

OUT OF GREAT TRIBULATION :
A DEFENSE OF THE PRETRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE

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“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.”

-I Thessalonians 4:15-18

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INTRODUCTION

The rapture of the Church is an important subdoctrine of Christian eschatology that warrants investigation and discussion. A correct perspective of the rapture is essential because one's viewpoint can greatly affect and influence his outlook on life and consequent hope for the future. As Townsend argues, "Equally sincere and devout students of the prophetic Scriptures hold differing views on the time of the rapture of the church in relation to the tribulation. This is due in large measure to the fact that no verse of Scripture specifically states that relationship."¹ Because of this fact, an investigation of key passages and principles from the Scriptures is necessary. The purpose of this paper is to examine and defend the concept of a pretribulational rapture.² This will be accomplished first by promulgating the essential bases of such an idea. Secondly, key biblical passages will be explicated followed by discussion regarding key biblical principles. Finally, answers will be offered to common objections brought against pretribulationalism. In the words of Henry Thiessen, "It is not necessary to examine each of the wrong conceptions listed [posttribulationalism, midtribulationalism]; an investigation of the positive teaching of the Word will serve to establish the truth. The weight of the evidence seems to be that the church will not pass through the tribulation."³ May the evidence revealed in this

¹Jeffrey Townsend, "The Rapture in Revelation 3:10," in Bibliotheca Sacra (July-September 1980), 252.

²There are several different views concerning the rapture of the Church. As far as the nature of the rapture is concerned, the partial rapture theory argues that only dedicated Christians will be raptured. The rest will be left to suffer in the judgments of the Tribulation. This particular theory is so exegetically weak that it need not even be mentioned in this paper. The remaining rapture theories deal with the actual time of the rapture and will be the main focus of this paper. Pretribulationalism, which this paper seeks to establish, argues that the Church will be raptured prior to the Tribulation. Midtribulationalism maintains that the Church will be raptured at the midpoint of the Tribulation. Posttribulationalism equates the rapture with the second advent and thus places it at the end of the Tribulation.

It is assumed in this paper that the Tribulation is a seven-year period based upon a literal, futuristic interpretation of Daniel's 70th week (Daniel 9:27). The "he" of verse 27 is interpreted as the "Antichrist," not the Messiah as some assert. Some posttribulationalists argue for a rapture following a 3 1/2 year Tribulation, applying a historic interpretation to the seventieth week of Daniel. Such an interpretation, however, is exegetically feeble and therefore rejected.

³Henry Thiessen, Lectures in Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 370.

thesis encourage the believer to watch and wait for that “blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.”⁴

⁴Titus 2:13.

CHAPTER 1

ESSENTIAL BASES OF PRETRIBULATIONALISM

Pretribulationalism rests essentially upon two major premises. The first, and most important according to Pentecost, is “the literal method of interpretation of the Scriptures.”⁵ To properly understand this premise, one must consider the dispute that exists between amillennialism, postmillennialism, and premillennialism.⁶ At the center of this controversy is the method of Scriptural interpretation--literal vs. allegorical. Oswald T. Allis, a leading amillennialist, argues “The question of literal versus figurative interpretation is, therefore, one which has to be faced at the very outset.”⁷ Allis, as well as other “anti-premillennialists” have even admitted that if the literal method of interpretation is the right hermeneutic, then premillennialism is the correct viewpoint. “Thus, we can see that our doctrine of the premillennial return of Christ to institute a literal kingdom is the outcome of the literal method of interpretation of the Old Testament promises and prophecies.”⁸ Since all three rapture theories (pre-, post-, and midtribulationalism) fall under the literal idea of premillennialism, it only makes sense that the literal method of interpretation would extend to each of them in order to maintain hermeneutical consistency. Unfortunately, this is not the case. For example,

The posttribulationalist must either interpret the book of Revelation historically, which is basically a spiritualizing method, or else treat it as yet future, but spiritualize away the literalness of the events in an attempt to harmonize these events with other Scriptures in light of his interpretation. Either interpretation violates the principle of literal interpretation.⁹

The midtribulationalist, on the other hand, seems to literally apply the last half of the Tribulation but spiritualize the first half in order to permit the Church’s involvement. This too, is

⁵J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), 193.

⁶According to Ryrie, amillennialism is the “view that holds that there will be no Millennium before the end of the world and teaches a parallel development of good and evil until the end.” Postmillennialism is the idea that “the kingdom is now being extended in the world by preaching the Gospel so that the world will be Christianized for a millennial time after which Christ will return.” Premillennialism suggests that “the second coming of Christ will be followed by the establishing of His kingdom on earth for 1,000 years.” The various rapture positions (pre, post, mid) are subdoctrines that fall under premillennialism. See Charles Ryrie, Basic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1981), 533, 537.

⁷Oswald T. Allis, Prophecy and the Church (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1945), 17.

⁸Pentecost, 194.

⁹Ibid.

inconsistency at its most basic level. Once again, Pentecost sums things up nicely. “The position [midtribulationism] must depend, to a certain extent, on the spiritualizing method of interpretation. This is particularly evident in the explanation of the portions of Scripture dealing with the first half of the tribulation period.”¹⁰ It is simply illogical to apply one method of interpretation to establish the concept of premillennialism and another method to outline the rapture promises. Ryrie argues, “If one does not employ normal interpretation, then objectivity is lost to the extent that he does not use it consistently. Switching the hermeneutical base from literal to allegorical or to semiallegorical or to theological inevitably results in different, inconsistent, and often contradictory interpretations.”¹¹ The literal method of Scripture interpretation is the foundation of pretribulationism, and as Pentecost vehemently asserts, “The literal method of interpretation consistently employed, can lead to no other conclusion than that the church will be raptured before the seventieth week.”¹²

Another important basis upon which pretribulationism rests is dispensational theology. Dispensationalism “emphasizes the differences in various periods of human history brought about through the progressive revelation of God’s salvation program.” In other words, it is a systematic approach to the Scriptures. “The crucial distinction between dispensational and non-dispensational interpretations of Scripture centers on the meaning of Israel and the church.”¹³ Non-dispensationalists generally view the church as a “new Israel” or “spiritual Israel.” In other words, Old Testament prophecies made to Israel are spiritually applied to the Church. God is finished with Israel as a nation. Dispensationalists, on the other hand, “affirm that Israel retains its Old Testament meaning as an ethnic people throughout the New Testament.”¹⁴ It is the author’s opinion that the dispensational distinction between Israel and the Church is clearly affirmed in Scripture (cf. Romans 9-11). Moreover, it is a natural outgrowth of the literal method of interpretation. The pretribulationist recognizes this plain distinction. Pentecost explains:

¹⁰Ibid., 180.

¹¹Ryrie, 113.

¹²Pentecost, 194.

¹³ Robert Saucy, The Case For Progressive Dispensationalism (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan., 1993), 187.

¹⁴Ibid., 188.

The Church and Israel are two distinct groups with whom God has a divine plan. The church is a mystery, unrevealed in the Old Testament. This present mystery age intervenes within the program of God for Israel because of Israel's rejection of the Messiah at His first advent. This mystery program must be completed before God can resume His program with Israel and bring it to completion. These considerations all arise from the literal method of interpretation.¹⁵

Other rapture views deny or weaken the dispensational distinction by placing the Church in the Tribulation which is otherwise noted as "the time of Jacob's trouble [the Tribulation]."¹⁶

¹⁵Pentecost, 193.

¹⁶Jeremiah 30:7.

CHAPTER 2

KEY BIBLICAL PASSAGES

Having established a foundation for pretribulationism, it is only appropriate to examine key biblical passages which support this doctrine.

I Thessalonians

Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians has much to say about the issue at hand. The most popular passage, of course, is found in I Thessalonians 4:13-18. The event described here includes a return of Christ in the air (not to the earth as the Second Coming is described in Zechariah 14:1-5 and Revelation 19:11-21), a resurrection of the dead in Christ, a rapture of living believers, and a reunion with those who have died in Christ. Paul penned these verses in order to clarify a misunderstanding that the Thessalonians embraced concerning the relationship between the resurrection and the saints who were asleep in Christ to the rapture. The question is this: Does the death of a believer before the Lord comes cause him to lose all hope of sharing in the glorious reign of Christ? Paul's answer is a reassuring affirmation that the living at the time of the rapture have no advantage over those believers who have died. Those who sleep will be raised to reign with those who remain. Both groups will share in the kingdom. If Paul and the Thessalonians were speaking of a rapture at the end of the Tribulation, it seems illogical that they would sorrow over believers who were fortunate enough to die and miss the horrible judgments that await these last years.

If the Thessalonians had believed that the church would be going through the seventieth week [the Tribulation] they would have rejoiced that some of their brethren had missed the period of suffering and were with the Lord without experiencing the outpouring of wrath. If the church were going through the tribulation it would be better to be with the Lord than to have to await the events of the seventieth week. They would be praising the Lord that their brethren were spared these events instead of feeling that those had missed some of the Lord's blessings. These Christians evidently believed that the church would not go through the seventieth week and in their anticipation of the return of Christ mourned for their brethren, whom they thought had missed the blessing of this event.¹⁷

Proponents of posttribulationism and midtribulationism also recognize that this passage is referring to a rapture of believers. In fact, the Greek verb “αρπαγησομεθα” which appears in verse 7 is a second future passive indicative of αρπαζω which means “to seize or carry off.” This verb is very similar in meaning to the Latin verb *rapio* which appears in the Vulgate. It is

¹⁷Pentecost, 209.

from this word that we get the term “rapture.” Rapture simply means “a catching or seizing away.” The disagreement, however, involves the time of the rapture. Posttribulationists argue that Paul is describing an event at the end of the Tribulation. Midtribulationists equate the “trump of God” in verse 16 with the last trumpet judgment in Revelation 11:15-19 and thus assert that the Rapture occurs at the midpoint of the Tribulation. As previously mentioned, the Thessalonians sorrow seems ridiculous if they believe Christians will have to suffer in this time of trouble.

There are other key verses in this epistle which shed light on the aforementioned passage. For example, I Thessalonians 1:10 says that Jesus has “delivered us from the wrath to come.” This phrase is most obviously a reference to the Tribulation. The same term (wrath) is used in Revelation 6:16 to describe this period. For a Christian to be delivered from this wrath would indicate a pretribulation rapture. Wiersbe argues that Paul “is careful to point out that the Church will NOT share in that tribulation.”¹⁸ A similar promise of deliverance from wrath appears in I Thessalonians 5:9.

Another key verse from this epistle that supports a pretribulation rapture is found in 5:3. In fact, the evidence is seen in the simple phrase “they shall say” which is a translation the Greek verb “λεγωσιν,” a present active subjunctive (future connotation). It is interesting to note that here Paul moves from speaking in the second person to the third person. Previously, he had utilized the second person, including himself and the Thessalonians (believers) in the events of the Rapture (see 4:13-5:2). Now, however, the apostle makes reference to “them” (unbelievers), excluding himself and the Thessalonians. This is subtle evidence for a pre-tribulation rapture. Believers will have no part in the horrific judgments of the Day of the Lord, for “sudden destruction cometh upon *them*.”¹⁹

Also of notable interest is the phrase “But of” (περι δε) which begins I Thessalonians 5. Throughout the writings of Paul, this phrase is used to introduce a completely new and contrasting subject (cf. I Corinthians 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1,12, and I Thessalonians 4:9). Ryrie points out, “Granted, the posttribulationists’ contention that the same subject is being discussed

¹⁸Warren Wiersbe, Expository Outlines on the New Testament (Covington, KY: Calvary Book Room, 1965), 338.

¹⁹I Thessalonians 5:3 [emphasis mine].

in 4:13-18 and 5:1-11 might be supported by the use of “δε” alone, but it is completely nullified by the use of “περι δε.” So the pretribulationists’ use of the passage is strongly supported exegetically.”²⁰ The Rapture is not a part of the “Day of the Lord” (Tribulation) and therefore must be pretribulationist.

I Corinthians 15:51-58

In his lengthy discussion of the doctrine of the resurrection, Paul briefly describes the rapture in I Corinthians 15:51-58. Once again, the event is clearly described but the time at which the event occurs in relation to the Tribulation is vague. Therefore, proponents of all rapture views claim this verse. The key, however, lies in verse 51 with the word “mystery.” The Scriptural definition of “mystery” is clearly explained by Paul in Romans 16:25:26. A Scriptural “mystery” is something unknown in ages past but now made manifest. Wiersbe adds, “A mystery in the NT is a truth understood only by the ‘family,’ hidden in ages past, but now made known by the Spirit.”²¹ The fact that Paul calls the event he is about to describe (the rapture in conjunction with the resurrection of those dead in Christ) a mystery indicates that it must be before the Tribulation, for according to Daniel 12:1-3, a posttribulationist resurrection was fully understood in the Old Testament. If the events of I Corinthians 15:51-58 were after or during the Tribulation, then they would not be a mystery in the biblical sense of the word. The fact that the Church is a biblical mystery (Ephesians 3:3-6) indicates that the close of the Church Age in conjunction with the rapture of the Church is likewise a mystery.

Revelation 3:10

No verse in all of Scripture specifically and clearly states the time of the Rapture, “but Revelation 3:10 comes close.”²² Although it comes close, it is still “probably the most debated verse in the whole discussion about the time of the Church’s rapture.”²³ In this verse, the Church at Philadelphia is promised protection from the hour of testing that will come upon the earth. The posttribulationist/pretribulationist debate over this verse concerns the nature of the protection

²⁰Ryrie, 486.

²¹Wiersbe, 254.

²²Townsend, 252.

²³Robert Gundry, The Church and the Tribulation (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 54.

that is promised. Is the Church promised protection *outside* the hour of testing (pretribulationism) or protection *in* the hour of testing (posttribulationism)? In considering this question, two phrases are of notable importance. First of all, one must consider the implications of the verb “keep” (τηρεω) in conjunction with the preposition “from” (εκ). The Greek verb “τηρεω” is often translated “keep,” but the idea conveyed is one of preservation and protection especially since great trials are in view in the Tribulation period. “Whatever the promise involves, its great fruit will be the genuine preservation and protection of the church during the hour of testing.”²⁴ Such a fact presents problems for posttribulationism because the book of Revelation presents a time of great persecution and martyrdom for the saints of that time period. Posttribulationists such as Gundry identify these saints as members of the Church.²⁵ However, if thousands of Christians are going to die under the reign of Antichrist, can it possibly be said that God has preserved them through the Tribulation? No logical sense is involved. Townsend argues, “It must be questioned whether this kind of ‘preservation’ would be of any comfort and encouragement to the persecuted Philadelphians. In effect the posttribulation scheme denies the meaning of preservation in τηρεω.”²⁶

The preposition “εκ,” however, is the focal point as to whether this verse provides preservation outside or inside the hour of testing. According to A.T. Robertson, the preposition itself basically means “out of, from within.”²⁷ Gundry argues that the preposition means “out from within” in this passage. In other words, the Church will be in the Tribulation.²⁸ However, as Townsend clearly shows, sufficient evidence exists throughout history as well as the New Testament that the meaning and usage of “εκ” may denote a position outside its object with no thought of prior existence within the object or of emergence from the object.²⁹ In fact, when

²⁴Townsend, 253.

²⁵Gundry, 80.

²⁶Townsend, 253.

²⁷A.T. Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research, 4th ed. (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1923), 596.

²⁸Gundry, 55-56.

²⁹Townsend, 254-259.

comparing this verse with other NT passages that utilize the same phrase (e.g. John 17:15 where the use of “τηρω εϰ” demands the idea of preservation *outside* the evil one), this meaning seems far more likely. As a result, Townsend concludes:

Revelation 3:10 may then be paraphrased, “Because you have held fast the word which tells of my perseverance, I also will preserve you in a position outside the hour of testing . . .” This paraphrase points up an important nuance of meaning that must be recognized. Τηρω εϰ in Revelation 3:10 does not describe the rapture as such. Instead it describes the position and status of the rapture, not the rapture itself. Revelation 3:10 does not state directly how the church will be preserved outside the hour of testing. However, the remainder of the verse indicates that the proper logical deduction is preservation by means of a pretribulational rapture of the church.³⁰

Another phrase of equal importance in this verse is “hour of testing” (της ωρας του περιρασμου). The preservation promised is in reference to a specific period of time. Such is indicated by the presence of the definite article. The purpose of this hour is to test the earth. This hour is none other than the Tribulation spoken of in passages such as Deuteronomy 4:26-31; Isaiah 13:6-13; 17:4-11; Jeremiah 30:4-11; Ezekiel 20:33-38; Daniel 9:27; 12:1; Zechariah 14:1-4; Matthew 24:9-31 and graphically portrayed in Revelation 6-18. In other words, the Church at Philadelphia is promised exemption from the Tribulation. This is only possible by way of a pretribulational rapture, for as Ryrie asserts, “the only way to escape worldwide trouble is not to be on the earth.”³¹

Some opponents of posttribulationalism have even attempted to get around the aforesaid argument by asserting that the promise was only to the church at Philadelphia. However, this weak line of reasoning is easily rebuked by pointing to 3:13. Anyone who has an ear is encouraged to hear what the Spirit has to say to the Churches. Therefore, each of the seven messages is universally applicable to churches of all ages despite the fact that it was written to a specific church in history which represents a specific period in church history. In light of all these considerations, “the pretribulation rapture is found to be a proper logical deduction from the data found in Revelation 3:10.”³²

II Thessalonians 2:5-12

³⁰Ibid., 259.

³¹Ryrie, 484.

³²Townsend, 263.

II Thessalonians 2:5-12 is of notable importance to pretribulationism even though it makes no mention of the rapture. Here, Paul explains that the man of sin (Antichrist) will not come until the restrainer is taken out of the way. This “restrainer,” however, is not identified. Some argue that it refers to human government or law. This seems illogical because Antichrist will come to power by way of human government and exert his rule by unifying all human government into one world order of martial law. These interpretations will not suffice, “for they will all continue in a measure after the manifestation of the evil one.”³³ The more logical viewpoint is to identify the restrainer as the Holy Spirit. “As the Holy Spirit strove with men in the antediluvian age [term denoting time period before the Flood] (Gen. 6:3), so he strives now against the full development of lawlessness. But as he then ceased striving with men, so he will again cease striving with them. This he will do when he is taken out of the way.”³⁴ It is true that the “restrainer” is referred to in the neuter in verse 6 instead of the masculine of verse 7. This, however, does not rule out the possibility of a person--the Holy Spirit. Throughout the New Testament the Holy Spirit is spoken of in the neuter because πνευμα (spirit) is a neuter word. Besides, according to the principle of attraction in Greek syntax, the masculine of verse 7 overrides the neuter of verse 6 and indicates the personal nature of the restrainer.

Having established that the “restrainer” is the Holy Spirit, one must remember that the Holy Spirit permanently indwells the life of each and every follower of Christ. The only way that He can be taken out of the way is if the Church is removed from the scene. Because the Spirit of God is omnipresent, the removal must refer to one of ministry rather than actual presence. As Thiessen argues, “It is easy to see that when his interference is withdrawn, wickedness will develop rapidly and the lawless one will appear among men. The Church is an instrument used by the Spirit in the restraining of evil. With the rapture, not a single believer will be left, and the Spirit’s ministry of restraining will cease.”³⁵ Of course, the Holy Spirit will continue to work in the Tribulation much like He did in the Old Testament, but “His hindering ministry through the

³³Pentecost, 205.

³⁴Thiessen, 374.

³⁵Ibid., 374-375.

Body of Christ will end. This will give Satan free course to fill the cup of iniquity to the full.”³⁶ All in all, the plain truth of this passage is complete nonsense apart from a pretribulation rapture of the Church.

Revelation 5:9-10

The final passage to be discussed is of little importance to many scholars because it involves a textual question. However, an investigation is warranted. In Revelation 5:9-10, the twenty-four elders sing a song to the Lamb praising Him for His work of redemption. According to the Authorized King James Version which is translated from the Greek Textus Receptus, the elders are singing in the first person as is indicated by the presence of the pronouns “us” and “we.” Modern versions (NIV, NAS, NLT, *et al.*), however, who follow the United Bible Societies Greek Text omit “us” in verse 9 and utilize the third person pronouns “them” and “they” in verse 10. The manuscript evidence for the omission of “us” (ημᾶς) is weak. However, the third person pronouns “them” (αὐτοὺς) and “they” (βασιλευσουσιν) are overwhelmingly supported in verse 10. Therefore, Bruce Metzger automatically accepts the omission in verse 9 and the third person pronouns in verse 10.³⁷ However, it makes more sense to the author to follow the manuscripts that are consistent throughout. All manuscripts include the first person pronoun in verse 9 except two. On the other hand, the majority of manuscript evidence supports the inclusion of the third person in verse 10.³⁸ First person in verse 9 and third person in verse 10 is nonsense. Metzger fails to recognize the fact that more manuscripts read like the Authorized Version as opposed to modern English version. The rest of the manuscript evidence is inconsistent, reading like the Authorized Version in verse 9 and modern versions in verse 10. It makes better sense to the author to follow the group of manuscripts that is most consistent. Therefore, the reading as contained in the Authorized Version seems far more acceptable.

What does all of this have to do with the idea of the rapture? Walvoord argues,

If the text of the Authorized Version is correct, the twenty-four elders in their new song declare that God has redeemed them by His blood out of every kindred, tongue, people, and nation and

³⁶Wiersbe, 352.

³⁷Bruce Metzger, A Textual Commentary On the Greek New Testament 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, Germany: United Bible Societies, 1994), 666-667.

³⁸Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce Metzger (4th Edition), The Greek New Testament (Germany: United Bible Societies, 1994), 843-844.

has made them kings and priests. If the twenty-four elders are actually redeemed by the blood of Christ, it is clear that they could not be angels [as some assert] but must be redeemed men.³⁹

Seeing as they are redeemed men, they must be, as Walvoord terms, “representatives of the church, the Body of Christ.”⁴⁰ If representatives of the redeemed are praising God for their redemption, then the redeemed must be present in heaven at the time of the song. The time, of course, is just prior to the unleashing of the seal judgments (the Tribulation) and the Church is in heaven, having been raptured from the earth.

Because this passage involves a textual problem, most posttribulationists and midtribulationists take it with a grain of salt. However, Walvoord points out that “even if the revised text is accepted . . . though it removes absolute proof of the human origin of the twenty-four elders, it does not constitute specific proof that they are angels.⁴¹ Rather, the context yields weighty evidence that they are human representatives of the Church in heaven at the time because of the pretribulation rapture.

³⁹John Walvoord, The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), 117.

⁴⁰Ibid., 118.

⁴¹Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

KEY BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

In addition to specific verses that speak to a pretribulational rapture, there are several underlying principles that run throughout Scripture from which a pretribulational rapture can be logically deduced. Let us consider but a few.

Old Testament Typology

On the surface, typology may seem like a weak line of argument, one stemming from analogy, but as Pentecost asserts, “if a teaching is contrary to all typology it can not be a true interpretation.”⁴² The Old Testament is filled with examples of people who walked by faith and consequently, were delivered from judgment that overtook the unbelieving. Outstanding examples include Noah, Rahab, and the Israelites in Goshen during the plagues against Egypt. Perhaps the clearest illustration for the purpose of our discussion, however, is Lot. He was one righteous man living in Sodom--a cesspool of iniquity awaiting the divine judgment of Almighty God. According to Genesis 19:22, the angel hastened Lot to take his family and leave the city, “for I cannot do anything till thou be come thither.” “If the presence of one righteous man prevented the outpouring of deserved judgment on the city of Sodom, how much more will the presence of the church on earth prevent the outpouring of divine wrath until after her removal.”⁴³

With regard to these typologies, II Peter 2:5-9 becomes of immediate interest as far as pretribulationalism is concerned. In the context of mentioning Noah and Lot’s salvation from judgment, Peter writes in verse 9, “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished.” The deliverance of the righteous is a principle that runs rampant throughout Scripture. If the church were to suffer the judgments of the Tribulation, this principle would be violated.

The Nature/Purpose of the Tribulation

Another biblical principle to consider with relation to a pretribulational rapture is the actual nature and purpose of the Tribulation. A number of words are used throughout Scripture to describe its nature: wrath (Revelation 6:16-17; 11:18; 14:19; 15:1,7; 16:1,19; Zephaniah

⁴²Pentecost, 217.

⁴³Ibid., 218.

1:15,18), judgment (Revelation 14:7; 16:5-7), punishment (Isaiah 24:20-21), destruction (Joel 1:15), hour of trial (Revelation 3:10), hour of trouble (Jeremiah 30:7), etc. These words describe the period in its entirety; the whole Tribulation bears this distinction. Such a purpose has nothing to do with the church. I Thessalonians 5:9 reads, “For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ.”

As previously mentioned, Revelation 3:10 states the purpose of the hour of temptation-- “to try them that dwell upon the earth.” The phrase “them that dwell upon the earth” is used numerous times throughout Revelation.⁴⁴ Mounce writes that when this “phrase occurs . . . the enemies of the church are always in mind.”⁴⁵ The overall purpose of the Tribulation is to punish the wicked. This is further indicated by the infinitive “to try” (πειρασαι). According to Thayer’s Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament, the word when related to God means “to inflict evils upon one in order to prove his character and the steadfastness of his faith.”⁴⁶ There is no need for Christians to be tested with wrath because they have been declared righteous by virtue of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. “This period can have no reference to the church for the true church does not need to be tested to see if her faith is genuine.”⁴⁷

There is yet another purpose of the Tribulation that relates to the nation of Israel. According to Malachi 4:5-6, Elijah will come before the “great and terrible day of the Lord” to prepare the people for the advent of the King. In Mark 9:12-13, John the Baptist is identified as an initial fulfillment of this prophecy, for he came to prepare the nation of Israel for Christ’s first advent. Therefore, it can safely be concluded that the Elijah who will ultimately fulfill this prophecy in the Tribulation (cf. Revelation 11:1-19) can only have one ministry, to prepare the Jewish

⁴⁴See Revelation 6:10; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:8.

⁴⁵Robert Mounce, The Book of Revelation in *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 120.

⁴⁶Joseph Henry Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: American Book Company, 1889), 498.

⁴⁷Pentecost, 197.

remnant for Christ's second advent.⁴⁸ "It is evident that no such ministry is needed by the church since she by nature is without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but is holy and without blemish"⁴⁹

The Principle of Imminence

An additional principle to consider is the fact the Christ's coming is spoken of to believers as imminent throughout the New Testament.⁵⁰ If this were a reference to a posttribulational or midtribulational rapture, the warnings to watch and wait would seem nonsensical because certain events would be required to happen first. Thiessen asks, "How can we watch and look for his return if there is a single event that is predicted to precede Christ's return?"⁵¹ Rather, believers would be looking for that particular event. Several times, the Lord's coming is likened to a thief coming in the night (I Thessalonians 5:2; II Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3; 16:15). A thief breaks in and steals unexpectedly with no prior clues of burglary. If Christ coming for the believer is during or after the Tribulation then the metaphor of a thief is ridiculous. All the believer would have to do is calculate 3 1/2 years (midtribulationalism) or 7 years (posttribulationalism) from the initiation of the 70th Week--the signing of the peace treaty between Israel and Antichrist (Daniel 9:27). The doctrine of imminency indicates that Christ could come at any moment. Therefore, "it forbids the participation of the church in any part of the seventieth week . . . the fact that no signs are given to the church, but she, rather, is commanded to watch for Christ precludes her participation in the seventieth week."⁵²

The Absence of the Church in Revelation 4-19

⁴⁸Elijah is obviously one of the two witnesses, along with Moses, who preaches repentance and judgment to the earth-dwellers of the Tribulation. The message of these witnesses can be determined by their dress--clothed in sackcloth. Elijah and John the Baptist both preached in sackcloth (garment of hair cloth) which symbolized national mourning and repentance. It can be concluded from their dress that the two witnesses are preaching the same message as John did--repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. No such message is even remotely applicable to the church and these witnesses would not be needed if the church was around. This fact, in and of itself, is subtle evidence for a pretribulational rapture.

⁴⁹Pentecost, 198.

⁵⁰See Matthew 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:35; John 14:2-3; Acts 1:11; Philippians 3:20; Colossians 3:4; I Thessalonians 5:6; I Timothy 6:14; James 5:8; Revelation 3:3; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 9:28.

⁵¹Thiessen, 376.

⁵²Pentecost, 204.

Yet another principle to consider is that the church is nowhere mentioned in Revelation 4-19. It is in these very chapters that the Tribulation is described in great detail. This fact is notable because the term is used frequently in the first four chapters and reappears again in 22:16.

Walvoord notes:

It seems that the church as the Body of Christ is out of the picture, and saints who come to know the Lord in this period are described as saved Israelites and Gentiles, never by terms which are characterized of the church, the Body of Christ. Saints mentioned from this point on do not lose their racial background as is commonly done in referring to the church where Jew and Gentiles are on in Christ. At the beginning of chapter 4, then, the church may be considered as in heaven and not related to the events which will take place on the earth in preparation for Christ's return in power and glory.⁵³

All in all, it is safe to conclude with Thiessen, "If the church were on the earth, we would expect it to be mentioned frequently."⁵⁴

The Silence Concerning the Tribulation in the Epistles

It is also interesting to note that the Tribulation is nowhere mentioned in the epistles. C.I. Scofield writes, "Not only is there no syllable of Scripture which affirms that the church will enter the great tribulation, but neither the upper-chamber discourse, the new promise, nor the Epistles which explain that promise, *so much as mention the great tribulation*. Not once in that great body of inspired writing, written expressly for the church, is the expression found.⁵⁵ Throughout the epistles, guidance is given for dealing with persecution.⁵⁶ If the church was supposed to experience the Tribulation, why wasn't guidance and preparation given for the greatest persecution that the world will ever know? "The silence in the Epistles which would leave the church unprepared for the tribulation argues for her absence from that period altogether."⁵⁷

Other Principles

There are many other principle contained in the Scriptures from which a pretribulation rapture can be logically deduced. However, there is neither time nor space to speak to each one

⁵³Walvoord, 103.

⁵⁴Thiessen, 378.

⁵⁵C.I. Scofield, Will the Church Pass Through the Great Tribulation (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia School of the Bible, 1917), 11[emphasis mine].

⁵⁶See I Peter 2:19-25; 4:12; James 1:2-4; 5:10-11; II Thessalonians 1:4-10; II Timothy 3:10-14; 4:5.

⁵⁷Pentecost, 211.

in detail. For example, consider the parallels that exist between Jewish marriage customs and the picture of the church as the “Bride of Christ.”

Jewish marriage included a number of steps: first, betrothal (which involved the prospective groom traveling from his father’s house to the home of the prospective bride, paying the purchase price, and thus establishing the marriage covenant) [First Advent of Christ, atonement and resurrection]; second, the groom returning to his father’s house and remaining separate from his bride for twelve months during which time he prepared the living accommodations for his wife in his father’s house [Church Age]; third, the groom’s coming for his bride at a time not known exactly to her [rapture]; fourth, his return with her to the groom’s father’s house to consummate the marriage and to celebrate the wedding feast for the next seven days [Marriage Supper of the Lamb in heaven while Tribulation ensues on earth].⁵⁸

Other principles include the scope of the Tribulation (wrath poured out upon the *whole earth*), the concept of the church as a mystery, the role of the 144,000 sealed Jews in the Tribulation, the great object of Satanic attack in Revelation 12 (the woman who represents Israel, not the Church), the absolute apostasy of the Tribulation period, and the concept of the times of the Gentiles.⁵⁹

⁵⁸Ryrie, 503-504.

⁵⁹For a more detailed discussion of these principles as well as many others one should consult J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), 193-218.

CHAPTER 4

COMMON OBJECTIONS TO PRETRIBULATIONALISM

There are basically three main objections brought against pretribulationism, especially by those of the posttribulation camp, that require refutation. These objections revolve around the historical argument, the supposed unity of Christ's return, and the promises of tribulation and persecution in the New Testament.

The Historical Argument

One of the most popular objections to pretribulationism is that it is supposedly a new doctrine that has arisen in the past one hundred years. It is therefore determined that the doctrine is not apostolic and should be rejected. Some, such as Dave MacPherson, have gone as far as to suggest that the "popular Pre-Trib Rapture teaching of today was really instigated by a teenager in Scotland who lived in the early 1800's."⁶⁰ Others claim that the theory of pretribulationism originated with John Nelson Darby, a member of the "Plymouth Brethren." Alexander Reese writes:

About 1830 . . . a new school arose within the fold of Premillennialism that sought to overthrow what, since the Apostolic Age, have been considered by all pre-millennialists as established results, and to institute in their place a series of doctrines that had never been heard of before. The school that I refer to is that of 'The Brethren' or 'Plymouth Brethren,' found by J.N. Darby.⁶¹

These assumptions are made because of the fact that there is almost complete silence on the subject of the Tribulation until about the middle of the nineteenth century. The early Church Fathers, although premillennial, were silent on the issue. In some places such as The Shepherd of Hermes and the writings of Irenaeus, vague references are made to belief in a pretribulation rapture. However, both contradict themselves elsewhere by vaguely making reference to a posttribulation rapture.⁶² Thus, the evidence is confusing. Regardless, it is clear that the early fathers "regarded the Lord's coming as imminent. The Lord had taught the church to expect his return at any moment, and the church looked for him to come in their day and taught his personal return as being imminent . . . We may assume that the early church lived in constant expectation

⁶⁰Dave MacPherson, The Great Rapture Hoax (Fletcher, NC: New Puritan Library, 1983), 7.

⁶¹Alexander Reese, The Approaching Advent of Christ (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, n.d.), 18.

⁶²Thiessen, 371-372.

of their Lord, and hence was not concerned with the possibility of a tribulation period in the future.”⁶³ Perhaps this fact accounts for silence on the issue.

In the Middle Ages, the church was likewise silent regarding this issue. This, however, is no surprise in light of the fact that the church, following the reign of Constantine and the initiation of the “State Church” turned to the allegorical method of interpretation regarding the return of the Lord. “With the denial of a literal millennium, the tribulation was allegorized or ignored.”⁶⁴

During the Reformation, a return was made to the doctrine of the Second Coming, but the Reformers’ main emphasis during this time period was soteriology (justification by faith). They were not concerned about the details of eschatology.

Despite these observations, this objection can be refuted from two angles. First of all, the objection is nothing more than an argument from silence. “If the same line of reasoning were followed one would not accept the doctrine of justification by faith, for it was not clearly taught until the Reformation.”⁶⁵ Secondly, Christian doctrine, or the lack thereof, is not established on the basis of its development in church history. Rather, it is discerned and established on the basis of Scripture. “The Bible must be our sole authority in matters of doctrine, and it is to it that we must turn to establish biblical truth.”⁶⁶

One final principle to keep in mind when refuting this objection is the progress or development of dogma. Pentecost argues that it is “the strongest argument against the posttribulation rapturist who argues that the doctrine [pretribulationism] must be rejected because it was not taught in the early church.”⁶⁷ If pretribulationism is taught in the New Testament (as has been shown), why did it take 1,800 years for Christians to realize and systematize it? According to Ice, “The answer lies in the fact that the *timing* of rapture is more the product of one’s theology than the proof-texting of specific passages.”⁶⁸ In other words, each

⁶³Ibid., 372.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Pentecost, 166.

⁶⁶Thiessen, 372.

⁶⁷Pentecost, 168.

⁶⁸Thomas D. Ice, “Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulation Rapture Did Not Begin with Margaret Macdonald” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April-June 1990), 164.

era of church history has been occupied primarily with a particular doctrinal controversy. A particular doctrine was the main object of discussion until there was a general acceptance in the Church over what the Scriptures taught. For example, the early church was concerned with the nature of Christ (deity vs. humanity). The Reformers were concerned with the nature of salvation (justification by faith vs. sacramentalism). The entire field of systematic theology was formulated across the ages much like the order found in many theology text books. Consider an observation made by James Orr:

Its opening sections are probably occupied with matters of Theological Prolegomena . . . Then follows the great divisions of the theological system--Theology proper, or the doctrine of God; Anthropology, or the doctrine of man, including sin (sometimes a separate division); Christology, or the doctrine of the Person of Christ; Soteriology (Objective), or the doctrine of the work of Christ, especially the Atonement; Subjective Soteriology, or the doctrine of the application of redemption (Justification, Regeneration, etc.); finally, eschatology, or the doctrine of the last things. If now, planting yourself at the close of the Apostolic Age, you could cast your eye down the course of the succeeding centuries, you find, taking as an easy guide the great historical controversies of the Church, that what you have is simply the projection of this logical system on a vast temporal screen.⁶⁹

Taking the progress of dogma into consideration, it is easy to see why pretribulationism seems to be a recent doctrine. It was not until the last 150 years that the Church's mind was turned to the field of eschatology so that the futuristic premillennialism of the Early Church resurfaced to overtake the "prophetic historicism" of the Middle Ages. "This environment of a literal, futurist, premillennial framework interacting with the progress made by systematic theology provided the momentum that led to the understanding of a pretribulation rapture."⁷⁰ Therefore, John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) of the "Plymouth Brethren" became the first, as far as we know, to systematize pretribulationism based upon the teachings of the New Testament.⁷¹

The Unity of the Second Coming

Another common objection made against pretribulationism is that the New Testament maintains a unity as far as the Second Coming of Christ is concerned. In other words, His coming is not in two stages--rapture and second advent. This objection is centered around the

⁶⁹James Orr, The Progress of Dogma (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), 21.

⁷⁰Ice, 166.

⁷¹It is often argued that Darby got his ideas from the prophetic revelations of Margaret Macdonald, a teenage Scottish girl who lived in the early 1800's. Supposedly, she was the first to separate the rapture from the Second Coming. However, a careful review of Macdonald's "prophecies" show that she was clearly teaching a posttribulation partial rapture. For more information on this subject refer to the aforementioned article by Thomas Ice.

use of different terms for the Second Coming in the New Testament (παρουσια, αποκαλυψις, επιφανεια). Some pretribulationists argue that “παρουσια” refers to the rapture.⁷²

Posttribulationists, on the other hand, argue that the terms are interchangeable throughout the New Testament much like the different terms for love (αγαπη, φιλεω). Erickson concludes, “the use of a variety of terms is not an indication that there will be two stages in the second coming. Rather, the interchangeableness of the terms clearly points to a single event.”⁷³ The terms may very well be interchangeable, but such does not rule out a pretribulationist rapture, for there are a number of contrasts to be drawn between the rapture and second advent which clearly show that they are not viewed as synonymous or unified in Scripture. For example, the rapture entails the removal of all believers while the second advent centers around the manifestation of the Son of God. The rapture sees the Church caught up into the air while the second advent sees a return to earth. At the rapture Christ comes to claim His bride while at the second coming, He returns with her. The rapture begins the Tribulation; the second advent is the inception of the Millennial Kingdom. The rapture is imminent while the second advent is preceded by numerous signs. The rapture brings comfort while the second advent brings judgment. The rapture is a mystery, but the second advent is predicted and prophesied in both Testaments. As Pentecost writes, “These and other contrasts which might be presented, support the contention that these [rapture and second advent] are two different programs and can not be unified into one event.”⁷⁴

The Promises of Tribulation to the Church

One final objection that must be rebuked is the argument that the Church is promised tribulation in the New Testament. The fallacy of such an objection is that it automatically equates trials and tribulation with the Tribulation (Daniel’s 70th Week). Passages often cited by the posttribulationist include Matthew 24:9-11; Mark 13:9-13; Luke 23:27-31. It must be noted that all three of these passages are addressed to Jews who will as a people (if they are not saved believers and consequently, a part of the Church) suffer in the Tribulation. “Scripture abounds in

⁷²Let it be noted that an argument from language need not be invoked in this thesis to defend a pretribulationist rapture. The author recognizes the interchangeableness of the three terms.

⁷³Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 1192.

⁷⁴Pentecost, 207.

promises that Israel will be brought into a time of purging to prepare them as a nation for the millennium to follow the advent of Messiah.”⁷⁵

Other passages that apply to the Church such as Romans 5:3; 12:12; II Corinthians 1:4; II Thessalonians 1:4; II Timothy 3:12; and Revelation 1:9 (many of which include the term “tribulation”) are also cited. Why does promise of tribulation and persecution automatically have to refer to the Tribulation period? Is it possible that the terms might be used in a non-technical sense? Haven’t these promises been fulfilled throughout the ages? Christians of all eras have suffered great tribulation all over the world. “When the word *tribulation* is used in reference to the church . . . it is used in a non-technical sense, in which the church is promised an age-long opposition from the god of this age, but it is not teaching that the church will be brought into the period technically known as the tribulation. Otherwise, one would have to teach that the tribulation has already existed for over nineteen hundred years.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵Ibid., 170.

⁷⁶Ibid.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a pretribulational rapture defense has been carefully constructed not only by establishing the essential bases of such a position, but by examining key passages of Scripture along with other key principles. Moreover, refutations of common objections to pretribulationalism were offered. In light of all of this, the concept of a pretribulational rapture is nothing more than logical. It is based on consistent hermeneutics, has a strong exegetical basis, and it best fits the biblical framework of eschatology. Other rapture views fall short in many areas. One is consigned to agree with Ryrie, “Only pretribulationalism fits harmoniously with all the scriptural evidence.”⁷⁷

One’s acceptance of pretribulationalism will have a profound impact on his outlook for the future. The believer can take comfort in knowing that Christ will one day come to claim His Church and remove her from a world about to experience the wrathful judgment of God. After the Tribulation, she will return with him to reign for a thousand years. Every believer should watch and be ready for the imminent return of Christ, for “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished.”⁷⁸

⁷⁷Ryrie, 487.

⁷⁸II Peter 2:9.

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