

# Futurist Posttribulation Interpretation

by John F. Walvoord

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*John F. Walvoord presents a comprehensive analysis of Futurist Posttribulationism, emphasizing its biblical foundations and historical context in contrast to pretribulationism.*

**Scripture:** Revelation 4

**Topics:** "Eschatology", "Tribulation Theology"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the emergence of premillennialism and the futurist view of posttribulationism, as advocated by George E. Ladd in the 20th century. Ladd's position emphasizes the personal, premillennial second advent of Jesus Christ and a futurist interpretation of the Book of Revelation, foreseeing a seven-year period culminating in a great tribulation before Christ's return. He challenges historic amillennialism and dispensationalism, proposing a new view of posttribulationism that aligns the rapture with the second coming of Christ after the tribulation, rejecting the pretribulation doctrine. Ladd's arguments are well-presented and respectful, aiming to uphold posttribulationism as the traditional position of the church.

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## Transcript

With the emergence of premillennialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a relatively new view of posttribulationism was advanced which can be called the futurist view. In contrast to posttribulationism which characterized amillennialism and the Protestant Reformers who considered themselves already in the tribulation, the new view contended that the last seven years of Daniel's prophecy of Israel's program revealed in Daniel 9:24-27 should be considered as still future. In harmony with this position, it was often also contended that Revelation 4-18 describes a future rather than an historic situation. The leading twentieth-century exponent of the futurist view is George E. Ladd who sets forth his position in his work *The Blessed Hope*, published in 1956.

### The Premises of Futurist Posttribulationism

As illustrated in Ladd, futurist posttribulationism is built on the premise of premillennialism. He states, "One thing should be emphasized: the author would affirm his belief in the personal, premillennial second advent of Jesus Christ. He is looking for His coming; it is his Blessed Hope." [1] George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), p. 13.

In adopting premillennialism, Ladd also holds to a futurist view of the Book of Revelation. Although he deviates in some minor respects from the futurist view of that book, in general he follows the concept that there is yet ahead a seven-year period climaxing in a great tribulation which will fulfill literally the prophecies of the Old and New Testaments that describe this time of trouble immediately preceding the second coming of Christ. In taking this interpretation, Ladd assumes the authority and accuracy of prophecy and usually interprets it literally, although there are some notable exceptions to this rule.

The premises of Ladd's position, accordingly, require him to turn away from historic amillennialism as held by Augustine and later embraced by the Protestant Reformers. Ladd offers a relatively new view of posttribulationism which differs in major aspects from that held by the early church as well as by the Reformed theology. His major point of agreement with them, however, is that he places the rapture as occurring at the second coming of Christ after the time of tribulation.

In rejecting pretribulationism, Ladd also rejects dispensational interpretation although he distinguishes Israel from the church in some passages. In others he rejects a distinction, holding that promises given to Israel in the Old Testament should be interpreted as having a dual fulfillment, that is, fulfilled both in the church and in Israel. Ladd recognizes that dispensationalism naturally leads to pretribulationism, and therefore he devotes a chapter to a refutation of dispensationalism.

In general, his arguments for posttribulationism are well presented in a persuasive way, and he attempts to avoid any unfair or discourteous treatment of those with whom he disagrees. His approach is that pretribulationism is a new doctrine not advanced until the early nineteenth century, in contrast to posttribulationism which is the traditional and historic position of the church.

#### The Historical Argument for Posttribulationism

As pointed out in an earlier review of Ladd's *The Blessed Hope*,<sup>[2]</sup> John F. Walvoord, "A Review of *The Blessed Hope* by George E. Ladd," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 113 (October 1956): 289-307. Some of this previously published material is adapted and used in this article. The first third of his book is devoted to the historical argument for posttribulationism., although the work is introduced as "A Biblical Study of The Second Advent and The Rapture." Ladd himself says, "Let it be at once emphasized that we are not turning to the church fathers to find authority for either pre-or posttribulationism. The one authority is the Word of God, and we are not confined in the strait-jacket of tradition."<sup>[3]</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 19. theology. While many seem to be specifically premillennial, a difficult matter like pretribulationism could not be settled in a context where they erroneously believed they were already in the great tribulation. The early premillennialism of the first two centuries was soon engulfed by the amillennialism which arose in the third and fourth centuries. Amillennialism with its spiritualization of prophecy provided no basis for considering a matter like pretribulationism. It was not until the Protestant Reformation that the authority of Scripture and the imminency of Christ's return were once again firmly recognized. It was not until premillennialism became a major factor in the church in the nineteenth century that pretribulationism could even be considered.

The often-repeated charge that Darby secured his pretribulationism from Edward Irving has never been actually documented although they arose about the same time. One can hardly account for the wide acceptance of pretribulationism by Plymouth Brethren, who were devoted students of the Bible, to the offering of this view by a person who had no reputation for orthodoxy. A more cogent explanation is that pretribulationism arose as a refinement of premillennialism based on literal interpretation of prophecy

which made it difficult to harmonize the doctrine of the rapture with the second coming of Christ to set up His kingdom. Most pretribulationists obviously base their views on the Bible, not on the historic background of the doctrine.

In his treatment of the history of the doctrine, Ladd is right in pointing out that pretribulationism was not the unanimous position of premillennialism in the nineteenth century. Much of his chapter dealing with the history of pretribulationism recounts those who abandoned pretribulationism for posttribulationism, with the implication that pretribulationism does not stand up to careful study. However, what this proves is that the pretribulationists did not know why they were pretribulationists. The argument that there was a broad trend away from pretribulationism is refuted by Ladd's own admission that pretribulationism has wide acceptance and current vitality as a doctrine. Undoubtedly, there are conversions both ways. If pretribulationism was not known until 1825, certainly there must be some doctrinal basis for its widespread acceptance at the present time.

On the basis of the documentation which Ladd offers, he concludes that the early church was posttribulationist, that pretribulationism arose in the nineteenth century, and that some who accepted pretribulationism later departed from it. His conclusion that, therefore, pretribulationism is unscriptural remains the question.

#### The Argument from Vocabulary of the Blessed Hope

In chapter three of his presentation, Ladd takes the position that the three Greek words for the rapture, coming or presence (παρουσία), appearing (επιφάνεια), and revelation (αποκαλύψις), are technical words that must refer to one event only, that is, the second coming after the tribulation. This is a broad assumption which is faulty in hermeneutics as well as in exegesis, and is an error that is sometimes held also by pretribulationists. The basic rule for the interpretation of any word in the Bible must be its context. Obviously, words like coming, appearing, and revelation are not in themselves technical words, and if they are used in a technical sense in the Bible it must be sustained by an examination of every reference.

Some pretribulationists have attempted to identify some of these terms with the rapture and others with the second coming. Most expositors, whether pretribulationist or posttribulationist, however, hold that these words are not technical words in themselves and must be interpreted by the context in which they appear. If the first coming and the second coming of Christ were both referred to as "comings," it would not prove that the two comings were the same coming. Likewise, the use of the same terms for the rapture and the second coming do not make them the same event. These words are general words and Ladd's entire chapter three begs the question, that is, it assumes what he is trying to prove. If the Scriptures were attempting to present a pretribulation rapture, how else could they do it without using the same words?

The argument on terminology is continued in chapter four where he deals with the subject "The Tribulation, the Rapture, and the Resurrection." The argument here turns on the lack of reference to the rapture in important passages dealing with the second coming of Christ. He discusses Matthew 24:4-14; 2 Thessalonians 2; and Revelation 8-16. He concludes:

Our survey of these three great passages which set forth the coming of Antichrist and the Great Tribulation shows clearly that none of them asserts that the Church is to be raptured at the beginning of the Tribulation. When such a doctrine is attributed to these Scriptures, it is an inference and not the assertion of the Word of God.[5] Ladd, The Blessed Hope, p. 77.

One wonders how such an argument can be offered soberly because it is so obviously based on an illogical premise. Two of the three passages are admittedly dealing with the second coming of Christ after the tribulation. The fact is that they do not talk about the rapture at all because no rapture occurs in connection with it. Second Thessalonians 2 deals with the rapture in verse one and with the second coming in verse eight, but this does not make them the same event. The problem is Ladd's, not that of the pretribulationist. The silence about the rapture in two of the passages points to the conclusion that the rapture does not occur at the second coming.

The fact is that none of the passages dealing with Christ's coming after the tribulation ever includes a reference to the translation of living saints. Even Ladd, while not referring to it in this chapter, later admits, "nor does the Word of God explicitly place the Rapture at the end of the Tribulation." [6] Ibid., p. 165. He nevertheless contends, "if a pretribulation rapture is a Biblical doctrine, it ought to be clearly set forth in the Scriptures which prophesy the Rapture of the Church." [7] Ibid., p. 77. Ladd does not seem to realize that the same argument holds against the posttribulationist point of view. Why is not a posttribulation rapture "clearly set forth in the Scriptures which prophesy the Rapture of the Church?" If pretribulationist doctrine is based on an inference, so is posttribulationism.

It is noteworthy that in his entire discussion, Ladd practically ignores the three principal Scriptures revealing the rapture, that is, John 14:3; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. If Ladd is going to deal with the biblical content of the rapture, why does he ignore the principal passages? The answer is, of course, that there is no explicit teaching of posttribulationism in these passages and it does not advance his argument.

In discussing the word resurrection, Ladd refers specifically to Revelation 20:4 where there is a resurrection that is obviously posttribulationist. Ladd here begs the question and rejects categorically the concept that there can be any other resurrection before the first resurrection. He argues, therefore, that the rapture must occur at the second coming.

The idea that the first resurrection can be in more than one stage is taught in 1 Corinthians 15:23-24. Three stages (τάξεις) of the resurrection of the saints are included: Christ, first; those at His coming, second; and those at the end, third. While the third resurrection can be debated, as it is not clear whether it refers to a resurrection of the saints at the end of the millennium or refers to the resurrection of the wicked, this passage clearly distinguishes the resurrection of Christ from the resurrection of the saints and declares that they are stages. To this could be added Matthew 27:52-53, which speaks of a token resurrection of saints immediately after the resurrection of Christ. The fact is that the resurrection at the rapture and the resurrection of the tribulation saints in Revelation 20:4 are not the "first" in the sense that no resurrection occurred before. They are first only in the sense that they occur first or before the final resurrection, which is the resurrection of the wicked at the end of the millennium. Actually, the order of resurrections are Christ first, then the resurrection of Matthew 27, then the resurrection of the rapture, and then the resurrection of the tribulation dead. To this should be added the resurrection of Old Testament saints which even pretribulationists place at the end of the tribulation. In other words, Ladd is once again assuming what he is trying to prove, namely, that the rapture and its attendant resurrection occur at the same time as the resurrection of the tribulation saints. What he overlooks is the fact that in Revelation 20:4 the specific resurrection refers only to tribulation saints, not to anyone else. The fact is that Ladd is inferring that the rapture occurs after the tribulation but has not proved it.

Is Posttribulationism a Valid Inference?

In chapter five Ladd faces the problem that posttribulationism is an inference. He approaches it, however, from the question as to whether pretribulationism is a valid inference. The fact that a whole chapter is devoted to this is most significant as it is an admission that this is a vulnerable point in the posttribulationist argument. While it is not possible to deal with all of his presentation, the salient points can be discussed.

Ladd concedes at the outset: "We will admit that even if Scripture did not explicitly affirm a pretribulation rapture, it is possible that the totality of scriptural data would demand such a conclusion; and in this case, it would be a valid inference." [8] *Ibid.*, p. 89. In the discussion which follows, he offers a comprehensive refutation of arguments commonly used by pretribulationism. In other words, his method is to attack pretribulationism rather than to support posttribulationism.

The important question of the usage of the word church is handled only briefly, although it is a major consideration. He admits that the word church is not found in any tribulation passage but replies that the word is never used in the Book of Revelation "to designate the Church in its totality." [9] *Ibid.*, p. 98. This, however, is not the real point. The burden of proof is on the posttribulationist to prove that the church is in the tribulation. If even a local church could be found in the period, it would be a point in favor of posttribulationism. Ladd, however, like most posttribulationists, passes over this point hurriedly because actually posttribulationism has no answer to this difficulty in their system. When it comes right down to it, they lack any positive proof that the church--the ecclesia--is ever found in the tribulation period or, for that matter, is indicated in the sequence of events related to the second coming to set up Christ's kingdom. As this is a key doctrine of pretribulationism, his rather weak and inadequate treatment of this problem is a defect in his argument. In contrast he devotes pages to indecisive questions.

In dealing with the question as to whether pretribulationism is a valid inference, Ladd finds it appropriate to ignore one of the most important pretribulation arguments for the necessity of an interval. [10] Cf. John F. Walvoord, "Premillennialism and the Tribulation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 112 (April 1955): 97-106. Pretribulationists have often pointed out that if every living saint is raptured at the time of the second coming this would, in itself, separate all saints from unsaved people and would leave none to populate the millennial earth. Ladd does not deal with this problem at all. Some of his fellow posttribulationists, such as Rose in his book *Tribulation til Translation* and Gundry in his recent work *The Rapture and the Tribulation*, do face this problem. Both postulate a second chance for those not saved at the time of the second coming. According to them there is a time period between the rapture and the beginning of the millennium during which people can still come to Christ. Rose puts this in a forty-day period between the rapture and the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25. The only posttribulationist answer to the problem which faces premillennialists in regard to populating the millennial earth is to give a second chance to those not saved and, therefore, not raptured at the rapture. However, the Scriptures do not reveal such a second chance. Ladd's silence on the whole matter seems to indicate he does not have a solution to this major problem of posttribulationism.

#### The Argument from Commands to "Watch"

In supporting his futurist view of posttribulationism, Ladd devotes considerable attention to various Greek words used in the New Testament to indicate the attitude of watchfulness. His point is to prove that the idea of the imminency of the Lord's return is not involved. Here his fallacy is that he attempts to make a general word a technical word, much as Reese and others have done. This violates the basic rule of interpretation that a word must be considered in its context. In some cases, the context is clearly in reference to the second coming of Christ to establish His kingdom. In other cases, it is in connection with

the rapture. The important point is that each of the various exhortations to watch for the Lord's coming has its own context. In some cases the context has to do with the return after the tribulation and, obviously, refers to people living at that time. The context in such instances makes clear, as in Matthew 24-25, that watching for the Lord's return has special pertinence after the signs appear but not before them. By contrast, however, where the rapture is clearly in view, no signs are given but the believers are exhorted to look for the Lord's return itself (cf. John 14:3; 1 Cor 15:51-52; 1 Thess 4:13-18). It may be conceded that some pretribulationists have overdone the argument based on these exhortations, but the similarity of expressions for expectancy of the rapture and the Lord's return after the tribulation does not prove that the two events are one and the same. Both are events to be expected, even if the expectancy may differ according to the context.

#### Wrath or Tribulation?

In a separate chapter, Ladd deals with the question as to whether divine wrath and tribulation are one and the same, and rightly concludes that the church cannot experience divine wrath although the church may experience tribulation. Most pretribulationists will concede this point. Ladd's argument, however, passes over the main point in the distinction as it is commonly presented by pretribulationists, and the real issue is avoided rather than faced. The point is not that the church will escape the wrath of God, but that it will escape the time of the wrath of God. As illustrated in the promise to the church at Philadelphia: "I will also keep thee from the hour of temptation, which will come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth" (Rev 3:10, italics added). It is also indicated in 1 Thessalonians 5, that Christians belong to the time designated as "the day" in contrast to "the night" in which the wrath will come. That the wrath of God is only at the end of the tribulation is refuted by the fact that it is mentioned in Revelation 6:17, that is, early in the period.

That the church will experience tribulation throughout its course is conceded by all pretribulationists. The question is whether the church will go through that specific time designated in Scripture as the great tribulation. It is noteworthy that Ladd does not deal adequately anywhere in his volume with the great theme of the tribulation although he evidently accepts a literal view of it. The characteristics of judgment of that period are such that they will affect both saved and unsaved, namely, such judgments as earthquakes, pestilence, war, famine, and stars falling from heaven. His argument that God will save the church in the tribulation as he saved Israel out of the judgments that fell on Egypt is its own refutation. No Israelites died in the plague. By contrast, as Ladd himself admits, the tribulation will feature the most awful persecution of saints ever to have occurred in the history of the church as supported by the multitude of those martyred in Revelation 7 who are said to come out of the great tribulation. While it is true that God can protect those whom He wishes and does protect the 144,000, the Scriptures make clear that the majority of those who trust Christ in the end time will seal their testimony with their own blood. The whole concept of the saints going triumphantly through the tribulation is not supported by the facts, as only a small portion of them will survive.

#### Relation of Posttribulationism to Dispensationalism

Although the recent work by Robert Gundry attempts to support the dispensational interpretation of Scripture while maintaining posttribulationism, his work is an anomaly, and he is the first in the history of the church to attempt this approach to posttribulationism.

By contrast, Ladd devotes a whole chapter showing that pretribulationism is built on dispensationalism, and if dispensationalism is proved to be incorrect, pretribulationism falls with it.

Ladd introduces his chapter attacking dispensationalism as the foundation for pretribulationism with these words:

In this brief chapter, we shall deal with a most important reason used by pretribulationists for refusing to apply the prophecies about the Great Tribulation to the Church. It is so important that it may be called the major premise of dispensationalism. It goes back to J. N. Darby, and is a method of handling the Scriptures which B. W. Newton, one of the earliest and most learned of the Brethren, called "the height of speculative nonsense."<sup>[11]</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 130.

In his discussion of dispensationalism, Ladd departs somewhat from his usual scholarly approach and accuses dispensationalists of holding interpretations which no dispensationalist would support. He defines dispensationalism as "the method of deciding in advance which Scriptures deal with the Church and which Scriptures have to do with Israel, and then to interpret the passages concerned in the light of this single 'division' of the Word."<sup>[12]</sup> *Ibid.* Dispensationalism, however, is not a premise seized on arbitrarily but a result of the application of literal interpretation of Scripture which all conservatives recognize is the norm for interpreting the Bible. A literal interpretation of passages dealing with the church and passages dealing with Israel indicate a distinct program, even though there are some similarities. Therefore, dispensationalists conclude that there have been various rules of life in Scripture and that it is not proper to apply Scriptures relating to one program to another without sufficient basis.

While it has not been possible to deal with all of Ladd's arguments in support of his conclusions, it is a fair judgment to say that his opposition to dispensationalism is a major cause for his posttribulationist view, and that this is normally the case for most posttribulationists. If his premise is correct--that dispensationalism which distinguishes Israel and the church is not a biblical method of interpretation--then Ladd may also be correct in arriving at his posttribulationist conclusion. Pretribulationism, however, is clearly based on literal interpretation, which holds that God's program for Israel and His program for the church are not identical.

#### The Posttribulationist Concept of the Blessed Hope

Posttribulationists are not at all agreed as to how the blessed hope fits into the prophetic program except that they always relate it to the second coming of Christ. Many will agree with Ladd's concluding chapter in which he expresses the opinion that we should not be so involved in the controversy between pre-and posttribulationism that we neglect our defense of the literalness of the second coming of Christ and the millennium which follows.

In his treatment of the blessed hope, however, it is most significant that Dr. Ladd does not expound even briefly the major passages on the blessed hope in the Bible, namely John 14:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; and 1 Corinthians 15:51-58. Instead he quotes an unknown author who uses Titus 2:11-14 to exhort to godly living in expectancy of the Lord's return. Ladd denies that the main force of this passage has to do with the Lord's return and also denies that the passage deals with the rapture. This is pure dogmatism. It does not seem to have occurred to Ladd that the glorious appearing here could very well be the rapture rather than the second coming as it has only believers in view, and to deny that believers will see Christ in His glory at the rapture is to deny the obvious.

It is unfortunate that Ladd repeats the libel that pretribulationism discourages worldwide missions. The facts are that many aggressive missionary organizations are pretribulational in their position and anyone else who uses the pretribulational point of view as an argument against missions is certainly violating Scripture. In this, pretribulationists will agree with Ladd while disagreeing that it is an argument against pretribulationism.

In reading the final chapter of Ladd's presentation, it is rather amazing how little is said about the blessed hope itself. Here the problem is that a posttribulational rapture is difficult to harmonize with "the blessed hope" if the church must go through the great tribulation, and many, if not most, of the church is martyred. It is hardly a blessed hope that those who survive will be raptured without dying. Far better it would be for them if they had lived out a normal life in a period prior to the rapture and had gone to heaven through death rather than living through the great tribulation. It is rather singular in most posttribulational works that they do not recognize the force of this problem in their own system.

It is also notable that Ladd does not give any reasonable sequence of prophetic events relating to the second coming except that he merges the rapture with the second coming. He does not discuss the problems that this causes premillennialism in regard to populating the millennial earth. He passes over Matthew 25:31-46 without dealing with the problems of posttribulationism. For many pretribulationists, one of their principal difficulties with the posttribulational view is that it does not resolve the problems that a merger of the rapture and the second coming create. If posttribulationism is to be credible, its proponents must not dodge their problems but face them.

Ladd's plea for tolerance on this point is understandable and with this many would agree. Fortunately, Christians can preach on many truths in agreement although disagreeing on the time of the rapture. However, it still remains true that the posttribulational view does not afford a uniform system of prophetic fulfillment related to the second coming, and this is evident by the fact that posttribulationists hardly ever sponsor a prophecy conference or attempt to unify their own school of thought as to the order of end-time events. Their problem is that they do not agree among themselves as to how a posttribulational rapture actually fits the sequence of events related to the second coming.

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