deity of Jesus Christ as a distinct person from the Father, set the stage for recognition of the doctrine of the Trinity as it is normally held in orthodoxy today. It was not until the Council of Constantinople in 381 that the Holy Spirit was given His rightful place. Subsequently, the church turned to the doctrine of sin and man, although the decision was less decisive as evidenced in the findings of the Council of Orange in 529.

It was not until the Protestant Reformation that the Augustinian concept of justification by faith was restored. With the withdrawal of the Protestant churches from the Roman Catholic Church, not only was soteriology, the doctrine of salvation by grace, firmly established, but important doctrines related to ecclesiology, such as the priesthood of the believer and the right of every Christian to be his own interpreter of Scripture under the guidance of the Spirit, became cardinal tenets of the Protestant Reformation.

In the history of the church, however, eschatology continued to be an unsettled doctrine. Although the early church for the first two centuries was predominantly chiliastic and held that the second advent of Christ would be followed by a thousand-year reign on earth, this interpretation was soon challenged with the rise of the Alexandrian school of theology in Egypt led by Clement of Alexandria and Origen. An attempt was made to harmonize systematic theology with Platonic philosophy. As this was possible only by interpreting Scripture in a nonliteral sense and regarding Scripture as one great allegory in which the apparent sense was not the real sense, much of the literal meaning of the Scripture was lost, including the doctrine of a literal millennium following the second advent.

The early church, as well as orthodox theologians since, regarded the Alexandrian school as heretical and outside the mainstream of biblical theology. The practical effect of the rise of this school of interpretation, however, was to destroy the premillennial interpretation of Scripture.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, however, with the rise of Augustine a consolidation of theology was achieved by separating eschatology from other areas of systematic theology. Two principles of interpretation were adopted by Augustine—a literal, historical, and grammatical interpretation of noneschatological passages,[1] Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: W. A. Wilde Co., 1950), p. 10. and a nonliteral or figurative interpretation of prophetic Scriptures.

[2] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1945), p. 3. The result was that while the Roman Church maintained many of the teachings of the Bible, it continued to use a nonliteral method of interpreting eschatology. Thus amillennialism became the accepted doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. With the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, the Reformers returned to Augustine and built on his method of interpretation of prophecy. The Protestant Reformers accordingly were amillennial and opposed premillennialism. similar views had been held by various individuals earlier, postmillennialism as it is held in modern times is usually attributed to Daniel Whitby (1638-1726).[6] Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 7th ed. (Philadelphia: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1902), p. 1014. This new view considered the rise of the church and the preaching of the gospel as eventually being triumphant and ushering in a golden age of a thousand years in which the church throughout the world would flourish. This thousandyear period would climax with the second advent of Christ, much as is taught in amillennialism.

After Whitby, varieties of postmillennialism arose, some being relatively biblical as illustrated in the nineteenth-century theologian, Charles Hodge,[7] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), 3: 790-880. and others identifying the optimism of postmillennialism with organic evolution which was espoused by liberal theologians such as Albrecht Ritschl,[8] Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macaulay (Clifton, NJ: Reference Book Publishers, 1966). Washington Gladden,[9] Richard D. Knudten, *The Systematic Thought of Washington Gladden* (New York: Humanities Press, 1968), pp. II R 17. and Walter Rauschenbusch.[10] Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1922), pp. 131-66. In some cases, postmillennialism became indistinguishable from amillennialism and the terms became almost interchangeable. In general, however, postmillennialism usually adopted a more literal view of the millennium and regarded it as a realistic golden age of spiritual triumph for the church on earth.

In the last century a new variation of millennial doctrine defined the millennial reign of Christ as referring to the intermediate state. This is usually attributed to the Continental theologians, Duesterdieck (1859) and Kliefoth (1874).[11] B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 643-64. It introduced the new view that the millennium is fulfilled in heaven, not on earth. This interpretation was especially applied to Revelation 20. In the light of various views of amillennialism and postmillennialism, which were evidence of dissatisfaction with these interpretations, premillennialism emerged as a live option.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Darwinian evolution began to penetrate the ranks of postmillenarians. Liberals hailed the theory of evolution, with its easygoing optimism, as the true divine method for bringing in the predicted golden age. Recognizing this as a departure from the faith, more conservative postmillenarians and amillenarians attempted to refute the new evolutionary concept. One of the means used was the calling of great prophetic conferences which were held in the last part of the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth.

As amillennialism and postmillennialism have little to offer by way of refutation of the concept of evolutionary progress, these prophecy conferences soon became dominated by premillennial interpreters. Many of the doctrines which later became an essential part of premillennial theology were introduced into the discussion, such as the restoration of Israel to the land, a coming time of literal tribulation and trouble on earth, a literal bodily return of Jesus Christ to the earth in His second advent, and a literal kingdom of a thousand years following the second advent. The renewed study of eschatology brought out in the open more than ever before the problem of principles of interpretation of Scripture.

The major question was whether Augustine was right that prophecy should be interpreted in a nonliteral sense. Premillenarians held that the point of departure which had led to amillennialism and postmillennialism was a faulty system of interpretation in which prophecy was made a special case and interpreted in a nonliteral sense. Accordingly, they went back to the early church Fathers who had been predominantly premillennial as their starting point and claimed to be the restorers of the true biblical faith of the early centuries of the church.

## The Hermeneutics Of Eschatology

The crucial issues which separated premillennialism from amillennialism soon became apparent. The question was whether

or not the Bible meant to prophesy literally a restoration of the nation Israel. Was Israel literally once again to return to their ancient land and be restored as a nation? Were the prophecies that heresy would increase, that evil would predominate at the end of the age, and that a great tribulation would ultimately emerge, to be interpreted literally?

Most important was the question as to whether or not the many Old Testament prophecies describing a glorious kingdom on earth where all nations would be under subjection to Christ and Israel would be prominent as a nation were destined to be literally fulfilled. Was there to be actually a thousand years during which Christ would reign on earth beginning with the second advent and the resurrection of saints and climaxing with the divine judgment on rebels? Was Satan actually going to be bound and inactive for the thousand years? If so, the premillenarians claimed, Christ must come before such a thousand-year period rather than at its end. Conservative amillenarians often conceded that if the prophecies were interpreted literally it would lead to such a doctrine, but they continued to insist that prophecy could not be taken literally.

In the process of discussing premillennialism as an emerging doctrine of the church, it is only natural that other questions should be raised, including the relationship of prophecies pertaining to a rapture or translation of the church and the question as to where this fits into the prophetic program. Amillenarians and postmillenarians merged this with the second advent of Christ, but a view soon surfaced among premillenarians that the coming of Christ for His church was a distinct event which, as a matter of fact, would occur before the time of great tribulation instead of at its close. Divergent views of pretribulationism and posttribulationism became major issues in prophecy which accompanied the new consideration of premillennialism as the proper view.

## Varieties Of Posttribulationism

In eschatology as a whole as well as in the controversies relating to the place of the rapture of the church in the sequence of events in the prophetic program, posttribulationism continued to be the majority view. It was universally held by liberal theologians who tended to take prophecy in a nonliteral sense. It also coincided with all forms of postmillennialism and amillennialism as their principle of interpreting prophecy in a nonliteral sense naturally led to this conclusion. It was only in premillennial interpretation that opposition to posttribulationism arose.

Within posttribulationism, however, a variety of explanations and interpretations have characterized the history of the doctrine. Although the early church in the first two centuries was premillennial, the postapostolic Fathers tended to identify their contemporary persecutions with the great tribulation immediately preceding the second advent. Although they usually linked this with the view that Christ's coming could occur at any time, they do not seem to have contemplated a period between the translation of the church and the second advent of Christ to set up His thousand year kingdom.[12] Adolph von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, 7 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1961), 1: 168. Accordingly, although their posttribulationism is quite different from most forms of posttribulationism that are current today, their view of the rapture of the church seems to have combined it with the second advent.

Most of the early church Fathers, however, made little effort to refine the doctrine and solve the seeming conflicts of their point of view. The problem of imminency of the rapture when events before the second advent remained unfulfilled does not seem to have caused concern. Quite a few of the early church Fathers in the first two centuries were silent on the whole problem, and it does not seem to have been a major issue. With the rise of amillennialism in the third century, there was little incentive to study the problem of posttribulationism, and there was little or no progress in the study of eschatology until the Protestant Reformation.

The Protestant Reformers, returning to Augustine, delivered the church from the doctrines of purgatory and other Roman inventions but do not seem to have raised any questions about the rapture of the church as a separate event. It was only when premillennialism began to demand a literal interpretation of prophecy and reexamine the prophetic program of Israel and other aspects of premillennialism that the question began to be raised whether or not the rapture, as a matter of fact, could be harmonized with the doctrines that declare that Christ will return to set up His kingdom.

In the last century a number of varieties of posttribulationism have emerged, some of them quite recent in their major tenets.

In general, they cover the-gamut of the possibilities.

Alexander Reese, in his *The Approaching Advent of Christ*,<sup>[13]</sup> Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1937). presents the most comprehensive classic defense of posttribulationism. He offers evidence that the resurrection of the church occurs at the same time as the resurrection of Revelation 20. Major emphasis is placed on terms like “appearing,” “the day,” “the end,” and “revelation” as technical terms that relate the rapture to the second coming as the terminus of the present age. Reese’s arguments have not been surpassed by other posttribulationists, but later writers offer other approaches.

J. Barton Payne, in his *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*,<sup>[14]</sup> J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962). advocates a return to what he says was the position of the early church, that is, a premillennial and posttribulational point of view which spiritualizes the tribulation and identifies it with the contemporary problems of Christianity. Comparatively few have followed Payne, however, although a tendency to spiritualize the period of tribulation is a general characteristic of posttribulationism.

A more popular form of posttribulationism has as its key doctrine that the church is the true Israel and includes the saints of all ages as is advocated by Alexander Reese<sup>[15]</sup> Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*. and Oswald Allis.<sup>[16]</sup> Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*. As the Scriptures, even from the premillennial point of view, clearly picture saints or a redeemed people in the period of future tribulation, this form of posttribulationism concludes that it is unquestionably true that the church will go through the tribulation. A variation of this makes both Israel and the church one as a covenant community who share the same eschatology.

In posttribulationism it is common to identify the doctrine with orthodoxy because it was held by the Protestant Reformers and the Roman theologian, Augustine. Holding that posttribulationism is the historic position of the church, posttribulationists label any other view as a departure from historic Christianity.

All the views previously mentioned consider the church already in the tribulation and identify the trials of the church through the centuries as the fulfillment of prophecies of a time of trouble preceding the second advent of Christ.

A futuristic school of interpretation among posttribulationism, however, has also emerged. One of the most prominent is George Ladd whose work, *The Blessed Hope*,<sup>[17]</sup> George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956). promotes the view that the great tribulation is still future. While other views of posttribulationism could conceivably be harmonized with the idea that Christ could return any moment, Ladd considers it inevitable that at least a seven-year period (described in Dan 9:27) separates the church today from the rapture and the second advent of Christ which are aspects of the same event. Although Ladd’s argument builds largely on the fact of the history of the doctrine and extols posttribulationism as the norm for orthodoxy thro’ugh the centuries, he introduces a new realism into the picture in adopting a literal future tribulation. His views have somewhat been qualified by his later writings, but in general he seems to retain a futuristic view of the great tribulation with its corresponding doctrine that Christ’s return could not be any day, but that it can only follow the years required to fulfill prophecies relating to the tribulation.

*BSac* 132:525 (Jan 75) p. 24

The most recent theory of posttribulationism has been advanced by Robert Gundry in his work, *The Church and the Tribulation*.<sup>[18]</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973). Gundry, following the lead of many premillenarians, distinguishes Israel and the church as separate entities and attempts a literal interpretation of many of the prophecies that deal with the end times. In advancing his theory he refutes most of the posttribulationists who have preceded him. Working with these premises he endeavors to establish a new doctrine of posttribulationism which he tries to harmonize with a literal interpretation of prophecy.

Gundry’s work poses a number of theological problems both for other posttribulationists and for contemporary pretribulationists. Because his arguments, in the main, are new and establish a new form of posttribulationism never

advanced before, his work is a milestone in the variety of interpretations which have characterized posttribulationism through the centuries and creates further need for study of posttribulationism in the history of the church. The articles which follow in this series will attempt to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of these various views of posttribulationism and the arguments advanced in support of conflicting posttribulational interpretations of prophecy.

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## Chapter 2

### Classic Posttributional Interpretation

[John F. Walvoord, President, Dallas Theological Seminary, Editor, *Bibliotheca Sacra*.]

### Contemporary Varieties of Posttribulationism

Although posttribulationism unites in refutation of pretribulationism, midtribulationism, and the partial rapture view, within posttribulationism itself at least four distinct schools of thought have emerged in the twentieth century. Although it is difficult to name them accurately they can be denominated: (1) classic posttribulationism; (2) semiclassic posttribulationism; (3) futuristic posttribulationism; (4) dispensational posttribulationism. Because classic posttribulationism is rooted most deeply in the history of the church and depends in large degree on the validity of the eschatology of the early church, it is the natural starting point in considering the varied and somewhat contradictory approaches to posttribulationism that are being advanced today.

Probably the most vocal, scholarly, and effective exponent of classic posttribulationism is J. Barton Payne. His recent major work, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*,<sup>[1]</sup> J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). has been considered by some a major contribution to contemporary prophetic interpretation. His earlier work, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*,<sup>[2]</sup> J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962). delineates in specific form his concept of classic posttribulationism. Payne reacts specifically against George Ladd's concept of a future tribulation presented in Ladd's *The Blessed Hope*<sup>[3]</sup> George Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956). and this author's *The Rapture Question*<sup>[4]</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Co., 1957). which defends pretribulationism. Although in the main a refutation of pretribulationism, his conclusions in large measure depend on his definition, support, and defense of classic posttribulationism. His point of view may be summarized under four propositions which will form the basis of this discussion: (1) the imminency of the second coming; (2) the posttributional second coming; (3) a nonliteral tribulation preceding the second coming; (4) a literal millennium following the second coming.

### The Second Coming as an Imminent Event

As indicated in the title of Payne's volume, the imminency of Christ's return is his major contribution to posttribulationism. By "imminency" he means that the rapture of the church and the second coming of Christ to the earth could occur any day at any moment. He summarizes his view in these words:

Finally, the "blessed hope," as it has been interpreted by the classical view of the church, is one the full accomplishment of which is imminent. Each morning, as the Christian casts his glance into the blueness of the sky, he may thrill with the prayerful thought, "Perhaps today!" Or, if his particular skies be shrouded in gloom, still the blackest moment comes just before the dawn. His very prayer of petition may be cut short by "a great earthquake" (Rev 6:12). Then, "Look up, and lift up your heads; because your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:28).<sup>[5]</sup> Payne, *The Imminent Appearing*, p. 161.

Having defined imminency as the possibility of Christ's return any day, Payne offers further explanation of his concept of imminency in the third chapter of his work. Here he states, "The term 'imminent' applies to an event 'almost always of

danger,' which is 'impending threateningly; hanging over one's head; ready to befall or overtake one; close at hand in its incidence; coming on shortly.'"[6] Ibid., p. 85. After citing Matthew 24:38-39, 42; 25:13 ; Revelation 22:7, 12; as compared to Revelation 3:11; 22:20 , he states, "It should therefore be clear at the outset that imminency does not mean that Christ's coming *must* be soon.... The day of Christ's appearing rests in the hands of God, 'which in its own times *he* shall show' (1 Tim 6:15)."[7] Ibid., p. 86. Payne goes on to say, "Does this mean then that it could be so soon as to happen right away, at any time? This is the thought that is associated with imminency, 'ready to befall or overtake one'; and the question of biblical eschatology is whether such a possibility does actually characterize Christ's second advent." [8] Ibid.

In his historical introduction to the subject of the appearing of Christ, Payne quotes the ante-Nicene fathers in support of his concept that the early church held to the doctrine of imminency. He states, "Prior to the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, the ancient church was characterized in general by two convictions respecting the sequence of events of Christ's second coming." [9] Ibid., p. 12. Payne summarizes these two convictions as follows: "The ante-Nicene fathers thus held two basic convictions relative to the second coming of Christ: that it was imminent, and that it was post-tribulational." [10] Ibid., pp. 15-16.

In support of the concept of imminency he states, "In the first place, it expected that the Lord could appear in the clouds in immediate connection with any day of contemporary life. The ante-Nicene fathers, in other words, were committed to the concept of the imminence of their Lord's return." [11] Ibid., pp. 12-13. Payne qualifies this, however, with the statement, "It must be observed at the outset, however, that imminency as herein defined does not mean that it had to be close at hand, only that it could be, that the establishment of Christ's eschatological kingdom was conceived of as capable of overtaking them at any time." [12] Ibid., p. 13.

In support of this he cites the First Epistle of Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians and Ignatius in Epistle to Polycarp in addition to other early fathers. [13] Ibid. In general, Payne establishes the fact that at least some of the early fathers expected the return of Christ momentarily even though how soon it might occur is not always clear. Whether or not all actually believed Christ could come at any day, the extent of the evidence, however, is that they commonly did expect Christ's coming soon, and a recurring note is the thought that they were in the very last days.

Payne goes on to point out that, with the advent of the Alexandrian School of Theology about A.D. 200 with its attack on the literalness of prophecy in general, the hope of imminency receded. Payne states, "Although the entire body of the early fathers, insofar as they expressed themselves, held to the above-outlined position of imminent post-tribulationism, there did appear, beginning at the close of the second century among the apologists who succeeded the apostolic fathers, a few exceptions." [14] Ibid., p. 17. As the church drifted into amillennialism, especially following Augustine, the doctrine of imminency became obscure. Payne concludes, "By medieval times there was thus exhibited a considerable deviation from the original expectancy of the imminent appearance of Christ." [15] Ibid., p. 21.

## **The Classical View That the Second Coming Is Posttribulational**

As already indicated, the classical view of posttribulationism claims that the early church not only held to the imminency of the second coming of Christ but also that it was posttribulational. The preponderance of evidence seems to support the concept that the early church did not clearly hold to a rapture as preceding the endtime tribulation period. Most of the early church fathers who speak on the subject at all considered themselves already in the great tribulation. Accordingly, Payne, as well as most other posttribulationists, takes the position that it is self-evident that pretribulationism as it is taught today was unheard of in the early centuries of the church. Accordingly, the viewpoint of the early church fathers is considered by practically all posttribulationists, whether adherents of the classical view or not, as a major argument in favor of posttribulationism. However, the fact that most posttribulationists today do not accept the doctrine of imminency as the early church held it qualifies the force of their argument against pretribulationism.

Most posttribulationists today actually reject the posttribulationism of the early church fathers. The fact is that Payne almost stands alone in his strict adherence to the viewpoint of the early church on prophecy. Not only have all amillenarians rejected the prophetic outlook of the early church, but most premillenarians also believe that the early church was mistaken

when they considered themselves already in the great tribulation.

Generally speaking, however, Payne has correctly analyzed the writings of the early church fathers in assuming that they should be classified as posttribulationist. While the force and cogency of this point of view may be debated, the historical fact is that the early church fathers' view on prophecy did not correspond to what is advanced by pretribulationists today except for the one important point that both subscribe to the imminency of the rapture. Most posttribulationists, while rejecting the concept of imminency prominent in the early church, accept the idea that the second coming of Christ is posttribulationist.

## **The Classical View of a Nonliteral Tribulation Preceding the Second Coming**

The most important problem facing classical posttribulationism is the necessity of explaining all prophetic events leading up to the second advent as either past or contemporaneous. The problems involved in such a point of view have led most contemporary posttribulationists away from the doctrine of imminency. By making the tribulation still future, posttribulationists allow a time period in which events predicted which have not yet been fulfilled can be fulfilled. The major problem of classic posttribulationism is to solve this problem of fulfillment of endtime prophecy.

In support of his position, Payne cites numerous Scriptures which support imminency and the concept of immediate expectation of the Lord's return. The Scriptures mentioned include many that relate to the second coming of Christ as well as those which speak specifically of the rapture. The presentation is confusing because verses are often included with little attention to their context or subject matter. Most expositors recognize that Scriptures relating to the rapture can be construed as presenting the event as imminent. It is also true that many passages relating to Christ's coming to set up His kingdom and to close the tribulation are presented as imminent for those living in the great tribulation. To put all these passages together, however, as proving that the second coming of Christ is imminent has not gained favor with most posttribulationists as well as those of other points of view.

While it is impossible to do justice to the discussion of Payne on this point, his extensive quotation of Scripture should be mentioned. In his discussion of "the time of the church's hope" he cites Isaiah 25:6-11; Matthew 24:29-31; Luke 17:24; Romans 8:18-21; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8; 2:1-2 ; Titus 2:12-13; Revelation 7:3-4; 14:3-4 ; 20:4-5 .[16] Ibid., pp. 53-65. He also discusses what he calls "contributory passages" and includes Isaiah 26:19-21; Daniel 12:1-2; Acts 1:11; Romans 11:15; 1 Corinthians 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17; 5:2-6 ; 1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 4:8; 1 Peter 1:6-7, 13; 5:4 ; and Revelation 2:25-26; 14:14-16 .

In support of imminency Payne mentions the following as "valid passages": Matthew 24:42-25:13 ; Luke 12:36-40; Romans 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Corinthians 1:7; Philippians 3:20; 4:5 ; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; Titus 2:12-13; James 5:7-8; Jude 21; and Revelation 16:15.[17] Ibid., pp. 95-102.

The problem of how to solve predicted events which have not taken place and which are scheduled to occur before the second coming does not go away easily simply by quotation of these many Scriptures. The problems surface immediately when certain questions are asked. A number of prophecies occur in Scripture such as Peter's predicted execution, the implication that a long time occurs before the first and second coming of Christ, and the prediction that Paul was to die. Prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem also are presented as preceding the second advent. In an extended discussion of this type of problem, Payne takes the position that while these were hindrances to imminency in the first century, they no longer existed as far as the early church fathers are concerned and certainly are no problem to us today. He also noted that it was not a practical problem for most of the early Christians as they were not aware of these predictions.[18] Ibid., pp. 90-91.

The more serious problems concern the prophetic program. One of these is the prophetic fulfillment of Daniel 9:27 predicting a final seven-year period and Daniel 12:9-12 in reference to the desecration of the temple. Payne solves this by applying it to the second century B.C. and holds that it is already fulfilled much in the style of many amillennialists.[19] Ibid., pp. 116-20. However, because Christ predicted the abomination of desolation as a future event, making a second century B.C. fulfillment impossible, Payne refers this to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In a word, Payne spiritualizes these

prophecies and does not expect literal fulfillment. His short dismissal of the possibility of future fulfillment is not convincing. is posttribulationism, that is, coming after events that describe the time of trouble preceding the second advent. (3) In order to preserve the imminency of the second coming of Christ, it adopts a nonliteral interpretation of the tribulation, finding the events either fulfilled in the past or in the contemporary situation. (4) In spite of almost a complete commitment to nonliteral interpretation of prophecies relating to the tribulation, the classic view holds with the early church fathers to a literal millennium following the second coming of Christ.

The probable reason why most conservative expositors, regardless of their eschatological position, have rejected classic posttribulationism is the inherent inconsistency of combining in one system a very literal interpretation of the last four chapters of Revelation while at the same time holding to an almost completely nonliteral interpretation of the preceding chapters. The problems inherent in this position also explain why most adherents of a completely nonliteral interpretation of the earlier chapters of Revelation are amillennial rather than premillennial and apply the nonliteral interpretation both to the tribulation and to the millennium which follows. Although many posttribulationists would undoubtedly agree with some of the arguments advanced by Payne against pretribulationism, contemporary posttribulationism has largely abandoned premillennialism on the one hand in favor of amillennialism and has abandoned the doctrine of imminency in favor of a deferred second coming of Christ.

Probably the most evident fault of classic posttribulationism is its logical inconsistency. The early church fathers were obviously wrong in believing they were already in the great tribulation and other events of the last days. It was partly for this reason that they held to imminency. Payne wants to ignore this error in judgment of the early church fathers and accept their conclusions anyway. A conclusion is no stronger than its premises, and if the early fathers were wrong in their premises, they were also wrong in their conclusions. Most posttribulationists, accordingly, have abandoned the precise interpretation of the early fathers and the classic view of posttribulationism.

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## Chapter 3

### Semiclassic Posttribulational Interpretation

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#### The Majority Posttribulational View

If the eschatology of liberal scholarship is excluded, probably the majority view of posttribulationism can be classified as semiclassic. Because of the great diversity of viewpoints among the posttribulationists themselves, it is difficult to establish broad categories such as this in the study of posttribulationism today. However, in contrast to the purely classical view of J. Barton Payne, described in the previous article, and the purely futuristic views of George E. Ladd and Robert H. Gundry, most contemporary posttribulationists can be designated as following a semiclassic view.

Within this broad category several subdivisions can be noted. First, some posttribulationists emphasize the contemporary character of the tribulation, and while not insisting that all predicted events prior to the second coming have been fulfilled, they assert as their major point that the church is already in the great tribulation. Hence, they argue it is folly to debate whether the church will be raptured before the tribulation. Second, some POSTribulationists in this school of thought who are contending that the church is already in tribulation find certain aspects of the tribulation still future. These unfulfilled aspects may be limited to certain major events which are yet to be fulfilled or major persons who are yet to be revealed. They assume, in contrast to the classic position, that the second coming could not occur any day. Third, some, like Alexander Reese, find a specific seven-year period still future, as anticipated in Daniel 9:27, but tend to find some of the predictions of the Book of Revelation as contemporary or past and, accordingly, are not, strictly speaking, futurists like George E. Ladd. When posttribulationists charge pretribulationists with not always agreeing among themselves on some details, they do not seem to realize the extent of diversity of opinion in their own ranks, even when subdivided into broad categories. In the analysis of semiclassic posttribulationism which follows, the main trends will be traced even though there may be those in this classification who hold views different from the broad trend.

#### The Semiclassic Claim To Be The Historical Interpretation

A major emphasis in most posttribulational presentations is the argument that they represent the historical view of the church and that pretribulationism arose only one hundred and fifty years ago. Alexander Reese, for instance, on the first page of his preface in reference to pretribulationism says, "These views, which began to be propagated a little over one hundred years ago in the separatist movements of Edward Irving and J. N. Darby, have spread to the remotest corners of the earth, and enlisted supporters in most of the Reformed Churches in Christendom, including the Mission field."<sup>[1]</sup> Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1937), p. xi. The argument that posttribulationism must be accepted as true because it has been the view of the entire church until recently has been emphasized and reemphasized. Long lists of great scholars who are posttribulational are often compiled, usually without regard as to whether they are premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial, as if that did not make any difference. Also, there is almost complete disregard of the varieties of opinion among these posttribulationists in arguments which support their conclusion. Posttribulationists advancing this view take for granted that the posttribulationism of today, and especially their particular type of it, is precisely what the church has held through the centuries.

The fact is that contemporary semiclastic posttribulationism differs from the historical view in a number of particulars. Secondcentury premillenarians interpreted contemporary events as identifying their generation as being in the end time. History has proved that they were wrong, and events that they identified as proof were not events of the end time. The same error can be observed in identifying contemporary posttribulationism with that of the Protestant Reformers. Some of the Reformers identified their contemporary events as being in the end time and looked for the coming of the Lord either momentarily or soon. Again their posttribulationism was based on an error in judgment. Most contemporary posttribulationists are more cautious and concede that many years may elapse before the second coming will be fulfilled.

The element of imminency is usually lacking in the semiclastic posttributational interpretation. While it is true that the postapostolic church did not understand or teach pretribulationism in the modern sense, neither did they teach posttribulationism as it is being advanced today. The fact is the early church, concerned with many other problems, did not resolve the tension between believing that Christ could come at any moment and the fact that many prophetic events had to be fulfilled before He could come again. Most modern interpreters believe that the early church fathers were quite immature in many areas of doctrine, as witnessed by the long centuries which elapsed before such doctrines as the Trinity, sin, and justification were carefully formulated. Because the early church, beginning with the third century, tended to abandon the literal interpretation of prophecy, their principles of interpretation did not permit any real advance in the understanding of the prophetic program. Each succeeding generation seems to have spiritualized prophecies to fit its own day, only to have history prove that they were wrong. The historical argument, while it is commonly advanced by posttribulationism, is accordingly an insufficient basis to determine the issues between pretribulationism and posttribulationism. The issue, as most conservative theologians agree, is the question concerning what the Bible teaches. The very fact that posttribulationists differ so radically in their interpretation of major elements of prophecy related to the end time should make clear to an impartial observer that they have not resolved their tensions and problems. As will be shown in later discussion, the reason for this is their lack of agreement on principles of interpretation as well as their exegesis of key passages.

## The Doctrine Of The Tribulation In Semiclastic Posttribulationism

Posttribulationists are not in agreement on the character, nature, and extent of the time of trouble preceding the second coming of Christ. While they hold that the church will go through the tribulation, they are in disagreement among themselves as to what the tribulation itself is. In general, they may be divided into three classifications: (1) those who hold that the tribulation extends throughout the entire age from the first coming of Christ to the second coming; (2) those who hold that the church is already in the tribulation but that the great tribulation is still future; (3) the futuristic school which, in contrast to the semiclastic interpretation, holds that the tribulation is completely future, usually identifying it as the last seven years preceding the second coming of Christ, based on a futuristic interpretation of Daniel 9:27 and Revelation 4-18 .

In holding that the church must go through the tribulation, most posttribulationists tend to identify the church with Israel or at least hold that the church and Israel are both members of the spiritual community. As even pretribulationists agree that there are saved people in the tribulation time, posttribulationists assume that they have proved that the church itself is in this period. A familiar text used by posttribulationists is Matthew 24:31, "And He shall send forth His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." The term *elect* is commonly taken as referring to the church and therefore because there are elect in the tribulation as proved by Matthew 24:31, they hold that the church is in the tribulation. Norman S. MacPherson, for instance, says, "There is nothing here to indicate who the *elect* are, although there is every likelihood that the term refers to the Church, ..." [2] Norman S. MacPherson, *Triumph through Tribulation* (Otego, NY: First Baptist Church, 1944), p. 8. Alexander Reese goes a step further and says it is "supreme rubbish" to argue whether the *elect* is equivalent to the church. [3] Reese, *Approaching Advent*, p. 207. Reese, of course, begs the whole question in assuming what he is trying to prove. Everyone agrees that the saved of all ages are the elect. The question is whether the term *church* and particular expressions like *the body of Christ* include all the elect. In the passage cited, some take the word *elect* to refer to Israel as an elect nation.

All agree that there are elect individuals in the great tribulation, but posttribulationists tend to assume without proof that this is identical in meaning to the church. While the word *church* is used to indicate a congregation or a physical assembly of people in both the Old and New Testaments, there is not a single instance in the entire Bible where the word *church*, as

indicating a body of saints, is ever used in a passage dealing with the tribulation. It is this crucial point which posttribulationists fail to take into account. There will be a gathering of the elect at the end of the tribulation, but Matthew does not indicate anything concerning its nature, and the purpose of the gathering as it relates to the introduction of the millennial kingdom. The strong, dogmatic statements of posttribulationism do not change the fact that Matthew does not mention either rapture or resurrection in this passage.

The greatest confusion of posttribulationists, however, is in their concept of the tribulation itself. George L. Rose holds that the great tribulation began with the apostolic period. He states, “The records left us in the book of The Acts of the Apostles leaves no room to doubt that ‘tribulation’ began almost as soon as the church was born....”[4] George L. Rose, *Tribulation till Translation* (Glendale, CA: Rose Publishing Co., 1942), p. 68. Rose goes on to point out that in Acts 8:1-3 there was “great persecution” of the church, and he holds that “great persecution” is the same as “great tribulation” and that the same word for tribulation is used in Matthew 24:21 in speaking of the “great tribulation.” According to Rose, the church of course goes through the great tribulation because it is already in the great tribulation.

Fromow, in a similar way, holds that the church is already in the great tribulation. “The Church is *already* passing through ‘the Great Tribulation.’”[5] George H. Fromow, *Will the Church Pass through the Tribulation?* (London: Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, n.d.), p. 2. Fromow goes on to say:

This term *Great* embraces the whole period of the Church’s course on earth and should not be confined to the final three and one-half years or the second half of Daniel’s seventieth week of intensive tribulation. It began with the first saints after the Fall, includes all who washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb until the Second Advent of Christ. [6] *Ibid.*

Fromow begins the great tribulation with Adam instead of with the early church. In holding this position, he ignores the plain teaching of Scripture that the great tribulation is the last three and one-half years preceding the second coming of Christ, as brought out in Daniel 12 where it is defined as a period of approximately twelve hundred and ninety days and as it is defined in the Book of Revelation as a time of forty-two months (Rev 13:5). This is why Christ used the great tribulation as the specific sign indicating that the second coming of Christ was near (Matt 24:15-22). The problem here, as it frequently is in posttribulationist interpretation, is that the argument is based on a nonliteral interpretation of prophecy in which expressions like “the great tribulation” are spiritualized. All agree that the saints have had problems and tribulation since the beginning of the human race. The Bible teaches, however, that these present trials are not to be confused with the great tribulation which is declared to be unprecedented and therefore unique, which will close the end of the age preceding the second coming (Dan 12:1; Matt 24:21).

In contrast to the position that the church is already in the great tribulation, Alexander Reese definitely advances the concept that the seven-year period predicted by Daniel 9:27 as preceding the second advent is still future. In an extended discussion, he supports a literal view of this last seven-year period as being yet future. He states, “...the eschatological character of the Seventieth Week is assumed throughout this volume....”[7] Reese, *Approaching Advent*, p. 30. On the basis of his strong stand for a future period, Alexander Reese could be classified as a futurist like George E. Ladd. However, in his treatment of the Book of Revelation dealing with the end-time trouble, he tends to support at least some of the findings of the historical school (which believes that the fulfillment of the seals is in some sense already under way), although he does not accept what he refers to as “the extravagances of the Historical School....”[8] *Ibid.*, p. 33. retributionists, of course, would agree with Reese that the last seven years preceding the second coming are still future.

Reese is in error, however, in holding that the futuristic view of the last seven years was that which was held by the early church fathers. As J. Barton Payne has brought out, the early church fathers thought they were already in the period, and that is why they did not give consideration to a possible pretribulationist interpretation. They tended to identify their persecutions with the persecution of the great tribulation. Like the early church fathers, Martin Luther also held that the church was already in the great tribulation. Luther wrote, “The last day is at hand. My calendar has run out. I know nothing more in the Scriptures.”[9] Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *Luther’s Works*, 56 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 54:134. This diversity of opinion among the semiclassic posttribulationists should make clear that posttribulationism, as it is held by this

school of thought, is not the same as that held by the early church fathers, and their constant assertion that they are in the tradition of the time-honored interpretation is only partially true.

The viewpoint of Reese, of course, also pinpoints the crucial question as to whether the rapture of the church is imminent. Rose and Fromow (with Martin Luther) held that though we are already in the great tribulation, the rapture could occur any day. And at least some of the early church fathers believed this also. But Reese, believing that the tribulation is yet future, cannot hold to the imminent rapture. In fact, he leaves without explanation why the rapture is uniformly presented as an imminent event in the New Testament.

The semiclassic view, while it is probably the majority view of posttribulationists, does not resolve the major problems which posttribulationism faces in interpreting the New Testament. It is evident by their various views of the tribulation itself that they are almost in complete confusion as to what they mean by the church going through the great tribulation. It is also evident that they are using differing methods of interpretation, some of them almost completely spiritualizing the tribulation and others, like Reese, taking it more literally.

While they argue against the idea that the Bible does not place the church in this time of great tribulation, their arguments always fall short of proof and frequently are circular in that they are assuming what they are trying to prove.

The basic problem of posttribulationism is that they have not agreed among themselves whether or not to interpret prophecy literally, and the great majority do not use the literal method when it would teach a pretribulation rapture. They also differ among themselves on the important question as to whether or not prophecy should be interpreted as teaching a future, literal millennium. Again and again, in examining posttribulation arguments, one is struck by their lack of uniformity in interpreting prophecy in a literal sense.

The fact remains, when all the evidence is sifted, that posttribulationists have yet to prove that the body of Christ is mentioned in any passage dealing with the great tribulation itself or the entire seven-year period leading up to the second coming. In view of the detailed prophecies that deal with this period, with Revelation 4-18 presenting a graphic picture of this end-time period, it is most strange that there should be no mention of saints who can be identified as belonging to the church. This is especially strange in view of the fact that Revelation 2-3 deals specifically with the seven churches of Asia.

## **Sequence Of Events Related To The Second Advent**

Another major problem of posttribulationism is that in the sequence of events relating to the second coming, there is no proof of a rapture of living saints or a resurrection of the church, the body of Christ. In the key passages on the second coming, as in Matthew 24, Jude, and Revelation 19, there is no mention of either rapture of living saints or resurrection of the church. It is most impressive that when resurrection is mentioned in Revelation 20:4, it is specifically limited to the tribulation saints as contrasted to the church. If the tribulation saints were a part of the church, why was not the expression "the dead in Christ" used as in 1 Thessalonians 4? The fact that this group is singled out for resurrection, as if they were a special body of saints, points to the conclusion that the church had been previously raptured.

Posttribulationists also have never resolved the pressing question as to why there is a rapture at the second coming. If, as a matter of fact, the purpose of Christ is to establish His saints in the millennial kingdom, why would saints meet Christ in the air at the rapture if they are going to return immediately to the earth as the posttribulationists teach? Why would it not be preferable for the church to go into the millennium in their natural bodies as the Scriptures make clear other saints will do. The omission of any reference to rapture of living saints or to the resurrection of the church as the body of Christ specifically in the events related to the second coming of Christ to the earth, while an argument from silence, is a very impressive one. How strange that such an important doctrine should be omitted from Scriptures that are obviously detailing the major events of the second advent. While the Old Testament saints are especially mentioned as in Daniel 12:2 and the tribulation saints are mentioned in Revelation 20:4, the church, the body of Christ, is not included in these resurrections.

Further, there is no evidence that any saints living on earth at the second coming of Christ are translated at the time Christ

comes back to set up His kingdom. It is rather clear to premillenarians at least that saints on earth at that time will enter the millennium in their natural bodies and populate the millennial earth. Many exegetical problems face the posttribulationists in their attempts to establish biblical proofs for their conclusions. These will be discussed more at length in the examination of the overall presentation of posttribulationists. Next, however, the particular view of the futuristic school and the new posttribulational dispensational interpretation of Robert H. Gundry need to be examined as major contributions to recent posttribulationism.

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# Posttribulationism Today

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 4

### Futurist Posttribulational Interpretation

[John F. Walvoord, President and Professor of Systematic Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary, Editor, *Bibliotheca Sacra*.]

With the emergence of premillennialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a relatively new view of posttribulationism was advanced which can be called the futurist view. In contrast to posttribulationism which characterized amillennialism and the Protestant Reformers who considered themselves already in the tribulation, the new view contended that the last seven years of Daniel's prophecy of Israel's program revealed in Daniel 9:24-27 should be considered as still future. In harmony with this position, it was often also contended that Revelation 4-18 describes a future rather than an historic situation. The leading twentieth-century exponent of the futurist view is George E. Ladd who sets forth his position in his work *The Blessed Hope*, published in 1956.

#### The Premises of Futurist Posttribulationism

As illustrated in Ladd, futurist posttribulationism is built on the premise of premillennialism. He states, "One thing should be emphasized: the author would affirm his belief in the personal, premillennial second advent of Jesus Christ. He is looking for His coming; it is his Blessed Hope." [1] George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), p. 13.

In adopting premillennialism, Ladd also holds to a futurist view of the Book of Revelation. Although he deviates in some minor respects from the futurist view of that book, in general he follows the concept that there is yet ahead a seven-year period climaxing in a great tribulation which will fulfill literally the prophecies of the Old and New Testaments that describe this time of trouble immediately preceding the second coming of Christ. In taking this interpretation, Ladd assumes the authority and accuracy of prophecy and usually interprets it literally, although there are some notable exceptions to this rule.

The premises of Ladd's position, accordingly, require him to turn away from historic amillennialism as held by Augustine and later embraced by the Protestant Reformers. Ladd offers a relatively new view of posttribulationism which differs in major aspects from that held by the early church as well as by the Reformed theology. His major point of agreement with them, however, is that he places the rapture as occurring at the second coming of Christ after the time of tribulation.

In rejecting pretribulationism, Ladd also rejects dispensational interpretation although he distinguishes Israel from the church in some passages. In others he rejects a distinction, holding that promises given to Israel in the Old Testament should be interpreted as having a dual fulfillment, that is, fulfilled both in the church and in Israel. Ladd recognizes that dispensationalism naturally leads to pretribulationism, and therefore he devotes a chapter to a refutation of dispensationalism.

In general, his arguments for posttribulationism are well presented in a persuasive way, and he attempts to avoid any unfair or discourteous treatment of those with whom he disagrees. His approach is that pretribulationism is a new doctrine not advanced until the early nineteenth century, in contrast to posttribulationism which is the traditional and historic position of the church.

# The Historical Argument for Posttribulationism

As pointed out in an earlier review of Ladd's *The Blessed Hope*,<sup>[2]</sup> John F. Walvoord, "A Review of *The Blessed Hope* by George E. Ladd," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 113 (October 1956): 289-307. Some of this previously published material is adapted and used in this article. The first third of his book is devoted to the historical argument for posttribulationism., although the work is introduced as "A Biblical Study of The Second Advent and The Rapture." Ladd himself says, "Let it be at once emphasized that we are not turning to the church fathers to find authority for either pre- or posttribulationism. The one authority is the Word of God, and we are not confined in the strait-jacket of tradition."<sup>[3]</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 19. theology. While many seem to be specifically premillennial, a difficult matter like pretribulationism could not be settled in a context where they erroneously believed they were already in the great tribulation. The early premillennialism of the first two centuries was soon engulfed by the amillennialism which arose in the third and fourth centuries. Amillennialism with its spiritualization of prophecy provided no basis for considering a matter like pretribulationism. It was not until the Protestant Reformation that the authority of Scripture and the imminency of Christ's return were once again firmly recognized. It was not until premillennialism became a major factor in the church in the nineteenth century that pretribulationism could even be considered.

The often-repeated charge that Darby secured his pretribulationism from Edward Irving has never been actually documented although they arose about the same time. One can hardly account for the wide acceptance of pretribulationism by Plymouth Brethren, who were devoted students of the Bible, to the offering of this view by a person who had no reputation for orthodoxy. A more cogent explanation is that pretribulationism arose as a refinement of premillennialism based on literal interpretation of prophecy which made it difficult to harmonize the doctrine of the rapture with the second coming of Christ to set up His kingdom. Most pretribulationists obviously base their views on the Bible, not on the historic background of the doctrine.

In his treatment of the history of the doctrine, Ladd is right in pointing out that pretribulationism was not the unanimous position of premillennialism in the nineteenth century. Much of his chapter dealing with the history of pretribulationism recounts those who abandoned pretribulationism for posttribulationism, with the implication that pretribulationism does not stand up to careful study. However, what this proves is that the pretribulationists did not know why they were pretribulationists. The argument that there was a broad trend away from pretribulationism is refuted by Ladd's own admission that pretribulationism has wide acceptance and current vitality as a doctrine. Undoubtedly, there are conversions both ways. If pretribulationism was not known until 1825, certainly there must be some doctrinal basis for its widespread acceptance at the present time.

On the basis of the documentation which Ladd offers, he concludes that the early church was posttribulational, that pretribulationism arose in the nineteenth century, and that some who accepted pretribulationism later departed from it. His conclusion that, therefore, pretribulationism is unscriptural remains the question.

## The Argument from Vocabulary of the Blessed Hope

In chapter three of his presentation, Ladd takes the position that the three Greek words for the rapture, *coming* or *presence*, *appearing*, and *revelation*, are technical words that must refer to one event only, that is, the second coming after the tribulation. This is a broad assumption which is faulty in hermeneutics as well as in exegesis, and is an error that is sometimes held also by pretribulationists. The basic rule for the interpretation of any word in the Bible must be its context. Obviously, words like *coming*, *appearing*, and *revelation* are not in themselves technical words, and if they are used in a technical sense in the Bible it must be sustained by an examination of every reference.

Some pretribulationists have attempted to identify some of these terms with the rapture and others with the second coming. Most expositors, whether pretribulational or posttribulational, however, hold that these words are not technical words in themselves and must be interpreted by the context in which they appear. If the first coming and the second coming of Christ were both referred to as "comings," it would not prove that the two comings were the same coming. Likewise, the use of the same terms for the rapture and the second coming do not make them the same event. These words are general words and

Ladd's entire chapter three begs the question, that is, it assumes what he is trying to prove. If the Scriptures were attempting to present a pretribulation rapture, how else could they do it without using the same words?

The argument on terminology is continued in chapter four where he deals with the subject "The Tribulation, the Rapture, and the Resurrection." The argument here turns on the lack of reference to the rapture in important passages dealing with the second coming of Christ. He discusses Matthew 24:4-14; 2 Thessalonians 2; and Revelation 8-16 . He concludes:

Our survey of these three great passages which set forth the coming of Antichrist and the Great Tribulation shows clearly that none of them asserts that the Church is to be raptured at the beginning of the Tribulation. When such a doctrine is attributed to these Scriptures, it is an inference and not the assertion of the Word of God.[5] Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 77.

One wonders how such an argument can be offered soberly because it is so obviously based on an illogical premise. Two of the three passages are admittedly dealing with the second coming of Christ after the tribulation. The fact is that they do not talk about the rapture at all because no rapture occurs in connection with it. Second Thessalonians 2 deals with the rapture in verse one and with the second coming in verse eight , but this does not make them the same event. The problem is Ladd's, not that of the pretribulationist. The silence about the rapture in two of the passages points to the conclusion that the rapture does not occur at the second coming.

The fact is that none of the passages dealing with Christ's coming after the tribulation ever includes a reference to the translation of living saints. Even Ladd, while not referring to it in this chapter, later admits, "nor does the Word of God explicitly place the Rapture at the end of the Tribulation." [6] *Ibid.*, p. 165. He nevertheless contends, "if a pretribulation rapture is a Biblical doctrine, it ought to be clearly set forth in the Scriptures which prophesy the Rapture of the Church." [7] *Ibid.*, p. 77. Ladd does not seem to realize that the same argument holds against the posttribulationist point of view. Why is not a posttribulation rapture "clearly set forth in the Scriptures which prophesy the Rapture of the Church?" If pretribulationist doctrine is based on an inference, so is posttribulationism.

It is noteworthy that in his entire discussion, Ladd practically ignores the three principal Scriptures revealing the rapture, that is, John 14:3; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. If Ladd is going to deal with the biblical content of the rapture, why does he ignore the principal passages? The answer is, of course, that there is no explicit teaching of posttribulationism in these passages and it does not advance his argument.

In discussing the word *resurrection*, Ladd refers specifically to Revelation 20:4 where there is a resurrection that is obviously posttribulationist. Ladd here begs the question and rejects categorically the concept that there can be any other resurrection before the first resurrection. He argues, therefore, that the rapture must occur at the second coming.

The idea that the first resurrection can be in more than one stage is taught in 1 Corinthians 15:23-24. Three stages of the resurrection of the saints are included: Christ, first; those at His coming, second; and those at the end, third. While the third resurrection can be debated, as it is not clear whether it refers to a resurrection of the saints at the end of the millennium or refers to the resurrection of the wicked, this passage clearly distinguishes the resurrection of Christ from the resurrection of the saints and declares that they are stages. To this could be added Matthew 27:52-53, which speaks of a token resurrection of saints immediately after the resurrection of Christ. The fact is that the resurrection at the rapture and the resurrection of the tribulation saints in Revelation 20:4 are not the "first" in the sense that no resurrection occurred before. They are first only in the sense that they occur first or before the final resurrection, which is the resurrection of the wicked at the end of the millennium. Actually, the order of resurrections are Christ first, then the resurrection of Matthew 27, then the resurrection of the rapture, and then the resurrection of the tribulation dead. To this should be added the resurrection of Old Testament saints which even pretribulationists place at the end of the tribulation. In other words, Ladd is once again assuming what he is trying to prove, namely, that the rapture and its attendant resurrection occur at the same time as the resurrection of the tribulation saints. What he overlooks is the fact that in Revelation 20:4 the specific resurrection refers only to tribulation saints, not to anyone else. The fact is that Ladd is inferring that the rapture occurs after the tribulation but has not proved it.

## **Is Posttribulationism a Valid Inference?**

In chapter five Ladd faces the problem that posttribulationism is an inference. He approaches it, however, from the question as to whether pretribulationism is a valid inference. The fact that a whole chapter is devoted to this is most significant as it is an admission that this is a vulnerable point in the posttribulational argument. While it is not possible to deal with all of his presentation, the salient points can be discussed.

Ladd concedes at the outset: “We will admit that even if Scripture did not explicitly affirm a pretribulation rapture, it is possible that the totality of scriptural data would demand such a conclusion; and in this case, it would be a valid inference.”[8] *Ibid.*, p. 89. In the discussion which follows, he offers a comprehensive refutation of arguments commonly used by pretribulationism. In other words, his method is to attack pretribulationism rather than to support posttribulationism.

The important question of the usage of the word *church* is handled only briefly, although it is a major consideration. He admits that the word *church* is not found in any tribulation passage but replies that the word is never used in the Book of Revelation “to designate the Church in its totality.”[9] *Ibid.*, p. 98. This, however, is not the real point. The burden of proof is on the posttribulationist to prove that the church is in the tribulation. If even a local church could be found in the period, it would be a point in favor of posttribulationism. Ladd, however, like most posttribulationists, passes over this point hurriedly because actually posttribulationism has no answer to this difficulty in their system. When it comes right down to it, they lack any positive proof that the church—the ecclesia—is ever found in the tribulation period or, for that matter, is indicated in the sequence of events related to the second coming to set up Christ’s kingdom. As this is a key doctrine of pretribulationism, his rather weak and inadequate treatment of this problem is a defect in his argument. In contrast he devotes pages to indecisive questions.

In dealing with the question as to whether pretribulationism is a valid inference, Ladd finds it appropriate to ignore one of the most important pretribulation arguments for the necessity of an interval.[10] Cf. John F. Walvoord, “Premillennialism and the Tribulation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 112 (April 1955): 97-106. Pretribulationists have often pointed out that if every living saint is raptured at the time of the second coming this would, in itself, separate all saints from unsaved people and would leave none to populate the millennial earth. Ladd does not deal with this problem at all. Some of his fellow posttribulationists, such as Rose in his book *Tribulation til Translation* and Gundry in his recent work *The Rapture and the Tribulation*, do face this problem. Both postulate a second chance for those not saved at the time of the second coming. According to them there is a time period between the rapture and the beginning of the millennium during which people can still come to Christ. Rose puts this in a forty-day period between the rapture and the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25. The only posttribulational answer to the problem which faces premillenarians in regard to populating the millennial earth is to give a second chance to those not saved and, therefore, not raptured at the rapture. However, the Scriptures do not reveal such a second chance. Ladd’s silence on the whole matter seems to indicate he does not have a solution to this major problem of posttribulationism.

## **The Argument from Commands to “Watch”**

In supporting his futuristic view of posttribulationism, Ladd devotes considerable attention to various Greek words used in the New Testament to indicate the attitude of watchfulness. His point is to prove that the idea of the imminency of the Lord’s return is not involved. Here his fallacy is that he attempts to make a general word a technical word, much as Reese and others have done. This violates the basic rule of interpretation that a word must be considered in its context. In some cases, the context is clearly in reference to the second coming of Christ to establish His kingdom. In other cases, it is in connection with the rapture. The important point is that each of the various exhortations to watch for the Lord’s coming has its own context. In some cases the context has to do with the return after the tribulation and, obviously, refers to people living at that time. The context in such instances makes clear, as in Matthew 24-25, that watching for the Lord’s return has special pertinence *after* the signs appear but not before them. By contrast, however, where the rapture is clearly in view, no signs are given but the believers are exhorted to look for the Lord’s return itself (cf. John 14:3; 1 Cor 15:51-52; 1 Thess 4:13-18). It may be conceded that some pretribulationists have overdone the argument based on these exhortations, but the similarity of expressions for expectancy of the rapture and the Lord’s return after the tribulation does not prove that the two events are one and the same. Both are events to be expected, even if the expectancy may differ according to the context.

## Wrath or Tribulation?

In a separate chapter, Ladd deals with the question as to whether divine wrath and tribulation are one and the same, and rightly concludes that the church cannot experience divine wrath although the church may experience tribulation. Most pretribulationists will concede this point. Ladd's argument, however, passes over the main point in the distinction as it is commonly presented by pretribulationists, and the real issue is avoided rather than faced. The point is not that the church will escape the wrath of God, but that it will escape the *time* of the wrath of God. As illustrated in the promise to the church at Philadelphia: "I will also keep thee from the *hour* of temptation, which will come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth" (Rev 3:10, italics added). It is also indicated in 1 Thessalonians 5, that Christians belong to the time designated as "the day" in contrast to "the night" in which the wrath will come. That the wrath of God is only at the end of the tribulation is refuted by the fact that it is mentioned in Revelation 6:17, that is, early in the period.

That the church will experience tribulation throughout its course is conceded by all pretribulationists. The question is whether the church will go through that specific time designated in Scripture as the great tribulation. It is noteworthy that Ladd does not deal adequately anywhere in his volume with the great theme of the tribulation although he evidently accepts a literal view of it. The characteristics of judgment of that period are such that they will affect both saved and unsaved, namely, such judgments as earthquakes, pestilence, war, famine, and stars falling from heaven. His argument that God will save the church in the tribulation as he saved Israel out of the judgments that fell on Egypt is its own refutation. No Israelites died in the plague. By contrast, as Ladd himself admits, the tribulation will feature the most awful persecution of saints ever to have occurred in the history of the church as supported by the multitude of those martyred in Revelation 7 who are said to come out of the great tribulation. While it is true that God can protect those whom He wishes and does protect the 144,000, the Scriptures make clear that the majority of those who trust Christ in the end time will seal their testimony with their own blood. The whole concept of the saints going triumphantly through the tribulation is not supported by the facts, as only a small portion of them will survive.

## Relation of Posttribulationism to Dispensationalism

Although the recent work by Robert Gundry attempts to support the dispensational interpretation of Scripture while maintaining posttribulationism, his work is an anomaly, and he is the first in the history of the church to attempt this approach to posttribulationism.

By contrast, Ladd devotes a whole chapter showing that pretribulationism is built on dispensationalism, and if dispensationalism is proved to be incorrect, pretribulationism falls with it.

Ladd introduces his chapter attacking dispensationalism as the foundation for pretribulationism with these words:

In this brief chapter, we shall deal with a most important reason used by pretribulationists for refusing to apply the prophecies about the Great Tribulation to the Church. It is so important that it may be called the major premise of dispensationalism. It goes back to J. N. Darby, and is a method of handling the Scriptures which B. W. Newton, one of the earliest and most learned of the Brethren, called "the height of speculative nonsense."<sup>[11]</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 130.

In his discussion of dispensationalism, Ladd departs somewhat from his usual scholarly approach and accuses dispensationalists of holding interpretations which no dispensationalist would support. He defines dispensationalism as "the method of deciding in advance which Scriptures deal with the Church and which Scriptures have to do with Israel, and then to interpret the passages concerned in the light of this single 'division' of the Word."<sup>[12]</sup> Ibid. Dispensationalism, however, is not a premise seized on arbitrarily but a result of the application of literal interpretation of Scripture which all conservatives recognize is the norm for interpreting the Bible. A literal interpretation of passages dealing with the church and passages dealing with Israel indicate a distinct program, even though there are some similarities. Therefore, dispensationalists conclude that there have been various rules of life in Scripture and that it is not proper to apply Scriptures relating to one program to another without sufficient basis.

While it has not been possible to deal with all of Ladd's arguments in support of his conclusions, it is a fair judgment to say that his opposition to dispensationalism is a major cause for his posttribulationist view, and that this is normally the case for most posttribulationists. If his premise is correct—that dispensationalism which distinguishes Israel and the church is not a biblical method of interpretation—then Ladd may also be correct in arriving at his posttribulationist conclusion. Pretribulationism, however, is clearly based on literal interpretation, which holds that God's program for Israel and His program for the church are not identical.

## **The Posttribulationist Concept of the Blessed Hope**

Posttribulationists are not at all agreed as to how the blessed hope fits into the prophetic program except that they always relate it to the second coming of Christ. Many will agree with Ladd's concluding chapter in which he expresses the opinion that we should not be so involved in the controversy between pre- and posttribulationism that we neglect our defense of the literalness of the second coming of Christ and the millennium which follows.

In his treatment of the blessed hope, however, it is most significant that Dr. Ladd does not expound even briefly the major passages on the blessed hope in the Bible, namely John 14:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; and 1 Corinthians 15:51-58. Instead he quotes an unknown author who uses Titus 2:11-14 to exhort to godly living in expectancy of the Lord's return. Ladd denies that the main force of this passage has to do with the Lord's return and also denies that the passage deals with the rapture. This is pure dogmatism. It does not seem to have occurred to Ladd that the glorious appearing here could very well be the rapture rather than the second coming as it has only believers in view, and to deny that believers will see Christ in His glory at the rapture is to deny the obvious.

It is unfortunate that Ladd repeats the libel that pretribulationism discourages worldwide missions. The facts are that many aggressive missionary organizations are pretribulationist in their position and anyone else who uses the pretribulationist point of view as an argument against missions is certainly violating Scripture. In this, pretribulationists will agree with Ladd while disagreeing that it is an argument against pretribulationism.

In reading the final chapter of Ladd's presentation, it is rather amazing how little is said about the blessed hope itself. Here the problem is that a posttribulationist rapture is difficult to harmonize with "the blessed hope" if the church must go through the great tribulation, and many, if not most, of the church is martyred. It is hardly a blessed hope that those who survive will be raptured without dying. Far better it would be for them if they had lived out a normal life in a period prior to the rapture and had gone to heaven through death rather than living through the great tribulation. It is rather singular in most posttribulationist works that they do not recognize the force of this problem in their own system.

It is also notable that Ladd does not give any reasonable sequence of prophetic events relating to the second coming except that he merges the rapture with the second coming. He does not discuss the problems that this causes premillennialism in regard to populating the millennial earth. He passes over Matthew 25:31-46 without dealing with the problems of posttribulationism. For many pretribulationists, one of their principal difficulties with the posttribulationist view is that it does not resolve the problems that a merger of the rapture and the second coming create. If posttribulationism is to be credible, its proponents must not dodge their problems but face them.

Ladd's plea for tolerance on this point is understandable and with this many would agree. Fortunately, Christians can preach on many truths in agreement although disagreeing on the time of the rapture. However, it still remains true that the posttribulationist view does not afford a uniform system of prophetic fulfillment related to the second coming, and this is evident by the fact that posttribulationists hardly ever sponsor a prophecy conference or attempt to unify their own school of thought as to the order of end-time events. Their problem is that they do not agree among themselves as to how a posttribulationist rapture actually fits the sequence of events related to the second coming.

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# Posttribulationism Today

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 5

### Dispensational Posttribulational Interpretation

[President and Professor of Systematic Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary, Editor, *Bibliotheca Sacra*.]

#### The New Approach To Posttribulationism

In the history of the church a movement can be observed away from an original doctrine of imminency of the Lord's return, as expounded today by J. Barton Payne, toward a non-imminent return of Christ. As previous discussion in this series of articles has pointed out, while there is confusion in the history of the church on the question of imminency, many of the early church fathers and some of the Protestant Reformers definitely believed that the Lord could come at any time. In order to accommodate themselves to this point of view, they recognized in their contemporary situation the fulfillment of end-time signs of the second advent.

In the twentieth century among posttribulationists there has been a definite trend away from the doctrine of imminency. This is illustrated in the work by George A. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*,<sup>[1]</sup> Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956. which was discussed in the previous article. Ladd definitely believes that there is at least a seven-year period which must be fulfilled before the second coming of Christ.

An entirely new approach to posttribulationism appeared for the first time in the work of Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*.<sup>[2]</sup> Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970. This work is a further advance away from imminency but is built on premises some of which have never before been used for posttribulationism. Because of the importance of this new view on posttribulationism, this article will be the first in a series dealing with the principal points in his argument. is a familiar argument which most posttribulationists either state or assume. Important as it is, Gundry for some reason does not devote any of his fifteen chapters to the specific discussion of this question. It may be assumed that this is the undergirding thesis which supports the entire book.

At first glance this seems to be a cogent argument which, to a large extent by inference at least, would support posttribulationism. Careful consideration, however, robs this argument of any real force.

In the Old Testament the first and second comings of Christ were often presented in the same revelation. Isaiah 61:1-2 quoted in part by Christ in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21) deals with the first coming of Christ through the phrase in verse 2, "the acceptable year of the LORD." The next phrase, however, "the day of vengeance of our God" refers to the second coming of Christ. It is significant that Christ in quoting the passage stopped with the portion that dealt with the first coming only.

In the Old Testament it would have been quite cogent to insist that the concept of two comings of the Messiah of Israel was inconceivable. The natural assumption would be that there would be only one coming of Christ in which all the prophecies relating to the comings of Christ would be fulfilled. It would have been difficult on the basis of the Old Testament alone to sustain the concept of a first coming and a second coming of Christ separated by thousands of years. Nevertheless, in the course of history this is exactly what has been supported. The first coming of Christ took place as predicted but the portions of Scripture dealing with the second coming are yet to be fulfilled although exegetically it is impossible to separate them

clearly. Historically, fulfillment has demonstrated that they are two distinctive comings. It illustrates that it cannot be presumed that two events that are presented as a single event actually occur at the same time.

In the New Testament the rapture of the church is presented for the first time. Just as the first and second comings of Christ are mingled in prophetic revelation in the Old Testament, so the rapture of the church and the coming of Christ to set up His kingdom are frequently mingled in the New Testament. Many of the same terms are used and exhortations relating to preparation of the two events are similar.

The lesson which can be learned regarding the necessity of separating the first and second comings of Christ is a word of warning that we should not presume that the second coming includes the rapture. Just as in the Old Testament, we can now see the difference between the first and second coming of Christ by studying the particulars that relate to each, so in the New Testament the rapture and Christ's coming to establish His kingdom can be distinguished by itemizing the differences that relate to these two events. While this is not in itself an argument for a pretribulation rapture, it supports the conclusion that the separation of these two events is not illogical or presumptive. The issue which some day will be settled by a prophetic fulfillment must today be determined exegetically. It is not too much to say that most pretribulationists distinguish the rapture from the coming of Christ to set up His kingdom because the two events are presented with such contrasting details in the New Testament. The posttribulationist view cannot throw the burden of proof on the pretribulationist, but the posttribulationist must assume his own responsibility to demonstrate that the events are one and the same.

## Does Dispensationalism Preclude Posttribulationism?

Until Gundry's new approach to posttribulationism was published, it was assumed by practically all pretribulationists and posttribulationists that dispensational interpretation automatically led to pretribulationism. J. Dwight Pentecost, for instance, states, " (1) Posttribulationism must be based on a denial of dispensationalism and all dispensational distinctions. It is only thus that they can place the church in that period which is particularly called 'the time of Jacob's trouble' (Jer 30:7). (2) Consequently, the position rests on a denial of the distinction between Israel and the church"[6] J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing House, 1958), p. 164.

George Ladd devotes an entire chapter to dispensationalism in his attack on pretribulationism.[7] Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, pp. 130-36. He introduces his chapter with these words: "In this brief chapter, we shall deal with the most important reason used by pretribulationists for refusing to apply the prophecies about the Great Tribulation to the Church. It is so important that it may be called the major premise of dispensationalism." [8] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

This common assumption by both pretribulationists and posttribulationists is debated by Gundry in his second chapter entitled "The Dispensational-Ecclesiological Backdrop." [9] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 12-28. In a rather laborious argument Gundry attempts to correct the prevailing view that dispensationalism leads to pretribulationism in order to establish a basis for his own dispensational posttribulationism. He admits "none of the 'mysteries' distinctive of the Church—such as the equality of Jews and Gentiles in one Body, the Church as the bride of Christ, and Christ's indwelling of believers—are ever applied specifically to tribulation saints." [10] *Ibid.*, p. 13. He then attempts to dismiss this, however, as being insignificant on the premise that "the burden of proof rather rests on pretribulationists to show that tribulation saints will *not* belong to the Church. . . ." [11] *Ibid.* Here Gundry attempts to avoid one of the major problems of posttribulationism: that the church by that title is never shown to be in the great tribulation. Why does the burden of proof rest on the pretribulationist?

In discussing the church as a mystery Gundry points out that a number of the truths designated as mysteries, which he properly interprets as New Testament revelation, extend beyond the present age. In this, Gundry is correct. However, the fact that the mystery of lawlessness, the mystery of God, and the mystery of the harlot of Babylon continue into the tribulation is not proof that the church continues in the tribulation. The pretribulationist does not, therefore, argue on the exclusiveness of mystery truth as far as its future fulfillment is concerned, but rather that the church as such, because of the various mystery truths related to it, is never found in the tribulation. Even Gundry admits that the translation of the saints, which is the distinctive feature of the rapture, is declared to be a mystery in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52. [12] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Much like opponents of dispensationalism, Gundry argues that the present age is not completely hidden in the Old Testament. Most dispensationalists would concede this. The Old Testament does anticipate a period following the first coming of Christ although it does not specifically reveal the church age as such. Accordingly, the New Testament frequently refers to Old Testament prophecies as being fulfilled in the present age. It is most significant, however, that the particulars mentioned are not those peculiar to the church but those that are natural in a post-Cross situation.

Gundry, like many other posttribulationist writers, makes much of the fact that Israel is promised the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34). Because this is quoted in Hebrews 8:8-13 as proving that the Mosaic Covenant had ceased, Gundry joins amillennialists and some premillennialists in asserting that the covenant with Israel is now being fulfilled in the church, without agreeing with his posttribulationism. The point is, as Gundry himself admits, Israel is in unbelief in this period, and Israelites who believe become part of the church, not a separate redeemed people. Gundry himself says that “the tribulation knows only one group of redeemed people, the Church.”[15] Ibid., p. 24. Here is precisely the point. The redeemed people in the tribulation are described as saved Israelites and saved Gentiles, not as “the church.” This is one of the numerous instances where Gundry assumes what he is trying to prove.

In his summary Gundry again contends that the dispensation of the church does not end with a clean break but continues throughout the tribulation period. Here he argues from the premise that there is no clean break to the conclusion that the church is in the tribulation. Logically, it should be just the reverse. The transition should be proved by proving that the church is in the tribulation. Until this is established it is impossible to prove that there is a transition.

## Summary

In introducing his argument for posttribulationism, Gundry makes clear at the start that his approach is different than that of any posttribulationist in the past although he adopts many familiar posttribulationist arguments. Gundry is, first of all, a dispensationalist who distinguishes Israel from the church. In order to maintain his posttribulationism, however, he attempts to divorce himself from what has been considered normal dispensationalism which calls for a sharp break between the church age and the age between the church and the second coming of Christ. It is essential to Gundry’s position that he makes the transition gradual, not an event like the rapture which abruptly terminates the church age. While agreeing with dispensationalists on many points, he differs with them where it would conflict with his posttribulationism. The real problem which Gundry faces is to harmonize his dispensational point of view with posttribulationist interpretation in general. Gundry’s point of view on the imminence of the rapture and the relationship of the rapture to the wrath of God will be presented in the next article.

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# Posttribulationism Today

by John F. Walvoord

## Chapter 6

### Posttribulational Denial of Imminency and Wrath

[President and Professor of Systematic Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary, Editor, *Bibliotheca Sacra*.]

#### Denial Of Imminency

Taking advantage of the fact that the word *imminent* is not a scriptural word, but an induction from scriptural facts, Robert Gundry attempts to deny the imminency of the rapture by redefining the term. The word *imminent*, of course, is not used in Scripture, but has normally been considered to represent the view that the rapture could occur at any time. Even some posttribulationists such as J. Barton Payne, although posttribulational in their interpretation, agree that the Lord could come at any moment and that there are no necessary intervening events. This is the proper meaning of the concept of imminence.

Robert Gundry, however, in his support of posttribulationism, attempts to solve the problem by redefining the English word:

We should first of all note a lack of identity between belief in imminence on the one hand and pretribulationism on the other. By common consent imminence means that so far as we know no predicted event will *necessarily* precede the coming of Christ. The concept incorporates three essential elements: suddenness, unexpectedness or incalculability, and a possibility of occurrence at any moment. But these elements would require only that Christ *might* come before the tribulation, not that He must. Imminence would only raise the possibility of pretribulationism on a sliding scale with mid- and posttribulationism. It is singularly strange that the most popularly cherished argument for pretribulationism should suffer such an obvious and critical limitation.[1] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), p. 29. events,”[3] Ibid. it is a dogmatic statement not supported by facts. Gundry in effect admits that the concept of imminency tends to contradict posttribulationism. The doctrine of imminence is incompatible with the posttribulational view, unless one holds, like Payne, that the tribulation should be spiritualized and considered as already fulfilled, rather than a future period.

The real issue, as pretribulationists state it, is that the hope offered them in the New Testament is the hope of the rapture before the tribulation, not the hope of survival through the tribulation. Accordingly, when the rapture is presented without any detailed events preceding it, the fulfillment of the hope of the rapture is properly regarded as an imminent event which necessarily must occur before the detailed prophecies that lead up to Christ’s return to establish His kingdom. Gundry, in his support of posttribulationism, is attempting to solve the problem by redefinition of the word *imminent* in order to make it apply to his concept of the second coming, which in no sense is imminent but is preceded by very dramatic and specific world events.

In attempting to redefine imminence as simple expectation without regard to time, Gundry offers a study of various words used for expectation in the Bible. Not only is his study slanted in an attempt to support his doctrine of imminence, but also the argument as presented is quite irrelevant, even though to the unwary reader it may seem impressive. The doctrine of pretribulationism and its concept of imminence as applying to the rapture as occurring any day is not dependent on definition of words that are used, but on the context in which the words are used. Gundry confuses the whole issue and begs the question by putting together passages that are used for both the rapture and the second coming simply because the same word is used for both. This does not prove that they refer to the same event or to expectancy of the same event. Even Gundry admits at the conclusion of his word study, “Since the words for expectancy do not resolve the question of imminence one

way or the other, their contexts become decisive.”[4] Ibid., p. 33. One wonders why he goes to such great lengths to a word study when, as a matter of fact, it does not prove anything as he himself states.

What is true of Gundry’s treatment of the word study also applies to his discussion of the contexts. Here Gundry begs the question by assuming that if exhortations are given to watch in relation to both the rapture and the coming of Christ after the tribulation, this proves that the expectancy is the same. Obviously, the question in each case is the question as to whom the exhortation is given. While the church may be watching for the rapture, those in the great tribulation may be watching for the second coming. Gundry’s argument seems very impressive, but it actually does not prove what he is attempting to prove.

It is true that in the first century the concept of imminency was qualified by certain predictions relating to individuals such as Peter and Paul. Peter was told that he would die before the rapture (John 21:18-19). Paul was informed that he had a great ministry ahead in Corinth (Acts 18:9-11), which actually continued for eighteen months. For a brief time Paul could conclude that the rapture would not occur. Later in Paul’s life he was told he would die a martyr’s death, but this occurred shortly before the event (2 Tim 4:6). As far as the church at large was concerned, the information given to Paul and Peter did not deter their belief in imminency because on a given day few would know whether Paul or Peter were still alive, and most of them were not informed about the prediction of their death. No such problem exists today in the doctrine of imminency. There is no authoritative revelation of intervening events. To use these temporary problems in the first century to deny imminency today is without reasonable justification.

Much of Gundry’s argument depends on assumptions which he does not prove, such as the premise that the Olivet Discourse is addressed to the church. This is sufficiently important to merit a special treatment later. In a word, however, there is an obvious difference in exhortations in the Olivet Discourse and those that are addressed to the church in the present age. This difference is that the Olivet Discourse is an exhortation to watch *after* the signs have been fulfilled, including the beginning of the great tribulation, whereas in the rapture passages believers in the present age are encouraged to look for the coming of the Lord without respect to any signs, and are not given any signs as far as the rapture itself is concerned. The situation is dramatically different. When Gundry gets through, while it is impressive to those who do not know the intricacies of this argument, he actually offers no proof in support of his major premise that the Bible puts end-time events before the rapture.

In the history of doctrinal statements as well as theological studies, the concept of imminency has been variously handled. Some posttribulationists actually hold to a literal imminency, that is, that Christ’s second coming could occur at any time, as did Luther and Calvin in their latter years. This is accomplished by spiritualizing events leading up to the second coming, as Payne does.[5] J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962).

Gundry, however, has an entirely different point of view; he takes the events of the great tribulation literally and necessarily must interpose these before his posttribulation rapture. Accordingly, while Payne can properly refer to his view as an imminent return of Christ, Gundry cannot do so if the word is defined as it has been traditionally understood. Accordingly, Gundry’s statement, “A tribulation interval no more destroys expectancy than the necessary delays during the Apostolic Age,”[6] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 43. is pure dogmatism which he does not even attempt to support by argument.

Gundry’s presentation makes clear that if one believes in posttribulationism as he presents it, the hope of the Lord’s return before the great tribulation is a vain illusion, and what we are looking for is not the Lord’s coming but the great tribulation. Because this is hardly a “blessed hope,” pretribulationists continue to insist that their point of view is quite different from the posttribulation view in its expectation. If there are well-defined events that must occur before the rapture of the church, as Gundry holds, then the concept of imminency can no longer be properly applied to the rapture.

## **Denial Of Divine Wrath In The Great Tribulation**

In his chapter on “Wrath and Rapture” Gundry begins by accusing pretribulationists of wrongly appealing to fear of the coming great tribulation. He states, “Sometimes the argument is so stated as to be marred by an appeal of fear.”[7] Ibid., p. 44. In a similar way Oswald T. Allis in his refutation of pretribulationism puts all his arguments under one subpoint,

“Pretribulationism Appeals to Unworthy Motives” (italics in original), and debates the entire pretribulational view on this basis.[8] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1945), p. 207.

Is it an unworthy motive to desire to escape the great tribulation? Actually, it is no more unworthy than the desire to escape hell. The point in either case is not our desire or wishes but what the Scriptures promise. Pretribulationists hope to escape the great tribulation because it is expressly a time of divine judgment on a world which has rejected Christ. But the Scriptures also reveal the great tribulation as a time of satanic wrath against Israel and believers in Christ who are in the great tribulation. The great tribulation is both a time of divine wrath and of satanic wrath. Pretribulationists believe that the rapture passages promise a deliverance which occurs before this final period of trial overtakes a wicked world.

Gundry’s approach to the subject of wrath and the rapture is an attempt to make the great tribulation a time of satanic wrath, but not a time of divine wrath, with a view to relieving the severity of the period in relation to believers. Here his argument is quite confused. His first heading is “The Exemption of All Saints from Divine Wrath.”[9] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 44. This common argument by posttribulationists is built on the false assumption that if the tribulation is not a time of divine wrath, then Christians will escape the severity of the period. Gundry is wrong on both counts. Not only do saints suffer severely in the great tribulation, but it is also a time of divine wrath. Gundry’s whole approach does not do justice to the facts and is faulty in its logic.

Even if the great tribulation were purely a time of satanic wrath, why would this assure that Christians would escape? Job certainly did not escape satanic wrath once God permitted Satan to afflict him. It should be clear to any reader that saints in the great tribulation suffer severely as the objects of satanic wrath, and that the world as a whole suffers severely because it is the object of divine wrath.

Most conservative expositors agree that the great tribulation in Scripture is definitely revealed to be a time of satanic wrath. This is expressly stated in Revelation 12:12, where Satan’s wrath is seen in the persecution of saints—clear evidence that saints in the tribulation do not escape. Many martyrs are seen in Revelation 6:9-11, and most conservative interpreters regard Revelation 7:9-17 as also referring to those who die as martyrs.

It is typical of posttribulationism that it attempts to water down and weaken in every possible way the extent of the sufferings of the great tribulation as they relate to the saints. Gundry arbitrarily moves Revelation 7:9-17 out of the tribulation and into the eternal state without any contextual support whatever. This point of view is somewhat necessary to posttribulationists because they contend that the church goes through the tribulation, and if the great majority is martyred they will, of course, not go through the tribulation.

Accordingly, even a relatively literal posttribulationist like Gundry has to avoid the full force of prophecy as it relates to the trials of the saints in the great tribulation. Whatever trials do eventuate, however, both posttribulationists and pretribulationists agree, result from satanic wrath rather than from divine wrath. Gundry, however, attempts to support the idea that all the trials of the tribulation are simply satanic in their origin and not a matter of divine wrath on a wicked world.

Gundry’s thinking here, however, is cloudy, because if the world is the object of satanic wrath, it is clear that if the church goes through it, it will experience satanic wrath. Gundry’s position does not assure the church of any relief from martyrdom if they have to go through the tribulation.

The fact that the great tribulation is a time of divine wrath is also expressly stated in Scripture, and Gundry is wrong when he denies it. It is true that the sixth seal introduces, according to Revelation 6:17, “the great day of his wrath,” but it is also clear that the preceding seals record devastating divine judgments. War, famine, death, and martyrdom occur in the first five seals of Revelation 6. Many expositors also hold that the sixth and seventh seals are part of the great tribulation and that the seventh seal includes the trumpet judgments and the vial judgments. Gundry claims that the sixth seal occurs at the end of the tribulation, and the seventh seal deals with the second coming itself. Accordingly, he concludes. “God’s wrath will not stretch throughout the whole tribulation.”[10] *Ibid.*, p. 77. This rather dogmatic statement does not take into account what has already been described in the preceding seal judgments. While the climax of the wrath of God may very well be

introduced by the sixth seal, it is by no means the beginning of the wrath of God on the world.

The facts are that Christ Himself declared the entire great tribulation a time of unprecedented trouble. In Matthew 24:15-22 the great tribulation begins with the breaking of the Jewish covenant. This occurs at the beginning of the last three and one-half years preceding the second coming of Christ and is described as “the time of Jacob’s trouble” in Jeremiah 30:7. The same period is described in Revelation 13:5 as the last forty-two months preceding the second coming of Christ.

Many conservative expositors who take this literally recognize that it is a period of satanic wrath beginning with Satan being cast out of heaven, according to Revelation 12:9. Chronologically, this begins the last three and one-half years before the second advent. It is clear, however, from the nature of the judgments poured out that these last three and one-half years are also a time of divine wrath on the earth. This is made evident by the disturbances in heaven, great earthquakes, and the catastrophes described under the trumpet judgments and the vial judgments. All of this cannot be compacted to be fulfilled on a given day such as Armageddon, but rather it describes the entire process of the forty-two months leading up to Armageddon. Armageddon is the climax immediately preceding the second coming of Christ.

The entire period of three and one-half years is so awful that Christ Himself predicted that if it were not terminated by His second coming, the whole human race would be destroyed (Matt 24:22). Gundry’s attempt to soften the force of these divine judgments prior to Armageddon in order to relieve it of the character of being a period of divine wrath is motivated by his interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 5 in which the church is promised deliverance from the time of wrath, a view which will be discussed in full later. His point of view, however, is simply not supported by the facts given in the Book of Revelation, which plainly indicate that the wrath of God is poured out in the world throughout the entire period of the great tribulation, even though it is also clear that it becomes increasingly severe as it approaches the second advent.

The fact that these end-time judgments extend over a period of time is brought out by the fact that Christ Himself says the great tribulation will begin with the abomination of desolation, which occurs three and one-half years before His second coming (Matt 24:15). It is also supported by Revelation 9:15, in which the duration of the fifth trumpet alone is said to be five months. The catastrophes pictured in the seats, trumpets, and vials extend over the entire three-and-one-half-year period leading up to the second coming. Some expositors even extend it over the entire seven-year period preceding the second advent.

Gundry is forced to an extreme and untenable position by trying to bring the church through the great tribulation without experiencing great tribulation. His position is further complicated by the fact that satanic wrath is expressly against believers and the people of Israel, while divine wrath is against the world as a whole. In some sense, Gundry is arguing against himself, because if it is a period of satanic wrath and the church is its object, then one cannot conclude that the church is delivered from tribulation while passing through it. going triumphantly through the great tribulation relatively untouched is not supported in the prophecies of the Book of Revelation, as indicated by the martyrs in Revelation 6 and 7 .

The content of Revelation 7:9-17, which Gundry attempts to place after the second advent without any supporting evidence at all, is another plain indication of the extent of the martyrdom of the saints in the tribulation. These passages clearly give a picture of heaven and not of the millennial earth, as indicated in Revelation 7:11 compared with Revelation 5:8. These tribulation saints are not in their natural bodies as those who have survived the tribulation; instead, they are presented as those who have died in the tribulation and who “came out of great tribulation.” To project this scene into the period after the second coming to either the millennium or the eternal state has no exegetical support in the context.

Even though the Book of Revelation is not written in strict chronological order, Revelation 7:9-17 does have some relevance to the context. In chapter 7 the contrast is between the 144,000 of Israel, who are sealed and protected through the great tribulation, and the multitude of the saved, which no man can number, who do not survive the tribulation and who are not sealed. It would seem that the burden of proof is on Gundry to prove that this is not a tribulational situation as the implication is that it belongs to this period even though chapter 7 is a parenthesis. Most significant is the fact that the term *church* is not used at all, and the tribulation saints are described simply as those who have been saved by the blood of the Lamb and who have come out of great trials.

Gundry's conclusion that the great tribulation is not a time of divine wrath rests only on his dogmatic statements, not on evidence which he produces. If the church must go through this period, probably the majority would not be delivered, but martyred. His attempt to support the idea that this is a period of satanic persecution but not of divine judgment, is shattered by the evidence of what occurs in the seals, trumpets, and vials. Inasmuch as his thesis, that the great tribulation is only a time of satanic wrath, is unsupported, to the same extent his whole argument is unsupported.

One of the major problems with posttribulationism is that adherents of that view must get the church through the tribulation relatively unscathed, but the only way they can do this is either to deny or to ignore the plain teachings of the Book of Revelation on this subject. The martyrs of Revelation 6 and 7 are eloquent in their testimony. It is especially significant that there is no evidence that these martyrs are related to the church as such. The only way Gundry can support his position on this point is to be selective in his material and to ignore the major prophecies relating to the great tribulation. If his argument here is faulty and unsupported, his conclusions are also unsupported.

## **Exegetical Premises Of Dispensational Posttribulationism**

Most of Gundry's important arguments for posttribulationism are based on exegesis of key passages, such as the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24-25 ; the Upper Room Discourse in John 13-17 (and particularly John 14:1-3); 1 Corinthians 15:51-58; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 5:1-11 ; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; and the argument of the entire Book of Revelation. While Gundry weaves the facts of these passages into his various arguments throughout his book, probably the most direct way of dealing with the theological issues involved is to turn to these passages and consider them exegetically. Central to his argument is that the Olivet Discourse concerns the church primarily, not Israel, and this concept will be considered next.

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# Posttribulationism Today

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 7

### Do the Gospels Reveal a Posttribulation Rapture?

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#### The Rapture in Relation to Matthew 13

The major weaknesses of dispensational posttribulationism are found in the exegesis which is advanced to support this new doctrine. It is in this aspect that dispensational posttribulationism fails to persuade either pretribulationists or the more traditional posttribulationists. While the treatment of various passages on the surface seems to be scriptural because of the numerous arguments and scriptural citations included, two pervading weaknesses can be noted in the exegesis: (1) the argument is selective, ignoring contradictory evidence in the passage itself; (2) the argument frequently either misstates or ignores the main thrust of the passage. These are weighty and important objections even if they are made against what seems on the surface to be a scholarly argument. These objections against dispensational posttribulationism are also often valid against other forms of posttribulationism.

Undoubtedly an important aspect of posttribulationism, regardless of which school of posttribulationist interpretation is followed,[1] The four schools of posttribulationist interpretation are mentioned in the author's first article in this current series, "Posttribulationism Today; Part I: The Rise of Posttribulationist Interpretation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (January-March 1975): 21-24. is the question of the doctrine of the rapture in the Gospel of Matthew. For the most part, Mark and Luke do not contribute to the argument, and the Gospel of John falls in a different category. In the Gospel of Matthew, the principal chapters pertaining to the tribulation question are Matthew 13 and Matthew 24-25, two of the four major discourses of Christ.

Matthew 13 comes at an important juncture in the Gospel of Matthew where Christ has been rejected by the Jews as their Messiah, and in turn Christ pronounces severe judgment on them for their unbelief. In keeping with the main thrust of the whole Gospel of Matthew, which is to explain why the predicted Old Testament kingdom was not fulfilled in Christ's first coming, Matthew 13 has as its dominant subject a sweeping revelation of the general characteristics of the period between the first coming and the second coming of Christ, a subject which is almost completely ignored in the Old Testament. Accordingly, in seven parables our Lord describes the various aspects of the period between the first and second comings of Christ.[2] For a more complete statement on Matthew 13, see John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), pp. 95-108.

The position of dispensational posttribulationism is stated briefly by Robert Gundry in what he calls "Excursus on the Consummation of the Age." [3] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), pp. 142-45. Most pretribulationists as well as posttribulationists agree that Matthew 13 is dealing with the entire interadvent age from the first coming of Christ to His second coming to establish His kingdom. A few pretribulationists have tried to make it coterminous with the church age, but this is an unnecessary and an unsupported conclusion because at this point in the revelation Christ has not even introduced the doctrine of the rapture, much less expounded it. Even the church as such is not introduced until Matthew 16.

Gundry follows other posttribulationists, however, in singling out the parable of the wheat and the tares as proving a posttribulationist rapture. As Matthew 13:30 states clearly, at the time of the harvest the tares are gathered first, and then the

wheat is gathered into the barn. Gundry, like most other posttribulationists, makes much of the fact that the wheat is gathered *after* the tares—which fact, he holds, corresponds to the second coming of Christ to set up His kingdom. This contradicts the order of the pretribulation rapture, in which believers are gathered out first. Like other posttribulationists Gundry ignores, however, the parable of the dragnet in Matthew 13:47-50 in which the exact opposite order is indicated. There, according to Matthew 13:48, the good fish representing believers are gathered into vessels, and then the bad fish are thrown away.

It should be obvious under these circumstances that these parables are not trying to set up a precise order but rather the fact of separation as brought out so clearly in Matthew 13:49-50. At the second coming of Christ to establish His kingdom, it may well be that the wicked are judged first, and then the righteous are gathered into His kingdom. This presumes, however, that the rapture has occurred earlier. If a posttribulation rapture is assumed, the posttribulationists have a problem with this event related to the second coming because obviously Christ comes to earth first and then the wicked are judged. If they desire to press this order, it becomes a problem to posttribulationism, but not to pretribulationism. The pretribulationist is unconcerned in interpreting this passage as to whether the unsaved are gathered first or the saved are gathered first. Either order is admissible at the time of the second coming of Christ to establish His kingdom. Gundry is actually fighting a straw man here as pretribulationists do not claim that these parables describe the rapture.

One of Gundry's peculiarities is his opposition to the view that all the wicked will be judged at the time of the second coming of Christ. He states, "The gathering and burning of the wicked must not include the entire unsaved population of the earth, else none would be left to be the goats in the judgment of the nations (in the pretribulation scheme) or to enter the millennium (in the posttribulation scheme). We may solve this problem by limiting the sphere of judgment to false disciples in the kingdom." [4] *Ibid.*, pp. 143-44.

Although this question is not important to the pretribulation argument, it is crucial to Gundry's approach to posttribulationism. Due to his peculiar and unique interpretation of Matthew 25, in which he places the judgment of the nations at the *end* of the millennium, he is forced to take unusual steps to evade the problems this creates, one of which is his partial judgment on the wicked at the second coming. Most premillenarians and amillenarians, whether posttribulation or pretribulation, hold that *all* the wicked living on earth are judged at the second coming of Christ. The Scriptures seem to make plain that all the wicked perish at the time of the second coming and that only persons who are born again enter the kingdom. This is the background of Christ's conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:3-5 where Nicodemus, on the basis of Old Testament revelation, is chided for not knowing that a person has to be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God. While a spiritual kingdom was in view in Christ's words, it was also associated in Nicodemus's mind with the coming kingdom of God on earth.

The Book of Revelation makes quite plain that there will be only two classes of citizens spiritually in the time of the great tribulation, those who are saved and those who are lost (Rev 13:8). All who are lost will worship the beast or the world ruler of the end time. According to Revelation 14:9-11, all who worship the beast will suffer eternal torment. According to Revelation 19:21, all the armies of the world that fight Christ at the time of His second coming will be destroyed.

If most expositors are correct that the judgment of the nations occurs at the time of the second advent of Christ, then it follows that the goats representing all the unsaved are cast into everlasting fire. It should become apparent that the dispensational posttribulationism as advanced by Gundry is built on untenable and strange interpretations which even his fellow posttribulationists do not follow. One can only conclude that his exegetical basis for his posttribulationism is faulty.

In a word, Matthew 13 does not discuss the doctrine of the rapture at all, and there is absolutely nothing in this passage which would contradict the pretribulation view. The arguments advanced by Gundry are not only inadequately supported, but logically irrelevant.

## **The Rapture in Matthew 24**

One of the most crucial arguments advanced by Gundry in support of his dispensational posttribulationism is based on his

exegesis of Matthew 24-25 . While his views are somewhat novel and different from other posttribulationists, unquestionably these two chapters have had a bearing on posttribulationism as a whole. It is most unfortunate for his argument that the same problems faced in exegesis of other passages surface here. Gundry again is selective in his material, choosing only what supports his view and ignoring contradictory evidence, and he tends to evade what is the obvious subject matter of the passage.

Gundry's approach to this passage is to debate at great length whether the Olivet Discourse is addressed to the church or to Israel. He asks the question, "To what group of redeemed do the Jewish saints addressed by Jesus and represented by the apostles belong, Israel or the Church?"[5] Ibid., p. 129.

The question as to whom the Gospels, including the Olivet Discourse, are addressed, has been mishandled by both dispensationalists and nondispensationalists. Obviously all the Gospels were written after Pentecost and they record material that is pertinent, in one respect or another, to those living in the church age. The actual subject matter of any point in revelation, however, has to be determined exegetically, not by sweeping categories. Accordingly, while Matthew is addressed primarily to Jewish Christians to explain why the kingdom was not brought in at Christ's first coming, it also includes reference to the church in Matthew 16.

Actually, all four of the Gospels deal with three dispensations, sometimes reaching back into the Law and expounding the meaning of the Law of Moses, sometimes looking forward to the millennial kingdom, a future age, and sometimes dealing with the present age, the church. The question as to whom any particular passage is addressed cannot be settled by the fact that it was given to the disciples, because they represent in some sense both Israel and the church. The issue must be settled on the subject matter, much in the same way that a person living in the present age can go back into the Old Testament and read portions addressed to someone else, but which may have a pertinent application to spiritual issues today.

Accordingly, Gundry's entire argument in his chapter on the Olivet Discourse, which concerns itself mainly with this question, is irrelevant. What is most important is that Gundry completely ignores and does not even notice what the subject of the passage is.[6] Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, pp. 179-204. According to Mark 13:3, four of the disciples, Peter, James, John, and Andrew, asked Christ three questions. These are stated in Matthew 24:3: (1) "When shall these things be?" (2) "What shall be the sign of thy coming?"; and (3) What shall be the sign "of the end of the age?" (NASB). It is rather difficult to understand why Gundry in his chapter on the Olivet Discourse should not even mention the questions that are being answered. In an analysis of the Olivet Discourse, the subject matter is more important than the question of to whom it was stated.

To the pretribulationist it is obvious that the rapture is not in view in this passage. Up to this point the disciples had had no instruction on this subject. They did not even clearly understand the difference between the first and second comings of Christ. Their questions indicated that they were first of all concerned about the destruction of Jerusalem which Christ had predicted in Matthew 24:2, as this obviously signaled some tremendous event. Christ did not deal with this first question in Matthew, but He did answer it in Mark and Luke; and, of course, the prophecy was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

The second and third questions, of course, are the same. The coming of Christ and the end of the age are coterminous, and the answer to the one is the answer to the other. Here again it is questionable whether the disciples clearly understood at that time that there would be a time period between the first and second comings of Christ. What they were talking about was Christ's coming to establish His kingdom and the end of the age which preceded it in which, from their point of view, they could still be living. Accordingly, the nature of the question is such that the church is not in view, nor is the rapture introduced. In a word, the disciples wanted to know the signs leading up to the establishment of the millennial kingdom.

In His answer Christ first stated the general signs of the period leading up to the second coming in Matthew 24:4-14. This coincides with Matthew 13. Then He gave them the specific sign of the beginning of the great tribulation three and one-half years before His second coming signaled by the abomination of desolation as stated in Matthew 24:15. The period of great tribulation will end according to Christ by His glorious second coming. While Christ answered the questions of the disciples,

He did not give all the details, many of which were supplied later in Revelation 4-18 .

The question raised by posttribulationists as to why Christ did not clearly delineate here a pretribulation rapture is answered simply by the fact that this was not His subject. If in the Old Testament in the frequent references to the first and second comings of Christ there is no clear distinction of the two events, why should Christ be obligated here to explain an event which He has not even introduced? Christ chose to introduce this in the Upper Room the night before His crucifixion. But the full exposition of the rapture was not to be given until later through the Apostle Paul.

The reasons are fairly obvious. The disciples were in no mood or situation to understand such a new doctrine. They did not even comprehend the concept of the church at this time, even though it had been announced. How could they be expected to understand the distinction between a pretribulation rapture and the posttribulation second coming to establish the kingdom of Christ on earth? The silence of Christ on the subject of the rapture here should be understandable in view of the subject matter and the total situation. If God did not see fit to reveal many other aspects of the special purpose He has for the church, the body of Christ, until the Pauline letters, it is not strange that the subject of the rapture should not be expounded in Matthew 24.

Despite the fact that the subject matter does not concern the rapture, it is not unusual for both pretribulationists and posttribulationists to attempt to read the rapture into this passage. Here the hermeneutical rule that the context must determine interpretation should be applied, and later revelation should not be read into earlier revelation unless the text itself justifies this.

The question as to whether the Olivet Discourse specifically discusses the rapture is asked by Gundry, "Where in the Olivet Discourse are we to place the rapture? There is no mention of a rapture prior to the tribulation." [7] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 134. All agree that there is no mention of a pretribulation rapture in this passage. The important question remains, however, whether there is mention of a posttribulation rapture.

Two passages in the Olivet Discourse are usually cited by posttribulationists, and Gundry goes along with their interpretation. According to Matthew 24:31, "They shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." Mark 13:27 states, "And then shall He send His angels, and shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven."

It should be stated first that these verses cause no problem whatever to a pretribulationist. All pretribulationists agree that at the time Christ comes to set up His kingdom the elect will be gathered from heaven and earth to participate in the millennial kingdom. Whether these elect refer only to the elect of Israel or also to the elect including both saved Israelites and Gentiles and the church, all agree that this gathering will take place in connection with the establishment of the millennial kingdom.

The question is not whether there will be such a gathering; the question is whether this gathering is the rapture of the church. Here the evidence is missing. There is a conspicuous absence of any reference to a translation of living saints or of any specific reference to the resurrection of the church in any passage in the Old or New Testaments that clearly refers to Christ's coming to establish His kingdom. Accordingly, for a posttribulationist to claim this passage is to beg the question, to assume what he is trying to prove. Inasmuch as the most important and distinctive aspect of the rapture is the translation of living saints, this becomes the question which must be resolved. Pretribulationists conclude that this passage does not contradict their point of view and does not support the posttribulation argument.

An argument advanced by Alexander Reese and adopted by Gundry is that the references in Matthew 24:40-41 should be interpreted as referring to the rapture. These verses state, "Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken and the other left."

Here both Gundry and Reese violate the rule that the context should determine the interpretation of a passage. [8] Ibid., pp. 134-39; Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1937), pp. 214-15. They both concede that the context deals with judgment such as that which characterized the time of Noah. According to Matthew

24:39 those living at that time “knew not until the flood came, and took them all away, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.” Those taken away were taken away in judgment. Gundry and Reese note that the words “shall be taken” in verses 40-41 are the translation of **παραλαμβάνω** which is different from the word used in verse 39 . Reese, however, erroneously states, “It is a good word; a word used exclusively in the sense of ‘take away with’ or ‘receive’ or ‘take home.’”[9] Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, p. 215.

The truth is, however, that this is a very common word used in many different connotations, and it is not true, as Reese and Gundry state, that it is always used in a friendly sense. The same word is used in John 19:16 in reference to taking Christ to Calvary to crucify Him, an express instance where it is used to take one away to judgment. Accordingly, the use of this word is indecisive in itself, and the context becomes the important consideration.

In claiming that those taken away in verses 40-41 are taken away in the rapture, Gundry in discussing the parallel passage in Luke 17:34-37 ignores verse 37 . In Luke 17, two are pictured in the same bed, with one taken and the other left. Two are grinding together, and one is taken and the other left. Two are in the field, one is taken and the other left. Then, in verse 37 , the question is asked, “Where, Lord?” The answer is very dramatic: “And He said unto them, Wherever the body is, there will the eagles be gathered together.” it should be very clear that the ones taken are put to death and their bodies are consumed by the “vultures” (NIV), If these are killed, then verses 40-41 of Matthew 24 speak of precisely the same kind of judgment that occurred in the Flood when the ones taken were taken in judgment. Matthew 24 is just the reverse of the rapture, not the rapture itself.

The arguments of Gundry that one cannot harmonize this with the judgment of the nations are nonsensical. Obviously before the Gentiles could be gathered in judgment they would have to be taken away as individuals. What is seen in Matthew 24:41-42 has its consummation in Matthew 25:31-46. While their bodies are consumed by the vultures, their souls are cast into everlasting fire. The two passages are parts of the same divine judgment which separates the saved from the unsaved at the beginning of the millennial kingdom.

While these issues may be debated, the most important point is the crucial fact that the translation of living saints, which is the main characteristic of the rapture, is not found anywhere in Matthew. Only by assuming what he is trying to prove can a posttribulationist put the rapture in these passages.

It would be appropriate in a discussion of the doctrine of the rapture in the Gospels to consider the relationship of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46. However, because this relates to end-time events which can better be considered later, discussion will be postponed.

## **The Rapture in the Gospel of John**

While the synoptic Gospels frequently deal with the coming of Christ in relation to the Law of Moses and the future millennial kingdom, most expositors recognize that the Gospel of John has a special character. As it was probably the last of the four Gospels and written late in the first century, the Gospel of John presents from the sayings of Christ certain truths especially related to the church. Accordingly, the Upper Room Discourse, the fourth and final great discourse of Christ, deals almost entirely with truth which anticipates the present age. It would be natural to assume that here Christ would introduce the subject of the rapture.

This is done in the familiar words of the opening verses of John 14 where Christ stated in verses 2-3 , “In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am there you may be also.” While some expositors have viewed this as referring to the Christian’s death and entrance into heaven, many posttribulationists as well as pretribulationists recognize this as a reference to the rapture. J. Barton Payne is an exception to the normal conservative interpretation when he holds that John 14 refers to a believer’s death.[10] J. Barton Payne. *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), p. 74. Gundry, accordingly, is correct when he says, “Nothing is said concerning the death of believers generally.”[11] Gundry, *The Church in the Tribulation*, p. 152, footnote.

Gundry's exegesis of the passage, however, leaves much to be desired.

The passage taken in its plain meaning says that Christ is going to leave the disciples and that they will not be able to follow Him. His purpose in leaving them is that He needs to prepare a place in the Father's house, an obvious reference to heaven to which Christ is going to ascend. When He states that He is coming after them to receive them to Himself so that they can be where He is, the implication is rather clear that He is taking them to the place He has prepared for them.

Gundry scoffs at the concept that the Church will go to heaven for approximately seven years and come back later with Christ to the millennial earth. Heaven is something more than a place. It is where Christ is. The church will be with Christ wherever He is, whether in heaven, the millennial earth, or the New Jerusalem. It is no more strange that the church will spend seven years in heaven in the Father's house than it is that the church will spend a thousand years on the millennial earth, and then later spend eternity in the New Jerusalem.

Gundry attempts to substitute for the concept of heaven the idea that the disciples are already in the Father's house. He states:

In order to console the disciples concerning His going away, Jesus tells them that His leaving will work to their advantage. He is going to prepare for them *spiritual abodes within His own Person*. Dwelling in these abiding places they will belong to God's household. This He will accomplish by going to the cross and then ascending to the Father. But He will return to receive the disciples into His immediate presence forever. Thus, the rapture will not have the purpose of taking them to heaven. It rather follows that from their being in Christ, in whom each believer already has an abode.[12] Ibid., p. 154 (italics in original).

One is at a loss to know how to comment on such fanciful exegesis. If the passage says anything, it says that Christ is going to leave them to go to heaven, not simply leave them by dying. The Father's house is not on earth, and Christ is not going to remain in the earthly sphere in His bodily presence. The expression "I will come" must be spiritualized and deprived of its real meaning in order to allow the explanation which Gundry advances. To spiritualize the Father's house and make it "*spiritual abodes within His own person*" is spiritualization to an extreme. Obviously the believer is in Christ, but this is not the same as being in the Father's house. It is most significant that Gundry, who claims to be a literalist, when he deals with the first passage that clearly reveals the rapture, is forced to spiritualization in order to avoid the pretribulation rapture.

This extreme form of exegesis to which Gundry is driven in this passage is to escape the implication that the rapture is different from the second coming of Christ to set up His kingdom. In contrast to the description of the second coming in Matthew 24 where important events, including the great tribulation, are seen to precede it, here Christ gives no preceding events, no signs, and the bare promise that they should be looking for His coming. This, of course, is in contrast to the posttribulation view of the rapture and explains the unusual exegesis of Gundry.

## Conclusion

Taking the testimony of the Gospels as a whole, it may be concluded that the rapture is not found at all in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, although the second coming of Christ is clearly spoken of and the events which precede it are described. In John 14 Christ introduces for the first time the subject of His coming for His own and His taking them to the Father's house. The somewhat desperate attempt of posttribulationists to spiritualize this passage and eliminate it as referring to the rapture is in itself a confession that the rapture is presented in John 14 as an event distinctive from the second coming. That Christ did not expound the details of the rapture here is understandable, for the disciples had many other spiritual and theological problems at the time. The full explanation awaited the revelation which would be given through Paul and which formed a central theme of the epistles he wrote to the Thessalonians.

Emerging in Gundry's discussion of the rapture in the gospels are the same problems which surface in other posttribulation approaches. Gundry does not apply the literal interpretation of prophecy in any consistent way, even though he claims to be a literalist, and it becomes very obvious that he is selecting only the facts that suit his argument, avoiding contradiction. This leads to an imperfect theological induction. When all the facts are taken into consideration, Gundry's conclusions are shown

to be questionable.

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# Posttribulationism Today

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 8

### The Comforting Hope of 1 Thessalonians 4

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[EDITOR'S NOTE: This series, begun in *Bibliotheca Sacra* with the January-March, 1975 issue, is now published in book form under the title *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976). This article is adapted from chapter 8 in the book. The series will continue through 1977.]

Although the rapture of the church was introduced by Christ the night before His crucifixion, as recorded in John 14:1-3, the details of the rapture were not revealed in Scripture until 1 Thessalonians was written. It is not too much to say that 1 Thessalonians 4-5 is probably the most important passage dealing with the rapture in the New Testament. Additional passages are 1 Corinthians 15:51-58 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; but more detail is given in 1 Thessalonians 4 than in any other passage.

Probably more pretribulationists base their conclusion for a pretribulational rapture on 1 Thessalonians 4 than on any other single passage of Scripture. By contrast, evidence indicates that posttribulationists find little of a positive character to help them in the details of this revelation. It would seem natural, if the great tribulation actually intervened before the rapture could be fulfilled, that this would have been a good place to put the whole matter into proper perspective, as Christ did in Matthew 24 in His description of the events leading up to His second coming.

### The Problem Of Death In Relation To The Rapture

It should be borne in mind as this central passage on the rapture is discussed that the Thessalonian Christians had had only a few weeks of doctrinal instruction before Paul, Silas, and Timothy left them. It is amazing that their instruction included such doctrines as election (1:4), the Holy Spirit (1:5-6; 4:8; 5:19), conversion (1:9), assurance of salvation (1:5), sanctification (4:3; 5:23), and teachings on the Christian life. Obviously there were great gaps in their understanding of theology in general, and more particularly of the prophetic future events.

It is most significant that in every chapter in 1 Thessalonians some mention is made of the future coming of Christ. The Thessalonians are described as those who are "to wait for His Son from heaven" (1:10). They will be trophies of Paul's gospel ministry at the coming of the Lord (2:19), and their ultimate sanctification is promised when Christ comes (3:13).

Although 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is addressed to correct their ignorance about the rapture, it is quite clear that Paul is not introducing a new subject, but clarifying an old one. He had faithfully told them of the possibility of Christ's coming, and it was with this eager expectation that they were exhorted to wait for the rapture. It is implied that the thought had not occurred to them that some of them would die before the rapture. Accordingly, when some of their number, after such a brief time, had passed into the presence of the Lord through death, they were unprepared for it.

As many commentators have pointed out, it is possible that the hopelessness of the pagan world may have affected their hope in resurrection. Yet the certainty of resurrection to which Paul refers in 1 Thessalonians 4:14 is so inseparable from the gospel itself that it seems highly questionable that they had any real doubt whether their loved ones in Christ would be

resurrected. Rather, their problem was how the future resurrection related to Christ's coming for the living saints. This was the problem Paul attacked and concerning which they needed further revelation.

As 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 clearly shows, their fears were groundless. Their loved ones who had died would be resurrected, for all practical purposes, at the same time that the living would be raptured. They would, therefore, not have an inferior experience, and those living who were raptured would not have to wait for a period of time until their loved ones were resurrected.

## Posttribulational Interpretation Of 1 Thessalonians 4

Posttribulationists usually do not treat 1 Thessalonians 4-5 extensively. Gundry is an exception and devotes a whole chapter to it.[1] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), pp. 100-111. Ladd discusses it for only a few pages, with references scattered throughout his discussion, at the same time devoting a third of his book to the historical argument for posttribulationism.[2] George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), pp. 77-80.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, posttribulationists face a major difficulty. As presented here, the hope of the rapture is an imminent hope with no events such as the great tribulation regarded as intervening. Posttribulationists must find some explanation for this silence and for the major problem that the hope of the Lord's return is presented as a comfort to the Thessalonians sorrowing for their loved ones who have died. The hope of a rapture occurring after a literal great tribulation would be small comfort to those in this situation. Thus posttribulationists have marshalled a number of arguments in an attempt to answer both problems and others that face them in this passage.

Generally posttribulationists encounter the following problems in 1 Thessalonians 4: (1) the nature of this supposed delay of the resurrection of the dead in Christ; (2) the nature of the revelation claimed to have been received "by the word of the Lord"; (3) the meaning of the revelation that saints will meet the Lord in the air; (4) the problem of emphasis on translation as opposed to resurrection; (5) the problem of silence concerning any warning of the coming great tribulation; (6) the problem of the exhortation to comfort in view of the rapture of the church.

### The Nature Of The Supposed Delay

The first problem faced by all expositors is discerning the reasons for the unusual sorrow of the Thessalonians over the death of their fellow believers. Various explanations have been given as to why they feared a delay in the resurrection of the dead in Christ that would place it after the rapture of the church. Pretribulationists have a convenient and plausible explanation in the possibility that the resurrection of the dead in Christ occurs at the end of the great tribulation when the tribulation martyrs will be raised (Rev 20:4). Even Gundry mentions this: "We might think that the sorrow of the Thessalonians derived from the mistaken belief in a remaining behind of deceased believers at a pretribulational rapture with a consequent later date of resurrection, perhaps after the tribulation." [3] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 100. This would make sense if the Thessalonians had been taught pretribulationism.

In rejecting the pretribulational explanation of the possibility of delay in the resurrection of the dead in Christ, Gundry offers instead another interpretation. He writes, "The Thessalonians further thought that departed brethren, along with the wicked dead, will not rise until after the Messianic kingdom, and thus will miss the blessedness of Christ's earthly reign. This view gives a more substantial basis for the Thessalonians' sorrow than the notion that the dead in Christ will be left out of the pretribulational rapture." [4] *Ibid.*, p. 101. It is curious that Gundry discards the pretribulational argument because it is based on an assumption, but considers as cogent and plausible the posttribulational argument also built on an assumption.

There are some real problems with Gundry's explanation. First, it is a new interpretation never before adopted by any other writer, whether pretribulational or posttribulational. Second, Gundry offers no factual support for his view. Third, pretribulationists can point to the fact that the Thessalonians had had some instruction on tribulation in general (cf. 1 Thess

3:4), as well as the coming great tribulation specifically (2 Thess 2:5-6). In other words, they had in mind the idea of a coming great tribulation which would be a time barrier between the rapture, if viewed as imminent, and the resurrection of the dead in Christ, which might occur after the great tribulation. Fourth, there is no indication anywhere in the Thessalonian epistles that their instruction included details of the millennium.

Gundry is grasping at a straw in injecting an explanation of the problem that has no support in the Scriptures. He undoubtedly does this only because he has no more plausible view to offer. While the Thessalonians might conceivably have had some grounds for confusion concerning the time of resurrection if they were pretribulationist in outlook, why would they consider a delay necessary until after the millennium which is really not their immediate concern?

While both pretribulationists and posttribulationists can only speculate concerning the reason for the Thessalonians' concern, it seems the pretribulationists at least have some scriptural support for their view, whereas Gundry has none. For His own and take them to the Father's house, which is considered equivalent to heaven. Gundry's spiritualization of the term "the Father's house" to get away from the idea that the saints go to heaven has been discussed and refuted in the preceding article in this series. Pretribulationists therefore view Christ's coming to the air above the earth as fulfillment of His purpose to receive His bride and take her back to heaven to the Father's house.

Posttribulationists have a twofold problem: (1) to explain why the church leaves the earth to meet the Lord in the air, and (2) to prove that the saints, having met the Lord in the air, change direction and proceed to the earth.

Gundry debates this as follows:

Other things being equal, the word "descend" (*katabaino*) indicates a complete, uninterrupted descent, like that of the Spirit at Christ's baptism (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32, 33) and that of Christ in His first advent (John 3:13; 6:33, 38, 41, 42, 50, 51, 58). Where a reversal from downward to upward motion comes into view, a specific statement to that effect appears, as in Acts 10:11, 16 ("a certain object coming down, ...and immediately the object was taken up into the sky"). In the absence of a statement indicating a halt or sudden reversal of direction, we naturally infer a complete descent to the earth, such as will take place only at the posttribulationist advent.[6] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

It should be noted that Gundry is attempting to solve this problem by definition of a word, a definition quite arbitrary and slanted in the direction of his conclusion. The text does declare that the church will meet the Lord in the air, which at least implies a halt for the meeting, even if it does not specify a change in direction. Gundry here again appeals to the argument from silence, which so often he disavows for the pretribulationist view. He says, "But surely it is strange that in this, the fullest description of the rapture, there should be no mention of a change in direction from earthward to heaven, or of a halt. The absence of a specific phrase such as 'to the earth' cannot be very significant, for there is not one NT account of the second coming which contains such a phrase." [7] *Ibid.*, p. 104. Here, on the one hand, Gundry argues from silence that there should be mention of a change in direction if such took place, but he discounts the silence of the passage on any indication of its continued direction to the earth. As a whole is concerned, the doctrine of resurrection is a familiar truth found in both the Old and New Testaments, whereas the idea of a translation of living saints is a new revelation. Thus the main point for Christians today is that 1 Thessalonians 4 presents in clear detail the fact that Christians living in the last generation will not die, but will meet the Lord and enter into their eternal relationship to Him without experiencing death.

In these facts, posttribulationism has a specific problem. Passages relating to the second coming of Christ to the earth, such as Revelation 20:4, speak of resurrection *after* the arrival on earth at the time Christ enters His kingdom, not *during* His descent from heaven. The resurrection, however, is specified as relating to the martyred dead of those in the immediately preceding generation who had refused to worship the world ruler and consequently died for their faith. There is no indication in this text that the resurrection extends to any other class of people, such as the church as a whole.

In a similar way, Daniel 12:2 refers to a resurrection occurring after the tribulation mentioned in Daniel 12:1. This seems to refer to Old Testament saints, or at least to include them. In none of the passages in the Old or New Testaments where a resurrection is tied to the second coming of Christ to the earth is there any clear identification that the church is included.

From the standpoint of pretribulation interpretation, this is no accident, but a clear revelation that all people are not raised at the same time. Revelation 20, of course, also distinguishes the resurrection mentioned in verse 4 from the resurrection of the wicked which occurs after the millennium (v. 12 ), as is usually understood by premillenarians.

Posttribulationists usually argue that the resurrection of Revelation 20:4-6 is declared to be “the first resurrection.” On the basis that it is called “the first resurrection,” they argue that no resurrection can precede it, such as a rapture at the beginning of the tribulation. Ladd argues along this line and asks the question, “Does the Word similarly teach that the first resurrection will consist of two stages, the first of which will occur at the beginning of the Tribulation? No such teaching appears in Scripture.”[9] Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 82.

The problem here is the common misunderstanding of what the word *first* means. *First* does not mean the number one resurrection, but rather that the resurrection here revealed occurs before the final resurrection in the millennium, mentioned in Revelation 20:12-14. It merely means that the resurrection occurs first or *before* the later resurrection.

Indeed, everyone has to agree that the resurrection of Jesus Christ Himself is the first resurrection. Any subsequent resurrection could not be resurrection number one. Also, in Matthew 27:52-53 a token resurrection of some saints occurred in Jerusalem at the time of Christ’s resurrection. The resurrection of Christ and these saints is the token of the resurrections to come. Accordingly, if there can be two separate resurrections which are already history, why should it be thought incredible that there should be more than one resurrection of the righteous still to be fulfilled, namely, the resurrection of the church or the saints of the present age before the tribulation, and the resurrection of the Old Testament saints and the tribulation saints who die just before the time of Christ’s coming to set up His kingdom? Logically, no argument can be built for posttribulationism on the word *first* because all these resurrections are “first,” or before the final resurrection of the wicked at the end of the millennium.

The real embarrassment of the posttribulationists, however, is that not a single passage related to the resurrection at the time of Christ’s second coming to the earth has anything at all to say about a translation of any saints, much less a specific translation for the church living on the earth. Most pretribulationists insist that there is no translation at all at the end of the tribulation; instead, the saints then living on earth enter the millennial kingdom in their natural bodies, not translated bodies. In view of the many passages that deal with both the subject of resurrection and the second coming of Christ to the earth, it is certainly a strange silence that there should be no clear passage indicating that any of the saints living on earth at that time should be translated. The alleged translation of the saints in Matthew 24:40-41 has already been demonstrated to be no rapture at all, but a taking away in judgment.

Therefore, the emphasis on translation in 1 Thessalonians 4 and in other passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, which have no clear contextual relationship to a second coming to the earth, leaves the posttribulationists groping for any proof that the rapture occurs at the end of the tribulation. Their frequently asserted accusation against the pretribulationists—that pretribulationism is based on inference—is a hollow charge when it must follow that posttribulationism is also built on an inference. The fact that a translation is necessary to the resurrection of 1 Thessalonians 4 sets this apart as different from any other resurrection mentioned in the Bible, which includes no translation of living saints.

*BSac* 133:532 (Oct 76) p. 308

## **Lack Of Warning Of Great Tribulation**

The rapture passages are distinguished by there being no warning of an impending great tribulation. In every instance where the rapture is clearly intended as the meaning, there is an absence of impending events, in contrast to revelations concerning the second coming of Christ, such as Matthew 24 or Revelation 4-18 . If they are at all comprehensive, they uniformly mention events that precede and serve as signs of the approaching second coming. By contrast, these signs are lacking in all the major rapture passages.

This is especially pointed out in 1 Thessalonians 4, where the truth of the rapture is presented in considerable detail. No

word of caution is given contextually that they should not look for this event until other events occur first—quite in contrast to the revelation concerning the second coming to the earth. Posttribulationists have no real answer to this problem, and they tend to ignore it.

## The Exhortation To Comfort

Undoubtedly the greatest problem posttribulationists face in 1 Thessalonians 4 is that the doctrine of the rapture is offered as a comfort to those who have lost loved ones in Christ through death. It is certainly a hollow argument to say that the truth presented is that of their resurrection. There seems to be no serious question that the Thessalonians believed in the doctrine of resurrection. They did have questions as to where this occurred in the prophetic scheme. This was primarily because the hope of the Lord's return for living Christians had been taught to them as an imminent hope, and they were actually waiting momentarily for His return.

If, as Gundry and Ladd agree, the great tribulation will be a time of great suffering and trial with many martyrs, and a Christian who enters this period must somehow survive the edict that all nonworshippers of the beast be put to death before he can hope to be raptured as a living saint, then the expectation of survival through such an awful period of suffering is small comfort. It would mean first that they could not possibly see their loved ones for years to come. It would mean that in the path ahead lay extreme suffering and privation and probable martyrdom. How, under these circumstances, could they derive any comfort from such a sequence of events? It would be far better from their point of view if the tribulation were to be indefinitely postponed and they were to live out normal lives and die and await resurrection at the rapture. That prospect would certainly be preferable to the possibility of survival through the great tribulation.

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Though not totally ignoring this point, posttribulationists have still to explain how the Thessalonians could derive any comfort whatever out of a posttribulational rapture, and how this would add at all to their faith and expectation at the time that they had lost loved ones through death. Those who, like J. Barton Payne, deny a literal, seven-year tribulation and therefore have a concept of genuine imminency of the Lord's return can with some justification offer comfort to Christians whose loved ones have died. But others, like Ladd and Gundry, who agree to a literal seven-year tribulation offer a most unconvincing solution by simply saying that the ultimate hope of resurrection is all that is in view. If the only way a Christian can experience the rapture is to survive the tribulation, it is no longer either a comforting hope or a blessed hope. Instead there should be grim preparation for what is probable martyrdom in the most awful time of human suffering and persecution of which Scripture speaks.

Gundry posits several arguments to solve this difficulty in posttribulationism. In general, he first tries to soften the rigors of the tribulation by making it a time of satanic wrath instead of divine wrath. This has been previously discussed.[10] See John F. Walvoord, "Posttribulationism Today; Part VI: Posttribulational Denial of Imminency and Wrath," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133 (April-June 1970): 108-18; or John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), chapter 6. Actually, if his view of the tribulation is right, it works against what he is trying to prove, because Satan's wrath is specifically against Christian believers and Israel. If Gundry is right, it emphasizes the rigors of the tribulation, instead of softening them. Any reasonably literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation, such as Ladd and Gundry attempt, should make clear that probably the majority of believers who are in the great tribulation will perish. The percentage of Jews who perish in the land is said to be two-thirds (Zech 13:8). The world's population as a whole will probably be reduced to less than half (Rev 6:8; 9:15). Such a prospect is hardly harmonious with a message of comfort. Only an imminent translation could provide real comfort.

Even posttribulationists like Ladd recognize that the translation of the living saints is the most important truth. Ladd writes,

God had never before revealed to men what would be the particular lot of the living saints at the end of the age. The doctrine of the resurrection had long been taught (cf. Dn. 12:2), but the fact that

the living are to put on the resurrection bodies at the moment of the Lord's return without passing through death and join the resurrected dead in the presence of Christ is revealed for the first time through the Apostle Paul.[11] Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 80.

Generally, posttribulationists tend to ignore the problem of how a posttribulation rapture could be a comfort. They dogmatically deny that comfort is affected by the prospect of the great tribulation. Gundry, for instance, attempts to dispose of the problem in two paragraphs.[12] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 101-2. Such a feeble attempt to erase the problem is an obvious confession that he has no realistic solution to offer. The prospect of the rapture after the tribulation is small comfort to those facing martyrdom. It is not too much to say that this is a most difficult problem to posttribulationists; as a group they tend to evade it rather than face up to it.

If a delay in the resurrection of the dead in Christ were a concern to the Thessalonian believers, how much more would have been their concern if they faced the prospect of dying as martyrs and joining these dead in Christ? Further, if martyrdom were a probability, they should have rejoiced that the dead in Christ had escaped the rigors of the tribulation. According to Revelation 14:3, the voice from heaven declares those who die as "blessed" because they will escape the persecution of believers in the great tribulation. As Hiebert expresses it, "But if they had been taught that the church must go through the great tribulation the logical reaction for them would have been to rejoice that these loved ones had escaped that great period of suffering which they felt was about to occur." [13] D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), p. 205.

Posttribulationists by and large do not solve their problems in 1 Thessalonians 4. The expectation of the Lord's return is uniformly pictured as an imminent event. Their prospect for imminent rapture was such that they feared a delay in resurrection for the dead in Christ. Posttribulationists have no adequate explanation for Paul's omission of any warning that the great tribulation was ahead and necessarily preceded the rapture; under the circumstances, such an omission would have been most misleading and contrasts sharply with the clear presentation of events leading up to the, second coming of Christ recorded in Matthew 24.

## Summary Of Posttribulation Interpretation Of 1 Thessalonians 4

As a whole, the posttribulationists' interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4 does little to advance their argument. They have no reasonable explanation how a posttribulation rapture offers comfort to sorrowing Thessalonians. They have no satisfactory answer why Paul is silent on the impending great tribulation. There is no good explanation why the rapture is portrayed as an impending event. There is no reasonable connection between this passage and the Olivet Discourse. The rapture of living saints is a new revelation not connected with the second coming of Christ in previous revelations, as ever posttribulationists like Ladd concede.

Obviously posttribulationism is at its weakest point in 1 Thessalonians 4, where the doctrine of the rapture has its most detailed revelation.

As the discourse relative to the future continues in 1 Thessalonians 5, however, posttribulationists have posed some problems for pretribulationists that warrant careful attention. These problems will be considered in the next article in this series.

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# Posttribulationism Today

by John F. Walvoord

## Chapter 9

### The Rapture and the Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5

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[EDITOR'S NOTE: This series, begun in *Bibliotheca Sacra* with the January-March, 1975 issue, is now published in book form under the title *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976). This article is adapted from chapter 9 in the book. The series will continue through the January-March 1978 issue.]

The relationship of 1 Thessalonians 5 to the rapture has been debated by both pretribulationists and posttribulationists with an amazing variety of opinions. The problem centers in the definition of "the day of the Lord" and its relationship to the rapture. Because there are differences of interpretation among both pretribulationists and posttribulationists, generalizations are inadvisable. The center of the problem is, first of all, the question of what "the day of the Lord" means. A second question is why the day of the Lord is introduced immediately after discussion of the rapture. A third question is the meaning of specific statements relating to the time of the rapture.

### The Meaning Of The Day Of The Lord

References to the day of the Lord abound in the Old Testament and occur occasionally in the New. Virtually everyone agrees that the judgments related to the second coming are in some sense a part of the day of the Lord. Definitions of the word *day* vary from a specific event, such as a twenty-four-hour day, to an extended period of time stretching all the way from the rapture to the end of the thousand-year reign of Christ. Generally speaking, pretribulationists have identified the day of the Lord as the millennial kingdom, including the judgments that introduce the kingdom. This view was popularized by the 1917 edition of the Scofield Reference Bible.[1] Scofield Reference Bible, p. 1272, footnote. In this interpretation, for all practical purposes, the day of the Lord begins at the end of or after the great tribulation.

Pretribulationists who see the day of the Lord beginning at the end of the tribulation have difficulty harmonizing this with the pretribulational rapture. Posttribulationists point out that 1 Thessalonians 5, referring to the day of the Lord, immediately follows chapter 4, which reveals the rapture. As chapter 5 is dealing with the beginning of the day of the Lord, the implication is that the rapture and the beginning of the day of the Lord occur at the same time. Capitalizing on the confusion among pretribulationists in defining the day of the Lord, Alexander Reese spends a chapter of his classic work on posttribulationism, making the most of this argument.[2] Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1937), pp. 17-83. Cf. discussion by John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Co., 1957), pp. 161-72.

Reese holds that the use of the expression "the day" indicates that endtime events all occur in rapid succession, including the translation of the church and the various judgments of the saints and the wicked. He identifies the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5 with other references to "the day" as found in 1 Corinthians 3:13 and Romans 13:11-12. He likewise so identifies the expressions "in that day" (2 Thess 1:10; 2 Tim 1:18; 4:8); "the day of Christ" (Phil 1:6, 10; 2:16); "the day of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:7-8; 2 Cor 1:14); and "the day of the Lord" (1 Cor 5:4-5; 2 Thess 2:1-3). According to Reese, all refer to the same time and the same event.

Reese and other posttribulationists, as their argument unfolds, lump together all references to “the day,” ignoring the context, arguing in a circle, assuming that posttribulationism is true. As is frequently the case with difficult points of exegesis, it is of utmost importance that the context of each passage be considered before terms can be equated with similar wording elsewhere. Reese pays little attention to the variety of contextual backgrounds.

The central problem, however, is that this kind of explanation assumes that “the day” is a simple and uncomplicated reference to a point in time, whereas in fact the total view of Scripture indicates something quite different. and the Persians, again gives graphic detail to the characteristics of the day of the Lord. It is described as “a destruction from the Almighty” (13:6 ). According to verse 9 , “the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it.” Next Isaiah describes the stars and sun as being darkened, a prophecy that will be literally fulfilled in the great tribulation. In Isaiah 13:11, he states, “And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogancy of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible.”

Beginning with verse 17 , Isaiah describes the Medes as destroying Babylon. In one sense this has already been fulfilled. In another sense this will not have a complete fulfillment until the time of the great tribulation. It is this mingled picture of judgment, regardless of when it occurs, that characterizes the day of the Lord. Any period of extensive divine judgment in the Old Testament is therefore “a day of the Lord.” All of them will be eclipsed, however, with the final judgment that culminates in the great tribulation and the battle of the great day of God Almighty at the second coming of Christ.

The other references cited contain similar material. Isaiah 34:1-8 seems to indicate that judgments will fall on the world in the events leading up to the second coming,

Probably the most graphic picture is found in the Book of Joel, most of which is dedicated to describing the day of the Lord. Included is the famous prophecy of the outpouring of the Spirit, quoted in Acts 2:17-21, which occurred on the day of Pentecost but will have its complete fulfillment in the days prior to the second coming of Christ. The judgments of God poured out on the earth, as well as disturbances in heaven, are graphically described by Joel. There will be great signs in the heavens (Joel 2:30-31), described in more detail in the Book of Revelation: “And I will shew wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD come.” What is meant here is not that the day of the Lord will begin after these wonders in heaven, but that it will come to its climax when the judgment is actually executed.

The Book of Zephaniah adds another aspect to the day of the Lord. After revealing in some detail the judgments to occur at that time, the prophet describes the blessings that will follow (1:7-18 ). In Zephaniah 3:14-17 the prophet writes, “Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more. In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack. The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.”

The significant truth revealed here is that the day of the Lord which first inflicts terrible judgments ends with an extended period of blessing on Israel, which will be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom. Based on the Old Testament revelation, the day of the Lord is a time of judgment, culminating in the second coming of Christ, and followed by a time of special divine blessing to be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom.

## **Posttribulation Interpretation Of The Day Of The Lord**

Generally posttribulationists like Reese and Gundry begin the day of the Lord at the end of the great tribulation. Gundry, who devotes a whole chapter to this, defines the day of the Lord in these words:

The “day of the Lord,” with its corollary the “day of Christ,” figures prominently in discussion of the rapture. In these

phrases the term “day” does not refer to twenty-four hours, but to a longer period of time, a period which includes the millennium and the final judgment. With reference to the time of the rapture, the crux of the argument lies in the *terminus a quo*, the beginning point, of the day of the Lord, not in its millennial extensions.[3] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), p. 89.

In his discussion he attempts to refute the idea that the day of the Lord begins earlier than the end of the tribulation. His discussion is somewhat difficult to follow, but in general he tries to refute all the contentions that the day of the Lord begins before the end of the great tribulation.

All agree that the climax of the day of the Lord, as far as judgment on the nations is concerned, comes at Armageddon and is furthered by the destruction of the armies at the second coming in Revelation 19. Many believe it is brought to its climax in the judgment of the nations after the second coming, as recorded in Matthew 25:31-46. The question remains whether this is all that is involved in the judgments already told the Thessalonians, and that specifically these events relate to the day of the Lord as a time period with special characteristics. In verse 2 he declares, “For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.” Much has been said about this figure of speech, and Paul expresses that they already knew what he meant by it. Obviously he is saying that they knew that the day of the Lord was certainly coming but, like a thief in the night, there was no way to date it.

In Paul’s discussion that follows, a sharp contrast is drawn between the day of the Lord as it relates to the unsaved and as it relates to Christians. This is brought out in the use of the first and second persons—“we,” “us,” and “you” (vv. 1-2, 4-6, 8-11)—and the third person “they” and “others” (vv. 3, 6-7). In verse 3 the day of the Lord is pictured as coming on the unbelievers like travail on a woman with child, so that they cannot escape, just as a woman cannot escape birth pangs. Paul further states that their destruction will come at a time when they are saying “peace and safety.” Gundry does not explain why they will be saying “peace and safety” toward the end of the great tribulation, as it does not fit into his view. Payne has no problem with this and regards it as a sense of false security that exists today in spite of atomic bombs and the danger of a holocausts.[5] J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), p. 108.

The idea that the expression “saying peace and safety” refers to the longing for peace and safety on the part of those who are in the great tribulation is not an acceptable explanation and is rejected by both posttribulationists and pretribulationists. The fact is that Gundry is faced with a real problem of trying to fit this into his scheme with the day of the Lord beginning toward the end of the great tribulation. First Thessalonians 5 states that people will be saying “peace and safety” before the great tribulation begins. This is in harmony with pretribulationism, but quite out of harmony with posttribulationism.

Paul states that the day of the Lord will not overtake the Thessalonians as a thief. Why does an event coming as a thief come unexpectedly on the world, but with proper expectation for believers? Paul explains this in verses 4 and 5: “But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness” (NIV). Here is a crucial point in Paul’s explanation: the thief is going to come in the night, but the believers are declared not to belong to the night or the darkness. The implication is quite clear that believers are in a different time reference, namely, that they belong to the day that precedes the darkness.

On this basis Paul gives an exhortation. If the Thessalonians are of the day, they are not to be asleep or drugged; rather they are to be sober or self-controlled, “putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet” (v. 8, NIV). Paul concludes in verse 9, “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (NIV).

In the exegesis of this verse, pretribulationists and posttribulationists part company. Posttribulationists insist that the church is not appointed to wrath, and with this all pretribulationists agree. What the passage is talking about, however, is not wrath in the abstract, but a *time* of wrath. The judgments poured out in the tribulation do not single out unsaved people only, for war, pestilence, famine, earthquakes, and stars falling from heaven afflict the entire population except for the 144,000 of Revelation 7 singled out by God for special protection.

Here, however, the believer in Christ is assured that his appointment is not to this time of wrath. In attempting to explain this, the pretribulationist has the obvious advantage: if the church is raptured before this time of trouble, then all that is said in this passage becomes very clear; that is, the period of wrath will not overtake the church as a thief, because the church will not be there. If Gundry's use of the argument from silence is valid, it would seem here that Paul's silence on the matter of whether the church must endure this period is again another indication that the church will not even enter the period.

When we take the total picture of this passage into consideration, the reason for Paul's introducing it becomes clearer. Although the events of the day of the Lord do not begin immediately after the rapture, the time period as such—following the symbolism of a day beginning at midnight—could easily be understood to begin with the rapture itself. The opening hours of the day of the Lord do not contain great events. Gradually the major events of the day of the Lord unfold, climaxing in the terrible judgments with which the great tribulation is brought to conclusion.

Taken as a whole, the pretribulationist point of view gives sense and meaning to 1 Thessalonians 5 and explains why this is introduced after the rapture. In effect, Paul is saying that the time of the rapture cannot be determined any more than the time of the beginning of the day of the Lord, but this is of no concern to believers because our appointment is not the wrath of the day of the Lord, but rather the salvation which is ours in Christ.

Confirmation is given to this approach to 1 Thessalonians 5 in a study of 2 Thessalonians 2, where the day of the Lord is again introduced, this time in a context in which the Thessalonians misunderstood and needed correction.

A further word needs to be said concerning the relationship of the day of the Lord to "the day of Christ." Gundry argues at length that the various forms of the six occurrences of this phrase (1 Cor 1:8; 5:5 ; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 1:6, 10; 2:16 ) do not justify any distinction from the basic term "the day of the Lord." This is an exegetical problem that does not really affect the question of pretribulationism and posttribulationism. The contexts of these passages are taken by many to refer to the rapture as a specific event in contrast to the day of the Lord as an extended period of time. If the context of each passage, along with all the references to "the day," is taken into consideration, there is really no problem. Even if Gundry is right in holding that these passages refer to the day of the Lord, they can be understood to refer to the beginning of the extended period of time which follows. It is again begging the question to assume this teaches posttribulationism, as Gundry does.

Gundry summarizes his viewpoint in a way that misrepresents the pretribulationist position. He states:

In the NT sixteen expressions appear in which the term "day" is used eschatologically. Twenty times "day" appears without a qualifying phrase. In view of the wide variety of expressions and the numerous instances where "day" occurs without special qualification, it seems a very dubious procedure to select five out of the sixteen expressions, lump together four of the five as equivalent to one another, and distinguish the four from the one remaining. There is no solid basis, then, for distinguishing between the day of Christ and the day of the Lord.[6] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 98.

The reference in 1 Corinthians 5:5 has a textual problem, and some texts read "the day of the Lord." Pretribulationists are justified in distinguishing the remaining five texts from the day of the Lord because the expression "the day of the Lord" is not expressly used. Pretribulationists do not claim that this proves the pretribulation rapture; what they point to is that if the pretribulationist rapture is established on other grounds, these references seem to refer specifically to the rapture rather than to the time of judgment on the world. This is based on what each passage states. It is therefore manifestly unfair to accuse pretribulationists of arbitrarily lumping things together that have no distinguishing characteristics. On the contrary, the posttribulationist is lumping together a number of different phrases that are not quite the same without any regard for the context or their precise wording.

Alexander Reese proceeds much on the same basis as Gundry when he declares that all references to "the day" refer to the day of the Lord.[7] Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, pp. 167-83. He does this without any supporting evidence. Yet the word *day* occurs more than two hundred times in the New Testament alone and only becomes an eschatological term when the context so indicates. The only way all these eschatological terms can be made to refer specifically to the day of the Lord is to assume that posttribulationism is true and argue from this premise. Pretribulationists rightfully object to this

illogical procedure.

Taken as a whole, 1 Thessalonians 5—while not in itself a conclusive argument for pretribulationism—is more easily harmonized with the pretribulational interpretation than the posttribulational interpretation. The passage is quite strange as an explanation of the time of the rapture if, in fact, the Thessalonians were taught posttribulationism and already knew that they would have to go through the day of the Lord. The beginning of the day of the Lord under those circumstances would have no relationship to the rapture and would be no comfort to them in their sorrow. On the other hand, if the rapture occurs before the endtime tribulation and the day of the Lord begins at the time of the pretribulation rapture, then the discussion is cogent because the indeterminant character of the beginning of the day of the Lord is the same as the indeterminant time of the rapture itself.

Nowhere in 1 Thessalonians 4 or 5 is the rapture specifically placed after the great tribulation and as occurring at the time of the climax of the judgments which are brought on the world at the time of the day of the Lord. On the contrary, the Thessalonians are assured that their appointment is not a day of wrath, but a day of salvation, a concept easily harmonized with the pretribulational interpretation.

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# Posttribulationism Today

by John F. Walvoord

## Chapter 10

### Is The Tribulation Before the Rapture in 2 Thessalonians?

[John F. Walvoord, President and Professor of Systematic Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary, Editor, *Bibliotheca Sacra*.]

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This series, begun in *Bibliotheca Sacra* with the January-March, 1975 issue, is now published in book form under the title *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976). This article is adapted from chapter 10 in the book. The series will continue through the January March 1978 issue.]

Posttribulationists often cite two passages in 2 Thessalonians in support of their viewpoint. The first concerns the comfort extended to the Thessalonians in their persecution in 1:5-10 ; the second is the word of correction concerning Paul's teaching which had reached the Thessalonians, as stated in 2:1-12 . A third reference—2 Thessalonians 3:5, where the believers are exhorted to “patient waiting for Christ”—is indecisive, for it is similar to many other references to their hope of the Lord's return.

### Posttribulationism and 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

It is apparent from both Thessalonian epistles that the Christians in that city had undergone much persecution. This arose from the same causes that had forced Paul, Silas, and Timothy to flee Thessalonica for their lives. This suffering is mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 3:3-5 ; and 2 Thessalonians 1:4-5. Paul exhorted the Christians to bear in mind that in due time God would punish their persecutors. He wrote:

All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will Paul asserts here that the Thessalonians were wrong in thinking that they were already in the day of the Lord, because there was a total lack of evidence for it. Two main evidences are mentioned: first, what the King James calls “a falling away” (“the rebellion” in NIV); second, that the man of lawlessness (NIV) or the man of sin (KJV) has not been revealed. Both of these would be necessary before the day of the Lord could really “come.”

The word translated “the falling away” or “the rebellion” is from the Greek *apostasia* from which the English word *apostasy* is derived. Some debate has arisen as to the exact meaning of this word, which could also be rendered “the departure.” E. Schuyler English and others have suggested that the word means literally “departure” and refers to the rapture itself.[4] E. Schuyler English, *Rethinking the Rapture* (Travelers Rest, SC: Southern Bible Book House, 1954), p. 65.

Gundry argues at length against this interpretation, which would explicitly place the rapture before the day of the Lord, and his evidence is quite convincing. English is joined by the Greek scholar Kenneth S. Wuest, but their view has not met with general acceptance by either pretribulationists or posttribulationists.[5] Kenneth S. Wuest, “The Rapture—Precisely When?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 (January-March 1957): 69-70. A number of pretribulationists have interpreted the apostasy in this way as the departure of the church, but the evidence against this translation is impressive. In that case Gundry, seconded by Ladd, is probably right: the word refers to doctrinal defection of the special character that will be revealed in the day of the

Lord. In this instance pretribulationists can agree with posttribulationists without agreeing with their conclusions on the passage as a whole.

The error into which the Thessalonians had fallen; according to Gundry, was one of two possibilities:

First, the Thessalonians, unaware of a pretribulation rapture, were led to believe that they had entered the tribulation, which they thought was part of the day of the Lord... Second, the Thessalonians thought that a pretribulation rapture had already occurred and that they had been left behind in the tribulation, which (as in the preceding view) they believed to be a part of the day of the Lord.[6] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 118-19.

Gundry's second hypothesis—that the Thessalonians feared they had been left behind in the tribulation—makes sense only if the Thessalonians had been taught pretribulationism. If they were posttribulationists, there was no reason for concern; thus Gundry rejects that second hypothesis and its pretribulationist implications.

As a posttribulationist, Gundry holds that the pretribulation rapture view here is impossible because under the circumstances Paul, in correcting an error, would have made “a categorical statement to the effect that the rapture will take place before the tribulation. Such a statement nowhere appears.”[7] *Ibid.*, p. 119. Here, once again, Gundry argues from the silence of the passage.

The fact is that as the passage continues, Paul is not silent about the rapture intervening, if the passage is rightly interpreted. Nevertheless, Gundry goes on speculating for several more pages about the nature of the error of the Thessalonians. The crux of the matter, however, is found in Paul's discussion immediately following.

Beginning with verse 6, the apostle reminded them of what he had previously taught them: an event had to occur first before the man of sin could be revealed. Pretribulationists find in this a direct reference to the rapture as proof that the Thessalonians had the wrong point of view. Paul wrote:

And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming (2 Thess 2:6-8, NIV).

Paul then describes further what will happen in connection with the coming of the lawless one.

Posttribulationists generally are quite divided as to the character of the one who is restraining or holding back evil. Gundry presents a chart indicating the various views that the restrainer is God, the Antichrist, or Satan, all views held by posttribulationists.[8] *Ibid.*, p. 123. As Gundry goes on to state, a popular view is that the restrainer is the Roman Empire or government itself.

Unlike his fellows, Gundry agrees that the restrainer is the Holy Spirit, a view incompatible with posttribulationism. In support he offers evidence that this is an old view corroborated by the grammar and that the view is quite superior to the alternative views that the restraint is provided by the restrainer himself, whether it be the Roman Empire, human government today, or the Antichrist himself. In his broad statement, “At every point the posttribulation view of the passage commends itself.”[9] *Ibid.*, p. 128. This is pure dogmatism and is no substitute for solid argument. Actually it is impossible to harmonize Gundry's position on the Holy Spirit with posttribulationism,

Posttribulationism has failed to account for the alarm of the Thessalonians that they were already in the day of the Lord and the great tribulation. If they had been taught posttribulationism, they would not have been alarmed. The fact that Paul refutes it shows that they were in error in holding this position. If posttribulationism were right, Paul's approach to their correction could have been entirely different.

While posttribulationists and pretribulationists will continue to argue this passage, in reality there is nothing in it that teaches posttribulationism as such. Paul's correction of error begins in the very first verse of the passage by appealing to the Thessalonians' knowledge of the rapture; throughout the passage Paul appeals to their previous instruction in various points.

The exegesis of this passage reveals once again how Gundry has taken a position different from all preceding posttribulationists; if Gundry is right, then the preceding posttribulationists were wrong and vice versa. The common practice of counting up posttribulationists, and by their very numbers proving that posttribulationism is right, is based on the false premise that posttribulationists agree. As a matter of fact, they are quite diverse in their basic arguments and tend to contradict one another.

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# Posttribulationism Today

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 11

### The Rapture in Relation to Endtime Events

[John F. Walvoord, President and Professor of Systematic Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary, Editor, *Bibliotheca Sacra*.]

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This series, begun in *Bibliotheca Sacra* with the January-March, 1975 issue, is published in book form under the title *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976). This article is adapted from chapter 11 in the book. The series will continue through the January-March 1978 issue.]

Probably one of the most difficult problems a posttribulationist faces is to establish a well-defined order of events at the second advent. Posttribulationists tend to avoid this problem. Robert Gundry, more than others, makes an effort to state and solve the order of events. In the process, however, a number of acute problems in posttribulationism surface.

### The Contribution of 1 Corinthians 15

Generally speaking, posttribulationists do not dwell at length on 1 Corinthians 15:51-58, one of the major passages on the rapture. The reason is obvious: This passage contributes nothing to the posttribulationist argument and, in fact, poses a serious problem.

First Corinthians 15 is one of the great chapters of Scripture and in many respects it is the central chapter of this epistle. Because of the numerous theological and moral problems in the Corinthian church, Paul dwells on correction of these problems in the first fourteen chapters of 1 Corinthians.

When Paul comes to chapter 15, he develops the central aspect of his theology, the gospel with its testimony to the death of Christ for sin and His resurrection. He then makes the practical application of the resurrection of Christ to the believer's faith and hope. The first fifty verses of 1 Corinthians 15 accordingly deal with the fundamental truths of the death and resurrection of Christ, and the resurrection of believers who die. Having laid this foundation, Paul then introduces the subject of the rapture of the church presented as "a mystery" in 1 Corinthians 15:51.

In referring to the rapture as a mystery, Paul is reaffirming that this is a New Testament truth not revealed in the Old Testament, a truth which, according to 1 Thessalonians 4:15, he had received by a special word from God. He summarizes what will happen at the rapture in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52: "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a flash, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed" (NIV).

This revelation clearly confirms what had previously been revealed in 1 Thessalonians 4, but it adds some details. The rapture will occur in a moment of time. The dead who are raised will be given imperishable bodies. Living Christians will be changed and given bodies similar to those being raised from the dead. All this is in keeping with the principle laid down in 1 Corinthians 15:50 that our present bodies are not suited for heaven.

The rapture of the church is declared to be a great victory over death and a partial fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies that the saints will have victory over death and the grave. On the basis of the fact of the return of Christ for His own, Paul exhorts the brethren in 1 Corinthians 15:58, “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (NIV).

In presenting the rapture in this passage, it should first be noted that Paul declared it to be a mystery. The doctrine of resurrection is no mystery, for it is clearly revealed in both the Old and New Testaments. The mystery was that living saints would be transformed at the time of the rapture and given a body suited for heaven without going through the experience of death. Although this had been anticipated in the Old Testament—in the case of Elijah and Enoch, who were translated and did not die—there is no intimation in the Old Testament that such an event would take place when Christ returned to set up His kingdom. Accordingly the mystery is not resurrection, but translation of the living.

It should be clear that Paul is presenting this truth as an imminent hope. On the basis of its expectation, he urges the brethren to serve the Lord faithfully. In that expectation, there is not a syllable of warning that their only hope of achieving this goal would be to pass through the coming time of great tribulation. Silence about a tribulation following the rapture is understandable if the rapture occurs first, but if the great tribulation precedes the rapture, it would have been cruel for the apostle to hold out the hope of the coming of the Lord for them when, as a matter of fact, it would be impossible unless they survived the tribulation.

First Corinthians 15 confirms what is uniformly true in all the rapture passages, that not a word of warning is ever given concerning a preceding tribulation. Posttribulationists tend to ignore this passage because to them it is a problem rather than a help in supporting their point of view. In the order of events, 1 Corinthians 15 confirms that the rapture comes first, before other great prophetic events will be fulfilled.

## **Pretribulation Order of Events**

According to pretribulationists, the rapture of the church occurs at the end of the church age. It is followed by a period of adjustment in which a dictator and a ten-nation group emerge in the Middle East. Then a time of peace follows as this dictator enters into a treaty with Israel, indicated in Daniel 9:27 as intended to last for seven years. However, after the treaty has continued for three and one-half years, half its intended duration, the treaty is broken and the peacetime abruptly ends, followed by a period of persecution.

According to Daniel 9:27 and Matthew 24:15, the dictator in the Middle East desecrates the Jewish temple of that day, stops the sacrifices, and begins worldwide persecution of the Jew. Concurrently he rises to world power and becomes a world ruler (Rev 13:7). He wields not only political power, but also religious power (claiming to be God) and economic power (permitting no one to buy or sell without his permission—Rev 13:8, 17). Because he blasphemes God and persecutes the saints, the judgments of the great tribulation follow.

As the great tribulation progresses, major areas of the world begin rebelling against the dictator. A gigantic war erupts with great armies from the north, east, and south converging on the land of Palestine. At the height of this conflict, Jesus Christ returns in power and glory. He first destroys the armies who unite to fight the hosts of the Lord, as described in Revelation 19. The world ruler and the false prophet associated with him are cast into the lake of fire. Revelation 20 records that the martyrs of the tribulation will be raised from the dead, and many believe that the Old Testament saints will be resurrected at the same time according to Daniel 12:2. A series of judgments will follow that include both Jews and Gentiles and deal with their eligibility to enter the millennial kingdom.

Once these judgments are fulfilled, the millennial kingdom begins, and for a thousand years Christ reigns on earth. The millennium in turn is followed by the new heaven and the new earth and the eternal state. Because the rapture of the church in this point of view takes place before these endtime events, the pretribulationist has no need to find a place for it in connection with Christ’s coming to earth. But posttribulationists have no such option and must find a suitable place for the rapture of the church among the events of the second coming.

# The Posttribulational Order of Events at the Second Advent

Posttribulationists seem to avoid itemizing events and their order at the second coming of Christ. Yet obviously, because the rapture is pictured as the church's meeting the Lord in the air, this must be inserted before Christ actually reaches the earth. As the heavenly hosts proceed from heaven to earth, the church, according to the posttribulationists, rises from earth and meets the Lord in the air; as the procession proceeds to the earth, the church joins with the coming King in extending His kingdom over the earth.

Millenarians—who are uniformly posttribulationists because they deny a literal millennium—believe that Christ at His second coming introduces the new heaven and the new earth immediately after a general judgment of all men. They merge the judgment of the nations, the judgment of Israel, the judgment of the church, and the judgment of the great white throne as different aspects of the same event.

Premillenarians who are posttribulationists have certain problems. A most important fact all posttribulationists ignore is that the resurrection at the second coming is *after* the descent to the earth, not during the event, as Revelation 20:4 makes clear. This contradicts the posttribulational order of events.

If all the righteous are raptured and all the wicked are put to death, posttribulationists also face the problem of who will populate the millennial earth. In premillennialism there is general agreement that there will be people in the flesh on the earth who will live normal, earthly lives, bearing children, planting crops, building houses, living, and dying. Most premillenarian posttribulationists simply avoid this issue. Gundry is to be commended for making an effort to face this problem and attempt a solution. But his exegetical efforts to solve this problem also reveal the many complications a posttribulationist faces in ordering endtime events, so special attention should be directed to his contribution.

## Gundry's View of the Judgment of the Nations

Unlike most posttribulationists, who avoid it, Gundry confronts the problem of the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25:31-46. According to the text., this judgment will follow the second advent of Christ and the establishment of His throne. Many expositors recognize that the separation of the sheep and the goats is the separation of the saved from the unsaved on the basis of the evidence of their salvation and how they treat the Jew. Though at present unsaved people may be kind to Jews, in the great tribulation, with anti-Semitism at its height, anyone befriending the Jews described as “brothers” of the king would do so only because he is motivated by faith in Christ. Thus while kind treatment of the Jew is not a ground for salvation, it is an evidence of it.

Gundry begins his objection to the normal pretribulational interpretation by citing the fact that in Matthew 12:50—many chapters earlier than Matthew 25—“Jesus defines His brothers as ‘whoever shall do the will of My Father.’” [1] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), p. 166. It seems to be extreme exegesis to take a reference thirteen chapters away, occurring in time two years before, as a specific definition. However, the major problem Gundry faces is determining where this judgment occurs in the sequence of events.

Virtually everyone except Gundry, whatever the eschatological viewpoint, considers the judgment of the nations as occurring approximately at the time of the second coming of Christ. This, however, poses a problem to posttribulationists because, if the rapture occurs while Christ is coming from heaven to the earth, it would automatically separate all believers from unbelievers. Then there would be no sheep (representing believers) intermingled with goats (representing unbelievers) on the earth when Christ sets up His throne. with other standard works on Revelation, yet in general he holds a futuristic viewpoint.

While it is unnecessary to take up all the details, attention can first be directed to his section on the rapture in Revelation 4:1-2. Though many pretribulationists find in the catching up of John a symbolic presentation of the rapture of the church, the

passage obviously falls somewhat short of an actual statement of the rapture. Accordingly Gundry has some grounds for questioning the validity of this argument. In the process, he makes certain dogmatic statements that must be challenged. He states, for example, “The book of Revelation treats final events in fuller detail than does any other portion of the NT. Yet, not a single verse in Revelation straightforwardly describes a pretribulational rapture of the Church or advent of Christ.”[3] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Pretribulationists rightfully are impatient with this kind of dogmatism because it is also true that the Book of Revelation nowhere describes a posttribulational rapture of the church. The last book of the Bible is specifically dealing with the second coming of Christ to the earth as its major theme, rather than with the rapture of the church as such; thus if the rapture indeed is included in the second coming of Christ, the silence of Scripture on this point becomes more eloquent than the supposed silence of a pretribulational rapture. Gundry’s repeated arguing from silence in his book is quite unwarranted unless he is willing to concede the validity of the argument from silence as it relates to pretribulationism. Yet he affirms the argument from silence over and over again when it suits his purpose for his viewpoint.

One of the familiar pretribulational arguments based on Revelation 3:10 is debated at length by Gundry.[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 54-61. Like most posttribulationists who discuss this subject, Gundry attempts to prove that the Greek preposition *ek* does not mean *from*, but *out from within*. The preposition, however, does not stand alone but is used with the verb *tereo*, normally translated *keep*. A parallel passage in usage is found in John 17:15, where Christ prays that His disciples may be protected from the evil one. Gundry points out that in the believers’ present experience they are not taken out of the world but protected from the evil of the world.

What Gundry and most posttribulationists do not take into consideration is that the Bible expressly reveals that saints in the great tribulation will not be protected, except in certain rare instances such as the 144,000, and that the only way they can be kept “from the hour of trial” (NIV) of the great tribulation is by being removed.

Accordingly, while Gundry displays a great deal of erudition in his discussion, it is another illustration of evading the most important point. The promise to the Philadelphian church was not that they would be kept *through* the tribulation. The promise is, “I will also keep you *from the hour of trial* that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth” (NIV, italics added). The point is that they were promised to be kept from the time period of the tribulation.

Gundry discusses the word *hour* referring to the prayer of Christ in John 12:27—“Father, save me from this hour?” (NIV)—arguing that it is not simply a time period. Here again Gundry misses the point. The fact is, the Father did not save Christ from the hour, that is, the time of suffering. While Gundry states the posttribulational argument as well as it can be stated, it still falls short of proof that this is what Revelation 3:10 really means.

The problem of this passage turns somewhat on the question of whether the Philadelphian church is typical of the true church, the body of Christ. This may be debated, but the fact remains that even the Philadelphian church as it was historically in existence in the first century could not have been promised that they would be kept “from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth” (Rev 3:10, NIV) if, as a matter of fact, posttribulationism is the correct view. All agree that the Philadelphian church died before the tribulation began, but the question is whether the promise was valid. Pretribulationists can claim this text for whatever application is relevant. While the extent of its support of pretribulationism may be debated, it does not offer any proof at all for the posttribulational view. The issue is whether the church is kept *through* the tribulation or kept *from* this period. The Greek preposition *dia* should have been used if the concept of *through* were intended.

Gundry, like many others, debates whether the twenty-four elders stand for the church. This is an issue that most scholars agree cannot be finally determined. If the Textus Receptus is correct, then the twenty-four elders are clearly the church, as the first person is used in the song of the redeemed in Revelation 5:9-10. If, however, this is changed to the third person as other texts read, it leaves the question open as to whether these are angels or men. Thus while the passage offers no support for the posttribulational view, the support for the pretribulational view remains under question.

There is, however, the inference that the elders are wearing crowns of reward, and this implies that their judgment has already taken place. If they are angels, this is inexplicable, for it is quite clear that the judgment of angels is later. If they are the church and the church has been raptured earlier, then the rewards make sense. Gundry's argument—that if the crowns imply rapture, then John's being caught up could not symbolize the rapture—may point out an inconsistency, but for those pretribulationists who do not regard John's being caught up as the rapture, it is no clear refutation. Whatever evidence there is about the twenty-four elders is in favor of pretribulationism, not against it. This probably explains why Gundry devotes five pages to this rather tenuous argument. All that posttribulationists can do at this point is to raise questions; they cannot prove that the pretribulationists are wrong in their identification of the elders as the church.

To harmonize the Book of Revelation with posttribulationism, Gundry has his own way of combining the seals, trumpets, and bowls of the wrath of God. According to his diagram, the trumpets begin with the fourth seal; the bowls begin with the fourth trumpet; the seventh seal, the seventh trumpet, and the seventh bowl are simultaneous. All this is quite arbitrary, but it is hardly necessary to debate all the issues involved in order to determine whether the Book of Revelation is in harmony with the pre-or posttribulational position. Gundry's position gives him a good deal of flexibility and tends to help him in his idea that the day of the Lord does not begin until the end. It should be evident to any reader, however, that Gundry is arranging the Book of Revelation to harmonize with posttribulationism and his peculiar view of it rather than interpreting it on exegetical considerations.

The usual pretribulational argument that the church is not mentioned in Revelation 4-18 calls for four pages of Gundry's discussion.[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 77-81. Some of Gundry's arguments may have partial relevance and force. But the fact remains that the church is not mentioned in this period. This does not prove pretribulationism, but it certainly poses a problem for posttribulationism which Gundry does not solve.

Probably the most important divergent view of Gundry is his interpretation of the 144,000 in Revelation 7:1-8 and 14:1-5. Practically all posttribulationists spiritualize these twelve tribes that constitute the 144,000 as representing spiritual Israel, viz., the church. Because he distinguishes Israel from the church Gundry cannot use this method of equating the 144,000 with the church.

Gundry may be right that the 144,000 are not necessarily preachers of the gospel, but he tends to ignore the evidence that they are genuinely saved. He refers to them as bondservants (Rev 7:3), significantly omitting a reference to the fact that they are servants "of God." Thus Gundry offers the suggestion that the 144,000 are a Jewish remnant who are unsaved, who are not members of the church, and who are not raptured. He holds that when the rapture occurs and they see their Messiah descending to the earth, they suddenly are converted.

The Scriptures Gundry cites (Zech 3:8-9; 12:9-13:1; Mal 3:1-5; Rom 11:26-27) simply do not support the concept that there is a second chance for people on earth who are unsaved at the time of Christ's return. Most posttribulationists disagree with Gundry here. While Gundry attempts to establish this point of view, it is a weak argument. As far as the writer knows, no one in the history of the church has ever held that the 144,000 are unsaved, orthodox Jews. They hold either that they are members of the church and are converted or, as pretribulationists usually hold, that they are saved Israelites. Gundry further holds that the 144,000 "will include both men and women who will populate and replenish the millennial kingdom of Israel." [6] *Ibid.*, p. 82.

While both posttribulationists and pretribulationists agree that there will be a godly remnant of Israel awaiting Christ at His return, Gundry's view of the 144,000 is absolutely unique and is another evidence of his somewhat desperate attempts to harmonize his very unusual views of posttribulationism with the Book of Revelation.

Gundry also spends some time refuting the view that the marriage supper of the lamb in Revelation 19 is another evidence for a pretribulation rapture. In a normal Oriental wedding, three stages can be observed—first, the legal stage; second, the bridegroom's coming for the bride; and third, the wedding feast. Pretribulationists stress that, if in Revelation 19 the wedding feast is announced, the two preceding stages, including the bridegroom's coming for the bride, has already been accomplished. Gundry replies, "To press woodenly the marital relationship of both Israel and the Church to the Lord would

be to say that God is a bigamist.”[7] Ibid., p. 85. Such a statement suggests that Gundry is straining too hard to try to explain a point which, after all, is not decisive. Whatever weight this may have, it is no help to the posttribulationist.

## **Gundry’s View of Armageddon**

A peculiarity of Gundry’s view is that he does not believe the day of the Lord begins until Armageddon. Although Armageddon is clearly the last hour preceding the second coming of Christ, Gundry would have us believe that none of the judgments preceding Armageddon are judgments of the day of the Lord. Gundry states, “Certain celestial portents will both precede the day of the Lord (Joel 2:30-31) and follow immediately upon the tribulation (Matt 24:29). Clearly, the day of the Lord will not begin with the tribulation or any part of it, for otherwise the heavenly portents after the tribulation could not be said to precede that day.”[8] Ibid., p. 95.

The logic of these and succeeding statements, as well as Gundry’s rather tangled argument in support of his contention, are all open to question. The facts are that the Book of Revelation, beginning in chapter 6, makes very clear that there are a series of “celestial portents” and that they occur throughout the whole period, as well as in the climax that marks its close. Most readers will find Gundry’s argument hard to understand at this point.

The Book of Revelation teaches that God will pour out His judgments on the earth over a period of years preceding Armageddon and that all of these judgments are properly a description of what the Bible refers to as the day of the Lord. Even if the various events of the Book of Revelation are shuffled to suit Gundry’s view, as he attempts to do, it still comes through clearly that judgments in the day of the Lord occur long before Armageddon; with this comes the evidence that the day of the Lord itself is under way. Since this is one of Gundry’s principal contentions and the view on which his whole superstructure rests, the questionable character of his evidence weakens his entire argument. If the Book of Revelation teaches anything, it teaches that God’s judgments fall upon the earth beginning at chapter 6 and culminating in chapter 19. For most readers Gundry’s view will not make sense.

## **Posttribulationism at Its Weakest Point**

As the discussion of the rapture in relation to the endtime events has indicated, the problem of ordering events is a major one for posttribulationism and especially for the view of Robert Gundry. All posttribulationists stumble when trying to place the rapture in the order of events at the endtime because it does not fit naturally into the sequence. Amillenarians have less trouble than premillenarians. But posttribulationists are trying to establish an event not indicated in any passage dealing with the second coming of Christ to the earth and without causal relationship to the events which follow.

The problem is compounded by Gundry’s attempt to combine dispensationalism with posttribulationism. His view as a whole stands or falls on three major issues: (1) his view of the judgment of the nations; (2) his view of the 144,000; and (3) his view of Armageddon as preceding the beginning of the day of the Lord. It is not too much to say that Gundry’s position is unique and is rather clearly the product of his problems in coordinating the endtime events. If Gundry is wrong in placing the judgment of the nations at the end of the millennium—as practically all expositors would hold—and if he is wrong in identifying the 144,000 as unsaved orthodox Jews who nevertheless are “servants of God,” and if he is wrong in his attempt to delete all the judgments of God which precede Armageddon as not being in the day of the Lord, then his conclusions are also wrong. The ordinary posttribulationist teachings that the judgment of the nations takes place at the second coming of Christ, that the 144,000 represent saved individuals, and that divine judgments fall on the earth before Armageddon are far more tenable than Gundry’s point of view.

Nevertheless the problem of all posttribulationists comes out more graphically in Gundry than in any other posttribulationist interpreter. The rapture of the church just does not fit endtime events unless it is made the first in the series and before the tribulation. The unique views of Gundry actually pose more problems to the posttribulationist than they do to the pretribulationist.

In attempting to relate the rapture to endtime events, the deep-seated problems of posttribulationism surface again and again. The basic problem of posttribulationists—that their theological inductions are not based on all the facts and that they tend to be selective in their supporting evidence, ignoring the problems—leaves their conclusions in question. Because of the comprehensive nature of scriptural revelation in both the Old and New Testaments on endtime events, for there to be a complete omission of the rapture in connection with the second coming of Christ becomes a most difficult problem. Gundry's argument is complicated by his attempt to be literal, which only results in entangling him in various conclusions which are unique to him and a practice of using principles that do not lead to his conclusions. If posttribulationism stands or falls on the reasonableness of his analysis of endtime events, it ought to be clear that posttribulationism fails to support its major contentions.

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# Posttribulationism Today

by John F. Walvoord

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## Chapter 12

### Unresolved Problems of Posttribulationism

[John F. Walvoord, President and Professor of Systematic Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary, Editor, *Bibliotheca Sacra*.]

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This series, begun in *Bibliotheca Sacra* with the January-March, 1975 issue, is now published in book form under the title *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976). This article is adapted from chapter 12 in the book. The series will conclude with the January-March, 1978 issue.]

In the study of the relative merits of arguments supporting pretribulationism and posttribulationism, it becomes evident that not all the arguments for either conclusion are necessarily decisive. If either the pretribulational or posttribulational rapture was unequivocally taught in Scripture, it is doubtful whether worthy scholars would divide on the question. The conclusions reached necessarily are based on the total weight of the supporting evidence and the extent to which each view solves its problems.

Pretribulationists continue to believe that, on the whole, they have offered a better solution to the exegesis of the New Testament on the subject of Christ's coming for His church than the posttribulationists. Posttribulationists continue to hold that pretribulationists have not firmly established their point of view.

### Summary of Posttribulational Arguments

Most posttribulational arguments are in the nature of refutation of pretribulationism. Posttribulationists, however, have approached the subject from at least four major points of view, as mentioned previously, and both the premises and the supporting evidence vary a great deal. A summary of the more important arguments is helpful in weighing the relative merits of posttribulationism and pretribulationism. Because of variations in posttribulational interpretation, however, these need to be divided into two classes: (1) arguments on which posttribulationists agree; (2) arguments on which posttribulationists themselves disagree.

### Posttribulational Arguments Advanced by All Posttribulationists

#### Historical Argument

Practically all posttribulationists charge that pretribulationism is a recent theory which surfaced in the writings of J. N. Darby about 150 years ago. Accordingly they argue that posttribulationism is the standard doctrine of the church, and they raise the question why pretribulationism was not advanced earlier if it is actually the teaching of Scripture. George E. Ladd, for instance, devotes a third of his book to the historical argument, and practically every writer on posttribulationism emphasizes and reemphasizes this point.[1] George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956). In offering this argument, posttribulationists generally ignore the fact that most modern forms of posttribulationism differ greatly from that of the early church or of the Protestant Reformers and are actually just as new or perhaps newer than pretribulationism.

## The Argument from Silence

Practically all posttribulationists appeal to the fact that the New Testament does not state in so many words a pretribulation rapture. Here they frequently refer to the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24-25), which does not mention the rapture in its list of endtime events. They also argue that in the rapture passages there is no clear statement of the great tribulation following the event. Writers like Robert Gundry repeat over and over this argument from silence as one of the most convincing arguments for posttribulationism.[2] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973). Almost invariably omitted, however, is the confession that the Bible is also silent on a posttribulation rapture and never mentions the great tribulation as preceding the rapture. It is a curious note that posttribulationists consistently deny pretribulationists the right to use the argument from silence while using the same argument to support their own viewpoints. by spiritualizing the great tribulation, those who take it literally must find some other explanation. Generally they tend to minimize the sufferings and to insulate the saints from the judgments of the great tribulation. Here posttribulationists flounder badly, and their major disagreement on the nature of the tribulation creates serious problems.

### Disagreement on the Book of Revelation

A major problem of posttribulationists is that they have no uniform interpretation of the Book of Revelation. Many posttribulationists spiritualize the great judgments described in Revelation 6-19, while others attempt to take them somewhat literally. Most posttribulationists spiritualize the 144,000 of Israel as representing saints in general and tend to make Israel and the church the same spiritual entity. Gundry offers a unique interpretation, differing from other posttribulationists in portraying the 144,000 as orthodox Jews who are unsaved until the moment of the rapture.[8] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 81-83. Because of the wide variety of viewpoints among the posttribulationists on the Book of Revelation, their arguments are conflicting and contradictory.

### Disagreement on the Nature of the Church

Most posttribulationists tend to spiritualize the church as including saints of all ages. They argue that saints are in the great tribulation and therefore the church must go through it. Gundry is the exception to this in that he attempts to distinguish between the church and Israel in most instances. Most posttribulationists recognize that a major ground for pretribulationism is the distinction between the church and Israel; posttribulationists like Gundry, however, take an opposite view. The result is further confusion in the posttribulation argument.

### Disagreement On A Second Chance For Unbelievers At The Second Coming Of Christ

Gundry and a few others attempt to resolve the problem of saints in the millennium still in their natural bodies—in contrast with the saints raptured after the tribulation—by teaching a second chance to be saved after the rapture. While pretribulationists can point to an extended number of years during which people could come to Christ and qualify to enter the millennium in their natural bodies, posttribulationists do not generally postulate a second chance for those who are unbelievers at the time of the rapture. Gundry is one of the few who advance this position, which is unsupported in Scripture.

### Disagreement as to a Specific Order of Events at the Time of the Second Coming

Posttribulationists rarely offer a specific sequence of events in connection with the second coming of Christ. Although obligated to include the rapture in the descent of Christ from heaven to the earth, most of them do not defend it or explain it. The reason for this is that the rapture is, for them, an extraneous note in the events described in the second coming of Christ

to the earth, and it introduces problems in the various Scriptures dealing with divine judgments. For instance, the resurrection of the tribulation saints is placed after Christ returns to earth, not in the process of His descent.

## **Disagreement on the Nature of the Judgments at the Second Coming of Christ**

While posttribulationists agree that there are judgments at the second coming of Christ, they disagree as to their time and order. Gundry places the judgment of the nations and the judgment seat of Christ at the end of the millennium.[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 163-71. Posttribulationists usually lump the various judgments at the second coming and if premillennial, place them before the millennium. There is no uniform teaching among posttribulationists on the final judgments.

### **Disagreement on the Millennium**

Posttribulationists are not agreed as to whether premillennialism, postmillennialism, or amillennialism is the correct view. Accordingly posttribulationism does not lend itself to a single system of eschatological interpretation and varies widely in its concept of the fulfillment of prophecy. It is difficult to find two posttribulationists who agree completely on the order of endtime events.

### **Resulting Unresolved Posttribulational Problems**

In most studies of posttribulational arguments, it is often overlooked that posttribulationists have not really solved their major problems. These fall into three major areas: (1) the silence of Scripture on crucial facts of posttribulationism; (2) the obvious contrasts between passages dealing with the rapture and passages relating to the second coming of Christ to the earth; (3) problems of contradiction, or teachings of posttribulationism that conflict with normal premillennial interpretation of Scripture. While these problem areas in posttribulationism have been considered in various articles in this series, the force of them becomes more evident when they are summarized.

### **Silence of Scripture on Facts Crucial to Posttribulationism**

Posttribulationists usually make much of the charge that pretribulationism is based only on inference. Although the charge is partly true, they cover up the fact that posttribulationism is also based on inference.

First, posttribulationists have never been able to prove that the church as the body of Christ is actually in the period of tribulation, especially the one designated in Scripture as the “great tribulation.” All agree that in the great tribulation there are people, referred to as “saints,” who are saved Israelites or saved Gentiles. None of the usual terms is used such as the word *church* or synonyms which include both Jew and Gentile as the distinctive body of saints in the present age. Posttribulationists attempt to solve this by making Israel and the church the same or by using other evasive arguments. But they cannot cite a single passage that incontrovertibly places the church, the body of Christ, in the great tribulation. While the argument from silence has its limitations, it is strange that in the extended description of the great tribulation as found in Revelation 4-18, there is not a single reference to the church as being in the period. While posttribulationists have worked hard to place the church in the Olivet Discourse and have otherwise attempted to counter the force of this argument, the fact remains that they have never satisfactorily explained this.

Second, posttribulationists have never satisfactorily explained why the Thessalonian Christians were not warned of the coming great tribulation when the hope of the rapture was extended to them as a comfort.

Writers like James Montgomery Boice, for instance, find the argument of 1 Thessalonians 4 sufficiently convincing to settle the question of pretribulationism and posttribulationism. Boice says, the rapture of the church. In addition, Scriptures make clear that there will be great disturbances in the heavens and great catastrophes on earth, including earthquakes, famine,

pestilence, and great loss of life, all of which constitute the horrors of the great tribulation. The second coming clearly is preceded by these events, but not a single passage dealing with the rapture ever anticipates such.

Second, details of the rapture vary considerably from the details of the second coming. At the rapture, saints meet Christ in the air, while at the second coming of Christ, the meeting with saints on earth follows His arrival on the Mount of Olives.

Third, as far as any rapture passage is concerned, there are no fundamental changes in the world situation at the rapture, while at the second coming there are devastating changes including the cleavage of the Mount of Olives (Zech 14:4-5).

Fourth, all agree that living saints are translated, and the dead in Christ are raised at the rapture. In no passage is there mention of translation at the second coming, and the saints who are raised are not identified with the church.

Fifth, posttribulationists have not satisfactorily explained John 14 with its promise of taking the saints to the Father's house. At the rapture, saints will fulfill this promise; at the second coming to the earth, there is no translation and no departure to the Father's house.

Sixth, when the rapture occurs, there is no indication of world-wide judgment, though it is followed by the judgment seat of Christ for the church. By contrast, at the second coming the whole world is judged, including both Jew and Gentile, saved and unsaved living on the earth.

Seventh, at the rapture there is no indication that a millennial reign of Christ immediately follows. But major passages on the second coming of Christ picture the world, not only as judged, but as established in righteousness in Christ's kingdom on the earth.

Eighth, indications from 1 Thessalonians 5 point to the conclusion that the church will be delivered *before* the time of wrath overtakes the world, while at the second coming the deliverance comes for those who have believed in Christ during the tribulation *after* they have gone through this time of wrath.

Ninth, in keeping with the peculiar character of the church as the body of saints in the present age, the truth relating to the rapture is found only in the New Testament. This contrasts with events related to the second coming that are the subject of much prophecy in both the Old and New Testaments. posttribulationism has inherent contradictions, especially if the premillennial viewpoint be adopted.

First, these problems surface in such passages as 1 Thessalonians 5, where posttribulationists have to give a particular interpretation to the day of the Lord which is not supported by its usage in the Old and New Testaments. While pretribulationists have not been without fault in their interpretation of this phrase, the posttribulationists have certainly not solved the problem.

Second, posttribulationists have never come up with a satisfactory explanation of how the restrainer must be removed before the man of sin can be revealed. Although the exegesis of 2 Thessalonians 2 is not without its difficulties, as was pointed out in the discussion of this passage, the interpretation that the restrainer is the Holy Spirit in relationship to the church is superior to any other. If this is the case, then posttribulationists have a real problem of harmonizing this with their view.

Third, as illustrated by Gundry's treatment of the time of wrath, posttribulationists are hard put to explain how the church can go through a day of wrath and yet have comfort with the thought of translation at its end. Posttribulationists disagree among themselves as to how to solve this problem. Some of them spiritualize the great tribulation, as does J. Barton Payne [11] Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ.*; others try to evade the problem by declaring that while the world is the object of divine wrath, the church is not. Gundry's position—that the great tribulation is a time of satanic wrath—complicates rather than helps his position, as satanic wrath is vented only on believers, not on unbelievers. Posttribulationists have not solved this problem and have not offered convincing answers.

Fourth, posttribulationists who are premillennial have not solved the problem of transition from the tribulation to the millennium. According to Scripture, survivors of the tribulation—both Jews and Gentiles who are saved—enter the millennium in their natural bodies. They are described as having normal functions as people living in the flesh on earth. If so, posttribulationists have a major problem in explaining how these could be raptured and still have natural bodies. Most posttribulationists choose to ignore this, as do Ladd and Reese.[12] Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*; Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*.

*BSac* 134:536 (Oct 77) p. 313

Gundry, as we have seen, attempts to solve the problem by a complicated explanation unique in the history of interpretation, but he actually never resolves the difficulty. It is not too much to say that this is one of the major problems of posttribulationism if premillennialism is assumed. How can saints go into the millennium in their natural bodies if, in fact, they were raptured while Christ was coming from heaven to the earth? Gundry's postulate of a second chance at the second coming is without any scriptural support.

## Conclusion

It is too much to say that the stated objections to the posttribulational view prove that the pretribulational interpretation is right. But they certainly give adequate ground for the pretribulationist to reject posttribulationism. The pretribulational view offers a better explanation of key problems and passages than does posttribulationism. The fact that posttribulationists avoid their major problems is in itself a confession that in crucial areas they have not supported their conclusions. For this reason, along with the positive testimony of the truth of the rapture in the New Testament, pretribulationists continue to hold that the coming of Christ for His saints is imminent, an event that precedes the tribulation period as a blessed, comforting, and purifying hope.

Just as the distinctions between the first and second comings of Christ were not fully apparent to all until the first coming took place, so it is probable that the church at large will not recognize the distinction between the rapture and the second coming until the rapture itself takes place. Meanwhile, those who depend on Scripture relating to these unfulfilled prophetic events will need to weigh the evidence for these contradictory views. Both cannot be true, and the question can only be resolved by searching the Scriptures dealing with this prophetic hope.

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# Posttribulationism Today

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## Chapter 13

### Pretribulationism as the Alternative to Posttribulationism

[John F. Walvoord, President and Professor of Systematic Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary, Editor, *Bibliotheca Sacra*.]

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the concluding article in this series, which was begun in *Bibliotheca Sacra* with the January-March, 1975 issue. The thirteen articles are available in book form under the title *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976).]

Throughout the discussion of posttribulationism in this series, the superiority of the pretribulational view to posttribulationism has been pointed out. Although it is not the purpose of this study to present pretribulationism as such, as this has been done in the author's *The Rapture Question*,<sup>[1]</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Co., 1957). a summary of pretribulationism is in order.

#### Clarity of Pretribulational Premises

As demonstrated in the preceding articles, posttribulationism is faulty in its statement of its premises. Because posttribulationists are largely in confusion in their basic presuppositions, they are open to the charge of contradiction and illogical reasoning. By contrast, pretribulationists bring into focus the major issues that relate to eschatology.

#### The Authority and Accuracy of Scripture

While conservative posttribulationists usually concur with pretribulationists on the authority and accuracy of Scripture, they lack the unanimity evident in all pretribulationists in their doctrine of the Scriptures. It is not uncommon for scholars who defect from pretribulationism in favor of posttribulationism to defect also in their doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. sequence of events which states in so many words that the rapture is first and the tribulation follows. Many eschatological problems, of course, would be resolved if the Scriptures specifically stated, for instance, that Christ's coming is premillennial or if the Old Testament clearly outlined the first coming of Christ to be followed by the present church age and then the second coming of Christ. The form of divine revelation given in Scripture does not always provide such an itemization.

While the argument from silence is never conclusive, most posttribulationists are not willing to admit that the silence in Scripture concerning a posttribulational rapture is much more significant than the silence in Scripture concerning the tribulation following the rapture. While no passage attempts to relate the rapture to a sequence of events, the second coming of Christ is revealed in a detailed way.

In Matthew 24, as well as in Revelation 4-19, specific revelation of events leading up to the second coming and a description of the second coming of Christ itself is provided. In view of this itemization, it is therefore most significant that the rapture is never mentioned at all when many other events are itemized. Accordingly, the rhetorical question of posttribulationists as to where the Bible teaches a pretribulation rapture actually boomerangs on the posttribulationist

because he is unable to come up with any statement of a posttribulation rapture, even though the events preceding and following the second coming are given in great detail.

In the argument from silence, posttribulationists also attempt to evade the fact that the church, the body of Christ, is never mentioned in a tribulation passage. Many posttribulationists spiritualize the tribulation and make the church equivalent to the saints of all ages. The complete silence of the Scriptures on the subject of the church as such in the great tribulation has considerable weight. On the whole, the argument from silence is more damaging to the posttribulation view than it is to the pretribulation interpretation.

## **Imminence of the Rapture**

As presented in all major passages on the rapture, the coming of Christ for His church is uniformly presented as an imminent event. This is in sharp contrast to the presentation of the doctrine of the second coming, which is consistently presented as following a sequence of events—including the return of Israel to the land, the rise of the dictator in the Middle East (sometimes referred to as the Antichrist), and the forty-two months of the great tribulation detailed in the Book of Revelation. The second coming of Christ to the earth in no proper sense can be called an imminent event, even though posttribulationists strain to redefine the English word *imminent* as meaning something other than an event which is immediately pending. Only by complete spiritualization of the major events leading up to the second coming of Christ can this problem be avoided by posttribulationism, and in this spiritualization a major principle of proper interpretation of eschatology is sacrificed.

The claim of many contemporary posttribulationists that they represent the historic position of the church is true only if they spiritualize the tribulation. Futurists like Ladd and Gundry offer a position that is quite different from the early church fathers and, as a matter of fact, it is more recent than pretribulationism as is commonly taught today. The fact that the rapture is presented as an imminent event is a major argument for distinguishing the rapture from the second coming of Christ to the earth.

## **The Doctrine of a Literal Tribulation**

Pretribulationists regard the great tribulation as a future event and rightly place the rapture as occurring before this time of unprecedented trouble. By contrast, there is complete confusion among the posttribulationists on this point and an amazing lack of uniformity in applying the principles of interpretation. Posttribulationists are caught in the twin problem of either carrying the church through the great tribulation with resulting martyrdom for probably the majority of the church, or spiritualizing the period and thereby introducing the principles of interpretation that lead not only to posttribulationism, but also to amillennialism and a denial of any reasonable order of events for the endtime.

The difficulty of harmonizing the rapture as the blessed hope with the prospect of martyrdom and the problem of maintaining premillennialism while holding to posttribulationism has continued to plague some of the major interpreters of the posttribulation view. By contrast, the pretribulation view offers a clear and simple explanation. The blessed hope is the rapture of the church before the great tribulation. The second coming of Christ to the earth follows the tribulation. Pretribulationists accordingly are not forced to spiritualize or to evade the plain teaching of Scripture on the subject of the rapture or of the great tribulation. at any time, would be devoid of any real meaning if they had to go through the great tribulation first. While many generations of Christians have died before the rapture, it is evident that the exhortation given to the Thessalonians applies to each succeeding generation which continues to have the bright hope of an imminent return of the Lord for His own.

The exhortations of the major passage on the rapture in 1 Corinthians 15:51-58 are similar in their implications. Not a word of warning is given concerning a coming tribulation, but the readers are exhorted to live in the light of the imminent return of Christ. This hope is defined by Paul in Titus 2:13 as “that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ.” The hope of a rapture after enduring the great tribulation is hardly a happy expectation, and this

passage is difficult for posttribulationists to explain. The hope is not that of resurrection after death and martyrdom, but rather the coming and revelation of Christ in His glory to them while they are still living on the earth. The exhortations relating to the rapture constitute a major problem to posttribulationism.

## **The Rapture in Relation to Premillennialism**

Posttribulationists who are premillennial are caught in the vise of a dilemma. If they spiritualize the great tribulation to avoid the problems of harmonization with a posttribulational rapture as J. Barton Payne does, they are adopting principles of interpretation that lead logically to amillennialism, which spiritualizes not only the tribulation but also the millennium itself. If, as premillenarians, they take the great tribulation literally, then they have the problem of harmonizing the imminence of the rapture and exhortations relating to it with a posttribulational rapture. The dilemma facing posttribulationism accounts for the general confusion that exists among them on endtime events.

Logically, posttribulationism leads to amillennialism and pretribulationism leads to premillennialism. Any compromise between these two points of view leads to confusion in principles of interpretation as well as in the interpretation itself. The obvious difficulty in moving from a posttribulational rapture into a millennium with saints on earth who have not been raptured forces interpreters like Gundry to postulate a second chance for salvation after the rapture, a doctrine nowhere taught in Scripture and expressly denied in the Book of Revelation (14:9-11 ).

*BSac* 135:537 (Jan 78) p. 23

The evident trend among scholars who have forsaken pretribulationism for posttribulationism is that in many cases they also abandon premillennialism. For those who wish to think consistently and logically from principles of interpretation, the options continue to be (1) a pretribulational rapture followed by a premillennial return of Christ to the earth, or (2) abandoning both for a posttribulational rapture and a spiritualized millennium. It becomes evident that pretribulationism is more than a dispute between those who place the rapture before and after the tribulation. It is actually the key to an eschatological system. It plays a determinative role in establishing principles of interpretation which, if carried through consistently, lead to the pretribulational and premillennial interpretation.

## **Advantages of Pretribulationism**

By way of summary, three major considerations point to the advantages of the pretribulational point of view.

### **Pretribulationism, A Logical System**

While writers in all schools of biblical interpretation can be found who are guilty of illogical reasoning, careful observers of posttribulationism will find that so often their conclusions are based on illogical reasoning. In some cases their arguments hang on dogmatic assumptions which they do not prove. In other cases they draw conclusions from Scripture passages under consideration which the passages actually do not teach. The fact that an interpreter is a great scholar does not necessarily make him a logician; unfortunately, ability to do research and skill in linguistics do not necessarily lead to formation of logical conclusions. The writer believes that a major problem in posttribulationism is logical inconsistency. By contrast, pretribulationism moves logically from its premises and principles of interpretation to its conclusion.

### **Exegetical Advantages of Pretribulationism**

In contrast with posttribulational treatment of major passages on the rapture which differs widely in interpretation, pretribulationists follow a consistent pattern of literal or normal interpretation. This allows the interpreter to explain the passage in its normal meaning—which in many cases is its literal meaning—without resorting to flagrant spiritualization in order to avoid pointed contrast between the rapture and the second coming of Christ to the earth.

It is rather significant that, without any attempt to establish uniformity in eschatology, the Bible institute movement of America is predominantly premillennial and pretribulational. This has come from taking Scripture in its plain, ordinary meaning and explaining it in this sense. By contrast, educational institutions that have approached the Bible creedally tend to make Scriptures conform to their previously accepted creed with the result that most of them are liberal or, if conservative, tend to be amillennial.

Pretribulationism has continued to appeal to thousands of lay interpreters because it makes sense out of the passages that deal with the rapture of the church. While the majority of biblical scholars may disagree with pretribulational interpretation, it is also significant that they disagree radically among themselves as well; often abandonment of pretribulational interpretation results in abandonment of serious study in the area of prophecy.

## **Practical Advantages**

In all the major rapture passages, the truth of the coming of the Lord is connected with practical exhortation. While it is undoubtedly true that eternal values remain in other interpretations, only the pretribulationists can consistently hold to a moment-by-moment expectation of the Lord's return along with the literal interpretation of the promises that are to be fulfilled following the Lord's coming. For the pretribulationist, the coming of the Lord is an imminent hope. For the great majority of others, there is only the somewhat blurred expectation of how the coming of the Lord really fits in to the pattern of future events. It is for this reason that pretribulationists hold tenaciously to their point of view, defend it earnestly, and believe the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ an important aspect of their future hope.

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