

Full Preterism Refuted, Chapter One

The Rapture of the Saints: Exposition of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Introduction

The doctrine of general eschatology or the final things is important to the Christian faith and should be a subject of study for every believer. It is crucial, for it tells us how the Savior's complete victory through the cross and empty tomb will result in an ultimate and final triumph in the future. It tells us how the counsel of God is finally perfectly realized—the Son will be publicly, universally glorified and His perfect salvation is brought to completion in history. On the final day, Christ will be crowned with complete victory and all His people will be fully redeemed and glorified in both body and soul. Eschatology tells us where the doctrine of salvation, in the broad sense of the term, ultimately leads. A time is coming when Jesus Christ will return literally and bodily to this earth. There will be a general (literal, *bodily*) resurrection from the dead of all people who have ever lived. Everyone will stand before the great white throne and be judged by the all powerful Messianic King. All those who rejected Christ will be cast into the lake of fire and suffer torment forever. Believers, however, will enjoy the presence of Christ and behold the face of God in their glorified, resurrected bodies. Death, suffering, disease, anguish, tears and heartaches will be banished forever from this earth and God's people will never again have to struggle against sin. God achieved a perfect redemption through Christ and will not leave any loose ends hanging when the Savior returns bodily to this earth.

This standard, orthodox conception of the end of the world (which in its basic form has been held by every branch of Christendom from the beginning of post-apostolic church) has come under attack in the last 30 years with the spread of a new heresy (which arose in the second half of the nineteenth century) called by the orthodox: full preterism (*preter* means past), consistent preterism, hyperpreterism, pantelism (from the Greek words meaning, "all is completed") or the "Hymanean heresy." Those who hold this view simply refer to themselves as "preterists." Consequently, the orthodox believers who hold that *some* things have come to pass have distanced themselves from this dangerous teaching by calling themselves "partial preterists." Partial preterists believe that Jesus did come in judgment upon Jerusalem (A.D. 66-70) and continues to come in judgment in history, but that the great complex of events that surround the second *bodily* coming of Christ obviously has not yet occurred.

Some of the peculiar teachings of full preterism are as follows. The second coming of Christ has already taken place including the rapture, the general resurrection from the dead and the final judgment; the old heavens and earth have completely passed away; and the new heavens and earth are present. The Great Commission has already been completely fulfilled (Mt. 28:18-20). The Bridegroom has returned for His church. Both death and Hell (or Hades) have been cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:13-14).

As we study the events connected with the second bodily coming of Christ, we will see that the central propositions of full preterism are blatantly unscriptural and completely absurd. Full preterists, like all heretics, devise clever ways to twist, misrepresent and misinterpret

passages of Scripture in order to force them to fit their unbiblical presuppositions. Since they believe that *everything* that makes up the complex of events connected with the second coming of Christ has already occurred, they must *redefine* the nature of the second coming itself, the resurrection of the body, the rapture of the saints, the final judgment and the nature of the final state. These are crucial Christian doctrines and not trivial matters over which professing Christians can agree to disagree. For this reason, orthodox pastors and elders must not extend the right hand of fellowship to these heretics until they repent and stop perverting an important part of Christ's work. (Keep in mind that full preterists cannot subscribe to nor confess any of the ecumenical creeds or Protestant symbols [whether Lutheran, Episcopal, Reformed or Baptist] on the second coming of Christ.)

As we examine full preterism, we need to keep a few things in mind. First, although the general beliefs on the second coming are basically held by all full preterists, there is diversity on individual doctrines (e.g., the resurrection, the rapture, the judgment and so on) and on interpretation of key passages. The movement is relatively young and is still in flux. When it comes to getting the square peg of full preterism into the round hole of Scripture, there are a number of different approaches. It is rather tragic and sad to watch men (some of whom have PhD's and write in a scholarly manner) struggle to get passages which clearly contradict and disprove their system to harmonize with their unbiblical paradigm. It is an interesting lesson on how creative and clever the human mind can be in supporting unbiblical nonsense. Also, keep in mind that on the internet there are full preterist writers who are amateurish, unqualified, and careless; while there are others who are exceptionally bright, clever, sophisticated and cautious. Both groups, however, are equally wrong and unbiblical. In fact, the careful, scholarly writers are more dangerous because their clever use of Greek word studies makes them *appear* to be more plausible.

Second, virtually all full preterists must live their lives in a manner that is inconsistent with their theology of the second coming. Most still believe in marriage and the family. They still believe in preaching to the lost, personal witnessing, partaking of the sacraments and the institutional church even though if their false theory was true these things would no longer exist or be necessary. For example, if the Great Commission was fulfilled, then there would be no need for missions or missionaries. If we have entered into God's eternal heavenly rest, then the Christian Sabbath on the first day of the week is no longer necessary. Some full preterists attempt to circumvent these blatant inconsistencies by teaching that the completion of all things still has an abiding application throughout history. This is an evasion and a major inconsistency of their whole system.

Third, once again it is important that we distinguish between partial preterists who are orthodox Christians and full preterists who are heretics that should be excommunicated if they don't repent. All Christians are partial preterists to some degree, in that they recognize that some New Testament predictions have already taken place. Today people who are associated with partial preterism usually teach that Matthew 24, at least up to verse 34, was fulfilled when Jesus came in judgment upon Jerusalem in A.D. 66-70 and destroyed the Temple. Also, many parts of Revelation are seen as already fulfilled. Some popular modern partial preterist authors are Milton Terry, R.C. Sproul, Greg Bahnsen, Ken Gentry Jr. and Gary Demar. Although there are a number of differences among partial preterists regarding certain passages and especially how to approach the book of Revelation, all partial preterist writers are careful to make a distinction between our Lord's judgment of Israel and the final, bodily coming of Christ. Thus, the orthodox

interpretation of the second coming, general resurrection, rapture and final judgment is maintained.

Our method of refuting full preterism will be primarily positive. We will look at various passages that discuss the events associated with second coming and give a straight forward exposition of what they teach. This method alone will disprove full preterism. But to strengthen the biblical and logical case against this heresy we will interact with some of their most common arguments that attempt to circumvent the plain meaning of Scripture.

Paul's Explanation of the Rapture Explicitly Contradicts Full Preterism

But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thess. 4:13-18)

In verse 13 Paul rather abruptly switches from the topic of the necessity of Christians to lead holy lives (4:1-12) to address a concern the Thessalonians had expressed regarding the role dead believers would have in the coming of Christ from heaven. Apparently, some of the Thessalonians had adopted the idea that believers who die before the second coming would have a serious disadvantage over those who survive and are still living. What the disadvantage is we are not specifically told. Perhaps they were concerned that dead believers would not be able to participate in the second coming itself. This concern is implied by Paul's discussion of the Parousia.

Scholars are puzzled as to why this concern was an issue with believers in Thessalonica. There is the possibility that some within the church were influenced by Jewish apocalyptic literature which taught that people who were alive at the consummation would be taken up into heaven, while people who had died would have a separate existence on earth. Another possibility is that Paul raises this whole issue simply as an antidote to excessive grief over dead loved ones who were believers. Apparently, there were some who were very sorrowful because they were not applying the great things in store for all true Christians at the second coming to those who had died. In any case, Paul answers this problem with one of the most vivid, detailed descriptions of the second coming of Christ in Scripture.

Paul begins by saying "I do not want you to be ignorant" (v. 18). Such introductory formulas are common in the epistles (cf. Rom. 1:13; 11:25; 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8). Ignorance regarding what will happen to Christians who have died can have negative spiritual and emotional consequences. It can lead to a deep, pagan-like sorrow which flows from a heart without hope. Christians are allowed to grieve over dead Christian family members and close friends. (Indeed, Jesus wept over the death of Lazarus His friend, John 11:35.) Their grief, however, is always to be tempered by hope and joy, because to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). Moreover, Paul will point out that the dead bodies of the saints will be resurrected, will meet Christ in the air and will fully participate, both *body* and soul, in Christ's final victory.

Consequently, Christians should have a completely different attitude toward death than unbelievers. The pagan Greeks had a concept of death that gave them no hope for the future. They did not believe in the bliss of heaven for the redeemed and they emphatically rejected the biblical concept of the resurrection of our physical bodies. They believed that when a person died their soul would exit their mouths or through a gaping wound. The soul would then live in a shadowy underworld called Hades. The realm of the dead was a dim, sunless place that was a serious descent from the realm of the living; the dead had a very depressing existence. Therefore, the Greeks could only approach death with fear and dread. Moreover, Paul knew of the terrifying future that awaited all those who died without Christ, that their souls would immediately be cast into hell (Lk. 16:23). Further, they would suffer even greater anguish after their bodies were resurrected; they would be judged by Christ (Rev. 20:12; Mt. 25:31-46) and then cast both *body* and soul into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14-15; cf. Rom, 1:18-20; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). The coming judgment of God can only produce terror, anguish and hopelessness among those who do not believe in the Savior and obey Him.

The expression “those who have fallen asleep” refers to Christians who have died physically. “The verb *koimaomai* occurs 18 times in the N. T. In 4 instances (Matt. 28:13; Luke 22:45; John 11:12; Acts 12:16) it is used in the literal sense of ‘be asleep.’ But in all other cases it is used metaphorically and euphemistically for being dead.”¹ The apostle is discussing what will happen to believers who have died physically and then been placed in a tomb or grave. This interpretation is supported by verse 16 where Paul says that the “dead in Christ will rise first.” Only a Christian can be dead and in Christ at the same time. The unregenerate are spiritually dead because they are not in Christ. Interestingly, the apostle uses the same word (*anastasis*) to describe the resurrection of Christ in verse 14 and the resurrection of dead believers in verse 16. A physical, bodily, literal resurrection is what Paul has in mind.

The use of the term “sleep” to describe physical death is common in Scripture (e.g., Gen. 47:30; 2 Sam. 7:12; 1 Ki. 2:10; Mt. 27:52; Jn. 11:11-13; Ac. 7:60; 1 Cor. 2:39; 15:6, 18; etc.) as well as pagan literature (e.g., Homer, Ill. 11:241; Sophocles, El. 509). This is understandable, in that a dead person looks as though he is sleeping. This term is especially appropriate for believers who, after death, are at rest from their suffering and labors and are waiting for their physical bodies to come to life and be transformed at the resurrection. Our word “cemetery” comes from this same Greek word (*koimaomai*) and means “a sleeping place.”

Those who attempt to form a doctrine of soul sleep from the use of this term in Scripture must ignore the many clear passages which teach that the souls of Christians immediately go to be with Christ (e.g., Lk. 23:43; Phil. 1:21-23; 2 Cor. 5:8; Rev. 6:9-11; 20:4) and the passages which prove that the souls of the wicked go straight to hell at death (e.g., Lk. 16:22-26; Rev. 20:14; 21:8).

The fact that Paul is discussing believers who are dead physically and buried poses insurmountable difficulties for full preterists, who attempt to spiritualize this passage or make it refer to something that happens on the inside of people who are alive. It cannot refer to regeneration or to a mere internal work of the Spirit because these people are physically dead and they are *already* “in Christ.” Moreover, it cannot refer to a transfer of the souls of believers who are trapped in Hades to be with Jesus in heaven because the Scripture unequivocally teaches that the souls of believers go to be with our Lord the very moment they die. We will see that only a real, literal, bodily resurrection of deceased believers does justice to this passage.

¹ Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament* (Peabody, MS: Hendriksen, 1974, 86), 371.

After stating the reason for this topic, in verse 14 and following Paul begins his argumentation as to why believers have no reason to grieve over dead Christian loved ones. “For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus” (v. 14). Believers can be relieved of their sorrows only by understanding the full salvific implications of our Lord’s death and resurrection. For Paul, the death and resurrection of Christ are the starting point of any discussion of salvation, even the redemption of our physical bodies at the resurrection. Paul essentially says we believe in *A* (the death and resurrection of Jesus); therefore, we should also understand and believe *B*, that all those united to Christ will be raised from the dead to accompany Him on His glorious return. The death and resurrection of Christ is the guarantee of the future resurrection of all physically dead believers. The fact that Paul says “God will bring with Him” instead of “God will raise them up” is because: a) the one assumes the other (they are intimately connected in the mind of Paul as we will see in verses 16-17); and, b) the Thessalonians were primarily concerned with the role that dead believers would play in the second coming. They wanted their dead loved ones to be with Christ on that day and share in His victory.

The full preterist who attempts to spiritualize this passage and make it speak of only a spiritual resurrection must ignore the broad context of Scripture on the effects of Jesus’ work on the elect. Union with Christ in His death and resurrection is the foundation of our regeneration and sanctification (Eph. 2:5-6; Col. 2:13-14; Rom. 6:3-11), as well as the resurrection of our physical bodies (1 Thess. 4:14; Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:20-23). Our Lord spoke of two separate and distinct resurrections for believers in John 5. The first resurrection, which is spiritual, involves a person becoming a Christian in this life and being delivered from spiritual death to everlasting life. “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My Word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come to judgment, but has passed from death into life. Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live” (vs. 24-25). The first resurrection is not directly connected to dead physical bodies, but to people who need salvation.² It was occurring in the Savior’s own day (“and now is”) and is progressively accomplished in history as people believe in Christ. The second resurrection is physical in character and applies to the final day of human history when our Redeemer returns bodily to this earth. “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in their graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (vs. 28-29). This passage is very explicit: those who during their lives heard the voice of Christ and became Christians (the first resurrection) will hear His voice again calling them out of their tombs to experience both *body* and *soul* the fullness of resurrection life in the kingdom of glory (the second resurrection).

Jesus teaches that He saves the whole person, both body and soul. The full preterist spiritualizing of the final resurrection is essentially Gnostic and neo-platonic. The fact that verse

² We do not want to give the impression that the two resurrections are not connected in any way. The first resurrection which is spiritual results in the second, physical resurrection unto glory. Moreover, those who do *not* experience the first resurrection and trust in the person and work of Christ are doomed to experience a resurrection unto eternal damnation where both body and soul suffer together. The whole person (body and soul) that served sin and rejected the Savior will experience its just recompense of reward. In this section of Scripture, Jesus assumes both the highest act of authority as God and Mediator—the final judgment; as well as the highest act of power—the ability to raise the dead. The purpose of this passage was to emphasize the fact that what they do with the Savior in the present will have radical consequences for the future. It reminds us of Paul’s statement, “For since by man [Adam] came death, by Man [Christ] also came the resurrection of the dead” (1 Cor. 15:21).

29 speaks of the resurrection of both the good and the evil (in other words, this is a general or universal resurrection of men) proves that a mere spiritual resurrection is not being taught. If it was only spiritual, then Jesus would be teaching that the souls of the wicked are brought out of hell to be judged and sent right back to hell. But, our Lord emphasized in another place that what makes this judgment so terrifying for the wicked is that both *body* and soul will be cast into the abyss. “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28). The apostle Paul also taught that the wicked dead would be raised and judged. “I have hope in God which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust” (Ac. 24:15). (Interestingly, the teaching of Jesus and Paul regarding the universal resurrection from the dead of all men, whether saved or unsaved, explicitly contradicted the teaching of the Pharisees [and the Talmud] which believed that only the righteous would experience a bodily resurrection.)

Paul distinguishes between dead believers and the wicked dead by the expression they “sleep in Jesus” (v. 14). Remember, the souls of believers are not asleep or dead, but only their physical bodies. The rotting corpses of Christians are not regarded by God as disposable garbage to be forever left behind in the ground, but are said to be “in Christ.” Paul is telling us that the efficacy of Jesus’ death and resurrection for believers does not stop when they die and their souls go to heaven. Rather, it continues until the physical bodies of Christians are fully redeemed at the resurrection and accompany the Redeemer in His climactic victory at the end of history. (Full preterism’s denial of a literal, bodily resurrection leads to both a defective view of spiritual death at the fall and a deficient understanding of Christ’s redemptive work.) Paul speaks to this same issue in Romans 8:11: “But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” Paul’s identification of our dead bodies as mortal bodies demonstrates very clearly that the same bodies that we have at death will be made alive at the resurrection. “The identity and continuity are intimated in the description which the apostle here adopts, identity and continuity in no way interfering with the newness of quality by which these same bodies will be fitted for the resurrection state.”³

In verse 15 Paul begins to go into detail regarding what will occur when Christ returns. “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.” The expression, “we say to you by the word of the Lord,” is often misinterpreted by full preterists to refer to Jesus’ words in Matthew 24. This interpretation is based on their assumption that all the references to the coming of Christ in the New Testament refer to His coming in judgment upon Israel in A.D. 66-70. They support this claim by noting the similarities between these two passages, often using parallel columns. While there are some similarities, the dissimilarities between the two passages far outweigh the resemblances. That is because Matthew 24, at least up to verse 34, has absolutely nothing to do with the second bodily coming of Christ.⁴

³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 65), 1:291-292.

⁴ Some of the differences between Matthew 24:1-34 and the second and final coming of Christ are as follows: (1) The coming in A.D. 66-70 was a coming in judgment, while the second coming is a literal, bodily coming (cf. Mt. 24:30; Ac. 1:9-11). (2) In the coming in judgment upon Israel Jesus is never seen by the physical eye because He remains in heaven (Mt. 24:30), while the second bodily coming will be visible to the naked eye (Ac. 1:11). (3) The coming in judgment upon Israel is near the beginning of the millennium, while the second bodily coming occurs at the end of the millennium which must last at least 1000 years (Rev. 20:7-9). (4) The judgment upon Israel is followed by a lengthy period of history called the times of the Gentiles (Lk. 21:24; Rom. 11:25-26). The second and final coming is followed by the general resurrection, final judgment and the perfect final state where there is no

Since 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15 reveals many things about the second coming of Christ that are not found in the gospels, the expression “by the word of the Lord” likely refers to the receiving of direct revelation from Christ to a prophet, one of the apostles or even to Paul himself. If Paul is discussing something that the apostles received from Jesus during His ministry on earth, then why did the evangelists omit many of the important details from the gospel accounts? It is indeed possible that Paul received a special revelation about this matter solely for the purpose of bringing hope and comfort to the Thessalonians. In any case, what Paul is about to say comes from God, is divinely inspired and should settle this issue for the church in Thessalonica. This direct appeal to divine authority is designed to strengthen the faith of the letter’s recipients in what Paul is about to say.

Before we look at all the details revealed about the second coming, we first need to discuss the issue of what Paul had in mind when he said, “we who are alive and remain” (v. 15). Full preterists point to the statement as proof that Paul believed that his generation would witness the second coming of Christ. Perhaps the best way to approach this statement is to present the three most common interpretations of this phrase and see which one makes the most sense exegetically, theologically and logically.

Excursus on a Full Preterist Equivocation

First, we will briefly examine the full preterist interpretation. They teach that the “we” must refer to Christians then living (i.e. when Paul wrote this epistle) and who will live long enough to be alive during the *Parousia*. The major problem with this view is that it *explicitly contradicts* the testimony of Scripture on the second coming, general resurrection, rapture, final judgment and the beginning of the eternal state. The full preterist (as we will see in these studies) must repeatedly go to passages where the plain meaning contradicts their paradigm and then twist Scripture, be very creative and use exegetical gymnastics to force an interpretation that harmonizes with their presuppositions. This results in eisegesis, the spiritualizing of literal events and all sorts of unfounded speculations (e.g., Steven’s secret A.D. 66 rapture; partial resurrections; a spiritual rapture; their seed analogy of the resurrection; etc). Their interpretation goes against the analogy of Scripture and the teaching in the immediate context; it is untenable and unbiblical.

A second view that is common among modernists and neo-evangelical expositors is that Paul truly believed that his generation would survive to witness these amazing events, but was *completely mistaken*. As Denny asks, “Is it not better to recognize the obvious fact that Paul was mistaken as to the nearness of the second advent than to torture his words to secure infallibility?”⁵ The problem with this view is that Paul begins this teaching with the statement

more death, disease, suffering tears, sin or temptation (1 Thess. 4:13-17; Rev. 20:7-21:8; 1 Cor. 15:23-26). It is obvious that these things have not yet occurred. The full preterist can only explain these things by spiritualizing, allegorizing and redefining the plain language of the biblical text. (5) In the period of the Jewish war, A.D. 66-70, the Christians fled to Pella and escaped the destruction by the Romans. In the second bodily coming of Christ the living saints are raptured. That is, they leave the earth to meet Christ in the air (i.e. the lower atmosphere) as He descends (1 Thess. 4:16-17). (6) In A.D. 66-70 *the enemies* of Christ and the church (i.e. the unbelieving Jews) are under siege in Jerusalem. But in Revelation 20, which describes the events near the end of the millennium, the saints of God or Christians are pictured under siege (v. 9). This is an explicit contradiction of the events of A.D. 70, for not one Christian remained in the holy city.

⁵ Denny as quoted in James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 173.

that this doctrine comes by “the word of the Lord.” This interpretation destroys biblical inspiration and inerrancy and has the Redeemer giving Paul incorrect information. This interpretation, although common, is impossible and must not even be considered for a moment.

The third and correct interpretation is that “we” is simply generic and means “we [Christians] who are alive and remain.” This is the only interpretation that does not contradict other clear sections of Scripture. Did Paul believe that all of Christ’s enemies throughout the whole world would be subdued in his own lifetime when he wrote 1 Corinthians 15:25 around A.D. 56, only fourteen years before A.D. 70? Are there not a number of passages that imply that our Lord’s return would be in the distant and unknowable future? Jesus said, “While the bridegroom was delayed, they are slumbered and slept” (Mt. 25:5). In the parable of the talents He taught, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them.... After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them” (Mt. 25:14, 19). In the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven (Mt. 13:31-33) Christ indicates that His kingdom will gradually grow over time until it spreads throughout the whole earth. This teaching is consistent with postmillennialism. Did the knowledge of the Lord cover the whole earth as the waters cover the sea in A.D. 70 (see Isa. 11:9; cf. Ps. 72:8)? Did the Gentile nations come to the church to learn about God’s law so they could rule according to biblical justice (Isa. 2:3-4)? A full preterist must either completely reject postmillennialism or redefine the Savior’s victory in terms of a secret, undetectable, spiritual victory that even the church of Christ was unaware of until the nineteenth century. Moreover, did not Peter imply in 2 Peter 3:8 that it could be thousands of years before the second coming? God is not slack concerning His promises, but has elect in all nations and among all tribes of the earth that need to be saved before Christ returns (2 Pet. 3:9). Full preterists have an irresolvable dilemma with the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19. If “all nations” refers only to the nations within the Roman Empire that were evangelized before A.D. 70 (cf. Mt. 24:14) and this passage has been fulfilled, then the task of world missions has been completed. If they argue that Matthew 28:19 has not yet been fulfilled and the *second* and *final coming* of Christ occurred in A.D. 70, then Jesus did not wait until all His sheep were gathered and 2 Peter 3:9 which says that God is delaying the second coming because He is waiting for every elect person to come to repentance is wrong.

The full preterist also cannot adequately explain the description of the millennium in Revelation 20. In general, Reformed expositors explain the millennium as either a very lengthy period of time running from the resurrection of Christ to the second coming (This is the view of the partial preterist [postmillennialists] and amillennialists. Thus far the millennium has lasted almost two thousand years.); or refers to a literal one thousand year period in the future (This is the golden age described by Puritans and historic postmillennialists.). The term 1000 can be used both ways. It can be either literal or symbolic of a very *long* indefinite time. The number 10 in Scripture can denote a fullness of quantity and 1000 can be used to indicate a *very large indefinite* number. For example, God “owns the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10; cf. Dt. 1:11; 7:9; Ps. 68:17; 84:10; 90:4; Rev. 5:11; etc). The use of this very large number to describe the period between the two *bodily* comings of Christ demonstrates that the full preterist’s view of Jesus’ coming in judgment upon Israel as the second and final coming of Christ is impossible. Israel was destroyed approximately only 40 years after our Lord’s resurrection. The full preterist chronology explicitly contradicts Scripture; it is impossible. The 1000 years cannot be explained away. It is especially absurd when, according to the full preterist view, John gave his prophecy

about the 1000 year reign only a year or two before the millennium supposedly came to an abrupt end.

One of the early expositors of full preterism, J. Stuart Russell, was aware of the great problem of Revelation 20 for their system and consequently admitted that imminence obviously does not apply to everything within the book of Revelation:

It is evident that the prediction of what is to take place at the close of a thousand years does not come within what we have ventured to call "apocalyptic limits." These limits, as we are again and again warned in the book itself, are rigidly confined within a very narrow compass; the things shown are "shortly to come to pass." It would have been an abuse of language to say that events at the distance of a thousand years were to come to pass shortly; we are therefore compelled to regard this prediction as lying outside the apocalyptic limits altogether...

We must consequently regard this prediction of the loosing of Satan, and the events which follow, as still future, and therefore unfulfilled. We know of nothing recorded in history which can be adduced as in any way a probable fulfillment of this prophecy.⁶

After this honest, but startling admission, Russell does something very strange and arbitrary exegetically. He simply assumes with no evidence that the great white throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15, which in the text comes immediately at the end of the millennium), took place in A.D. 66-70. He believes that Revelation 20:7-10 is a parenthesis which breaks the continuity of John's narrative. Anyone reading Revelation 20 without a paradigm that must be forced upon Scripture would conclude that Jesus returns at the end of the millennium, after which the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment occurs. This final judgment clears the scene for the *literal* establishment of the new heaven and earth from which sin, temptation, suffering, tears, disease, imperfection and death are banished forevermore.

Further, the description of what occurs at our Lord's return in Revelation 20 explicitly contradicts what occurred in A.D. 70.—the Roman armies conquer the city, slay its inhabitants and march back to Rome victorious. In Revelation 20:9 the beloved city is the encampment of the saints. In the Jewish war the city is completely abandoned by Christians who flee to Pella to escape the destruction. In A.D. 70 the city is the encampment of apostate, Christ-hating, Jewish *unbelievers*. How can Revelation 20 be harmonized with the full preterist system when it teaches almost the exact opposite of what full preterists purport? Sadly, once people become locked into a heretical paradigm, the abundant evidence to the contrary must be twisted, spiritualized and perverted with arbitrary, fanciful eisegesis to avoid paradigm collapse disorder.

Although the Bible teaches that the second *bodily* coming of Christ is in the distant future when the New Testament was written, nevertheless we must always be prepared for our Lord's coming (Mt. 25:13) and "be awake" (*gregoreo*) or "watch" as though He could come at any moment (Mt. 24:42; 25:13). Moreover, we do not know when we will die and will be standing before Christ. We are to look "for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Tit. 2:13). The participle "looking" refers to a "patient looking forward to." This would not apply to us today if full preterism were true.

One must be very careful at coming to dogmatic theological conclusions on the basis of the words, "we," "our," "us," or "you" (plural). These words are used in different ways by Paul. Sometimes the words "you" (plural), "us" or "our" refers to the elect or true believers only (e.g., Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:3-5). There are times when "we" applies only to the apostles or Paul's

⁶ J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second coming* (Grand Rapids: Baker [1887] 1990), 522.

immediate associates (e.g., 1 Thess. 3:1, 4; 4:1, 15; cf. Rom. 1:5). The word “our” can even refer to the whole human race (cf. Rom. 3:5). In 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 17 the “we” is immediately modified and conditioned by “who are alive and remain” indicating that only God knows who will be alive at the Parousia.

After his introductory remarks Paul begins to elaborate on precisely what will occur when Jesus returns. He says that those who are alive and are still on this earth when Jesus returns “will by no means precede those who are asleep” (v. 15). The word translated “prevent” (KJV) or “precede” (NKJV, NASB), *phthasomen*, has the sense of “doing something before someone else and so of gaining an advantage.”⁷ Paul uses the double negative to emphasize his point. The living saints will *in no way* precede those believers who have died. Those who are alive at Christ’s coming will not experience the great blessings of the advent *before* those who sleep. This statement is Paul’s central proposition which will be explained and expanded upon in the next two verses. The Thessalonians wanted comfort concerning the role of dead believing loved ones in the Parousia, so Paul gives them the emphatic assurance that they needed.

Paul’s Description of the Second Coming

In verses 16 and 17 we have one of the fullest and most vivid descriptions of the second coming in the New Testament. “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16-17). There are a number of important things to note in this passage.

First, note that Christ Himself will descend. The verb used (*katabaino*) means literally to go down (*kata*, down, *baino*, to go). Although the verb can refer to various kinds of motion that people do on the ground such as going or walking (cf. Mk. 15:32; Ac. 24:1), here it can only mean a descent from heaven toward the earth. Jesus, we are told in verse 17, is going to meet the resurrected saints and the believers who are alive in the air (i.e. the earth’s atmosphere). Our Lord descends and the saints rise and are caught up to meet Him. Full preterist attempts to spiritualize this scene must ignore the plain meaning of the language used in order to describe only a coming in judgment.

The full preterist contention that the events described here are the same as what took place when our Lord came to judge Israel (A.D. 66-70) is easy to disprove. Although there are many problems with the full preterist view, we will consider three of the most obvious contradictions.

(1) In the book of Acts, we see that the second coming of Christ is bodily and literal, not spiritual or figurative. “Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This *same* Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven’” (Ac. 1:9-11). The passage plainly teaches that in *the same way* that Jesus ascended up into the earth’s atmosphere until He entered heaven, He will descend (1 Thess. 4:16) in His resurrected body to the earth.

⁷ Marshall as quoted in Charles A. Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 172.

The expression “in like manner” means literally “in what manner” or “in that manner in which.”⁸ “The Greek phrase (*hon trogon*) never indicates mere certainty or vague resemblance; but wherever it occurs in the New Testament, denotes identity of mode or manner.”⁹ This means that, “in like manner” in this passage could be translated, “in the same manner.” Therefore, the New American Standard Bible translates this verse: “This Jesus...will come in just the same way as you watched Him go into heaven” (Ac. 1:11b). Moreover, the angels emphasize the sameness with the statement, “...as you saw Him.” “In like manner” and “as you saw Him” are essentially expressions of the same idea twice. “The fact of his [bodily] second coming and the manner of it [are] also described by this emphatic repetition.”¹⁰ In this passage the angels who are giving the disciples information directly from God, go out of their way to make sure the disciples do not misunderstand the nature of the second coming of Christ. It will be a literal, bodily descent through the earth’s atmosphere. This is exactly what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:16. This point is so obvious it is admitted by the full preterist scholar J. Stuart Russell: “The words, however, imply that this coming was to be visible and personal, which would exclude the interpretation which regards it as *providential*, or *spiritual*.”¹¹

That the second coming will be bodily and literal is supported by Acts 5:31-32 where Peter says that the apostles were witnesses of the exaltation of Christ. This means that the disciples saw the resurrected Savior and watched Him ascend into glory with their own eyes. They were not in the throne room when He came before the Father (Dan. 7:13-14), but saw our Lord ascend until He was taken up by a cloud (Ac. 1:9). The second coming will be visible to the naked eye. It is not just a spiritual event or a coming in judgment. (Matthew 24 at least to verse 33 describes a *non-literal, non-bodily* coming. The coming on the clouds terminology of Matthew 24:30 is taken from the poetic metaphor language of the Old Testament prophets [e.g., Isa. 19:1; Nah. 1:3]. In the Old Testament Jehovah did not literally come to judge the heathen nations riding on clouds. Acts 1:9-11, however, teaches that just like the apostles, people will be able to see Jesus’ body. Our Lord’s body was never seen in A.D. 66-70 because He did not literally return. His body was in heaven, as the next point will demonstrate.

The visible, bodily, literal nature of the second coming is also clearly taught in the epistles. Paul refers to the coming of Jesus as a revelation or a time when He is revealed. Christ will be “revealed from heaven with His mighty angels” (2 Thess. 1:7). Believers are to eagerly wait for the *revelation* of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:7). Our Lord ascended and visibly disappeared into heaven, but a time is coming when He will descend (i.e. there will be a visible movement in the opposite direction) and all believers will behold His glory which had not been visibly disclosed to them before. He will be *unveiled* at the second coming and the saints will admire and glorify Him (2 Thess. 2:10). The word “admire” (*thaumazo*) which is sometimes translated “marvel” or “wonder,” in this passage clearly contains the idea of wonder and astonishment. “Jesus’ eschatological revelation will bear the features of a strictly momentary, miraculous act...the event is catastrophic in the absolute sense, nay this very idea of suddenness and unexpectedness seems to be intimately associated with the word.”¹² Did the saints marvel at the glorious, literal, bodily presence of Jesus in A.D. 70? No, they most certainly did not. That is

⁸ See C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 132.

⁹ J. A. Alexander, *Acts of the Apostles* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857] 1963), 16.

¹⁰ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1930], n. d.), 3:12.

¹¹ J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia*, 147.

¹² Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1930] 1972), 79.

because Christ never left the throne room of heaven at that time; it was a coming in judgment. People marveled at the destruction of Jerusalem, not the bodily presence of the Redeemer.

Another passage which teaches that we will see Christ when He appears is 1 John 2:28-3:2:

And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him. Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

In verse 28, John commands believers to continue to abide in Christ and maintain proper fellowship with Him so that when He appears they will not be ashamed. The word translated “appears” (NKJV, NASB) or “shall appear” (KJV) is *phanerothe* which literally means “he shall be manifested.” Paul uses the same word to describe the second coming of Christ in Colossians 3:4: “When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.” The word “manifested” means to make visible. It can mean that something is revealed or made plain to the senses (especially sight) or is made clear to the understanding. It is used by Paul and John in a similar manner to *apokaluptesthai* (to be revealed, or unveiled, cf. 1 Cor. 1:7; 3:13; Rom. 2:5; 8:18; 2 Thess. 1:7. In fact, *phanerothe* is translated “revealed” in 1 John 3:2.). It is obvious that John is speaking about the second coming and that being ashamed before Him implies the final judgment.

In 3:2 we are not only told that Jesus will be revealed, manifested or unveiled before the saints, but that believers will see Him when He returns.¹³ The verb used here *hopsometha* (the future tense of *horao*) is almost always used of physical or of beholding with the eyes. It is “we *have seen* with our eyes...the life was manifested, and we *have seen*.” Obviously seeing with the eyes was a literal sensation. The apostles saw, heard, touched and handled the Messiah. If John were using the same verb in a non-literal manner in 1 John 3:2, then we would expect the apostle to indicate such in the immediate context; however, he does not. This is a glorious promise! At the second coming we will receive glorified bodies like Christ’s glorified body and we will behold at the glorified Savior. Believers will surround the Redeemer and admire Him. “They shall see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads” (Rev. 22:4). When Jesus is manifested we “will appear with Him in glory” (Col. 3:4). We will “meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:17). Our Lord “will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body” (Phil. 3:21).

This passage (like the others we have considered) poses insurmountable exegetical difficulties for the full preterist. If “He shall be manifested” does not refer to something visible, then what does it mean? It cannot mean a coming of Christ’s Spirit, for that already occurred at Pentecost. It cannot mean regeneration, for John is writing to believers. It cannot refer to a subjective, existential experience alone for a believer’s glorification occurs when he is literally and personally gathered to Jesus and actually beholds Him. Moreover, if the word “see” is used

¹³ Some commentators believe that “see Him” in verse 2 refers to the Father and not to Christ. This is a mistake. If we ignore the chapter division (i.e. the artificial separation between 2:29 and 3:1), we see that John speaks of Christ’s coming to spur believers to personal holiness in 2:28; then he briefly turns his attention to God’s love of the saints; and, finally, in 3:2 turns his attention again to Jesus’ manifestation and personal godliness (v. 3).

in the non-literal sense of a mental seeing (i.e. a looking or comprehending with the mind only), then why is the future tense used? All Bible-believing Christians already see, or perceive, the theological portrait that Scripture sets forth of Christ. The seeing of 1 John 3:2 obviously goes far beyond a mental recognition. In addition, as our next point makes clear, living believers did not see Jesus in A.D. 66-70 because He never left heaven.

(2) In Matthew 24 we are told explicitly that the destruction of Jerusalem is not the second bodily coming where “the Lord himself will descend” (1 Thess. 4:17) and meet the resurrected and the living saints in the air (i.e. the earth’s atmosphere). The judgment of Jerusalem is the sign *not* of the second and final coming of Christ, but that Jesus has been glorified as Mediator and sits at the right hand of God in heaven. In Matthew 24:30 we read, “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with great power and great glory” (Mt. 24:30 KJV). A literal rendering of the Greek reads, “And then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in the heaven.” The sign is not Jesus appearing up in the sky, but rather is the smoking ruins of Jerusalem which indicates that the Son of Man is in heaven. The judgment of Israel is the sign to that nation that Jesus is indeed the Lord and Christ, the ruler over the nations. As the exalted Lord He is able to bring vengeance upon His enemies. Our Lord’s allusion to Daniel 7:13 in the second half of this verse makes this interpretation unavoidable: “One like the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days...” Jesus quotes a passage very familiar to the Jews where He is *not* descending to earth, but rather is *ascending* to the Father to be “given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve Him...” (Dan. 7:14). The imagery of Daniel’s vision where the Mediator comes up to God to receive universal sovereign power indicates that the destruction of Jerusalem is near the beginning of His reign and is not the conclusion of it. “The time of the temple’s destruction will also be the time when it will become clear that the Son of Man, rejected by the leaders of his people, has been vindicated and enthroned at the right hand of God, and that it is he who is now to exercise the universal kingship which is his destiny.”¹⁴ Jesus was given all power and authority at the resurrection and ascension (Mt. 28:18; Rom. 1:4; Dan. 7:14; cf. Mk. 14:62). This mediatorial Kingship *with power* was demonstrated to the Jews at Pentecost when Jesus sent His Spirit to the church (Ac. 2:2-4, 17-21) and at the destruction of Jerusalem when Christ crushed apostate Israel.

(3) We also see proof that full preterism is wrong in the simple fact that physically dead believers were not raised during the Jewish war (A.D. 66-70) and living believers did not meet Jesus in the air (i.e. the earth’s atmosphere) at that time. In Matthew 24:1-35 our Lord did not tell His disciples that dead believers would be raised and living saints would join them and Christ in the air. Instead he warned Christians to flee Jerusalem and go into hiding in the mountains to avoid the slaughter (Mt. 24:15-21). Historians tell us that that is precisely what happened. A major portion of the Christian community fled to Pella. The Jerusalem believers escaped the

¹⁴ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 924. France writes, “This saying belongs to the group of three Matthean allusions (16:28; 24:30; 26:64) which are shared with Mark (Mark 8:38; 13:26; 14:26), and which have certain significant features in common: all of them speak of a ‘coming of the Son of Man’ which is visible, which is associated with power, and which is to take place within the lifetime of those to whom he is speaking (in this case, ‘this generation’ in v. 34). We have seen at 10:23 how the imagery of Daniel’s vision requires that these passages be interpreted not of a ‘coming’ to earth at the Parousia but of a ‘coming’ to God in heaven to be given the universal dominion declared in Dan. 7:14. These are enthronement texts. In 26:64 that exegesis is now widely recognized (see comments there), not least because that pronouncement speaks explicitly of what is to be true ‘from now on,’ not at some separate time in the future” (Ibid. 923).

siege and the terrors that went with it. Moreover, if the Olivet Discourse were discussing Jesus' second bodily coming, which will be accompanied by the general resurrection and final judgment, why would our Lord be so concerned to preserve the lives of Jewish believers? The destruction by the Romans was so severe that it needed to be shortened to preserve the lives of the elect (Mt. 24:22; Mk. 13:20). If the dead would be raised out of their tombs and the living were about to receive glorified bodies to meet Jesus as He descends, this concern to preserve the church to minister and preach the gospel in the future would be completely superfluous.

Further, Luke's account clearly says that pre-consummate human history will continue after this coming. "...For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Lk. 21:23-24). This passage is devastating to the full preterist theory. Luke says that death and destruction awaited the Jews and this would lead to an indefinite period of time where the Gentiles would be the focus of God's blessing. This period has already lasted almost 2000 years. When this passage is considered in light of the more detailed prophecy of Paul in Romans 11:25-26, it is obvious that there will be a long period of history when the Gentiles are converted before the Jews *en masse* embrace their Messiah. Luke 21:24 clearly implies that the destruction of Jerusalem is near the beginning of Christ's reign and is not the end of the millennium as full preterists assert. The seasons have a time limit ordained by God. Human history as we know it has an end. The seasons will continue from the destruction of Jerusalem until the day Jesus returns bodily in glory. Because the full preterist mistakenly equates the coming of Christ to destroy Jerusalem with the second bodily coming at the end of history, he must attempt to spiritualize the resurrection of the dead saints, the rapture of living believers and the bodily descent of Christ to meet the saints in the air. These exegetical gymnastics would be amusing if they were not so damaging spiritually to the followers of full preterism.

Second, there are three audible acts that are coterminous with Christ's bodily descent. "For the Lord will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God" (v. 16). This statement tells us that the events of the second coming are awe-inspiring and *public in nature*. Although trumpet blasts can be used in a symbolic manner (e.g., a great trumpet blast attends the sending of Christ's messengers to go forth into the nations to preach the gospel and gather the elect in Mt. 24:31),¹⁵ here we have every reason to believe that

¹⁵ Gary DeMar's comments on Matthew 24:31 are very helpful. He writes, "Immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem, God began to shake down the world (Matthew 24:29). The nations began to recognize Christ as King (24:30). In context, verse 31 does not refer to the end of the world. Rather, it speaks of the spread of the gospel to the nations of the world."

The Greek word translated 'angels' is simply the common word used for 'messengers.' God's prophets, messengers, and ministers, both in the Old and New Testament, are described as His angels. In the Greek version of the Old Testament (Septuagint), the Greek word *angelos* is translated numerous times as 'messenger': 'and the LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers (*angelos*), because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place' (2 Chronicles 26:15). The people continually 'mocked the messengers (*angelos*) of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophecies, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy' (26:16). These verses parallel the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Haggai is described as 'the messenger (*angelos*) of the LORD' (Haggai 1:13). The priest in Malachi is designated a 'messenger (*angelos*) of the LORD of host' (Malachi 2:7). John the Baptist is an 'angel,' a messenger of God (Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:24, 27; cf. Malachi 3:1). Jesus 'sent messengers (angels) ahead of Him' (Luke 9:52). The spies Joshua sent to Jericho are called 'messengers' (James 2:25). Again, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures the Greek word for 'angels' is used" (*Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* [Atlanta: American Vision, 1994], 162-163).

these events are literal. “That this ‘voice,’ ‘shout,’ ‘sound of trumpet,’ means something more than the mere forth-putting of the *power* which is to raise the dead—that there will be *an audible and mighty sound*—has never, I believe, been questioned.”¹⁶ In Exodus 19 when Jehovah descended upon the mountain in fire the people *heard the blast* of the trumpet which sounded long and became louder and louder (v. 19). This passage refutes the dispensational secret rapture theory as well as the full preterist doctrine of a clandestine, inaudible, indiscernible second coming of Christ (i.e. In the coming in judgment in A.D. 66-70 Jesus is never seen, heard or touched. According to the full preterist it was a spiritual event that both the church and the heathen, at that time were completely unaware. In fact no professing Christian was aware of it until the nineteenth century when the full preterist heresy was invented.)

The descent of Christ from heaven begins with a shout. The word “shout” (*keleusma*), which occurs only here in the New Testament, is used to issue orders such as a military command, the shout of a chariot driver to his horses, the command of a huntsman to his dogs, or the cry of a captain to his rowers to row. A better translation would be “the Lord will descend with the shout of command.” Who is the one who first shouts out orders on that great and final day? In this context it is clearly the Lord Jesus Christ. As He begins His descent from heaven, He commands the dead to arise from their graves. Our Lord spoke of this when He said, “all who are in the graves will hear His voice” (Jn. 5:28). “The command, therefore, is definitely *his own*, proceeding from *his* lips. It is not a command to him, but an order given *by* him. Leaving heaven in his human nature, he utters his voice, and immediately the souls of the redeemed also leave, and are quickly reunited with their bodies, which, thus restored to life arise gloriously.”¹⁷ Jesus, as a victorious King, will give the word of command to gather together all the saints to His side to be with Him and admire Him in His final act of redemption when He completely triumphs over sin, death and Satan.

Accompanying this authoritative shout is “the voice of an archangel.” The only archangel mentioned by name in Scripture is Michael (see Jude 9; Rev. 12:7; Dan. 10:13). In Daniel 10:13 he is called one of the chief princes. Therefore, there are a number of archangels that serve God. Scripture indicates that there are different ranks of angels and archangels are probably the chief authorities of the angelic armies. The Bible tells us that Jesus will come with all the holy angels (Mt. 25:31). It may be that this archangel is summoning the mighty hosts of heaven to descend with the Savior. Angels ministered to Jesus during His time of humiliation (Mt. 4:11; Mk. 1:13) and have always sympathized with the salvation of sinners (Mt. 18:10), therefore it is fitting that they are present at the second coming and final judgment.

The shout of command and voice of the archangel are accompanied by the sound of God’s trumpet. The blast of the trumpet in Scripture calls to mind a number of biblical uses. The two silver trumpets blown by the priests were used to call the people of God together for worship (Num. 10:3), to sound the call for the Israelites to begin their journeys (Num. 10:5-6), to sound the alarm to go to war (Num. 10:9) and were blown over the sacrifices (Num. 10:10; 2 Chr. 29:28). Trumpets were blown to announce the year of Jubilee when land was released to the original owners and slaves were set free (Lev. 25:8-17). All of this symbolized the redemption and freedom wrought by Jesus Christ. Our Lord even said that “the favorable year of the LORD” was fulfilled in Him (Lk. 4:16-21; cf. Isa. 61:1-3).

¹⁶ David Brown, *Christ’s Coming: Will It Be Premillennial?* (Edmonton, Alberta: Still Waters Revival Books [1882], 1990), 193.

¹⁷ William Hendriksen, *Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1955, 57] 1979), 116.

The sound of a “great trumpet” announced the going forth of the gospel to the world (Mt. 24:31). With the trumpet blast a great work commenced where God’s messengers went forth as an army to conquer with the sword of the Spirit. The apostles and evangelists were gathering together God’s elect into a new nation (the New Covenant church); composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

Trumpet blasts are often associated with the wrath and judgment of God (Isa. 27:13; Zech. 9:12; Rev. 8:2-11:15). The use of the trumpet is also associated with Old Testament theophanies. In Psalm 47:5 God ascends to heaven with a shout and the sound of a trumpet. Jehovah’s descent to Mount Sinai was accompanied by the sound of a trumpet that grew louder and louder and lasted quite some time (Ex. 19:16, 19; cf. Heb. 12:19).

Paul connects the trumpet blast with the resurrection of the saints and the second coming in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52: “Behold I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible...” Note that the apostle calls it the last trumpet. With the second coming, bodily resurrection and final judgment, the eternal state begins and there is no longer any use for the announcing of judgment or the calling together of God’s people.

After looking at the use of the trumpet in Scripture, we see why it is appropriate at the second coming of Christ. In fact, the second coming, more than any other event, calls to mind most of these usages. The second coming involves: judgment, the resurrection, the gathering together of the saints of God, their movement together as a gathered host and the ultimate accomplishment of redemption. Our bodies are glorified and set free and the earth itself is no longer under the bondage of the fall. The eternal Sabbath rest and Jubilee begins and the whole church is called unto worship. What a blessed trumpet blast this will be! Perhaps this is why this trumpet is specifically called the trumpet which belongs to God.

A Real, Bodily Resurrection of Dead Believers

Third, these audible sounds which accompany the descent of Christ lead immediately to the resurrection of the saints: “and the dead in Christ will rise first.” Here Paul focuses on the area in which the Thessalonians needed assurance. The Christians who are already dead when Jesus returns will rise before anything else occurs. They are not at a disadvantage over the living, for their turn will come first. Those Thessalonians who mourned excessively, or were tempted to do so, should be relieved to discover that dead believers receive the equivalent of first class accommodations at the second coming. When we think of this amazing scene we must keep in mind the teaching of Acts 1:9-11. Our Lord’s descent to earth is not instantaneous, but rather “will be characterized by a kind of majestic leisureliness... There will be time...for the souls of those who have fallen asleep to leave their heavenly abodes, to be reunited with their bodies, and then in these gloriously raised bodies to ascend to meet the Lord in the air!”¹⁸

The fact that Paul is discussing the raising up of “the dead who are in Christ” (*oi nekroi en Kristo*) rules out the full preterist idea that this account describes only a spiritual event. As noted, this cannot refer to regeneration, for these dead persons are *already saved and their souls are in heaven*. It cannot refer to a resurrection of *Christian* souls, for such a thing is impossible, unnecessary, purposeless and unscriptural. Moreover, it cannot refer to a partial resurrection, for

¹⁸ Ibid, 118.

the apostle does not qualify or restrict this resurrection of saints in any way. (In 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul focuses his attention on the resurrection of dead Christians and the glorification of believers who are alive at His coming, he writes “*all of us shall be changed*” (v. 51). This great event encompasses all believers whether alive or dead.) In addition, it cannot mean the release of Christian saints from Hades to go to heaven to be with Jesus, for this contradicts several New Testament passages (e.g., Lk. 23:43; Phil. 1:21-23; Rev. 4:10-11) and is not taught anywhere in Scripture.¹⁹ The passage must be taken literally. The context, the meaning of the words used and the analogy of Scripture demand it. This passage agrees with 1 Corinthians 15:12, 20-23, which explicitly compares the resurrection of the dead saints to the resurrection of Christ, the raising of His dead *physical* body (Lk. 24:39; Jn. 20:27). To deny the literal, bodily resurrection of dead saints is to reject Scripture.

Fourth, after speaking of the summons to the dead in Christ to rise first, Paul proceeds with a discussion of what happens to the living saints at the Savior’s return. “Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet in the Lord in the air” (v. 17). The word “then” (*epeita*) simply means “then after” and is used to introduce the second result of the Redeemer’s descent.²⁰ Full preterists have attempted to make much out of this word because *eita* is often used to indicate immediate sequence instead of *epeita*. The problem with this argument is three-fold. (1) *Epeita* can designate a very short or long period of time depending on the context. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 the events described *occur as the Lord descends*. Consequently, *epeita* cannot be days, years or all of history as full preterists may assert. The ascension occurred while the apostles stood and watched (Ac. 1:9-11). There is nothing about a dinner break or spending the night. (2) The living saints are caught up together to meet the resurrected believers in the air. This indicates a very rapid sequence of events. (3) If we follow the full preterist line of reasoning, we do not have one final second bodily coming of Christ, but at least two separate comings or a progressive coming throughout history. Both views are clearly unbiblical and exegetically unacceptable.

A Spiritual Subjective Experience vs. an Objective Event

As we look at this verse there are a number of questions that need to be answered. (1) What does Paul mean when he says the living saints shall be caught up to meet the resurrected saints in the air? The verb *harpagesometha* (future passive indicative of *harpazo*) means to catch, seize, carry off, or snatch. In Matthew 13:19 the word is used to describe the wicked one who “snatches away” the word sown in the hearer’s heart. The idea of removal is implied by the

¹⁹ The passage 1 Peter 3:19, “By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison,” cannot be a proof text for such a view because: a) The context makes it clear (v. 20) that Christ preached through Noah to Noah’s generation which is now in prison. b) This passage says nothing about dead saints waiting to be released from Hades to go to heaven. c) Even if there was such a release, it would have occurred immediately upon the death or resurrection of Christ and not 40 years later at the coming in judgment upon Jerusalem. d) The people described in this passage are unbelievers who rejected the gospel in the days of Noah (v. 20). Dead saints are not addressed in this passage.

²⁰ “Then (*epeita*). The next step, not the identical time (*tote*), but immediately afterwards” (Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:32). “The sequence of events is emphasized again by *epeita* (‘then’) at the beginning of v. 17. The living are drawn into the unfolding events only after the resurrection of the dead has occurred first (v. 16)” (Charles A. Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 174). “*epeita...arpagesometha ktl.* ‘Then, presumably at no great interval after the resurrection...’” (James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979], 175).

context. In John 10:28 Jesus says that no one will “snatch them out of My hand.” Once again a seizing to remove is stated. In Acts 8:39 the word is used to describe Philip being caught away suddenly by the Holy Spirit. Even if we do not interpret this verse in a supernatural manner, the result is that Philip was seized and removed. In 2 Corinthians Paul speaks of a man (i.e. himself) who was “caught up” to the third heaven (12:2) into paradise (12:3). Whether this rapture refers to the whole person or only the soul, the point remains that the apostle was seized and then moved to another place. In Revelation 12:5 the Christ Child is “caught up” to God to protect Him from the power of the dragon. In Jude 23 the word is used of “seizing” someone *out* of the fire. In other words, the seizing is equivalent to a rescue or removal. Given all these usages of this term and the fact that the saints are snatched away to meet Jesus in the air, off the surface of the earth, the virtually universal opinion of Greek scholars and expositors that *harpagesometha* refers to a “seizing away” or a “catching up” is fully justified. God, by an irresistible power, will seize the living saints and bring them up to meet Christ in the air. The Latin word for *harpazo* is *raptus* and this word is the basis of our English word “rapture.” The rapture is a real event that will occur, *not* at the beginning of a supposed seven year tribulation, but will take place when Christ returns bodily to this earth.

The full preterist is forced by this passage to argue either that a literal bodily rapture already occurred in A.D. 70, but this was kept a secret and the church had to be restarted by left-over hypocritical (i.e. false) Christians (this view is patently absurd and exceptionally rare); or, that the rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is some kind of spiritual event where believers did not really ascend to meet Jesus in the air or atmosphere. This is the most popular interpretation by full preterists. This view is dependent on the argument that *harpazo* strictly defined does not imply a physical movement of any kind. It also is based on the idea that “air” (*aer*) does not mean literal air or the lower atmosphere, but means man’s spirit. The rapture happens in man’s spirit they contend; it is a subjective experience rather than an objective, historical event.

Harpazo: The True Meaning

There are a number of serious problems with the standard full preterist interpretation. (1) While it is indeed true that *harpazo* does not necessarily teach a seizing plus movement, in many passages, as we have noted, it does imply movement. This point has been recognized by Greek scholars, translators, commentators and writers of lexicons for centuries. This writer could not find one reputable commentator that agreed with the full preterist position. Lexicons explicitly recognize a taking plus movement. Walter Bauer says that *harpazo* can have the following meanings: “snatch, seize, i.e., take suddenly and vehemently, or take away in the sense of 1. steal, carry off, drag away...2. snatch or take away.”²¹ He notes that it can be used of arrested

²¹ Walter Bauer, translated, revised and augmented by William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich and Fredrick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1957, 1979), 109. Joseph H. Thayer agrees with Bauer: “to seize on, claim for one’s self eagerly...to snatch out or away...to rescue...to seize and carry off speedily...to *snatch* or *catch* away” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker (1901) 1977], 74-75). The foremost authorities on word meanings in classical Greek (who certainly have no axe to grind on the nature of the rapture), Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott (revised and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones), write of *harpazo*: “*snatch away, carry off...seize hastily, snatch up...seize, overpower...draw up* by means of a vacuum...*plunder*” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1843] 1968), 246. The full preterist idea that *harpazo* can have nothing to do with a physical removal from one point to another is patently false, both for classical Greek and Koine Greek. Full preterist efforts to overturn the plain meaning of passages which contradict their paradigm are deceitful. They are grasping after straw.

men who are *taken away*; seed *removed* from the ground; people *rescued* from fire; and winds which *transport* a person from one place to another. The Greeks used the word for *plundering* a city. The goods are seized and removed. “The verb *harpazeiv* is used in Gn. 5:24 (LXX) for the taking up of Enoch [literally, bodily] to heaven and by Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:2 and 4 to refer to his own descent into the third heaven. In these instances, as in v. 17, it implies that the ascent is brought about by a force outside the individual.”²² The usages in Greek literature, the Greek Septuagint and the New Testament all fit perfectly and totally support the traditional or orthodox interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. The living saints will be seized by God and will be removed from this earth to meet Christ in the atmosphere.

(2) If the rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is merely a spiritual event that takes place inside man, then why is it necessary for Jesus to descend *bodily* from heaven to meet them? Moreover, how could the glorified human nature of Christ meet with believers all over the world *simultaneously* in their spirits? This would be impossible unless one adopts the ancient heresy that mixes the two natures of the one Mediator. This leaves the full preterist with only the option of denying the second bodily coming altogether and opting for some type of spiritual coming of Christ. But this heresy leads to even greater problems. One problem is the saints who are resurrected from their graves to meet Christ in the air. Are they physically resurrected to meet with the Savior’s Spirit? This doesn’t make any sense. Another problem is that if the coming is only a spiritual coming, then the second coming of Christ is no different than Pentecost. Since Pentecost already happened and Jesus already had an inner, spiritual meeting with all living believers, then what is the theological and salvific meaning of the second coming? What sets it apart from the work of the Holy Spirit and Christ’s high priestly mediatorial work that *already* flows from His resurrection victory? Moreover, if one accepts the full preterist definition of the rapture as a subjective spiritual experience that occurred in A.D. 70 (and perhaps continues somehow in history), then one has adopted a completely new and unique application of salvation that every theologian in history has completely missed. In addition, what is the salvific purpose of this subjective experience? How does it improve upon Pentecost and our possession of the Spirit of Christ? A spiritual/ subjective rapture makes absolutely no sense exegetically or theologically. The old adage holds true: “One heresy leads to another.” Full preterists have obviously not carefully thought through the implications of their Scripture twisting of 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

(3) If one holds the position that the rapture is a subjective spiritual experience, then he has denied the explicit Pauline teaching that all the living saints are *gathered together* with the believers who were physically dead then raised bodily out of their graves. If the full preterist argues that such people are united spiritually or are united in Christ mystically, then once again they are simply asserting something that is true prior to the second coming. Their system forces them to redefine the second coming and our literal gathering unto Him out of existence. Tragically, they must also redefine the public, universal vindication and glory the Redeemer receives on that great day out of existence. The second coming of Christ in A.D. 70 is the greatest secret in history.

²² Wanamaker, 175.

In the Air

The full preterist's entire exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is dependent on an exegetical fallacy. They must somehow redefine the word air (*aer*) to mean man's spirit. Consequently, they substitute the root definition of the word *aer* (*aemi*-to breathe, blow or respire) for its primary meaning, which is the air around us or the lower atmosphere. A full preterist advocate, Kelly Nelson Birks, writes,

Please note Strong's root definition followed by the primary meaning of the word that Paul uses in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. It is in reference to the "place" of respiration. The idea of the exchange of oxygen within one's immediate sphere, is what is the associative understanding. Paul is not saying that we meet the Lord in the *harpazo*, in our lungs! Understand what Paul is driving at. He is speaking of a spiritual meeting with the Lord, "within" ourselves. Within our spirits. Why did he use this particular form of explanation here? So that the Thessalonians, who could not conceive of the nature of the *harpazo* at Christ's Parousia in the least (and we don't do a very good job of it either), would begin to grasp that the meeting with the Lord was to be a personal meeting "within" the believer. Each believer was to have his or her own meeting with the Lord. If Paul had meant to communicate that this meeting was of a physical nature relative to joining the Lord in a place high above the planet surface, which Strong refers to as the place of "rarer" air (thinner air, high above the planet), then he would in all likelihood have used the Greek word "*ouranos*". This is the primary word for the sky high above. The place of rarer air. There would have been no misunderstanding whatsoever if he had used *ouranos*. "*Ouranos*": "To lift, to heave." Vines, Pg. 548. Paul chooses the more spiritually descriptive word *AER*, in order to communicate the primary defined meaning that Strong actually gives us. Christ would meet the believer within. It is an analogous to one's spirit that is within their body.²³

This exceptionally clever and convoluted method of interpreting the word *aer* merits our attention. Is it legitimate exegetically to ignore the primary meaning of a word (i.e. how the word was used in everyday speech by ancient Greeks in both the classical period and the first century) and instead substitute a root definition? No! It is illegitimate and very deceptive. For example, a number of Greek scholars believe the root of the word *uperetas* translated as "ministers" or "servants" in 1 Corinthians 4:1 ("Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ") is a "rower" (e.g., Trench, A. T. Robertson, J.B. Hofman, etc). The word, however, in Koine Greek is a synonym of *diakonos* or "servant." But if we follow Birks' method of exegesis, Paul and the New Testament evangelists were *boat rowers* for Christ. Our English word "nice" comes from the Latin root *necius*, which means "ignorant." When we say someone is nice, do we really mean they are ignorant? No, of course not! Our word "martyr" means a person who is killed for his belief in Christ. But the Greek root word behind our English word in classical Greek means a person who gives testimony in a court and in the New Testament means a person who witnesses for Christ in life and word, even in the face of persecution and possible death. Examples could be multiplied. The only reason the full preterist substitutes a completely irrelevant root word (*aemi*) for the true meaning of the word that is actually used, is the simple fact that the real meaning does not fit into their system.

What do the Greek scholars say about the word, *aer*? James Strong says it "signifies 'the atmosphere' (1) certainly in five of the seven occurrences (Acts 22:23; 1 Cor. 9:26; 14:9; Rev.

²³ Kelly Nelson Birks, *A Response to "Silence Demands a Rapture,"* Internet Article.

9:2; 16:11), and (2) almost certainly in the other two (Eph. 2:2 and 1 Th. 4:17).²⁴ G. Abbott-Smith says, “The lower air which surrounds the earth, as opp. To the purer *aither* of the higher regions; generally air.”²⁵ W.E. Vine says that it “signifies the atmosphere, certainly in five of the seven occurrences...and almost certainly in the other two.”²⁶ Marvin R. Vincent writes, “*Aer the atmosphere with the clouds*, as distinguished from *aither the pure ether*, which does not occur in N.T.”²⁷ Thayer concurs with this definition: “...*the air* (particularly the lower and denser, as distinguished from the higher and rarer [Homer II.14, 288]),...*the atmospheric region*.”²⁸ Speaking of classical Greek, Liddell and Scott write, “*mist, haze...later generally air...the open air*.”²⁹ The word *aer* can mean the air around us or the atmosphere. It, however, is *never* used as a synonym for *pneuma* (“spirit”) which is the immaterial, invisible part of man. If Paul wanted to convey to the Thessalonians the idea that Jesus was going to come and meet them in their *spirit*, then the Thessalonians would almost certainly have misunderstood the term he chose. To the Greeks *aer* meant air or atmosphere.

If we look at the biblical usage of this word, we see that every example (except possibly one) refers to the air around us or the atmosphere. “Then, as they cried out and tore off their

²⁴ James Strong, *The New Strong's Expanded Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 3:7.

²⁵ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), 11. H. Merklein writes, “According to the ancient worldview the air forms the intermediate sphere between earth and heaven (ether)... In 1 Thess. 4:17 the air is the place where believers who have been caught up in the clouds meet the returning Lord, either to accompany him in his return to earth...or for reunion in heaven” (Ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, (1978-80), 1990], 1:34). Forester writes, “According to the ancient conception of the earth, the sphere of the air reaches to the moon, where the ethereal region of the stars commences. The Greeks made a distinction between the impure element of air and the purer ether.... Because of its middle position, the air in 1 Th. 4:17..., is the sphere where believers will meet Christ on his coming to set up on earth the millennial kingdom” (Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 1:165-166). According to Paul, Jesus returns and the kingdom is handed over to His Father and the eternal state begins (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24-28).

²⁶ W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell [1940] 1966), 45.

²⁷ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1887] 1946), 4:43.

²⁸ Thayer, 13.

²⁹ Liddell and Scott, 30. “The *eis aera* designates the place of meeting, probably the space between the earth and the firmament of the first heaven, as in Slav. En. 3:1ff. quoted above” (Frame, 176). John Gill’s comments are interesting: “Here [in the air] Christ will stop, and be visible to all, good and bad, as the body of the sun at noon-day; as yet he will not yet descend on earth, because [it is] not [yet] fit to receive him; but when that and its works are burnt up, and it is purged by fire, and becomes a new earth, he’ll descend upon it, and dwell with his saints in it” (*An Exposition of the New Testament* [Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, (1809) 1979], 3:238). The Greek scholar John Eadie writes, “The dead who are raised and the living along with them meet the Redeemer not in heaven as he leaves it, nor on earth, if He come down to it, but between heaven and earth in the air...” (*Commentary on the Epistles to the Thessalonians* [Grand Rapids: Baker, (1877) 1979], 170). The standard Protestant orthodox interpretation [i.e. non-dispensational and non-full preterist] of verse 17 is well stated by the Lutheran expositor R.C.H. Lenski: “The main point is the union of the dead and the living believers who form one joint host that is lifted in a divine *raptus* to meet their heavenly Lord as he descends. First Corinthians 15:51, 52 supplies the thought that the living will be changed without passing through death, in the twinkling of an eye. Glorified in body and soul like the risen dead, they will be swept up ‘into the air’ and thus rise to meet the Lord at his descent. We take this to mean that they will meet the Lord in welcome and will descend to the earth with him and all his angels for the purpose of judgment. ‘Snatched into the air’ does not mean into heaven. The Lord will descend to the earth (Job 19:25; Acts 1:11) where the judgment shall take place. It shall not take place in the air; nor shall the wicked, after being raised, be taken into the air. Revelation 21:1, 2 unites the new heaven and the new earth with the holy city; and the judgment will exclude the wicked from it. We read nowhere that the Lord will return to heaven after the Parousia, but rather that heaven and earth shall be one” (*The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, (1937) 1946], 336-337).

clothes and threw dust into the air (*aer*)” (Ac. 22:23). This refers to the air around them. In 1 Corinthians 9:26 Paul says he fights, “not as one who beats the air (*aer*).” This is also the air or space around him. Paul speaks of the devil in Ephesians 2:2 as “the prince of the power of the air (*aer*).” This is the only passage in the New Testament where there is some disagreement over the meaning of *aer*. If *aer* is to be understood literally as the air or atmosphere surrounding the earth, then obviously Paul is speaking from our perspective. When the demons moved from the demon-possessed man to the swine, from our standpoint, they moved through our air even though they exist in a spiritual dimension (Mk. 5:13). The literal position was the common view of the Jews in Paul’s day. After extensive argumentation on this matter Hendriksen concludes,

This passage, in conjunction with others (3:10, 15; 6:12), clearly teaches that God has tenanted the supermundane realm with innumerable hosts, and that in its lower region the minions of Satan are engaged in their destructive missions. Grosheide is right when in his comments on this passage he states that according to the New Testament “the atmosphere is inhabited by spirits, including evil spirits, who exert an evil influence on people” (op.cit, p. 36). Note this word “including.” The evil spirits do not have it all to themselves by any means! And as far as they and their leader are concerned, the Christian’s real comfort is found in such passages as 1:20-23; Col. 2:15; Rom. 16:20; Rev. 20:3, 10. Cf. Gen. 3:15; John 12:31, 32.³⁰

Even if Paul is speaking figuratively in this passage, he certainly is not discussing man’s soul or spirit.

In Revelation 9:2 the sun and air (*aer*) are darkened from smoke that arises from the pit. This obviously refers to our atmosphere for the smoke darkens the sun. Revelation 16:17 tells us that the seventh angel pours out his bowl of wrath into the air (*aer*). This usage also refers to the atmosphere. The objection that this is apocalyptic literature and is not meant to be taken literally is irrelevant. The picture painted by the Holy Spirit, whether literal or not, is still dependent on the ordinary use of the Greek language. Here *air* means atmosphere even if the events are symbolic.

Finally we come to 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In this passage it is obvious that *aer* means atmosphere for the following reasons. (1) Christ is said to descend from heaven (v. 16). The Jesus who descends is the same One who died and rose from the dead (v. 16). Therefore, our Lord will descend in His resurrected body (Ac. 1:9-11). This is very different than Pentecost when the glorified Redeemer poured out His Spirit upon the church (Ac. 2:2-4). Of Pentecost our Lord told the disciples, “I am coming back to you” (Jn. 14:28). But He made it very clear that the Holy Spirit was coming (Jn. 14:15; 15:26; 16:7, 13) and not His theanthropic Person.

(2) Acts 1:9-11 makes it perfectly clear that this coming involves the resurrected Redeemer, who continues to exist as God and (glorified) man in one person forever. Once again we need to point out that if the coming mentioned in Acts 1:9-11 and 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is not

³⁰ William Hendriksen, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962, 64, 67, 68), 2:111. S.D.F. Salmond writes, “The word *aer* cannot be taken as equivalent to *mundus* (Aquino.) or *ouranos* (Olsh.) or *skotos* (Kl.) or *pneuma* (Hofm.); neither can it express the *quality* of these evil powers—their incorporeal or aeriform nature (Hahn). In all its other N.T. occurrences (Acts xxii.23; 1 Cor. ix.26; xiv.9; 1 Thess. iv.17; Rev. ix.2, xvi.17) it has the literal sense. It was here, and it describes these demonic powers as between earth and heaven, in that ‘supra-terrestrial but subcelestial region (*ho hupou-ranios topos*, Chrys.) which seems to be, if not the abode, yet the haunt of evil spirits’ (Ell.)...these demonic powers, as having their seat in the air, are distinguished from the [holy] angels whose abode is in heaven (*angleoi ton our-anon*)” (in W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor’s Greek New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 3:284).

literal or bodily, then what separates it from Pentecost or the special work of the Holy Spirit upon the elect that occurs every single day?

(3) The believers who are alive at the time are said to meet together with the bodily resurrected saints in the clouds to meet Jesus in the air. If meeting Christ in the air represents a subjective spiritual experience, then what are these clouds and how do we meet the resurrected glorified saints? Although the term clouds often has a symbolic meaning of the divine presence (e.g., Ex. 13:21; 14:24; 19:9; 20:21; 24:15; 33:9; 34:5; 1 Ki. 8:12), God's abode (Ps. 97:2), Jehovah's method of transportation (Ps. 104:3), God's judgment (Ez. 30:3; Joel 2:2; Nah. 1:3; Isa. 19:1) and the glorification of Christ (Mt. 24:30; 26:64; These passages both refer to Daniel 7:13-14 where Jesus is glorified), in this passage it can be taken literally (in Ac. 1:11 Jesus is received up into a cloud) or it could be literal with symbolic overtones. Since the clouds are a meeting place in the air or atmosphere, it is exceptionally unlikely that the term "clouds" is purely symbolic in this passage. Would the Thessalonians who read in this epistle that they will be caught up into the air to meet their dead loved ones in the clouds think of this as a subjective experience? Would not the terms air or atmosphere and clouds (that exist up in the atmosphere) make them think immediately of the traditional, orthodox concept of the rapture? Of course! (Moreover, as we have already noted previously, Jesus did not leave heaven in A.D. 66-70. The destruction of Jerusalem was a sign that He was in heaven at the right hand of God).

But, what about the full preterist objection that if Paul had the traditional concept of the rapture in mind he would have used the word *ouranos* (heaven, air or sky) instead of the word *aer*? This objection is desperate and bizarre. The answer to this question is quite simple. If Paul had chosen *ouranos*, then his statement about the coming of Christ would have been ambiguous, for although *ouranos* can mean sky, it also refers to the dwelling place of God (e.g., Mt. 5:16; 12:50; Rev. 3:12; 11:13; 16:11; 20:9) which is a spiritual realm. In fact, that is usually how the term heaven is used in the New Testament. By choosing the word *aer* which can only mean the air around us or the atmosphere (not spiritual heaven or even the place where the moon and stars exist [i.e. the second heaven]), Paul made it very clear that this great event would be visible from the earth's surface. Although 1 Thessalonians 4:17 does not tell us where Jesus takes the resurrected and raptured saints after He meets them in the air, we can infer from other passages (e.g., Ac. 1:11; Col. 3:4; 2 Thess. 1:6-10; Rev. 21:2) that He continues descending with them to the earth. The dispensational idea of a rapture which takes the saints back to heaven has no basis in Scripture whatsoever. It was the invention of Margaret McDonald in 1830.

Before we consider this meeting in the air, it is important to note that 1 Thessalonians 4:17 teaches that believers who are alive at the second coming of Christ will not experience physical death. They will instantaneously receive glorified bodies that are immortal, incorruptible, holy and fit to spend eternity with Jesus. Paul spoke of this in more detail in 1 Corinthians 15:51-54: "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep [i.e. die], but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: '*Death is swallowed up in victory.*'" The similarities between this passage and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 are striking. The trumpet sounds; the believers who have died are raised from the dead and made incorruptible; then the believers who are still alive are changed. That which is mortal, and subject to decay or destruction, is made incorruptible and immortal. This transformation applies to the living as well as to the dead. The verb "to put on"

(*endusasthai*) refers figuratively to being clothed with our new glorified bodies. “For we who are in *this* tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor. 5:4). The word “immortality” (*athanasia*) is a combination of two Greek words: *alpha*-negative and *thanatos*-death. The word literally means “deathlessness.” “The long chain of decay and death inaugurated by the first Adam will finally be irrevocably broken by the last Adam.”³¹ Death, decay, rotting, destruction and attendant suffering are swallowed up by the resurrection and glorification of God’s people. As long as the physical death and decay of Christians is occurring, the resurrection and rapture have not occurred.

The Nature of this Meeting

Having examined the meaning of *harpazo* (which teaches that the living saints are “caught up”) and *aer* (which means the “air” around us or “atmosphere”), we can now ask: what is the nature of the meeting? The expression “to meet” (*eis apantesin*) “was a technical expression in Hellenistic Greek for the departure from a city of a delegation of citizens to meet an arriving dignitary in order to accord the person proper respect and honor by escorting the dignitary back to the city.”³² Our Lord is greeted in the air by all of the elect (the church invisible and universal) from all of human history. The returning Savior is given the reception by the church that accords with His divinity and exalted human royalty. The same Greek word is used to describe the wedding guests going out to meet the Bridegroom (Mt. 25:6), which is a parable about the second coming. It is also used in Acts 28:15 when some brethren came out to meet Paul (who was already accompanied with other believers). They greeted Paul and accompanied him “as far as Appii Forum and the Three Inns.” The saints in unison meet Christ to salute, admire and worship Him, while those remaining on earth must wait for Him as criminals wait for the judge and executioner. The expression used rules out the idea of a secret meeting in a believer’s heart. Believers already possess the Spirit of Christ. How can they meet Jesus in a spiritual manner when they have already been baptized with the Holy Spirit? Are the full preterists proposing a second blessing like the Pentecostals? Moreover, could millions of Christians meet Jesus in their spirit, yet be completely unaware of it? In addition, what about all the believers who are born after A.D. 70? Did they miss out on this second blessing? And if they did not, how does the full preterist find a never ending progression of meetings in our text? Once again, we see that the full preterist’s interpretation is an absurd fantasy. Full preterists take a meeting that is public, official and exceptionally significant and essentially redefine it out of existence.

That the meeting described in the air is literal and objective is proved by Paul’s main thrust at the end of verse 17: “And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” It will certainly be a great and wonderful experience for us to be reunited with Christian loved ones who have died. But the chief comfort presented in this verse is that we will be in the presence of Christ. We will behold Him, admire Him, adore Him and worship Him. We will look upon His pierced hands, feet and side and we will cast our bejeweled crowns at His feet. We will enjoy the peace, bliss and joy of His magnificent presence forever. This is what Paul wants us to look forward to when death has caused a separation from a spouse or a child or a dear friend. Our souls and perfect *glorified bodies* will all meet again in the presence of the Lamb. There will be no more

³¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 803.

³² Wanamaker, 175.

separation from Him or the saints forever and ever. What Paul says should remove all doubts or grief about what happens to Christians who are dead and buried when Jesus returns. Their future and our future are glorious and blessed beyond our comprehension.

Contrast this amazing statement with the full preterist heresy. "Take comfort dear Christians, for although your dead loved ones' bodies will rot in the cursed earth forever, we will have a secret indiscernible meeting with Jesus in our spirits in A.D. 70." If we accept the full preterist interpretation of this passage we need to ask: How do we derive comfort from the second coming when all true believers were not really brought together and united forever in A.D. 70 and the curse wrought upon this earth by Adam's sin continues forever (see Gen. 3:16-19)? In the full preterist world view, disease, calamity, suffering and death continue. They teach that, at death, we receive our new glorified bodies that have been hanging in storage in heaven since A.D. 70; but, while we enjoy heaven our posterity is still on earth suffering the effects of the fall. Their theological system is a heretical monstrosity haphazardly coupled together with eisegesis and human invention. (Moreover, if this gathering together of all the saints is purely spiritual and subjective, how does this passage teach anything different from what occurs in regeneration and conversion when Christians are united to Christ?)

Comfort One Another

With his teaching about the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of dead believers and the rapture of the living saints completed, Paul draws out an inference from this doctrine: "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:18). These are precious words given to us by divine inspiration. They contain the teachings that are designed to give believers a genuine and lasting consolation. Our dead Christian friends and loved ones have absolutely no disadvantage compared to those who are alive at Christ's coming. The dead will rise first. Both will meet our blessed Savior in the air as He descends. Both will be joined together as worshippers of Christ forever. When we see another Christian who is upset because their husband or wife has died, we have the teaching at hand to comfort them and support them. This doctrine is very practical; it adds joy and hope to our tears. It tells us that a time is coming when all believers *both body and soul* will dwell forever before the loving gaze of Christ. Please tell me, what is more comforting to sorrowful believers, the teaching of Paul, which has been the orthodox view for almost 2000 years; or the full preterist fantasy of a *secret, indiscernible* meeting of Christ within our Spirit? Obviously, we will do much better if we place our faith in Scripture and Christian orthodoxy.

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