

PRETRIBULATIONISM

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PRETRIBULATIONISM

There are three tribulational views debated among premillennialists and they are posttribulationism, midtribulationism and pretribulationism. The posttrib interpretation holds that the rapture will occur after the tribulation, and the church will be on earth during this seven-year period.¹ The midtrib interpretation sees the rapture as occurring at the midpoint of the tribulation, which is right before the great tribulation (the last 3.5 years).² The pretrib view holds that the church will in no way experience either the tribulation or the great tribulation (the last 3.5 years). The church will be spared from the judgments and suffering.³ I believe that the pretribulational view is the most Biblical, as it has the widest support from the scriptures. The arguments for a pretribulation rapture are from a literal hermeneutic of prophetic passages, and from passages that promise exemption from God's divine wrath, and the timing of his wrath. Before we dive into the main arguments, which support pretribulationism, it is important to look at the historical support in favor of the doctrine. The early church fathers believed in the imminent return of Christ.⁴ Clement of Rome (1st century) wrote

¹ Leon Wood, *The Bible and Future Events* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 29.

² *Ibid.*, 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴ John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 53.

Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished, as the Scriptures also bear witness, saying, "Speedily will he come, and will not tarry;" and, 'The Lord shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Holy One, for whom ye look.'⁵

The church fathers were not perfect and did not have all the details of theology figured out, but as stated, they believed in the imminent return of Christ.

I believe that a literal hermeneutic is a strong strength of the pretribulation argument making the position far more evident from the scriptures. The same can be said when interpreting the Bible its very important to interpret in light of Biblical theology rather than exegesis alone, because then the passage in question will be illuminated by the other passages throughout the scriptures that have the same theme. Amillennialism borrows much from Augustine and for some reason amillenarians believe that prophecy requires spiritualizing.⁶ The same hermeneutical differences are seen between the tribulational views. Posttribulationists apply the same principles of the amillennialists and typically ignore the distinction between Israel and the church. Posttrib interpret the term "elect" to mean the church regardless of the context.⁷ Posttrib have many other issues with their exegesis & methods of interpretation. The biggest problem with the posttrib argument is its tendency to spiritualize prophecy, which in my eyes is enough not to trust their method of interpretation.

The doctrine of imminency teaches that the return of Christ can happen at any moment. There are three things that are true about the imminent return of Christ. First the coming of Christ can happen at any time. Second we cannot set a

⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁶ Ibid., 56

⁷ Ibid., 57.

date for His coming. And third we cannot say that his coming will happen soon or any time.⁸ There are a number of passages throughout the canon of scripture that support the imminent return of Christ (1 Cor 1:7, 4:5, 15:51-52, 16:22, Phil 3:20, 4:5, 1 Thes 1:10, Tit 2:13, James 5:7-9). In 1 Thes 1:10 Paul writes “and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (ESV). The true believer will eagerly look forward to the return of Christ, because then will come fulfillment and the end of pain, misery, sickness & disease. The coming wrath of God is scary for the unregenerate, but for us we have been delivered from this wrath, and will not experience any of it as we will be with Christ. In 1 Cor 15:51-52 Paul says

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will all be changed (NIV).

When Christ returns it will be instantaneous so that all believers will be translated into glorified bodies.

References to the day of the Lord are in many places in the Old Testament and also occur in the New Testament. Definitions of the word *day* differ, but in general do pretribulationists believe that the day of the Lord refers to an age (millennial kingdom).⁹ This view became popular in 1909 with the Scofield Reference Bible. Posttribulationism argues that the day of the Lord will occur

⁸ Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha Our Lord Come* (Bellmawr: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1995), 128.

⁹ John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 108.

after the tribulation. One author makes a case against the pretribulation definition of the Day of the Lord and says

Of the remaining five occurrences, there are four different combinations of the component names in the full title of Christ: “day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:8); “day of our Lord Jesus” (2 Cor 1:14); “day of Christ Jesus” or “Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6 – again manuscripts vary); “day of Christ” (Phil 1:10; 2:16. The variations suggest that we do not have a single technical phrase in contradistinction to the day of the Lord, but an expansion of the basic term “day of the Lord.”¹⁰

He goes on to argue his case that the day of the Lord cannot begin until after the tribulation. While it may seem logical, the problem with the logic of this author and other posttrib is their inability to read the text for what it says in a wooden literal fashion. Therefore, this is one reason why pretribulationism is more accurate. Prophecy passages must be read literally to understand their meanings.

The Bible says that followers of Christ will not experience the wrath of God. When he comes he will change all of us into a glorified state, so that we will no longer need to eat, sleep, worry, fear, or be concerned about the limitations of the body. This is a day that we should all look forward to. This rapture will occur before the time of wrath as indicated in the Bible. It is this time that so often in the writings of Paul are we encouraged to live in purity. Not only is the hope of the Lord’s return a great source of comfort, but it’s also an encouragement for holy living.¹¹ If the details of these events had been revealed to us, then most likely all the preceding generations would not have had an encouragement to live holy in expectedness of the return of Christ. The same goes for our

¹⁰ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 97.

¹¹ Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept From The Hour* (Miami Springs: Schoettle Publishing, 1991), 108.

generation as well, as born again believers await the return of Jesus Christ, and await the day that he will destroy his enemies (2 Thes 1:6-10). For me I await the day when the enemies of the cross will be destroyed. So many of them live to blaspheme the name of God and have no one to hold them accountable. So many Christians are persecuted at worksites around the world, and so many employers and blasphemers will be punished on that day. That will be a day of justice.

John 14:1-3 provides a strong argument for the pretribulation position.

The text says;

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my fathers house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (ESV).

This passage I believe brings defeat to the post & midtrib arguments. Midtrib advocate Marvin Rosenthal believes that the interpretation of John 14:1-3 is debatable.¹² Not once in his entire 300-page book does he address or give attention to this "debatable" passage. Perhaps the argumentation style of some post & mid tribulationists is to ignore passages that bring defeat to their arguments. In the passage does Christ promise that he will rescue his elect from the earth and will bring them to heaven (Jn 13:36). He has prepared a place for believers. This place is described differently in different translations. The KJV uses the word "mansions" instead of "rooms" (ESV, NIV) to describe this place. The English language has changed over time and the word "mansions" no longer has the same connotation that it did in the 16th century. The Greek word used translated by "mansions" or "rooms" is *mone* which literally can be translated as

¹² Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 55.

dwelling places. If Christ had intended for believers to go through the tribulation and to experience the wrath of God, then this passage would make no sense.

Another passage in strong support of the pretribulation argument is 1 Thes 4:13-18. The passage gives great detail to the events. One of the certain truths in the passage is the assurance of a rapture. The advantage to reading the text literally will naturally lead one to a pretribulationist perspective as the view flows naturally from this text and many others.

Another major passage in defense of pretribulationism is 1 Thes 5:1-11. Leon Wood says “the gist of Paul’s thought is that ‘the day of the Lord’ will come ‘as a thief in the night,’ and will catch people unprepared for it.”¹³ Wood argues that there are two points in favor of the pretrib position from this passage. He argues that the first is the words “peace and safety,” which characterize the thinking of people during the reign of the Antichrist who will be the peacemaker for mankind.¹⁴ The other that Wood argues concerns the note of comfort in the 11th verse. Wood argues that Paul in his writings to the Thessalonians Christians was extending them comfort, as they would be delivered from suffering through Christ’s pretribulational coming. Wood argues that the suffering or tribulation would not come on believers but on those that were saying “peace and safety” as these are the unregenerate that do not await and look forward to the return of Christ. The man that will give them peace and safety is not Christ, but their leader whom scripture describes as the Antichrist.¹⁵ Another argument from the passage in support of pretribulationism that Wood did not address is verses 9-10 “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our

¹³ Leon Wood, *The Bible and Future Events*, 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep we may live together with him" (NIV). Some argue that the meaning of "wrath" in this passage is referring to punishment in Hell. John MacArthur in his commentary on 1 Thessalonians believes that the word wrath as used in this passage must also include the day of the Lord, because it was a concern of the Thessalonians. Paul in writing this passage assures them that they will not face the wrath of God during the tribulation, or the wrath of God in the eternal hell.¹⁶ Midtribulationists argue a difference between the meaning of tribulation and wrath. Erickson says, "As terrible as this tribulation will be, however, it should not be identified with the time of the wrath of God."¹⁷ Posttribulationists likewise argue a difference between tribulation and wrath. Erickson says, "The Church will be spared from the wrath of God but not from the tribulation."¹⁸ How post and mid come to this conclusion is beyond me, as the Bible says that the wrath of God will be poured out in the tribulation. It is not good exegesis to differentiate between wrath and tribulation.

Daniel 9:24-27 is another passage used in defense for pretribulationists. In view of the evidences mentioned in the text of scripture, it would be proper for a conclusion that the seventieth week mentioned is identified to be the tribulation period which is exactly seven years.¹⁹ One of the major interpretation challenges has been identifying if the seventieth week relates to Israel or the church. Conservative premillennialists believe that the passage is speaking of Israel and

¹⁶ John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2002), 163.

¹⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1977), 165.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁹ Leon Wood, *The Bible and Future Events*, 59.

not the church. They also believe that the term *week* means seven literal years.²⁰

The seventieth week as mentioned here is future and yet to be fulfilled. John

Walvoord comments

The 'end' of which Daniel 9:27 speaks can be only the return of Christ to bring righteousness, peace, prosperity, and universal knowledge of the Lord to this evil world. Before the world will witness these stirring events, we who are His look for that blessed moment when, caught up from this world at the return of the Lord for his own, we shall see His face and forever thereafter know one passion and one love – to worship and serve our blessed Lord.²¹

I believe the scripture to be quite clear in this passage that should be interpreted literally. There will be a real seven-year tribulation, and Christ will return to rapture his church before the tribulation.

The Church is promised exemption not only from the wrath of God, but also from the time of the wrath of God. Revelation 3:10 says “because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth” (ESV). This verse was written to the church in Philadelphia which according to Leon Wood represents the true and faithful church in the world.²² Wood also argues that the preposition “from” is used more than 800 times in the NT, and its usage here argues that the church will not experience the tribulation.²³ Robert Van Kampen argues strongly against the pretribulation interpretation of Rev 3:10 and says “In reality, however, we shall see that the underlying Greek text proves the

²⁰ John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, 24.

²¹ John F. Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955), 78-79.

²² Leon Wood, *The Bible and Future Events*, 77.

²³ *Ibid.*, 77.

prewrath position, not the pretrib position.”²⁴ The problem with Robert’s argument is that he fails to consider Biblical Theology and uses exegesis alone to throw out the interpretation of Rev 3:10. Such faulty exegesis is used by Third Wave & Snake Handler congregations. Sure a snake handler congregation could look at Mark 16 and using exegesis alone conclude that the Bible supports the teachings to pick up snakes and drink poison. When interpreting this passage in question in the scope of Biblical Theology no such other teachings of “picking up snakes and drinking poison” are found in the scriptures. In the same way opponents of pretribulationism & Rev 3:10 should follow the same type of methods of interpretation. Paul Feinberg argues for the pretribulation position and examines several verses that support Rev 3:10. In his examination of John 17:15 he says

The application of this to Rev 3:10 is as follows. Just as the disciples were not in the Evil One, so the Philadelphians would not be in the hour of testing. The promise of our Lord is to keep them outside the hour of trial. If this be so, it does not describe the rapture per se. Instead, it looks at the results or consequence of the Rapture. Rev 3:10 does not describe the manner in which this protection is achieved, it only tells of the condition of the church during that hour.²⁵

I believe the Biblical evidence is clear that God will keep his people from the great wrath & the timing of the great wrath. 1 Thes 1:10 & John 14:1-3 provide support that Christ will return again to rescue his servants from the coming wrath. Rev 3:10 is one of the strongest passage in defense of pretribulationism. Midtrib advocate Archer disagrees and says “but the promise given in

²⁴ Robert D. Van Kampen, *The Rapture Question Answered* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 168.

²⁵ Paul D. Feinberg, *Three Views on the Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 68.

Revelation 3:10 to the church of Philadelphia can hardly be interpreted in such a general fashion.”²⁶ I think Archer’s interpretation is incorrect as he fails to consider Biblical theology and all the other passages that defend the pretrib interpretation. Pretribulationism is the most accurate as it’s the only view that allows for a literal interpretation of passages in both testaments on the tribulation, is the only view that distinguishes Israel and the Church, and finally, is the only view that takes seriously the doctrine of imminency. The doctrine of imminency is vitally important to pretribulationism. Tit 2:13 would lose its appeal if the tribulation came first, and finally the exhortation on purifying ourselves in 1 John 3:2-3 would be be worthless.²⁷ 1 John 3:2-3 says

Dear friends now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure (NIV).

1 John 3:2-3 speaks of a time when believers will be transformed, glorified and changed into his image. Therefore all believers should look forward to the imminent return of Christ. Believers have this confidence that they will not in any way endure the tribulation or the wrath of God, because the Bible provides much defense for the pretrib argument. So be ready!

²⁶ Ibid., 118.

²⁷ John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, 192-195.

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