

Is the Pretribulation Rapture Biblical?

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One of the most popular teachings today in Evangelical and Charismatic churches is the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture. The pretribulation rapture teaching is that there are two separate comings of Christ. The first coming is secret and occurs before the future seven year tribulation. At this coming Jesus comes *for* the saints (i.e., all genuine believers) both living and dead. These saints meet the Lord in the air and then are taken to heaven to escape the horrible judgments that take place during the seven year tribulation. At the end of the great tribulation Jesus returns to the earth *with* the saints. This coming is not secret but is observed by all. At this coming Christ crushes His opposition; judges mankind; and sets up a one thousand year reign of saints upon the earth (the millennium). Some pretribulation advocates speak of two separate comings while others prefer to speak of one coming in two separate stages or phases (phase one is the secret rapture and phase two is the visible coming in judgment). Hal Lindsey likes to refer to the rapture as “the great snatch.” He writes, “The word for ‘caught up’ actually means to ‘snatch up,’ and that’s why I like to call this marvelous coming event ‘The Great Snatch’! It’s usually referred to as the ‘Rapture,’ from the Latin word *rapere*, which means to ‘take away’ or ‘snatch out.’”¹

Although the pretribulation rapture doctrine is very popular and is even considered so crucial to Christianity that it is made a test of a person’s orthodoxy in some denominations, Bible colleges and seminaries, the exegetical and theological arguments used by its advocates are all classic cases of forcing one’s theological presuppositions onto particular texts (*eisegesis*). The purpose of this brief study is to show that the pretribulation rapture theory is not plainly taught or directly stated in any place in Scripture, cannot be deduced from biblical teaching, contradicts the general teaching of the Bible regarding Christ’s second coming and was never taught in any branch of the church prior to 1830.

The Origin of the Pretribulation Rapture Teaching

Whenever a Christian encounters a doctrine that has not been taught by anyone in any branch of Christ’s church for over eighteen centuries, one should be very suspect of that teaching. This fact in and of itself does not prove that the new teaching is false. But, it should definitely raise one’s suspicions, for if something is taught in Scripture, it is not unreasonable to expect at least a few theologians and exegetes to have discovered it before. The teaching of a secret pretribulation rapture is a doctrine that never existed before 1830. Did the pretribulation rapture come into existence by a careful exegesis of Scripture? No. The first person to teach the

¹ Hal Lindsey, *There’s a New World Coming* (New York. NY: Bantam, 1975 [1973]), p. 60.

doctrine was a young woman named Margaret Macdonald. Margaret was not a theologian or Bible expositor but was a prophetess in the Irvingite sect (the Catholic Apostolic Church). Christian journalist Dave MacPherson has written a book on the subject of the origin of the pre-tribulation rapture. He writes, “We have seen that a young Scottish lassie named Margaret Macdonald had a private revelation in Port Glasgow, Scotland, in the early part of 1830 that a select group of Christians would be caught up to meet Christ in the air *before* the days of Antichrist. An eye-and-ear witness, Robert Norton M.D., preserved her handwritten account of her pre-trib rapture revelation in two of his books, and said it was the first time anyone ever split the second coming into two distinct parts or stages. His writings, along with much other Catholic Apostolic Church literature, have been hidden many decades from the mainstream of Evangelical thought and only recently surfaced. Margaret’s views were well-known to those who visited her home, among them John Darby of the Brethren. Within a few months her distinctive prophetic outlook was mirrored in the September, 1830 issue of *The Morning Watch* and the early Brethren assembly at Plymouth, England. Early disciples of the pre-trib interpretation often called it a new doctrine.”²

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), who was the leader of the Brethren movement and the “father of modern dispensationalism,” took Margaret Macdonald’s new teaching on the rapture, made some changes (she taught a partial rapture of believers while he taught that all believers will be raptured) and incorporated it into his dispensational understanding of Scripture and prophecy. Darby would spend the rest of his life speaking, writing and traveling, spreading the new rapture theory. The Plymouth Brethren openly admitted and were even proud of the fact that among their teachings were totally new ones which had never been taught by the church fathers, medieval scholastics, Protestant Reformers or the many commentators.

The person most responsible for the rather widespread acceptance of pretribulationism and dispensationalism among Evangelicals is Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843-1921). C. I. Scofield published his *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909. This Bible, which espoused the doctrines of Darby in its notes, became very popular in Fundamentalist circles. In the minds of many a Bible teacher, fundamentalist pastor and multitudes of professing Christians, Scofield’s notes were practically equated with the word of God itself. If a person did not adhere to the dispensational, pretribulation scheme he or she would almost automatically be labeled a modernist.

Today there is a whole plethora of books advocating the pretribulation rapture theory and the dispensational understanding of the end times. Given the fact that among professing Christians the pre-trib rapture is still wildly popular, a comparison of this theory with scriptural

² Dave MacPherson, *The Incredible Cover-Up: The True Story of the Pre-Trib Rapture* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1975), p. 93. The following scholars are cited by MacPherson who agree with MacPherson’s contention that pre-tribulationism is a fairly modern doctrine that originated in or around 1830: Samuel P. Tregelles, Alexander Reese, Floyd E. Hamilton, Oswald T. Allis, D. H. Kromminga, George E. Ladd and J. Barton Payne. MacPherson also cites several dispensational, pre-trib scholars who admit that the pre-trib theory is in fact a new doctrine: W. E. Blackstone, H. A. Ironside, Charles C. Ryrie, Gerald B. Stanton and John F. Walvoord.

teaching is warranted. We will see that the typical arguments offered in favor of this theory are in conflict with the Bible.

Revelation 3:10

A passage of Scripture that is considered crucial for a defense of the pretribulation rapture position is Revelation 3:10. “Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.” It is argued that this passage refers to the great tribulation (“the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world”) and that the church is promised a physical removal from the world for protection. The “from the hour of trial” (*ek tes horas tou peirasmou*) is interpreted in a spatial sense. The preposition *ek*, translated *from*, is interpreted as a preposition of motion. The saints will be taken *out from within* the earth to heaven. Thus, they are kept or preserved from the hour of trial.

The pretribulation interpretation of Revelation 3:10 is totally off the mark for a number of reasons. First, standard biblical methods of interpretation must be completely ignored to apply this passage to a future tribulation two thousand years in the future. The letter is addressed to a specific church (Philadelphia) in Asia Minor in the first century. The specific promise that is made by Jesus is given to the Philadelphian Christians and cannot be applied *directly* to all the churches of Asia Minor or the universal church. For example, the church of Smyrna is told that they “will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful unto death” (Rev. 2:10). They are to take comfort in the fact that they cannot be hurt by the second death (2:11). They are not promised protection from the coming time of tribulation. Further, the promise to the Philadelphian Christians is based on their past behavior: “Because you have kept [*eteresas*—aorist active indicative]...I also will keep.” “The aorist ‘didst keep’ states the historical fact. The church held fully and completely to the Word as was stated in v. 8: ‘and didst keep my Word.’”³ Because the promise is based on the behavior of a particular church in Asia Minor it cannot be universalized to include all Christians in the distant future. To do so is to render the commendation to the Philadelphians meaningless.

Second, the time indicators within the passage render impossible the idea that the promise was not to take place for two thousand years. The passage says that the hour of trial is about to happen. “I also will keep thee from the hour of trial that is about to come upon all the world” (Rev. 3:10, *Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible*). When the verb *mello* is joined to the present infinitive which is what is found in Revelation 3:10 (*tes mellouses erchesthai*), it always expresses imminence. When Jesus says that the hour of trial is *about to come*, He means it will happen soon.⁴ To place the promise thousands of years away is a denial of the plain meaning of the Greek language. Chilton writes, “Does it make sense that Christ would promise the church in

³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1943), p. 143.

⁴ For a scholarly defense of this assertion see Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), pp. 141-142.

Philadelphia protection from something that would happen thousands of years later? ‘Be of good cheer, you faithful, suffering Christians of first century Asia Minor: I won’t let those Soviet missiles and killer bees of the 20th century get you!’ When the Philadelphian Christians were worried about more practical, immediate concerns—official persecution, religious discrimination, social ostracism, and economic boycotts—what did they care about Hal Lindsey’s lucrative horror stories?”⁵

Third, the pretribulationist’s idea that *ek* (from) in verse 10 is used in a spatial sense and thus refers to the saints being moved outside of the earth away from tribulation is not supported by the immediate or broader context of the book of Revelation. This novel interpretation cannot be found in any theological work or commentary prior to 1830 when the pre-tribulation theory was first espoused by Margaret Macdonald in western Scotland. Also, it is a historical fact that the church of Philadelphia was not taken to heaven during the tumult and persecution that took place *soon* after the Philadelphian Christians received this prophecy. The idea that Revelation 3:10 refers to the rapture is a classic case of reading one’s own preconceived opinions into a text. The most logical understanding of *ek* (from) in Revelation 3:10 is that Christ will protect the Philadelphian Christians from the soon-to-come trials. This understanding is exactly how the identical Greek phrase is used in John 17:15: “keep them from the evil one.” Jesus’ prayer does not refer to a spatial separation but to protection from the wiles of Satan. The church of Philadelphia is not going to be beamed out of the Roman Empire but it will be protected and preserved through the coming trials.⁶

Further, according to the dispensational understanding of the great tribulation, all genuine Christians must be raptured at the beginning of the tribulation while the Jews must stay on earth and go through the tribulation. The problem with this view is that it involves both an abandonment of the literal principle of interpretation and an arbitrary interpretation of the word “from” (*ek*). In other words when *ek* is used of Christians it means they will be raptured to safety in heaven, but when it is used of Jews it means they will remain on earth but receive protection. Oswald T. Allis writes, “Jer. xxx. 7 declares, ‘but he shall be saved out of it’ (literally, ‘from it’). Dan. xii. 1 says only, ‘thy people shall be delivered.’ In Rev. iii. 10 we read, ‘I also will keep thee from (*ek*) the hour of trial.’ In chap. vii. 14 we are told of those ‘who have come out of (*ek*) the great tribulation.’ Matt. xxiv. 22 by speaking of the shortening of the days of the tribulation clearly implies that the elect will pass through it. John xvii. 15 illustrates the ambiguity of the

⁵ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion, 1987), p. 129.

⁶ After spending a number of pages analyzing the pretribulation approach to the word *ek* in Rev. 3:10 Douglas J. Moo writes: “1) The evidence that *ek* can mean ‘outside position’ in a spatial sense is nonexistent in biblical Greek; 2) The combination *tareo* or *diatareo ek* denotes protection from, or guarding against a real and threatening danger.... 4) The phrases qualifying ‘the hour of trial’ imply nothing at all about the presence or removal of the church. The lexical and contextual evidence strongly favors the interpretation according to which Christ in Revelation 3:10 promises His church protection from the real and present danger of affliction when the ‘hour of trial’ comes. Thus, we reject four different meanings commonly attached to the phrase *tareo ek*: ‘removal from’ (Pentecost); ‘keeping outside of’ (Townsend, Feinberg); ‘removal from the midst of’; and ‘Protection issuing in emergence’ (Gundry)” (“Response to the Pretribulationist View” in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulationist* [Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books, 1984], p. 97).

preposition ‘from’ (*ek* in the same sense of ‘out of,’ ‘away from’) the world, ‘but that thou shouldest keep them from (*ek*) the evil.’ the purpose of the sealing of the servants of God before the pouring out of the plagues (vii. 3) favors the view that they are to pass unscathed through them. Why should not the same apply to Rev. iii. 10? It seems rather inconsistent to insist that ‘from’ in Jer. xxx. 7 must mean that Israel will pass through the tribulation, but that ‘from’ in Rev. iii. 10 must mean that the church of Philadelphia, and by implication the entire church then on earth, will not pass through it but be delivered from it by rapture.”⁷

Dispensationalists, who are the chief advocates of the pretribulation rapture, claim that they are the champions of a literal approach to biblical interpretation. They say that a literal approach to prophecy logically leads to the pretribulation view. Yet there are a number of important passages such as Revelation 3:10 where dispensationalists take a very non-literal approach while their theological opponents take a very literal approach. It has already been noted how the literal view of Revelation 3:10 has been totally ignored in order to posit a tribulation and rapture thousands of years in the future. This contradiction to the literal method of interpretation is also found in their overall view of the letters to the seven churches. According to C. I. Scofield and the vast majority of dispensational authors, the seven churches of Revelation chapters 2 and 3 represent seven consecutive chronological periods of church history. According to the general outline of this scheme the church of Philadelphia represents a period of church revival and great missionary activity (A.D. 1750-1925) while Laodicea (the seventh century) represents the final period of church history, which is one of compromise and apostasy. This interpretation raises a number of questions. 1.) If the seven churches are seven consecutive periods of church history, why is the rapture passage in the sixth period, the time of revival and not the seventh and last period, the time of apostasy? If dispensationalists were to be consistent they could not claim Revelation 3:10 as a proof text for the rapture. The dispensational view of Revelation contains serious internal contradictions. 2.) There is not one thing within the text or context of this passage that indicates that the seven letters are somehow prophetic of seven long periods of church history. Although such an interpretation may be popular, one is not obligated to hold to a view that has no exegetical basis. 3.) The interpretation that claims the seven churches are seven long periods of church history is a very non-literal approach to biblical interpretation. Dispensational scholars are fond of accusing amillennial and postmillennial expositors of spiritualizing various Scripture passages. Yet the idea that the seven letters are long periods of church history is itself a blatant example of spiritualizing Scripture. The dispensational slogan of “literal whenever possible” is a claim that obviously is not a reality.

Revelation 4:1

Another proof text for the pretribulation rapture theory is Revelation 4:1, “After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, ‘Come up here, and I will show you things which

⁷ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945, 47), pp. 213-214.

must take place after this.” Pretribulationists cite this verse and then remark that the church is not observed on earth again until Revelation 19 when believers return to earth for the millennial reign of Christ. Pretribulationists reason that since the church is not mentioned as being on earth during the great tribulation after Revelation 4:1, then John’s removal to heaven must be equated with the rapture. Hal Lindsey gives us an example of the typical pretribulationist understanding of this verse. He writes, “It’s important to note that the Church has been the main theme of Revelation until Chapter 4. Starting with this chapter, the Church isn’t seen on earth again until Chapter 19, where we suddenly find it returning to earth with Christ as He comes to reign as King of kings and Lord of lords.... Although Revelation 4:1 does not specifically refer to Christ’s reappearance at the Rapture, I believe that the Apostle John’s departure for heaven *after* the church era closes in Chapter 3 and *before* the tribulation chronicle begins in Chapter 6 strongly suggests a similar catching away for the Church.”⁸

Does Revelation 4:1 and the fact that the word church (*ekklesia*) is not mentioned in chapters 4 through 18 prove or support the pretribulation rapture theory? There are a number of reasons why this argument in favor of pretribulationism should be rejected. First, this argument is an argument from silence in which the idea of the pretribulation rapture is presupposed and then imposed upon this section of Scripture. In the immediate context (Revelation 4:2) it says that John the apostle is transported to the throne room of heaven. Not one word is uttered that suggests that John represents the church or that the people of God as a whole are taken to heaven. Also, there is not any mention or any indication whatsoever of a descent by Christ or a resurrection of the saints. In Revelation 4:1 there is mention of a trumpet but this is not the trumpet blast announcing the rapture. It is a voice that has a sound of a trumpet just like the voice of authority that John heard in Revelation 1:10, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet.” What occurred in Revelation 4:1 with John was no different than the transportation and throne room scenes experienced by other prophets (e.g., Ezek. 1:1, 22-28; 8:3-4 [Ezekiel is apparently below the crystal sea looking up to the throne room]; Isa. 6:1 ff.; 2 Cor. 12:1-4).

Second, the argument from silence is arbitrarily applied to Revelation and could be used to prove many heretical doctrines if applied to other theological topics. The argument from silence consistently applied would not prove the rapture of the saints but the annihilation of the saints, for not only is the word church (*ekklesia*) not used of the saints on earth in chapters 4 through 18, it also is never used of the saints in heaven. Does this mean that all the saints have vacated heaven and moved to Limbo or some other place during these chapters? No. Of course not! This argument, if consistently applied, leads to an incredibly absurd conclusion. The word church (*ekklesia*) does not even occur in the book of Revelation until Revelation 22:16. Does this mean the church is not involved in the second coming, the resurrection or white throne judgment? No. Obviously not! An argument that proves too much is worthless.

Further, the reasoning that pretribulationists use to make Revelation 4:1 a proof text for the rapture could also be used to prove many dangerous and heretical doctrines. In the book of

⁸ Hal Lindsey, *There's a New World Coming*, pp. 59, 61.

Esther the words for God and Jehovah do not occur even once. Does this fact mean that God does not exist, or that God is a deistic absentee landlord of the universe? No. It certainly does not. It should be clear to everyone from this example that arguments from silence are useless.

Third, a careful examination of Revelation 4 through 19 proves conclusively that the church is on earth during this period. John does not use the word church (*ekklesia*) in these chapters but given the nature of apocalyptic literature where allusions to the Old Testament are constantly used to dramatically portray coming events, the non-use of the word church in the highly symbolic prophetic section of the book is not surprising. In chapter 6 after the opening of the fifth seal the martyred saints ask God to avenge their deaths on the persecutors “who dwell on the earth” (v. 10). These martyred Christians are told wait “until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed” (v. 11). The phrase fellow servants and brethren is used in Revelation to describe Christians in Revelation 6:11, 19:10 and 22:9. Paul uses the same terminology in Colossians 1:7; 4:7. There is not a shred of evidence to support the idea that those martyred during the tribulation are a Jewish remnant. These are Christians of every nation (cf. Rev. 7:9, 14) who die because the church of Christ is persecuted on earth.

In Revelation 7 there are the 144,000 saints of God. Dispensationalists argue that this large group refers to literal Israel and not the New Testament church which has been raptured. This view is based on a literal understanding of verse 4: “One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed.” Although the idea of “literal whenever possible” is good, Revelation 7:4 ff. is obviously not meant to be interpreted literally. In Revelation chapter 7 God uses the imagery of the old covenant Israel’s military camp divisions (1 Chron. 4-7) to symbolize the new covenant church of God as an overcoming conquering army of Jehovah. This is evident for the following reasons. First, the book of Revelation often employs descriptions of Old Testament Israel directly to the new covenant church. The church is called a kingdom of priests (*textus receptus*—kings and priests) which is an allusion to the Old Testament identification of Israel in Exodus 19:6 (found in Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). The church of Jesus Christ is identified as the New Jerusalem—the gates of which bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The foundation of the city bears the names of the twelve apostles.

Second, we are specifically told in Revelation itself that the 144,000 are those redeemed by Jesus Christ from among men. “These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb” (Rev. 14:4). Third, the literal interpretation of Revelation 7:4ff ignores the fact that ten of the twelve tribes had disappeared in Assyria. Virtually all the ten tribes had inter-married with pagans and had long ago lost their ethnic identity. Further, “if Israel according to the flesh were meant, why should Ephraim and Dan be omitted? Surely not all the people in the tribe of Dan were lost. Not Reuben but Judah is mentioned first. Remember that our Lord Jesus Christ was of the tribe of Judah (Gn. 49:10).”⁹ Fourth, the teaching of the New Testament is that the church which is composed of

⁹ William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982 [1940]), p. 111.

both Jews and Gentiles is the true Israel of God (cf. Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6; Gal. 6:16; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:9-10). James, writing to Christians, even calls them “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (Jas. 1:1). Paul taught that all who believe in Christ are the true sons of Abraham (Rom. 4:11-17; Gal. 3:7); that the middle wall of partition has been removed by Christ; the believing Jews and Gentiles are one body (Eph. 2:14ff.). The church of Christ is one building (Eph. 2:20-22) and one bride (Eph. 5: Rev 21:9ff.). Fifth, that the 144,000 refers to all believers is proved from Revelation 9:4 where the demonic scorpions are told they can only harm those who do not have God’s seal on their forehead. Are we to believe that Jewish believers are protected while their Gentile brothers are left to perish? Of course not! The church of Jesus is definitely still on earth during the great tribulation.

2 Thessalonians 2:6-7

Another argument for the pretribulation rapture is based on 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7, “And now ye know that which restraineth, to the end that he may be revealed in his own season. For the mystery of lawlessness doth already work: only there is one that restraineth now, until he be taken out of the way” (ASV). The standard dispensationalist understanding of this passage is that the restrainer spoken of is the Holy Spirit. Pretribulationists argue that since the Holy Spirit dwells and works to restrain evil by means of the church, a removal of the Spirit entails a removal of the church. Once the church is raptured the Antichrist will be revealed.

Although this passage is a difficult one that has resulted in many different interpretations, the idea that this passage teaches the removal of the Holy Spirit is theologically impossible and totally contradicts the dispensationalist’s own interpretation of the events that are supposed to take place during the tribulation. After the rapture a Jewish remnant of 144,000 is converted to Christ. These Jews will be the greatest evangelists the world has ever seen, who bring multitudes to Christ from every nation. What is wrong with this understanding of Scripture? It places the dispensationalist in the position of either denying his own interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 or of denying the biblical teaching regarding the Holy Spirit’s role in converting sinners. The Bible teaches that no one can be converted without the regenerating and drawing power of the Holy Spirit (Ezek. 36:25-26; Jn 1:13; 3:5-8; Ac. 5:31; 11:18; 16:13-14; 1 Cor. 2:12-14; 2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:11; Tit. 3:5). Yet, pretribulationists teach that the 144,000 Jews are converted *after* the departure of the Holy Spirit. They also teach that the preaching of these converted Jews will be a hundred times more fruitful *without* the Holy Spirit than the preaching of the church *with* the Holy Spirit throughout the so-called church age. Multitudes are said to be converted to Christ from every nation during the absence of the Holy Spirit in only 1260 days! The truth is that if the Holy Spirit is removed, there would be no converts during the tribulation—not even one.

Realizing the obviously unbiblical nature of the standard view, many modern dispensationalists argue that the Holy Spirit is not taken away, “but ‘taken out of the way;’ thus the Holy Spirit will continue a divine activity to the end-time, though not as a restrainer of evil

through the church.”¹⁰ In other words the Holy Spirit doesn’t go away to heaven, He merely gets out of the way so that the anti-Christ can have sway over the masses. This interpretation avoids the absurdity of mass conversions without the Holy Spirit. However, it also removes 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 as a proof text for the pretribulation rapture. If the Holy Spirit doesn’t leave the scene but merely ceases to restrain the forces of evil as He had before, there is no longer any reason to suppose that this passage indicates the rapture of the church. The idea that the Holy Spirit is *dependent* on the church to restrain evil is not supported by Scripture. Further, even if the restraining power of the Holy Spirit came by means of the church, would not the massive revival throughout the earth caused by the preaching of the converted Jewish remnant also be a restraining of evil by Christ’s disciples (His church)? Dispensationalists cannot have it both ways. Therefore, this passage has nothing to do with the rapture.

Another reason that this passage should not be considered a proof text for the rapture is Paul’s teaching in the immediate context. The Thessalonians were troubled because of false teaching regarding the day of Christ. Many within the church believed that the day of the Lord had already taken place. Paul wants to remove any misconceptions regarding this coming day by pointing out that certain events must take place before this coming. Paul says there must first be a falling away or rebellion and the man of sin must be revealed. Then he gives certain details regarding the man of sin and when these things will occur. What is particularly interesting regarding this section of Scripture is that it proves that the Thessalonians who had previously received instructions by Paul did not know anything about a pretribulation rapture. If they had been taught such a doctrine then they would have known that the day of the Lord could not have taken place, for the rapture had not yet occurred. Furthermore, it proves that Paul did not believe in a pretribulation rapture (or that he was negligent in his instructions), for Paul says nothing about a rapture that is to occur seven years before the day of the Lord. If Paul believed in pretribulation rapture one would expect him to say: “Don’t be deceived that the day of the Christ has already come, brethren. It can only come after you have been raptured to heaven. The fact that you are still on earth is proof positive that it had not yet occurred.” Paul does not tell the Thessalonian brothers to look for the rapture but to look for an apostasy (or rebellion) and the man of sin. If the pretribulation rapture theory were true, why would Paul instruct these Christians to look for events that are supposed to happen during the tribulation, when the church is not supposed to be around? It is obvious that Paul presupposes that the church will indeed be present on earth during the great tribulation.

1 Thessalonians 5:9

One of the most popular arguments for the pretribulation rapture is based on 1 Thessalonians 5:9, “For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is argued that the great tribulation is an unprecedented time of God’s wrath

¹⁰ E. Schuyler English, chairman of the editorial revision committee, *The New Scofield Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1967 [1989]), p. 1460, footnote 1.

falling upon the *whole* world. Since believers are specifically told that they are not appointed to wrath, it is only logical to conclude that the church will be removed from the earth *before* God's wrath is poured out. This removal is the rapture of the saints. This argument for the rapture is fallacious for a number of reasons. First, it assumes that the wrath spoken of in verse 9 is the wrath poured out during the tribulation. The context of chapter 5 however makes it abundantly clear that the wrath spoken of in verse 5 is not the wrath of the tribulation but the wrath that occurs at the second coming of Christ—the day of the Lord (cf. 1 Th. 5:1-3).

Second, it assumes that the only method at God's disposal for protecting the church from His wrath is a total removal from the earth. An examination of the wrath of God in both testaments reveals that the pretribulationist assumption is totally unwarranted. When God poured out His wrath upon Egypt, He spared the people of Israel (cf. Ex. 8:22-23; 9:4-6, 11, 26; 10:23; 11:7; 12:23; 14:28-29) without first removing them out of the land. The prophet Isaiah says explicitly that God can judge the earth without harming His own covenant people who remain on earth. "Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourself, as it were, for a little moment, until the indignation is past. For behold, the LORD comes out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; the earth will also disclose her blood, and will no more cover her slain" (Isa. 26:20-21).

The nail in the coffin to the pretribulationist use of 1 Thessalonians 5:9 comes from the book of Revelation which shows that God's people are protected from His wrath during the tribulation. In Revelation 6:16 it is the heathen that ask the mountains and rocks to protect them from the wrath of the lamb. A wrath that falls as a response to the prayers of persecuted and martyred saints (Rev. 6:9-11). After the fifth trumpet is sounded, the locusts of destruction are ordered by God only to harm "those men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads" (Rev. 9:4). God's saints are specifically protected from harm. In Revelation 9:20-21 we are told that these plagues were directed to wicked men. Revelation 14:9-10 says that those who are to experience God's wrath and undiluted indignation are those who receive the mark of the beast; who worship the beast and his image. This obviously excluded Christians. Revelation 16:1-2 says that God's wrath (the first bowl) is only to be poured out on the worshipers of the beast, who have his mark. Once again believers are excluded. In 16:9 and 11 those who receive God's plagues are identified as blasphemers who refuse to repent. A careful reading of Revelation demonstrates that although God's people experience persecution, death and harm at the hands of wicked men they are carefully and lovingly excluded from every act of God's wrath. God's wrath only falls upon those who are the enemies of Christ and His church. The wrath that falls on the wicked is God's loving response to the prayers of His saints. Does the church need to be completely removed from the earth to be spared from God's wrath, as pretribulationists assert? The Scriptures answer that question with an emphatic "no!"

The “Children in the Millennium” Argument

One argument that is used by both pre and mid-tribulationists is based on the necessity of human beings entering the millennium with natural, non-glorified bodies. Premillennialists teach that during the millennium people with glorified bodies will dwell side by side with people who have not yet been glorified. The millennium must begin with people who are converted after the rapture yet before the second coming so that procreation can occur during the millennium. Natural bodies and procreation are necessary because descendants are needed who will rebel against Christ at the end of His earthly reign. If the rapture and second coming occur at the same time, then all believers would have glorified bodies and there would be no natural descendants who could rebel. Christians with glorified bodies cannot rebel because one aspect of glorification is losing the ability to commit sin.

This argument may have an effect upon historic premillennialists who believe in a literal one thousand year reign of Christ on earth that is to begin immediately after the post tribulation rapture and second coming occurs. It, however, has no effect upon those (amillennial and postmillennial) believers who reject premillennialism as unscriptural.

Because the Bible very clearly teaches in both the gospels and epistles that the second coming of Christ, the rapture, the resurrection and judgment of the righteous and the wicked are to occur on the same day (the day of the Lord) premillennialism with its separate resurrections and judgments must be rejected. Note the following passages.

Matthew 25:31-46—“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...’ Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels...’ And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Matthew 13:30—“Let both [the righteous and the wicked] grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn’” (cf. Mt. 13:47-50).

John 5:28-29—“Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the 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.”

John 6:39-40—“This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (Cf. Jn. 6:44, 54).

From these passages we learn that Christ taught a general judgment of *all* men, not just the wicked. Jesus plainly taught that there will be a general resurrection in which *all men* will be raised on the *same* day. There is nothing in the New Testament regarding a partial bodily resurrection which is followed by another bodily resurrection or 1000 years (or for the dispensationalist, 1007 years). Further, Jesus taught that the bodily resurrection of the dead and the day of judgment occur on the last day. The designation *last day* means the end of human history. It precludes another thousand years of non-glorified earthly existence.

The epistles of Peter and Paul are even more explicit in their rejection of premillennialism:

2 Thessalonians 1:6-10—“...it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed....”

For the apostle Paul, the punishment of the wicked and the reward of the righteous are to occur simultaneously, immediately following the second coming of Christ. There is nothing here teaching separate comings. There is nothing about a secret rapture. There is no 7 year, 1,000 year or 1,007 year gap between the glorification of the saints and the destruction of the wicked. According to Paul they occur the *same day* (“that Day”), the day Christ returns. Further, note that Christ comes from heaven to crush His enemies and judge the world. Jesus does not crush the wicked from His earthly throne in Jerusalem, as premillennialists assert. Note also that there are no wicked people left to populate the earth during the millennium, and the saints will all have glorified bodies.

1 Corinthians 15:23-26, 50-54—“But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming. *Then comes the end*.... The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.... Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, 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.... Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’”

According to Paul, the second coming of Christ and the glorification of the saints will occur *immediately* prior to the final state. Christ returns, the saints receive immortal, glorified bodies “then comes the end.” (The adverb *eita*, translated *then* in “then comes the end” in the New Testament, never refers to a long period of time. It is the adverb used to denote a *short*

period of time.) There is no place in Paul's understanding of the second coming to put a 1,000 year reign. When Christ returns, the kingdom is delivered to the Father. Furthermore, after Christ's return, death is completely destroyed and abolished. How can there be converts in the millennium who live, have children and die, if death is abolished at the second coming?

1 Thessalonians 5:1-4, 9-10—"But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.... For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him."

Once again the apostle Paul teaches that the day of the Lord is a day of deliverance for the saints but wrath for the wicked. Paul does not tell believers, to look for a secret rapture seven years before the second coming. He points them to the second coming itself when both parties, believers and unbelievers will be dealt with. Believers are to "watch, and be sober" in preparation for the second coming (1 Th. 5:6). When Christ returns they will "live together with Him" (1 Th. 5:10); but, unbelievers will receive God's wrath—sudden destruction will come upon them (1 Th. 5:3). If Christians are to be secretly raptured away from the earth seven years before Christ's second coming, then why do the Scriptures repeatedly teach that Christians are to remain on earth until the revelation of Christ? The resurrection of the righteous and the wicked and the final judgment both occur on *the same day*, the day of the Lord (Mt. 13:47-50; 25:31-34, 41; Jn. 5:28-29; 6:3-40, 44, 54; Rom. 2:5-8, 16; 1 Th. 5:1-4, 9-10, etc.).

2 Peter 3:4-10—"Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation'.... But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.... But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat...."

Peter teaches that the second coming, the day of judgment and the beginning of the final state occur contemporaneously. Like Paul, Peter says that these events occur on the "the day of the Lord." According to premillennialism Christ does not *come* on the day of judgment, because He is already on earth ruling from Jerusalem. But Peter says that when Christ returns, the judgment occurs and then the heavens and the earth are destroyed. The premillennialist believes that Christ will return and rule on earth for 1,000 years before the elements are destroyed. Thus Peter's account of Christ's coming totally contradicts premillennial doctrine.¹¹

¹¹ Premillennialists of course will point to Revelation 20 and argue that it conclusively proves premillennialism. To our premillennial brothers we ask: "What makes more sense as a method of interpretation? Should we take one passage in an apocalyptic book that is full of non-literal symbolism, literally as a chronology of the second coming (and so on), even though this interpretation *contradicts* several clear passages in the gospels and epistles? Or, should

The “Translation vs. Return” Argument

Another pretribulationist argument is based on the difference between the translation of the saints at the rapture and the return of Christ to earth to establish His millennial kingdom. It is argued that the rapture of the saints is a catching away up into the air. However, the return of Christ is a returning to earth. Therefore, since the rapture and second coming describe two very different activities (one is a catching up while the other is a going down) they must be two separate events separated by time. Pretribulationists also argue that a clear demarcation exists between the rapture and second coming on the basis that at the rapture no judgment occurs but at the second coming there is a judgment. Once again this is supposed to prove that the rapture and second coming are two separate events that take place at different times (a seven-year difference).

These pretribulationist arguments should be rejected for the following reasons. The idea that the difference between the translation of the saints and the return of Christ proves the pretribulation rapture theory is an argument begging the question. In other words it assumes what it sets out to prove. It is true that the rapture and the return to earth are not exactly the same events. This point, however, tells us nothing regarding the time sequence of these events. Jesus could meet the saints in the air as He returns to earth. There is no scriptural reason to assume a seven year gap between the rapture and return. Given the passages discussed in our consideration of premillennialism, the rapture, second coming, and general judgment all occur on the same day. The saints meet Christ in the air and return to earth with Him.

What about the argument that at the rapture no judgment takes place but at the second coming there is a judgment? As noted above there is no biblical reason to take events such as the rapture, second coming and judgment that all are to occur *the same day* and insert several years between them. What is particularly devastating to the pretribulationist is the fact that when Paul discuss the second coming and gives us the most explicit passage in the New Testament on the rapture he connects Christ’s descent with both the rapture and the judgment of the wicked. “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so

we interpret Revelation 20 in light of the clear teaching we find in the rest of the New Testament?” Obviously we should follow the latter procedure. Revelation 20 is not a description of a literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth after the second coming. It rather summarizes the period from Christ’s first advent to the second advent. Jesus comes to earth and by His death and resurrection binds Satan so that the gospel can go forth to all nations. Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords rules at the right hand of God. The saints participate in this rule. The first resurrection is not a bodily resurrection but refers to regeneration (cf. Jn. 5:24-25; 3:14; Eph. 2:5-6; Col. 2:13-14). In Revelation 20 John describes the spiritual reign of the church during the millennium (the one thousand years represent a very long period of time between the first and second coming of Christ). The church rules from heaven in the sense that Christians positionally are in Christ seated on the throne with Him in heaven (cf. Eph. 2:6; Rev. 3:21). The church receives all its authority from Christ who rules from heaven, yet Christians must apply His word to every area of life on earth. Christians rule with Christ and reign over the world by preaching the gospel, teaching and discipling the nations. In understanding Revelation 20 we must let Scripture interpret Scripture. One can only understand Revelation 20 if he uses the clear historical and didactic portions of Scripture to understand John’s symbolic language.

God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. 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. 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.... For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief" (1 Th. 4:13-17; 5:2-4). Note that Paul connects the second coming, the rapture and the destruction of the wicked all together. He presents them as coterminous and not separated by seven years. Everything will take place on that "Day" (5:4)—the day of the Lord. Furthermore, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 explicitly teaches that the rapture is a *public* event, not secret: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a *shout*, with the *voice* of an archangel, and with the *trumpet* of God."

Oswald T. Allis exposes the fallacious manner in which pretribulationists make subtle distinctions in Paul's terminology which the apostle himself never intended. He writes, "The question which confronts us is this. If the distinction between the rapture and the appearing is of as great a moment as dispensationalists assert, how are we to explain Paul's failure to distinguish clearly between them? And the failure of other writers, Peter, James and John, to do the same? Paul was a logician. He was able to draw sharp distinctions. If he had wanted, or regarded it important, to distinguish between these events, he could have done so very easily. Why did he use language which dispensationalists must admit to be confusing? Feinburg [a noted dispensationalist scholar] made the following surprising statement regarding the three words we have been discussing: 'We conclude, then, that from a study of the Greek words themselves the distinctions between the coming of the Lord for His saints and with His saints is not to be gleaned' (*Premillennialism or Amillennialism?* p. 207). Such an admission raises the question whether the distinction itself is valid. If the distinction is of importance, Paul's ambiguous language is, we may say it reverently, inexcusable. If the distinction is negligible, accuracy of statement would be quite unnecessary. We conclude, therefore, that the language of the New Testament and especially of Paul not merely fails to prove the distinction insisted on by dispensationalists but rather by its very ambiguity indicates clearly and unmistakably that no such distinction exists."¹²

¹² Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), pp. 184-185. "Titus 2:13 is often used to support this view, but it is not speaking of the two comings of Christ, but of one event, 'the blessed hope and glorious appearing our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.' This is one event because one article ('the') covers the two nouns ('hope' and 'appearing') joined by 'and' (and so it is in the original Greek)" (W. Fred Rice, "The Not-So-Secret Rapture," in *New Horizons* [Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, July 1999], p. 19).

The “No Signs Verses Many Signs” Argument

A popular pretribulationist argument is based on the idea that passages which discuss Christ’s second coming indicate that many signs will proceed the second coming, while passages that discuss the rapture mention no signs. Feinberg writes, “In Matthew 24:32-51 our Lord makes it clear that these signs are to alert the believers that His coming is near: ‘Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door’ (Matt. 24:33). On the other hand, there is no mention of any signs or events that precede the Rapture of the church in *any* of the Rapture passages. The point seems to be that the believer prior to this event is to look, not for some sign, but the Lord from heaven. If the Rapture was a part of the complex of events that make up the Second Advent, and not distinct from it, then we would expect that there would be a mention of signs or events in at least one passage.”¹³ In other words you can’t have signs and no signs at the same time. Therefore, the rapture and second coming must occur at different times.

The “signs verses no signs” argument should be rejected for a number of reasons. First, the idea that certain signs will precede the second coming of Christ is based on an incorrect interpretation of Matthew 24. The signs of Matthew 24:6-33 (wars, famines, pestilence, earthquakes, false prophets, etc.) are signs not of the second coming but of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the armies of Titus. This is indicated by the context (Mt. 23), the disciples’ question (Mt. 24:3), the time indicator (Mt. 24:34) and the parallel passage in Luke 21:20. After noting the signs Jesus said, “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass till all these things take place” (Mt. 24:34). Kik writes, “Viewing what is obvious from this sentence, one would judge that everything mentioned in the previous verses were to be fulfilled before the contemporary generation would pass away. That is certainly the evident meaning, and one that may be taken as literal. The generation living at the time of Christ would not pass away until all things he had mentioned hereto were manifested.”¹⁴

Second, passages which are used as proof texts for no signs before the rapture are better interpreted as referring to the second coming itself and not just the rapture. A favorite passage for pretribulationists is 1 Thessalonians 5:2 which says, “the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.” The coming as a thief in the night is interpreted to mean that the rapture comes secretly. That is, it is a surprise. There are no signs that precede it. The problem with such a view is: 1.) The phrase “day of the Lord” is consistently used in the New Testament to refer to the day of judgment which occurs at the second coming; and, 2.) The context of 1 Thessalonians 5:2 clearly indicates that the day of the Lord is a day when the enemies of God will be destroyed (cf. 1 Th. 5:3). Christians are told to watch and live sober because they know the day of judgment is coming (1 Th. 5:6ff.). The “signs vs. no signs” argument simply has no exegetical support.

¹³ Paul D. Feinberg, “The Case for The Pretribulation Rapture Position,” in Ben Chapman ed., *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books, 1984), p. 80.

¹⁴ J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), pp. 60-61.

Conclusion

Although the pretribulation rapture theory is very popular today, given arguments that are offered in support of this doctrine we must declare pretribulationism to be contrary to the clear teachings of Scripture. Simply put, there is not one shred of evidence that can be found in the Bible to support the pretribulation rapture. The typical pretribulation arguments offered reveal a pattern: of imposing one's presuppositions onto a text without any exegetical justification whatsoever; of finding subtle meaning between words and/or phrases that were never intended by the author; of spiritualizing or ignoring passages that contradict the pretribulation paradigm; and, of imposing pretribulationism upon passages that actually teach the unity of the eschatological complex (i.e., the rapture, second coming, general resurrection, and general judgment all occur on the same day—the day of the Lord). It is our hope and prayer that professing Christians would cast off this escapist fantasy and return to the task of personal sanctification and godly dominion.

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[HOME PAGE](#)