

# Part 22: Premillennialism and the Tribulation

by John F. Walvoord

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*The doctrine of the tribulation is important because it has tremendous practical and doctrinal implications, and its interpretation is crucial to understanding the relationship between the church and the coming of Christ.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 24:21

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

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the significance of the tribulation in relation to the second coming of Christ, exploring the exegetical, theological, and practical implications of this doctrine. He contrasts the postmillennial and amillennial attitudes towards the tribulation, highlighting the differences in interpretation and theological context. Walvoord also discusses the premillennial perspective on the tribulation, emphasizing the various interpretations within this view, such as posttribulational, midtribulational, and pretribulational positions, including the unique concept of partial rapture.

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## Transcript

### Part 22: Premillennialism and the Tribulation

In the memorable Olivet Discourse, our Lord Jesus Christ answered the searching question of His disciples, "What shall be the sign of thy coming and of the end of the world?" (Matt 24:3). The major event predicted by the Lord as a sign of the second advent was the great tribulation. He urged those living in Palestine in that day "to flee unto the mountains" (Matt 24:16). He exhorted them, "Let him that is on the housetop not go down to take out the things that are in his house: and let him that is in the field not return back to take his cloak. But woe unto them that are with child and to them that give suck in those days! And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on a sabbath: for then shall be great tribulation, such as hath not been from the beginning of the world unto now, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened" (Matt 24:17-22).

For those anticipating eagerly the coming advent of Christ, these words are fraught with tremendous meaning. Does there lie between us and the consummation of the age this awful period of trial? Must the church remain on earth through the great tribulation?

The Tribulation a Major Problem of Eschatology

While Eschatology is at present enjoying revived interest among liberal theologians, the trend among conservatives seems to be to minimize its importance. It is frequently argued that in a day when the authority of the Bible as a whole is being disputed there is little profit in debating the fine points of Eschatology. If this is the case, an inquiry into the relationship of the tribulation to premillennialism is wasted effort. The question of whether the church must continue on earth through the predicted time of trouble, however, is neither trivial nor academic. It can be demonstrated that the issue is fraught with tremendous practical and doctrinal implications. While not as far-reaching in Biblical interpretation as premillennialism as a whole, the decision concerning the character of the tribulation is important to any detailed program of the future and is significant in its application of principles of interpretation far beyond the doctrine itself.

Importance of the doctrine of the tribulation. There are at least three reasons why the relationship of the tribulation to the coming of the Lord is important. It is first of all an exegetical problem. The many passages in the Old and New Testament, including the major part of the Book of Revelation, require an intelligent exegesis. The problem of the interpretation of the tribulation cannot be left in the area of suspended judgment without leaving these passages without exposition.

Second, it is a theological problem. It can be demonstrated that the interpretation given to the tribulation is integral to particular theological points of view, especially in the area of Eschatology. Questions such as the use of the literal method of interpretation as opposed to the nonliteral or spiritualizing method, the separation of divine programs for Israel and the church, and the larger issue of amillennialism versus premillennialism combine to make the doctrine significant beyond its own borders. To some extent the interpretation of the tribulation is predetermined by decision in other aspects of Eschatology.

Third, the doctrine is one of practical importance. If the church is destined to endure the persecutions of the tribulation, it is futile to hold the coming of the Lord before it as an imminent hope. Instead, it should be recognized that Christ cannot come until these predicted sorrows have been accomplished. On the other hand, if Christ will come for His church before the predicted time of trouble, Christians can regard His coming as an imminent, daily expectation. From a practical standpoint, the doctrine has tremendous implications.

Postmillennial attitude toward the tribulation. While there is a wide variety of interpretation of the doctrine of the tribulation, each form of millennial teaching can be broadly characterized by its own position on the tribulation. In the postmillennial point of view, as illustrated in the writings of Charles Hodge, the tribulation is viewed as a final state of trouble just preceding the grand climax of the triumph of the gospel. The national conversion of Israel and the national conversion of Gentiles is viewed as containing in its last stages a final conflict with Antichrist, which is equated with Romanism.[1] Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, III, 812-36.

It is characteristic of postmillennialism that it does not attempt a literal interpretation of the tribulation. Some less conservative than Hodge, such as Snowden, regard the tribulation as any time of trouble, now largely past or associated with the apostolic period. Hodge himself does not offer any specific system of interpretation, as illustrated in his comment on the Book of Revelation: "Some regard it as a description in oriental imagery of contemporaneous events; others as intended to set forth the different phases of the spiritual life of the Church; others as designed to unfold the leading events in the history of the Church and of the world in their chronological order; others again assume that it is a series, figuratively speaking, of circles; each vision or series of visions relating to the same events under different aspects; the end, and

the preparation for the end, being presented over and over again; the great theme being the coming of the Lord, and the triumph of his Church." [2] Ibid., III, 826.

While vague as to specific teaching, the postmillennial interpretation of the tribulation is clear, however, in its general characteristics. The tribulation is a time of trouble just preceding the second advent of Christ. The tribulation, however, is not very definite and its character is not sufficiently serious to interfere with the onward march of the church to a great climax of triumph at the second advent of Christ. The tribulation is a minor phase of the closing events of the age.

Amillennial attitude toward the tribulation. The amillennial interpretation of the tribulation does not differ essentially from the postmillennial although it has a different theological context. In Augustinian amillennialism, the present age is regarded as the predicted millennium, and inasmuch as the tribulation is said to precede the millennium, by so much it must already be past. Often it is identified with the troubles of Israel in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The fact that the Book of Revelation was written after this event, however, and that a time of trouble is predicted to precede the second advent, has led some like Berkhof to hold to a future tribulation, placing the fulfillment of Scripture dealing with the tribulation, to which is added the battle of Gog and Magog, after the millennium. Berkhof writes: "The words of Jesus [Olivet Discourse] undoubtedly found a partial fulfillment in the days preceding the destruction of Jerusalem, but will evidently have a further fulfillment in the future in a tribulation far surpassing anything that has ever been experienced, Matt 24:21; Mark 13:19." [3] Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, p. 700.

The amillennial view, therefore, holds to a future tribulation period, but there is little uniformity concerning its exact character. The tendency in amillennialism is to avoid specific details in describing the tribulation. In effect, while admitting the fact of the coming tribulation amillennialists spiritualize the sequence of events which are prophesied. This is particularly true in the interpretation of the tribulation section of the Book of Revelation.

Premillennial attitude toward the tribulation. In general premillennialists interpret the coming tribulation with more literalness than either the amillennialists or postmillennialists. Within the ranks of premillennialists, however, there are three main types of interpretation. Some premillennialists hold the view that the coming of Christ for His church will be posttributational, that is, that the church will remain on earth throughout the tribulation period.

In recent years there has arisen a modification of this, known as the midtributational view, which holds that the church will be translated at a coming of the Lord for His church just before the great tribulation prophesied by our Lord, but in the middle of the seven-year period predicted by Daniel as preceding the coming of Christ (Dan 9:27). This view is rather recent and as yet has a limited literature.

The third view, which is very popular with premillennialists who have specialized in prophetic study, is the pretributational position, which holds that Christ will come for His church before the entire seven-year period predicted by Daniel. The church in this point of view does not enter at all into the final tribulation period. This teaching was espoused by Darby and the Plymouth Brethren and popularized by the famous Scofield Reference Bible. Generally speaking, the pretributational position is followed by those who consider premillennialism a system of Bible interpretation, while the posttributational and midtributational positions characterize those who limit the area of premillennialism to Eschatology.

An offshoot of pretribulationism, though seldom recognized as an orthodox point of view, is the partial rapture concept that only the godly Christians expecting the return of Christ will be translated before the tribulation, the rest continuing through it until the return of Christ to establish His earthly kingdom. It is obvious that only one of these four possible positions is correct, and it is the duty of the Biblical exegete to determine which is the proper interpretation of related Scriptures. It is the plan of the following treatment to deal with the pretribulation position, including a refutation of the partial rapture concept, then to consider the posttribulation view, and finally the midtribulation position. that the followers of Darby "sought to overthrow what, since the Apostolic Age, have been considered by all pre-millennialists as established results." [5] Loc. cit.

It must be conceded that the advanced and detailed theology of pretribulationism is not found in the Fathers, but neither is any other detailed and "established" exposition of premillennialism. The development of most important doctrines took centuries. If the doctrine of the Trinity did not receive permanent statement until the fourth century and thereafter, beginning with the Council of Nicea in 325, and if the doctrine of human depravity was not a settled doctrine of the church until the fifth century and after, and if such doctrines as the sufficiency of Scripture and the priesthood of the believer were not recognized until the Protestant Reformation, it is not to be wondered at that details of Eschatology, always difficult, should unfold slowly. It is certainly an unwarranted generalization to postulate a detailed and systematic premillennialism as in existence from the Apostolic Age.

The central feature of pretribulationism, the doctrine of imminency, is, however, a prominent feature of the doctrine of the early church. Without facing all the problems which the doctrine of imminency raises, such as its relation to the tribulation, the early church lived in constant expectation of the coming of the Lord for His church. According to Moffat, it was the widespread Jewish belief that some would be exempt from the tribulation. [6] Cf. Expositor's Greek Testament. s.v., Rev 3:10. "Rabbinic piety (Sanh. 98b) expected exemption from the tribulation of the latter days only for those who were absorbed in good works and in sacred studies." For this citation and others which follow, cf. H. C. Thiessen, Bibliotheca Sacra, April-June, 1935, pp. 187-96. Clement of Rome (first century) wrote, "Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished, as the Scriptures also bear witness, saying, 'Speedily will he come, and will not tarry;' and, 'The Lord shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Holy One, for whom ye look.'" [7] I Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, chapter 23.

The Didache (120 A.D.) contains the exhortation, "Watch for your life' sake. Let not your lamps be quenched, nor your loins unloosed; but be ye ready, for ye know not the hour in which our Lord cometh." [8] Ante-Nicene Fathers, VII, 382. It should be clear from this quotation that the coming of the Lord is considered as possible in any hour, certainly an explicit reference to the imminency of the Lord's return.

A similar reference is found in the "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles" (Book VII, Sec. ii, xxxi): "Observe all things that are commanded you by the Lord. Be watchful for your life. 'Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning, and ye like unto men who wait for their Lord, when He will come, at even, or in the morning, or at cock-crowing, or at midnight. For what hour they think not, the Lord will come; and if they open to Him, blessed are those servants, because they were found watching...." [9] Ibid., VII, 471. Here again is the doctrine of imminency taught without apology.

It should be clear to any discerning student of prophecy that this expectancy of the early return of the Lord was not always coupled with a systematic structure of Eschatology as a whole. The problems were

frequently left unresolved. To say, however, that the doctrine of imminency, which is the heart of pretribulationism, is a new and unheard of doctrine is, to say the least, an overstatement. While the teachings of the Fathers are not clear on details, it is certainly beyond dispute that they regarded the coming of the Lord as a matter of daily expectancy. It is entirely unwarranted to assume as the posttribulationists do that the early church regarded the imminent coming of the Lord as an impossibility and that their expectation was the great tribulation first, then the coming of the Lord. If pretribulationism was unknown, in the same sense modern posttribulationism was also unknown. The charge that pretribulationism is a new and novel doctrine is false; that it has been developed and defined to a large extent in recent centuries is true. In any event, the thesis that the early Fathers were omniscient and once-for-all defined every phase of theology is an unjustified limitation on the liberty of the Spirit of God to reveal the truth of Scripture to each generation of believers. The history of the doctrine of the church has always to this hour revealed progress in other areas, and it is to be expected that this will continue also in Eschatology.

The hermeneutical argument. It is generally agreed by all parties that one of the major differences between amillennialism and premillennialism lies in the use of the literal method of interpretation. Amillenarians, while admitting the need for literal interpretation of Scripture in general, have held from Augustine to the present time that prophecy is a special case requiring spiritualizing or nonliteral interpretation. Premillenarians hold, on the contrary, that the literal method applies to prophecy as well as other doctrinal areas, and therefore contend for a literal millennium.

In a somewhat less degree the same hermeneutical difference is seen in the pretribulationist versus the posttribulationist positions. Pretribulationism is based upon a literal interpretation of key Scriptures, while posttribulationism tends toward spiritualization of the tribulation passages. This is seen principally in two aspects.

Posttribulationists usually ignore the distinction between Israel and the church much in the fashion of the amillenarian school. The reason for this is that none of the tribulation passages in either the Old or New Testament ever mention the "church" or the ecclesia. In order to prove that the church is in the tribulation period, it is necessary to identify key terms as equivalent to the church. Hence, Israel becomes a general name for the church and in some contexts becomes an equivalent term. The term elect becomes a general designation for the saints of all ages, regardless of limitation of the context. Saints of all dispensations are considered as members of the true church. In order to make these various terms equivalents, it is necessary to take Scripture in other than a literal sense in many instances--the use of Israel as equivalent to the church being an illustration. The proof that the church is in the tribulation requires a theological system which spiritualizes many of its terms, and posttribulationists brush off a more literal interpretation as too trivial to answer. through the Tribulation without being compelled to feel the full force of it, even as the Israelites went through the plague-period in Egypt? ...The way of escape might take the form of a partial exemption from suffering..."[12] McPherson, op. cit., pp. 22-23. Reese has a different slant on the same subject by declaring that "immediately before the Day of the Lord falls, God can call His saints to Himself, without the necessity of an additional advent a generation earlier." [13] Reese, op. cit., p. 212. He goes on to explain, "That is, the righteous shall first be removed and then the judgment shall fall." [14] Ibid., p. 213. In effect, Reese is denying that judgments will fall until the close of the tribulation when the Lord comes. Practically speaking, he denies that the tribulation will be a time of tribulation. For Reese the wrath does not begin at Revelation 6:13 but in Revelation 19. By such sophistry the teaching that the church will go through the tribulation but without tribulation is preserved. Of importance here,

however, is the illustration of the principle of interpretation used by the posttribulationists--the avoidance of the literal interpretation of the major passage, the Book of Revelation.

The choice of a weakened tribulation is not an accident, however, but necessary to their position. Only by this device can passages picturing the hope of the Lord's return as a comfort and joy be sustained. It is impossible to harmonize a literal interpretation of the tribulation with posttribulationism. It would nullify not only the promises of comfort, but also the imminency and practical application of the doctrine of the Lord's coming. The controversy between pretribulationists and posttribulationists is, in miniature, a replica of the larger controversy of premillennialism and amillennialism as far as principles of interpretation are concerned. This is brought out more in detail in the Scriptural revelation of the tribulation itself to which we now turn.

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