

# (Revelation) 08 the Rapture

by David Pawson

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*David Pawson explores the controversial topic of the Rapture, examining its historical roots, theological implications, and differing interpretations within Christianity.*

**Duration:** 1:06:24

**Topics:** "Eschatology", "Time And Eternity"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the concept of time in relation to God's promise of Jesus' return. He mentions that the statement of Jesus coming soon has been interpreted to mean that his return is imminent, but it has already been two thousand years. The speaker suggests that time is different for God and references Einstein's theory of relativity. He also mentions the suffering of God the Father at the cross and concludes that from God's perspective, it has only been a couple of days since Jesus went back to heaven.

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## Transcript

I've been using the afternoon to tackle the more controversial issues associated with the book of Revelation and I'm going to do that this afternoon. The two biggest arguments or debates that take place are over one, what's called the Rapture, and two, what's called the Millennium. These are the two issues I want to deal with this afternoon.

I know the afternoon is not the best time for thinking, particularly if you've had a good lunch and those of you who were fasting yesterday have had a good lunch today. Nevertheless, I think that's right so that we should finish up in glory this evening. Now in the talks I have given, both last week and this week, it has been very clear to you that I believe Christians will go through the Big Trouble or the Great Tribulation, that distress right at the end of this age which God will keep short for the sake of the elect, but which is quite a difficult time, a very difficult time for Christians, however brief.

Nevertheless, many Christians today believe that that is wrong teaching, that I have misled you, and that in fact Christians will all escape the Big Trouble, that they will be taken to heaven before it happens and therefore do not need to get ready or prepare their minds and hearts for it. Often those who study Revelation more than other Christians take this point of view. Many mainline churches hardly ever mention Revelation, hardly ever teach it.

But some of the other parts of the church, Pentecostals for example, particularly a group called the Brethren who major on the Second Coming, and that's good, all credit to them for preaching regularly and frequently and singing about the Second Coming. Nevertheless, many of them, perhaps the majority of them, would take a different view to the one I've been presenting to you. They say the church will be taken out of this world in the rapture.

That phrase is a little misleading. It comes from the Latin Vulgate translation of scripture of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, where it talks about us meeting the Lord in the air. In fact, it says we shall be caught up with the Lord in the air, snatched up.

The Latin word translating that particular phrase is *rapto*, *raptere*, or *rapture* in our English transliteration, and it's taken from that. The word the rapture refers to being caught up to meet Christ in the air. Now I believe in the rapture.

It's we shall be caught up to meet him in the air. That is not the question. Many people ask me, David, do you believe in the rapture or not? I say, of course I do.

We're all going to be caught up in the air. The real difference of opinion is when the rapture takes place, not whether it takes place, but when does it take place before the big trouble, in the middle of the big trouble, or after the big trouble. Of course, what is involved in all this has far-reaching implications for the way we live our Christian life and the way we talk to others about the return of Christ.

I want to start by giving you a bit of the history of this. We have a particular name for this approach to interpreting revelation. We call it dispensationalism.

That's a horrid long word I know, but you'll come across it so I'm going to explain it and what it actually refers to. But this is the dispensational interpretation of revelation which is probably held by the majority of evangelical Christians in America, though it originated in England as we shall see. Actually, England, Scotland, and Ireland, all three had a contribution to that particular approach.

Yesterday afternoon we looked at the four different schools of interpretation depending on when the prophecies or predictions of revelation will be fulfilled and actually come to pass. But this afternoon we're looking at a different interpretation of revelation, dispensationalism. It consists of a number of divisions.

Let's put them up for you. It began with a verse in 2 Timothy in the King James Version which talks about rightly dividing the Word of Truth. From that verse it was assumed that we've got to divide the Bible up in the right way, rightly dividing the Word of Truth.

Actually, the word translated dividing in the King James Version is actually the word plowing, rightly plowing up the Word of Truth. It means rightly opening it up, opening it up. Not splitting it up, but opening it up.

But the King James Version did lead many to assume it meant cutting it up. And that is what essentially dispensationalism has done. There are three huge divisions of the Word of God that we need to take note of.

This is the dispensational system which is used to interpret the Bible as a whole, and revelation in particular. The first major division of the Bible is to divide it into seven dispensations, seven periods of time. Now why did they use the word dispensation for each of these seven ages? Simply because they

believed that God dispensed salvation in each of these seven ages on a different basis, that he saved people one way in the first dispensation, a different way in the second, a different way in the third, a different way in the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh.

But God was always saving people but in seven different ways. Now that's quite an astounding suggestion, but that is the heart of dispensationalism. The seven different dispensations during which God dispensed his grace in a different way are as follows.

The first is called the dispensation of innocence and refers to Adam. If you're taking notes I'd rather you took them on a completely separate sheet to the ones you've taken of the rest of the talks for a reason that is obvious. The second dispensation is from Cain Enoch and is the dispensation of self-determination in which God saved those who were determined people, self-determined.

The third was the age of human government and incidentally what divided two from three was the flood. So after the flood it was the dispensation of human government. And then with Abraham began the dispensation of the patriarchs and now God was going to dispense salvation in a different way to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and so on.

With Moses we entered the dispensation of law, that commandments were given to Moses and from now on you would be saved if you kept the law. A new dispensation, a new dispensing of God's grace now coming through keeping the commandments. And that lasted until Christ and it changed with his first coming to the dispensation of grace.

And now we are saved by grace through faith according to the dispensationalists. All that I'm teaching you now is not what I believe, so please don't take it down as my teaching, will you? But it's my teaching about others' teaching. And the second coming ends the dispensation of grace and ushers in the millennium when people will be saved on a different basis again.

So here we have the seven dispensations that divide the Bible up and salvation is quite different in each of these periods. Well now, what is the truth of this? At the opposite end of the scale is covenant theology. Presbyterians hold this and Lutherans hold this.

Covenant theology says, no, there's only one dispensation covering the whole Bible and it's all the dispensation of grace. There is only one overriding covenant of grace for everybody in all ages. There is no distinction here between old and new covenant.

It's all one. It's simply grace expressing itself in different ways, but it's salvation by grace through all the covenants that God gave. My own position is that there are two basic covenants in Scripture.

One is the covenant of law through Moses and the other the covenant of grace through Jesus Christ. And the covenant of grace has now annulled the covenant of law. We are free from Moses in Christ.

I just mentioned these positions to show that there are widely differing views on the word covenant and on the word dispensation in the Christian church. But it is out of this one that had said there were seven divisions that other ideas came. The next great dividing that took place in those who thought this way, and it's comparatively recent in the Christian church.

It's in the last two centuries that this has all come. The second division was to divide the two peoples of God, not only now on earth but for ever and ever. Amen.

The Jews were said to be God's earthly people and the Christians were said to be God's heavenly people, and the two will never become one. There is a future destiny for the Jews and a future destiny for the Christians and it's not the same. And so, following that through into eternity when there's a new heaven and a new earth, the Christians will be up there in the new heaven and the Jews will be down here on the new earth.

We are God's heavenly people, they are God's earthly people. And so the Jews and Christians were quite separate and would remain that way for all eternity. The third division that was introduced by these teachers was a division of Christ's return into two returns.

He was going to come back twice, once in secret and once in public. He would come secretly first and the world wouldn't even know that he'd come. They would know that all the Christians had gone, but they wouldn't know that Christ had come.

And whoosh! Suddenly all the Christians have gone and then a few years later he comes back again to earth for the second time, the third time actually, with his saints and with the angels. Now that is essentially the dispensational scheme. So we have the secret coming for the saints and the public coming with the saints.

Now this had a profound difference effect on the way we viewed the second coming because if he's coming secretly for his people before the big trouble then that could happen at any minute now. In other words, there is no sign of his coming. This is the next event on the prophetic calendar.

He could come back tonight, tomorrow, and we will have no warning of that secret coming whatever because all the signs the Bible gives about his second coming are concerned with the big trouble and the Antichrist and all the things we've talked about. But if we're gone before all those signs come, we won't even see them. Therefore, those who hold this scheme tell their people, you must be ready for Jesus coming tonight, this afternoon, even before I finish talking to you.

There will be no warning whatever, no sign to see. He will come secretly, take all the Christians away. I have ridden in many American automobiles that had little notices in front of the passenger seat.

If you hear the sound of the trumpet, grab the steering wheel quick. I know what is meant by that. These are people who have believed this and who believe that Christ could come any minute and while you're in their car they would be gone and you'd better grab the wheel to avoid that huge truck bearing down on you.

Well now, that is the dispensational interpretation of the future. I've tried to be fair and give it to you as I believe it really is. I was wondering whether to give you the history of it.

I think I ought to. But first let me, having outlined the position that the church escapes the big trouble and that the rapture, so-called, is the next event in the Christian calendar, the prophetic calendar of God, and therefore is totally unexpected and imminent in the sense of can happen any minute now, any minute. That's the basic scheme.

I can understand why this teaching appeals. There's a very profound appeal to anybody who wants comfort rather than discomfort, who wants to be cheered up rather than depressed. To be told, don't worry about the big trouble, you won't be in it, is good news, no question about it.

Therefore, in a sense the human heart is weighted to believe it. We want to believe that, surely, to escape all that we've been talking about. So there's a kind of bias there.

It's not only a comfort but it is used as a challenge. In many churches and fellowships that believed this, that believed that Christ could come at any moment, this was often used in an evangelistic appeal, especially, I'm sorry to say, with children in those fellowships. I have met so many Christians who said that they first professed faith because they were frightened stiff as children that they would wake up in the morning and find their parents gone.

This was used in evangelizing children. Your mummy and daddy are Christians and if Jesus comes tonight they will be gone and when you wake up in the morning you will be alone. That's a powerful motivation to use the children and I believe a wicked one.

The apostles never would have said that to children and I'm quite sure Jesus never would have. That's a very wrong motive to put before little children. I'm glad that people came to Christ even in spite of that and often remained his loyal servants for the rest of their lives.

But I believe it nevertheless was a wrong motivation to put before them. So it has been used as a comfort for Christians. Don't you want to be taken to heaven before the trouble? It was also used as a challenge to non-Christians.

If Jesus came back tonight, you won't be ready. It puts a real time pressure on people listening to the preacher. Well, that still doesn't decide whether it's right or wrong, nor does the history of this idea.

I want to give you the history because the genealogy of a doctrine is rather important. Before the nineteenth century, nobody had taught this or heard it and above all, nobody had ever found it in the Bible. Now that to me carries some weight.

I know that God has more truth and more light to show us from his Word. Nevertheless, if for eighteen hundred years nobody had found this in the Bible, that raises a question in my mind. Why didn't they find it if it was there? Well, we'll answer that question in a moment.

Now three strands came together in the year 1830, one from Scotland, one from Ireland, and one from England. The three strands were these. There was a Scottish girl in a place called Port Glasgow on the River Clyde in Scotland and she was a very ill girl, but the Lord touched her body with healing power.

She became a prophetess and gave words from the Lord. Margaret MacDonald was her name. One of the prophecies she gave, it wasn't too clear, but one of the prophecies she gave seemed to be a promise from the Lord that he would keep his people from big trouble or great tribulation.

That seems to have been the seed that was sown. There was a remarkable Church of Scotland minister called Henry Irving who picked this up and ran with it. He was a remarkable man.

He started the Catholic Apostolic Church. He was, in a sense, the first charismatic or Pentecostal in Britain because he experienced tongues and gifts of the Spirit and talked about these long before Pentecostals had ever been thought of. He moved from Scotland to London, founded the Catholic Apostolic Church, and they built a huge cathedral about two miles from where I used to live in Guildford in Surrey called Albury Park.

The cathedral is still there today though it's empty and not used. But it was in the grounds of a large park and a mansion, Albury Park, where lived a man called Dr. Henry Drummond. Dr. Henry Drummond was fascinated with prophecy in scripture and made a special study of prophecy and called together conferences of people interested in interpreting the predictions of the Bible.

To a conference at Albury Court came Henry Irving from Scotland, but also an Anglican curate from Dublin in Ireland whose name was J. Nelson Darby. You may never have heard that name if you don't belong to the Brethren, but if you belong to the Brethren you will most certainly have heard it because he began the movement. He also came and heard this talk of an escape before the big trouble began.

He went back to his Bible and he thought he could find it there in numerous places, and he made it foundational teaching in the Brethren movement. Though there are twenty-eight varieties of Brethren, and my uncle was one of the leaders in England, they've spread everywhere. One of my relations went up and down the coast of South America, Brazil, planting Brethren assemblies up and down there.

So I've got one line of my genealogy in the Brethren. However, even among the Brethren there was not full agreement on this. There was one man in particular who believed that Darby was wrong and tried to rescue the Brethren from this teaching.

I'm sure some of you will have heard his name. His name is George Muller. George Muller is even more widely known than Nelson Darby because he had an orphanage, a large orphanage which he built really on faith.

By faith I mean that he never, ever asked for money and he never told any human being of their needs. He would sit down at breakfast with hundreds of children and nothing to give them. He would say grace and give thanks for the Lord's provision of food for their children.

When he'd given thanks for no food on the table at all, they heard a commotion outside the orphanage and a baker's van had had a wheel come off just outside and spilled all its bread onto the street. They simply thanked the Lord and picked the bread up and took it in to the children and had breakfast. That was the kind of man George Muller was, what a man.

He is known as one of the greatest men of faith. But not many know that he opposed this teaching of Nelson Darby. However, Darby won out and the Brethren movement as a whole believes this approach and therefore believes that Jesus is coming any moment.

Now Darby came over to America and he met a lawyer, a brilliant man called Dr. C.I. Schofield. He shared this view with the lawyer and this lawyer got a brilliant idea of producing a Bible with this written into it in the form of notes, human notes. So the Schofield Bible came out with the Word of God at the top of the page and Schofield's notes at the bottom, which he had taken from Nelson Darby.

That was by far the best-selling Bible in America in the nineteenth century. Now let me say what I said last week, never, never buy a Bible with human notes in it, please. Buy plenty of commentaries, buy books about the Bible, the more you buy the better.

But you see the problem is that your brain is not clever enough after you've read a Bible like the Schofield Bible to remember whether you read that at the top of the page or the bottom, whether what you were reading was the Word of God or the comments of men. Many who bought that Bible got totally confused and just said, well I read it in my Bible, it must be true. But it was in the bottom half of the page, you see

the problem.

It's very difficult to remember which part of the page you read something in if you've got a Bible with man's speculation in it as well, or man's attempts to explain the Word of God. So I always keep my commentaries and books about the Bible quite separate from my Bible. When I'm preparing, I was telling young people over lunch, when I prepare a Bible study I spend hours and hours with nothing but my Bible and a stack of paper on which I write everything that comes to me.

Only after I've got all I can out of the Bible do I begin to check out what I've found with what others have found and that's how I go about preparing the Bible. I don't want to be influenced in what I find by other people's comments until I've found everything I can find by myself, just opening the Bible and asking the Holy Spirit to guide me. I think that's very important.

If you use Bible study notes, there are plenty of daily Bible readings with notes to read each day. Just watch out that you don't spend more time on the human notes than on the divine Word. So often if you use those things you skip through the verses and then you study the notes, whereas we're called to study the scriptures.

But human comments on the Bible are helpful. What others have found means you can check up with what you've found. So I'm not saying don't use other people's comments, I'm just saying don't have them in your Bible and then you won't think they're the Word of God.

Well that's what happened. The Schofield Bible took off in America even more than it did back in Britain, but it's there as well. Do you know I once said this at a very large Christian gathering in a holiday camp in Britain and later that day somebody found a garbage bin full of Schofield Bibles and my name was mud.

I tell you, the things that were said about me were just dreadful. How dare I tell people to throw their Bibles into the garbage bin? I did nothing of the kind. What had happened was there was a book stall at the camp in the open air and a sudden thunderstorm would come and it had poured out rain on all these Schofield Bibles.

Now that was God's doing, not mine. They became so useless to sell that they put them all in the garbage bin and that's what had really happened. But I was blamed around the whole country for persuading people to throw Bibles in the garbage, nothing of the kind.

I just wish they hadn't been bought in the first place. Now of course there are now seminaries in your country. There aren't in mine yet, but there are seminaries here which only teach this and will only accept students who accept this.

The main one is Dallas Seminary down in Texas. There are one or two others. The most famous pupil of that seminary is a man called Hal Lindsey, whose books have sold by the million around the world.

The first one was the late Great Planet Earth and there are many more. There is much that is good in those books, but you need to be careful and realize that those books are based on this scheme. I always read books that I disagree with.

In fact, before I write a book on a subject I buy as many books as I can on the same subject that take opposite points of view because I want to hear every point of view. I want to hear their questions and their answers and their criticisms so that I can think it through for myself. I urge other people to listen to many

teachers.

Don't become fans of one teacher alone. You're following a fallible man if you do. Listen to many teachers.

Check them out by the Word of God and only believe what you can find in the scripture for yourself after you've listened to such a teacher. That's my advice. So don't anybody go away from here, as I said yesterday, and say, David Pawson teaches this.

Find out if what he's teaching is in your Bible. If you find it there for yourself, it's not me who's teaching it, it's the Lord who's told it to me. And if you don't find it there, forget it.

Terribly important. Now let's look at the biblical basis that is offered for this position because those who hold it genuinely do believe that the Bible supports it. Now then, I had a transparency and here it is.

Now the first thing to say is this, that there is not a single verse in the whole of the Bible that plainly and clearly states, my people will not go through the big trouble. If there were just one verse somewhere that said that, then I would have to revise my thinking quite radically. But I can't find one, neither can anybody else, because this position is not based on clear declarations of scripture but on logical deductions from scripture, inference, believing that that text infers this, that it implies this.

It may not say it, but it seems to imply it. That's an inference and I think it's very dangerous to build doctrine on inferences, partly because I don't trust human logic totally. What may sound thoroughly logical to me may be quite wrong to God, but inference is a shaky basis.

But that is the approach. I want to add something else here and I say it in love, but I have never met anyone who came to this position by themselves through reading the Bible. I never have.

They have all been taught it by someone else from inferences from the Bible. Now that also weighs heavily with me because there are many people who've come to Christ and who've never been taught who only have a Bible, and especially on the mission field this happens. But I have never met anyone like that who believed all this.

And so I have asked, when people say to me, this is what I believe and it's the dispensation schema, I simply ask, where did you get it from? Who was your teacher? Who was the author you read? Because it seems to be passed on from one to another as a possible interpretation of scripture. Now then, what are the inferences that are drawn? Here they are. First of all, there are statements in the New Testament that he is coming quickly, statements about the speed of his return.

And that from this is inferred that every generation must be ready for him to come quickly, soon, at any moment. And therefore, his return is imminent, which means about to happen. And so these statements of, I am coming soon, I am coming quickly, are inferred to mean I am coming at any moment.

The second inference is made from statements about surprise. He will come like a thief in the night. He will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

And from these statements again is inferred that it could be at any minute, which seems again logical. It isn't actually stated any minute, but it's inferred that that means any minute. Thirdly, it is claimed that there are differences of language about the return of Christ which can be distinguished from one another to infer that there are two returns.

And certainly there is different language used about the return of Christ. Sometimes it's called the day of the Lord, sometimes it's called the day of Christ. Sometimes it's called his arrival, parousia.

Sometimes it's called his appearing, apocalypsis. Sometimes it's called he's coming for the saints, sometimes it's called coming with the saints. And so a division has been driven between these variations and they've been assumed or inferred to apply to two separate returns, that the day the Lord is one and the day of Christ is another, that his arrival is one, that his appearing is another, that he is coming for his saints at one return and with his saints at the other.

And so the language of the New Testament has been neatly put into two columns and from this inferred that they are referring to two separate events some years apart. The next inference is made from the expectation of the early church, from such verses as, this generation will not pass away until all these things are fulfilled, verses like, he is at the door. And from this is inferred that the early church expected him any minute and that this was their faith in the return of Christ.

They lived expecting him any moment. Then the next one is the absence of the word church in every passage describing the Great Tribulation. And it's certainly true that from Revelation 44 to 16 or to 19 the word church never occurs.

In other passages in the New Testament that describe this time of big trouble, the word church does not occur. Therefore, it is assumed that the absence of the word church means the absence of the church. The church can't be there if the word is not used.

Then there is an argument on the emphasis of comfort. When Paul described the return of Christ he said, use this to comfort one another. And they said, what comfort is it to tell us we've got to go through big trouble before he returns? We should be comforting and encouraging one another and the teaching that Christians go through the big trouble is not exactly comfort or encouragement.

Now again it doesn't say this in scripture, but it's inferred from scripture. And the final inference is this, that tribulation is wrath, the wrath of God poured out, particularly the seven bowls of wrath which are poured out at the climax of the big trouble. The verse is quoted from 1 Thessalonians 5, we are not children of wrath.

And it is inferred therefore that we are saved from wrath, therefore we cannot be in the world when God pours out his wrath, therefore we must have gone. Again, it's not stated in scripture, it is inferred. Are you following now what inferred is? It's a logical deduction from something scripture does say to the point of something that it doesn't say but which is believed to be compatible with and even consistent with what is actually said in scripture.

Those then are the seven grounds in scripture that are offered. And I underline again, there is not one single verse that actually states we will not be in the big trouble. If there were one, the argument would be over.

But the problem is when you get into the realm of inference and logical deduction, you are in a very debatable area. And therefore, there are others who draw other inferences and now you have an argument. And now you have genuinely sincere Christians disagreeing, not over scripture but over their different inferences and deductions from scripture, and that's how it's happened.

I want now to go through those again and look them a second time and see whether they stand up really to what has been assumed from them. The statements about speed. When he said, I'm coming soon, well it's already been two thousand years.

I'm coming quickly, he said. Somehow we've got to line that up with two thousand years. One possible way of course is that time is different to God.

The relativity of time is not just Einstein's theory, it's in your scripture. Time proceeds at a different speed to different people. And I love the story of Einstein who was asked, can you explain your theory of the relativity of time in simple terms for an ordinary person to understand? And being a great mind, he could do.

And in fact, people make things complicated and not necessarily great thinkers. Great thinkers can usually be simple. And so Einstein said this, one minute sitting on a hot stove seems much longer than one hour talking to a pretty girl.

Now you know the theory of the relativity of time. All right, you got it? There's a bit more to it than that I think, but I thought that was a pretty good answer. Now to the Lord, a day can seem like a thousand years and a thousand years can seem like a day.

It doesn't say time means nothing to God, it means it can pass at different speeds for God. I can think of one day that must have seemed like a thousand years to God, can you? The day he watched his son die. That must have been horrible.

Do you ever think about the suffering of God the Father at the cross? But thinking about a thousand years seeming like a day to God, it means to God it's only been a couple of days since Jesus went back to heaven. We must take soon and quickly from God's angle as well as ours. Time is relative.

But I think Jesus used those words so that every generation would be thinking of his return. But James the Apostle says in his letter when he talks about the second coming, learn patience from the farmer. Slow but sure of course, the farmer has to wait for the harvest to come.

Every farmer has to learn to be patient that things don't happen immediately. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux was a saint of the Middle Ages and he once said this in his prayer to God. I find it very amusing, "'Dost thou call that a little while in which I will not see thee?' Oh Lord, this little is a long little while." Isn't that lovely? He's talking about Jesus saying, a little while and you will not see me and then you will see me again.

This little while seems such a long little while. And in fact, that trouble came up even in the days of the New Testament. People already in 2 Peter chapter 3, people were saying, where is this coming? All things are just as they were from the creation.

He's not coming back. And that's when Peter actually said, now remember a thousand years is like a day to God. It was in that context that he told us to remember the relativity of time to us and to God.

We get very impatient if things don't happen by next Tuesday. God is very patient, thank God he is. This really doesn't hold up to an imminent return any moment.

Let's take the statements about surprise. Yes, the New Testament says he will come at an hour you know not. He will come like a burglar in the night, not expected.

But that is not the whole of Bible teaching. 1 Thessalonians 5 follows 1 Thessalonians 4 which is about the rapture. And 1 Thessalonians 5 makes it quite clear that it will not be a surprise to Christians who are awake and alert and sober, to those who are looking for his coming.

It will not be a surprise. They will know when he's coming. That's why Jesus said, if the householder had known when the thief was coming he would have stayed awake and seen his approach.

Christians, well not all Christians, sleepy Christians who are not looking for his coming may be surprised. Unbelievers will all be surprised. The fact that he comes like a thief in the night, he's not coming to take anything away from us.

Those who are alert and awake and watching for his coming will not be surprised. You see, this whole dispensational scheme means there is nothing to watch for. Do you hear me? There are no signs to see.

Jesus repeatedly said about his second coming, watch and pray. What are we to watch? Well, I can't go around looking up at the clouds all the time. In any case, he's only coming in clouds in the Middle East so I can't watch there.

So how do I watch for his coming if there is no warning whatsoever? When Jesus said, watch and pray, he told them what to watch for. He gave them signs of his coming and said, when you see these things happen, know that I am at the door. When you see all these things, stand up and lift up your heads for your redemption draws near.

Now that's as plain as my faith, isn't it? We are to watch for the signs of his coming and that means he can't be coming today. The signs are not there, not all of them anyway. We're to watch and keep alert and sober and we shall not be taken by surprise.

He will not, Paul says, he will not come to you as a thief in the night because you're awake and you're ready. What about differences of language? I can only say for this, I've studied the case very carefully and the differences in language are not about two different events but about one event and its rich aspects. They are used interchangeably again and again of the same event.

A careful study of the language reveals that all the phrases used refer to one single coming, not two entirely different comings. So the argument from language or the inference from language also falls down. What about the fact that the early church expected him any moment? Did they? No, they did not.

No question about this. For example, Jesus said, take the gospel to the ends of the earth. How could they expect him back any minute? They couldn't.

That would at least take a lifetime and indeed it's taken many lifetimes. But how can you say the disciples expected him back any minute before they had even done what he told them to do? Furthermore, Jesus predicted that Peter would be crucified in his old age. Are you telling me that Peter spent every day expecting the Lord any moment when the Lord had already told him that when he was old he would be carried where he didn't want to go? In other words, crucified? No.

Jesus even hinted that John would survive to old age and not die. Some took that up wrongly and assumed that Jesus would get back before John died. But Jesus himself corrected that, or John himself corrected it in his gospel.

He said, Jesus didn't say, I would survive until he returned. He simply said, what if? Because Peter typically, when Jesus told Peter what would happen to him at the end, Peter said, and what about him Lord? That is such a human reaction. What about John? And Jesus said, if I decide that he should live till I return, that's none of your business Peter.

I like that reply. Our concern should be about our destiny, not everybody else's in that sense. And so John in his gospel quotes that and says, you note that Jesus didn't say, I would stay until he returned, but only if I decide that he should stay, that's none of your business Peter.

So John had to correct a wrong expectancy in the early church. All this added up really means that they hoped it might be in their lifetime but they were not expecting him any moment. The imminent theory of the Lord's return, the any-moment theory of his return, is not borne out by scripture.

Even Paul himself said he hoped that the Lord would return in his lifetime because he would then be transferred in an instant, a twinkling of an eye, from one body to another. This is what he wrote, we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed in our heavenly dwelling. Nevertheless, we prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

What he's saying is, I want to go from one body to the next. But if he doesn't come back when that happens and we get a new body, somehow he would feel incomplete or unclothed. But nevertheless, he'd rather not have a body and be at home with the Lord in the meantime.

Now this is not a man who is expecting any moment. Let's move on to the, I think, the weakest argument of the whole lot, the absence of the word church in the great tribulation passages. Instead, you only find the word elect and the word saints.

Remember Revelation 14, this is a call to the saints to endure and to keep the commandments of God and remain faithful to Jesus. These argue that it says saints, it doesn't say church. And then when Jesus spoke of the big trouble he said, unless the Lord had kept the days short, even the elect would be lost.

Elect saints but no church. Now this is to make a mountain out of a molehill. Christians are referred to throughout the New Testament as the elect, the chosen of God and the saints.

Every epistle is addressed to the saints. Just out of interest for you, I wrote it down. There are six epistles of Paul that never use the word church but only use the word elect.

And there is one epistle that uses the word saints but never uses the word church, that's Jude. So I assume from that that two Timothy, Titus, one Peter, two Peter, two John, Jude are not for Christians. How foolish.

The dispensationalists faced with this problem that elect and saints are used throughout Revelation in the big trouble get rounded by saying, oh, that means the Jews. That's a bit too neat. Elect and saints throughout the New Testament refers to Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus.

Matthew 24 and Revelation 4 to 18 are addressed to Christians, they're not addressed to Jews. And as I said when we went through it, why would Jesus give all that information about the big trouble if we're not going to be around? It could have the worst possible effect. It could leave us gloating that when out of it, blow you jack, I'm all right.

You know the kind of feeling? Why would Jesus tell us so much about the future when we don't really need to know it? That's my biggest problem with this. I believe the elect and the saints to whom those chapters are addressed are ourselves, believers in Jesus. The emphasis on comfort, let's look at that one.

Well yes, but what does the word comfort mean? The trouble is with us, it means pleasant, free of pain. It doesn't mean that in scripture. In fact, it doesn't even mean that in English.

The word fort is the key. What's a fort? It's a defence in trouble. To comfort is to give people strength to face opposition.

There's a famous tapestry in France, in northern France, when William the Conqueror came over and subjugated England in 1066 and everybody thinks English history began at 1066. William the Conqueror came over and some women in Bayeux, his hometown in northern France, did a famous tapestry. It's about two hundred metres long and it's still there.

You can see it in the last case, very carefully preserved. How many of you have heard of the Bayeux Tapestry? Yes, any of you seen it? Have you seen it? No? Well you've heard of it. Well in the tapestry it's the whole history of William the Conqueror's conquest of England, so the English aren't terribly excited by it.

I went to see it and I went round it and he used French bishops to lead his troops. There was one lovely picture of a French bishop on horseback with a long spear and in front of him, on another horse, was a French soldier who clearly was showing signs of apprehension or cowardice. The bishop, Bishop Odin, is pushing him in the back with the point of the spear to keep going on to attack the English.

Underneath it says, Bishop Odin comforts his troops. Isn't that wonderful? That's comfort, get a spear stuck up your backside to keep you going into battle. Actually, the word fortify is the same as the word comfort in Old English, same word fort.

To turn a person into a fort, not to give them an electric blanket or a hot water bottle or a cushion to sit on. That's what comfort means to us, but comfort means strength. It's the name of the Holy Spirit incidentally, he is the Comforter.

He's the who turns us into a fortress when we're attacked. Now you see, it is the sentimental meaning of comfort that is behind this argument. We are to comfort one another, strengthen one another, fortify one another because the Lord is coming back.

We come to the last, which I think is the most impressive of the inferences that is made, especially at the final part of the tribulation where bowls of wrath are poured out. It is specifically labelled as God's wrath. His anger at what we've done to his world is finally poured out.

He's slow to anger, but when his anger boils over it's something. These people say, we have been saved from the wrath of God, delivered from the wrath of God. Why then should we be in the world when his wrath is poured out upon it? Well, his wrath is being poured out on the world now.

Read Romans 1, the wrath of God is already revealed from heaven against the sins of men. And then we get a description of violent society, broken families, homosexual activity. The signs of God's wrath are all around Western society and I have to tell you that Christian families don't escape from it.

It can affect Christians too. A friend of mine was mugged by a drug addict, a good Christian, but the violence of the wrath of God came on him. You see what I mean? We're not necessarily immune from God's present wrath.

What we are saved from is the day of his wrath and the hell that follows, that's for sure. Will our experience of wrath in the final part of the big tribulation be different? Of course it will. For one thing, we know it will be short.

For another thing, we know that Jesus' coming will be very near. But for another thing, we know that if it is his will to protect us from God's wrath, he will do so. He did so in Egypt when he poured out his wrath in the plagues of Egypt.

None of it ever touched the people of God. He put a shield over them and they were protected from it when he poured out his wrath on Egypt. But it is clear from my reading of the book of Revelation that he will protect some Christians and not others.

Some will die, there will be martyrs and that is God's way of releasing them from the trouble and getting them to heaven quickly. Others will have fled into the wilderness when the mother flees, remember, and will be protected and provided for by God. God can do that.

The wrath that we are delivered from is the wrath that will end in the lake of fire. The second death will not touch those who overcome when the pressure is on. So I don't see that this argument is decisive.

Listen to this verse from Revelation, "Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth." That's not a promise to be taken out of it, but to be protected in it. I will keep you from it. He is perfectly capable of doing that, though he may not do it and allow us to die in his name.

Well now, in practical terms there are two other minority views which I'll just mention in passing. There was a book on the bookstall at the convention of One View which is called the Mid-Tribulation Rapture, that people are taken out of the world, Christians are taken out of the world after the seals and trumpets but before the bowls. I find that's a growing opinion in America and it's appearing in Britain too.

I have to point out that it still is claiming that there will be two return visits of Jesus, one in the middle of the tribulation, one at the end. I still cannot find any trace of two visits in my New Testament. The other view is called the Partial Rapture, that some specially saintly Christians will escape before the big trouble but the rest will go through it, usually written by those who think they are among the special saints.

But that still suffers from the basic flaw that it's saying there are two returns. The real heart of it is that as you search your New Testament, see if you can find a single statement that clearly says, He is coming back twice. It is not there.

That's why I said earlier, I have never met anybody who came to this viewpoint that Christians will be visited first and taken out who has come to that from studying the Bible for themselves. They have studied the Bible with a preacher or a teacher who told them that's what it means. Or they've read a book

alongside their Bible that says, this is what it means.

So we've got it second-hand every time. But people who go to their Bible by themselves with the Holy Spirit come to the conclusion, He's coming back once and through much tribulation we will enter the kingdom of God. That's the conclusion they come to.

It is the profusion of teaching that has come about in the last two hundred years from my country to yours and spread through Bible notes and popular authors that has spread far and wide. America is now exporting it all over the world. When that dear Dutch woman, Corrie ten Boom, went to China she was shocked to find Christians saying to her, Corrie, American missionaries told us that before the big trouble came we'd be up in heaven.

And the big trouble came and we didn't know how to handle it. Why didn't they tell us we would suffer for Jesus? Corrie wrote this in one of her books, I have been in countries where the saints are already suffering terrible persecution. In China the Christians were told, don't worry, before the tribulation comes you will be raptured.

Then came a terrible persecution. Millions of Christians were tortured to death. Later I heard a bishop from China say, sadly, we have failed.

We should have made the people strong for persecution rather than telling them Jesus would come first. And turning to me, Corrie, he said, tell the people how to be strong in times of persecution, how to stand when the tribulation comes, to stand and not faint. Incidentally, that's a perfect definition of comfort.

And Corrie went on to write, I feel I have a divine mandate to go and tell the people of this world that it is possible to be strong in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are in training for the tribulation. What a phrase! We are in training for the tribulation since I have gone already through prison for Jesus' sake.

And since I met that bishop from China, now every time I read a good Bible text I think, hey, I can use that in the time of tribulation. Then I write it down and learn it by heart. And you know the story of that wonderful woman, what she went through in the concentration camp, her sister dying in that camp.

Maybe some of you have heard her or read her books or seen the film, Hiding Place. Very, very moving. I told you again last week that her particular tribulation came when alas, she suffered a gigantic stroke and became totally shut off from everybody else, totally paralyzed.

She was kept alive by devoted people looking after her. And I was told only years later that she only showed any response, just a little movement, to two things when her lovely nephew, Peter Van Verden, the one who dressed up as a girl and rode a bicycle to escape the Nazis in the film. Peter Van Verden would play the violin to her and she would just respond a little.

Somebody told me that they bought a lot of my tapes and they played those to her and she would respond just a little to the Word of God. But she was in her big tribulation, but she'd prepared for it. She'd stored the Word of God in her heart in case she couldn't get a Bible.

She was fortifying herself, comforting herself, preparing herself, in training for the tribulation as a lady in her seventies. What a saint she was. Now she's free of it and God has wiped away all tears from her eyes and he is shepherding her.

Well my final word in this session is simply this. If I'm wrong, I'd rather be wrong my way than their way. I'd rather tell you to get in training for big trouble and find out that I didn't need to and you didn't need to than tell you it's okay, don't bother, it'll never come to you.

I have a feeling that it's false prophets who say it'll never happen. It's false prophets who say, peace, peace, when there is no peace. It's false prophets who heal the wounds of their people lightly.

It's false prophets who want to comfort in the wrong sense, to soothe rather than to fortify. But if I'm wrong then may God forgive me, but I think I've done less harm than if they're wrong. Let's pray.

Father, how we need your wisdom when we hear so many different views, different interpretations of your Holy Word. But Lord, we believe in the inspiration of your Word. We believe it's the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth.

But Lord, help us to be discerning when we hear different interpretations of it. Help us to search the scriptures until we're sure what we find there and then help us so to cling to your Word that whatever happens, whatever comes, that Word will keep us firm, standing, above all to stand. And Lord, in that great day we want to stand before you and look you proudly in the eyes and know that by your grace and the power of your Spirit we made it.

We stayed faithful to you as you stayed faithful to us. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you're coming back soon and our hearts cry, come back quickly. The world needs you desperately.

We need you. Oh, please come back soon. We long to see your face.

Amen. For more information on Friends of the Bridegroom, visit our website at [www.fotb.com](http://www.fotb.com).

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