

Do the Gospels Reveal a Posttribulational Rapture?

by John F. Walvoord

John F. Walvoord argues that the Gospels, particularly Matthew, do not support the doctrine of a posttribulational rapture, emphasizing the importance of proper exegesis and context in biblical interpretation.

Scripture: Matthew 13:49, Matthew 24:30, Luke 17:34, John 3:3, John 14:2

Topics: "Rapture Theology", "Eschatology"

Description

John F. Walvoord discusses the weaknesses of dispensational posttribulationism in relation to the doctrine of the rapture as presented in the Gospel of Matthew. He highlights the selective exegesis and misinterpretation of passages by posttribulationists, emphasizing the importance of considering the context and subject matter of the text. Walvoord examines Matthew 13 and Matthew 24-25, pointing out that while these chapters address the period between Christ's first and second comings, they do not specifically discuss the rapture. He contrasts the pretribulational view with the posttribulational interpretation presented by Robert Gundry, showcasing the differences in understanding the timing and nature of the rapture.

Transcript

The Rapture in Relation to Matthew 13

The major weaknesses of dispensational posttribulationism are found in the exegesis which is advanced to support this new doctrine. It is in this aspect that dispensational posttribulationism fails to persuade either pretribulationists or the more traditional posttribulationists. While the treatment of various passages on the surface seems to be scriptural because of the numerous arguments and scriptural citations included, two pervading weaknesses can be noted in the exegesis: (1) the argument is selective, ignoring contradictory evidence in the passage itself; (2) the argument frequently either misstates or ignores the main thrust of the passage. These are weighty and important objections even if they are made against what seems on the surface to be a scholarly argument. These objections against dispensational posttribulationism are also often valid against other forms of posttribulationism.

Undoubtedly an important aspect of posttribulationism, regardless of which school of posttribulational interpretation is followed,[1] The four schools of posttribulational interpretation are mentioned in the author's first article in this current series, "Posttribulationism Today; Part I: The Rise of Posttribulational

Interpretation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (January-March 1975): 21-24. is the question of the doctrine of the rapture in the Gospel of Matthew. For the most part, Mark and Luke do not contribute to the argument, and the Gospel of John falls in a different category. In the Gospel of Matthew, the principal chapters pertaining to the tribulation question are Matthew 13 and Matthew 24-25, two of the four major discourses of Christ.

Matthew 13 comes at an important juncture in the Gospel of Matthew where Christ has been rejected by the Jews as their Messiah, and in turn Christ pronounces severe judgment on them for their unbelief. In keeping with the main thrust of the whole Gospel of Matthew, which is to explain why the predicted Old Testament kingdom was not fulfilled in Christ's first coming, Matthew 13 has as its dominant subject a sweeping revelation of the general characteristics of the period between the first coming and the second coming of Christ, a subject which is almost completely ignored in the Old Testament. Accordingly, in seven parables our Lord describes the various aspects of the period between the first and second comings of Christ.[2] For a more complete statement on Matthew 13, see John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), pp. 95-108.

The position of dispensational posttribulationism is stated briefly by Robert Gundry in what he calls "Excursus on the Consummation of the Age." [3] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), pp. 142-45. Most pretribulationists as well as posttribulationists agree that Matthew 13 is dealing with the entire interadvent age from the first coming of Christ to His second coming to establish His kingdom. A few pretribulationists have tried to make it coterminous with the church age, but this is an unnecessary and an unsupported conclusion because at this point in the revelation Christ has not even introduced the doctrine of the rapture, much less expounded it. Even the church as such is not introduced until Matthew 16.

Gundry follows other posttribulationists, however, in singling out the parable of the wheat and the tares as proving a posttribulational rapture. As Matthew 13:30 states clearly, at the time of the harvest the tares are gathered first, and then the wheat is gathered into the barn. Gundry, like most other posttribulationists, makes much of the fact that the wheat is gathered after the tares--which fact, he holds, corresponds to the second coming of Christ to set up His kingdom. This contradicts the order of the pretribulational rapture, in which believers are gathered out first. Like other posttribulationists Gundry ignores, however, the parable of the dragnet in Matthew 13:47-50 in which the exact opposite order is indicated. There, according to Matthew 13:48, the good fish representing believers are gathered into vessels, and then the bad fish are thrown away.

It should be obvious under these circumstances that these parables are not trying to set up a precise order but rather the fact of separation as brought out so clearly in Matthew 13:49-50. At the second coming of Christ to establish His kingdom, it may well be that the wicked are judged first, and then the righteous are gathered into His kingdom. This presumes, however, that the rapture has occurred earlier. If a posttribulational rapture is assumed, the posttribulationists have a problem with this event related to the second coming because obviously Christ comes to earth first and then the wicked are judged. If they desire to press this order, it becomes a problem to posttribulationism, but not to pretribulationism. The pretribulationist is unconcerned in interpreting this passage as to whether the unsaved are gathered first or the saved are gathered first. Either order is admissible at the time of the second coming of Christ to establish His kingdom. Gundry is actually fighting a straw man here as pretribulationists do not claim that these parables describe the rapture.

One of Gundry's peculiarities is his opposition to the view that all the wicked will be judged at the time of the second coming of Christ. He states, "The gathering and burning of the wicked must not include the entire unsaved population of the earth, else none would be left to be the goats in the judgment of the nations (in the pretriblational scheme) or to enter the millennium (in the posttriblational scheme). We may solve this problem by limiting the sphere of judgment to false disciples in the kingdom." [4] Ibid., pp. 143-44.

Although this question is not important to the pretriblational argument, it is crucial to Gundry's approach to posttriblationalism. Due to his peculiar and unique interpretation of Matthew 25, in which he places the judgment of the nations at the end of the millennium, he is forced to take unusual steps to evade the problems this creates, one of which is his partial judgment on the wicked at the second coming. Most premillenarians and amillenarians, whether posttriblational or pretriblational, hold that all the wicked living on earth are judged at the second coming of Christ. The Scriptures seem to make plain that all the wicked perish at the time of the second coming and that only persons who are born again enter the kingdom. This is the background of Christ's conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:3-5 where Nicodemus, on the basis of Old Testament revelation, is chided for not knowing that a person has to be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God. While a spiritual kingdom was in view in Christ's words, it was also associated in Nicodemus's mind with the coming kingdom of God on earth.

The Book of Revelation makes quite plain that there will be only two classes of citizens spiritually in the time of the great tribulation, those who are saved and those who are lost (Rev 13:8). All who are lost will worship the beast or the world ruler of the end time. According to Revelation 14:9-11, all who worship the beast will suffer eternal torment. According to Revelation 19:21, all the armies of the world that fight Christ at the time of His second coming will be destroyed.

If most expositors are correct that the judgment of the nations occurs at the time of the second advent of Christ, then it follows that the goats representing all the unsaved are cast into everlasting fire. It should become apparent that the dispensational posttriblationalism as advanced by Gundry is built on untenable and strange interpretations which even his fellow posttriblationalists do not follow. One can only conclude that his exegetical basis for his posttriblationalism is faulty.

In a word, Matthew 13 does not discuss the doctrine of the rapture at all, and there is absolutely nothing in this passage which would contradict the pretriblational view. The arguments advanced by Gundry are not only inadequately supported, but logically irrelevant.

The Rapture in Matthew 24

One of the most crucial arguments advanced by Gundry in support of his dispensational posttriblationalism is based on his exegesis of Matthew 24-25. While his views are somewhat novel and different from other posttriblationalists, unquestionably these two chapters have had a bearing on posttriblationalism as a whole. It is most unfortunate for his argument that the same problems faced in exegesis of other passages surface here. Gundry again is selective in his material, choosing only what supports his view and ignoring contradictory evidence, and he tends to evade what is the obvious subject matter of the passage.

Gundry's approach to this passage is to debate at great length whether the Olivet Discourse is addressed to the church or to Israel. He asks the question, "To what group of redeemed do the Jewish saints addressed by Jesus and represented by the apostles belong, Israel or the Church?" [5] Ibid., p. 129.

The question as to whom the Gospels, including the Olivet Discourse, are addressed, has been mishandled by both dispensationalists and nondispensationalists. Obviously all the Gospels were written after Pentecost and they record material that is pertinent, in one respect or another, to those living in the church age. The actual subject matter of any point in revelation, however, has to be determined exegetically, not by sweeping categories. Accordingly, while Matthew is addressed primarily to Jewish Christians to explain why the kingdom was not brought in at Christ's first coming, it also includes reference to the church in Matthew 16.

Actually, all four of the Gospels deal with three dispensations, sometimes reaching back into the Law and expounding the meaning of the Law of Moses, sometimes looking forward to the millennial kingdom, a future age, and sometimes dealing with the present age, the church. The question as to whom any particular passage is addressed cannot be settled by the fact that it was given to the disciples, because they represent in some sense both Israel and the church. The issue must be settled on the subject matter, much in the same way that a person living in the present age can go back into the Old Testament and read portions addressed to someone else, but which may have a pertinent application to spiritual issues today.

Accordingly, Gundry's entire argument in his chapter on the Olivet Discourse, which concerns itself mainly with this question, is irrelevant. What is most important is that Gundry completely ignores and does not even notice what the subject of the passage is.[6] Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, pp. 179-204. According to Mark 13:3, four of the disciples, Peter, James, John, and Andrew, asked Christ three questions. These are stated in Matthew 24:3: (1) "When shall these things be?" (2) "What shall be the sign of thy coming?"; and (3) What shall be the sign "of the end of the age?" (NASB). It is rather difficult to understand why Gundry in his chapter on the Olivet Discourse should not even mention the questions that are being answered. In an analysis of the Olivet Discourse, the subject matter is more important than the question of to whom it was stated.

To the pretribulationist it is obvious that the rapture is not in view in this passage. Up to this point the disciples had had no instruction on this subject. They did not even clearly understand the difference between the first and second comings of Christ. Their questions indicated that they were first of all concerned about the destruction of Jerusalem which Christ had predicted in Matthew 24:2, as this obviously signaled some tremendous event. Christ did not deal with this first question in Matthew, but He did answer it in Mark and Luke; and, of course, the prophecy was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

The second and third questions, of course, are the same. The coming of Christ and the end of the age are coterminous, and the answer to the one is the answer to the other. Here again it is questionable whether the disciples clearly understood at that time that there would be a time period between the first and second comings of Christ. What they were talking about was Christ's coming to establish His kingdom and the end of the age which preceded it in which, from their point of view, they could still be living. Accordingly, the nature of the question is such that the church is not in view, nor is the rapture introduced. In a word, the disciples wanted to know the signs leading up to the establishment of the millennial kingdom.

In His answer Christ first stated the general signs of the period leading up to the second coming in Matthew 24:4-14. This coincides with Matthew 13. Then He gave them the specific sign of the beginning of the great tribulation three and one-half years before His second coming signaled by the abomination of desolation as stated in Matthew 24:15. The period of great tribulation will end according to Christ by His

glorious second coming. While Christ answered the questions of the disciples, He did not give all the details, many of which were supplied later in Revelation 4-18 .

The question raised by posttribulationists as to why Christ did not clearly delineate here a pretribulation rapture is answered simply by the fact that this was not His subject. If in the Old Testament in the frequent references to the first and second comings of Christ there is no clear distinction of the two events, why should Christ be obligated here to explain an event which He has not even introduced? Christ chose to introduce this in the Upper Room the night before His crucifixion. But the full exposition of the rapture was not to be given until later through the Apostle Paul.

The reasons are fairly obvious. The disciples were in no mood or situation to understand such a new doctrine. They did not even comprehend the concept of the church at this time, even though it had been announced. How could they be expected to understand the distinction between a pretribulation rapture and the posttribulation second coming to establish the kingdom of Christ on earth? The silence of Christ on the subject of the rapture here should be understandable in view of the subject matter and the total situation. If God did not see fit to reveal many other aspects of the special purpose He has for the church, the body of Christ, until the Pauline letters, it is not strange that the subject of the rapture should not be expounded in Matthew 24.

Despite the fact that the subject matter does not concern the rapture, it is not unusual for both pretribulationists and posttribulationists to attempt to read the rapture into this passage. Here the hermeneutical rule that the context must determine interpretation should be applied, and later revelation should not be read into earlier revelation unless the text itself justifies this.

The question as to whether the Olivet Discourse specifically discusses the rapture is asked by Gundry, "Where in the Olivet Discourse are we to place the rapture? There is no mention of a rapture prior to the tribulation." [7] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 134. All agree that there is no mention of a pretribulation rapture in this passage. The important question remains, however, whether there is mention of a posttribulation rapture.

Two passages in the Olivet Discourse are usually cited by posttribulationists, and Gundry goes along with their interpretation. According to Matthew 24:31, "They shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." Mark 13:27 states, "And then shall He send His angels, and shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven."

It should be stated first that these verses cause no problem whatever to a pretribulationist. All pretribulationists agree that at the time Christ comes to set up His kingdom the elect will be gathered from heaven and earth to participate in the millennial kingdom. Whether these elect refer only to the elect of Israel or also to the elect including both saved Israelites and Gentiles and the church, all agree that this gathering will take place in connection with the establishment of the millennial kingdom.

The question is not whether there will be such a gathering; the question is whether this gathering is the rapture of the church. Here the evidence is missing. There is a conspicuous absence of any reference to a translation of living saints or of any specific reference to the resurrection of the church in any passage in the Old or New Testaments that clearly refers to Christ's coming to establish His kingdom. Accordingly, for a posttribulationist to claim this passage is to beg the question, to assume what he is trying to prove. Inasmuch as the most important and distinctive aspect of the rapture is the translation of living saints, this

becomes the question which must be resolved. Pretribulationists conclude that this passage does not contradict their point of view and does not support the posttribulational argument.

An argument advanced by Alexander Reese and adopted by Gundry is that the references in Matthew 24:40-41 should be interpreted as referring to the rapture. These verses state, "Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken and the other left."

Here both Gundry and Reese violate the rule that the context should determine the interpretation of a passage.[8] Ibid., pp. 134-39; Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1937), pp. 214-15. They both concede that the context deals with judgment such as that which characterized the time of Noah. According to Matthew 24:39 those living at that time "knew not until the flood came, and took them all away, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." Those taken away were taken away in judgment. Gundry and Reese note that the words "shall be taken" in verses 40-41 are the translation of παραλαμβάνω which is different from the word used in verse 39 . Reese, however, erroneously states, "It is a good word; a word used exclusively in the sense of 'take away with' or 'receive' or 'take home.'"[9] Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*), p. 215.

The truth is, however, that this is a very common word used in many different connotations, and it is not true, as Reese and Gundry state, that it is always used in a friendly sense. The same word is used in John 19:16 in reference to taking Christ to Calvary to crucify Him, an express instance where it is used to take one away to judgment. Accordingly, the use of this word is indecisive in itself, and the context becomes the important consideration.

In claiming that those taken away in verses 40-41 are taken away in the rapture, Gundry in discussing the parallel passage in Luke 17:34-37 ignores verse 37 . In Luke 17, two are pictured in the same bed, with one taken and the other left. Two are grinding together, and one is taken and the other left. Two are in the field, one is taken and the other left. Then, in verse 37 , the question is asked, "Where, Lord?" The answer is very dramatic: "And He said unto them, Wherever the body is, there will the eagles be gathered together." it should be very clear that the ones taken are put to death and their bodies are consumed by the "vultures" (NIV), If these are killed, then verses 40-41 of Matthew 24 speak of precisely the same kind of judgment that occurred in the Flood when the ones taken were taken in judgment. Matthew 24 is just the reverse of the rapture, not the rapture itself.

The arguments of Gundry that one cannot harmonize this with the judgment of the nations are nonsensical. Obviously before the Gentiles could be gathered in judgment they would have to be taken away as individuals. What is seen in Matthew 24:41-42 has its consummation in Matthew 25:31-46. While their bodies are consumed by the vultures, their souls are cast into everlasting fire. The two passages are parts of the same divine judgment which separates the saved from the unsaved at the beginning of the millennial kingdom.

While these issues may be debated, the most important point is the crucial fact that the translation of living saints, which is the main characteristic of the rapture, is not found anywhere in Matthew. Only by assuming what he is trying to prove can a posttribulationist put the rapture in these passages.

It would be appropriate in a discussion of the doctrine of the rapture in the Gospels to consider the relationship of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46. However, because this relates to end-time events which can better be considered later, discussion will be postponed.

The Rapture in the Gospel of John

While the synoptic Gospels frequently deal with the coming of Christ in relation to the Law of Moses and the future millennial kingdom, most expositors recognize that the Gospel of John has a special character. As it was probably the last of the four Gospels and written late in the first century, the Gospel of John presents from the sayings of Christ certain truths especially related to the church. Accordingly, the Upper Room Discourse, the fourth and final great discourse of Christ, deals almost entirely with truth which anticipates the present age. It would be natural to assume that here Christ would introduce the subject of the rapture.

This is done in the familiar words of the opening verses of John 14 where Christ stated in verses 2-3, "In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am there you may be also." While some expositors have viewed this as referring to the Christian's death and entrance into heaven, many posttribulationists as well as pretribulationists recognize this as a reference to the rapture. J. Barton Payne is an exception to the normal conservative interpretation when he holds that John 14 refers to a believer's death.[10] J. Barton Payne. *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), p. 74. Gundry, accordingly, is correct when he says, "Nothing is said concerning the death of believers generally." [11] Gundry, *The Church in the Tribulation*, p. 152, footnote. Gundry's exegesis of the passage, however, leaves much to be desired.

The passage taken in its plain meaning says that Christ is going to leave the disciples and that they will not be able to follow Him. His purpose in leaving them is that He needs to prepare a place in the Father's house, an obvious reference to heaven to which Christ is going to ascend. When He states that He is coming after them to receive them to Himself so that they can be where He is, the implication is rather clear that He is taking them to the place He has prepared for them.

Gundry scoffs at the concept that the Church will go to heaven for approximately seven years and come back later with Christ to the millennial earth. Heaven is something more than a place. It is where Christ is. The church will be with Christ wherever He is, whether in heaven, the millennial earth, or the New Jerusalem. It is no more strange that the church will spend seven years in heaven in the Father's house than it is that the church will spend a thousand years on the millennial earth, and then later spend eternity in the New Jerusalem.

Gundry attempts to substitute for the concept of heaven the idea that the disciples are already in the Father's house. He states:

In order to console the disciples concerning His going away, Jesus tells them that His leaving will work to their advantage. He is going to prepare for them spiritual abodes within His own Person. Dwelling in these abiding places they will belong to God's household. This He will accomplish by going to the cross and then ascending to the Father. But He will return to receive the disciples into His immediate presence forever. Thus, the rapture will not have the purpose of taking them to heaven. It rather follows that from their being in Christ, in whom each believer already has an abode.[12] *Ibid.*, p. 154 (italics in original).

One is at a loss to know how to comment on such fanciful exegesis. If the passage says anything, it says that Christ is going to leave them to go to heaven, not simply leave them by dying. The Father's house is not on earth, and Christ is not going to remain in the earthly sphere in His bodily presence. The expression "I will come" must be spiritualized and deprived of its real meaning in order to allow the explanation which

Gundry advances. To spiritualize the Father's house and make it "spiritual abodes within His own person" is spiritualization to an extreme. Obviously the believer is in Christ, but this is not the same as being in the Father's house, It is most significant that Gundry, who claims to be a literalist, when he deals with the first passage that clearly reveals the rapture, is forced to spiritualization in order to avoid the pretribulation rapture.

This extreme form of exegesis to which Gundry is driven in this passage is to escape the implication that the rapture is different from the second coming of Christ to set up His kingdom. In contrast to the description of the second coming in Matthew 24 where important events, including the great tribulation, are seen to precede it, here Christ gives no preceding events, no signs, and the bare promise that they should be looking for His coming. This, of course, is in contrast to the posttribulation view of the rapture and explains the unusual exegesis of Gundry.

Conclusion

Taking the testimony of the Gospels as a whole, it may be concluded that the rapture is not found at all in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, although the second coming of Christ is clearly spoken of and the events which precede it are described. In John 14 Christ introduces for the first time the subject of His coming for His own and His taking them to the Father's house. The somewhat desperate attempt of posttribulationists to spiritualize this passage and eliminate it as referring to the rapture is in itself a confession that the rapture is presented in John 14 as an event distinctive from the second coming. That Christ did not expound the details of the rapture here is understandable, for the disciples had many other spiritual and theological problems at the time. The full explanation awaited the revelation which would be given through Paul and which formed a central theme of the epistles he wrote to the Thessalonians.

Emerging in Gundry's discussion of the rapture in the gospels are the same problems which surface in other posttribulation approaches. Gundry does not apply the literal interpretation of prophecy in any consistent way, even though he claims to be a literalist, and it becomes very obvious that he is selecting only the facts that suit his argument, avoiding contradiction. This leads to an imperfect theological induction. When all the facts are taken into consideration, Gundry's conclusions are shown to be questionable.

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