

Part 25: Pretribulationism (Continued)

by John F. Walvoord

This sermon explores the necessity of an interval between the translation of the church and the establishment of the millennial kingdom, supported by scriptural evidence and theological arguments.

Scripture: Isaiah 65:20, Ezekiel 20:34, Zechariah 14:4, Matthew 25:31, 1 Corinthians 3:14, 2 Corinthians 5:10, 1 Peter 5:4, Revelation 22:12

Topics: "Millennial Kingdom", "Eschatology"

Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the necessity of an interval between the translation of the church and the establishment of the millennial kingdom, supported by a careful study of Scripture. The argument is based on four lines of evidence: intervening events in heaven, intervening events on earth, the nature of the judgment of the Gentiles, and the nature of the judgment of Israel. The interval is crucial for various events to unfold, including the judgment seat of Christ for believers, the regathering and judgment of Israel, and the judgment of the Gentiles, all pointing to the need for a generation of believers to enter the millennial kingdom.

Transcript

Argument from the necessity of an interval between the translation and the establishment of the millennial kingdom. A careful study of related Scripture will demonstrate that an interval of time between the translation of the church and the coming of Christ to establish the millennial kingdom is absolutely necessary because certain events must take place in the intervening period. In general, the argument depends upon four lines of evidence: (1) intervening events in heaven; (2) intervening events on earth; (3) the nature of the judgment of the Gentiles; (4) the nature of the judgment of Israel.

(1) Intervening events in heaven. According to 2 Corinthians 5:10, all Christians will appear before a judgment seat of Christ to be judged according to their works: "For we must all be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad." [1] All quotations from Scripture are from the American Standard Version (1901) unless otherwise stated. This judgment is not a general judgment--it relates to those described as "we all," which the context would seem to limit to believers in Christ in the present age. [2] Cf. L. S. Chafer, Systematic Theology, IV, 404-6; E. S. English, Re-thinking the Rapture, pp. 81-84. The character of the judgment is that of reward. By comparing this Scripture with a companion passage in 1 Corinthians 3:14-15, it is clear that the issue is not punishment for sin but reward for good works: "If any

man's work shall abide which he hath built thereon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire." The distinguishing of good and bad works in 2 Corinthians 5 is for the purpose of determining reward.

The character of this judgment seems to set it apart from judgments occurring at the second advent. The rewards anticipated in this judgment are described as imminent in several Scriptures. In 1 Peter 5:4 it is revealed, "And when the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory that fadeth not away." Again in Revelation 22:12, Christ declares, "Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me to render to each man according as his work is."

While the time of the judgment is not explicit in any of the passages, certain other evidences seem to require this judgment as preceding and prerequisite to the second coming itself. If the four and twenty elders of Revelation 4:4 are interpreted as referring to the church--a disputed point--it would tend to confirm that judgment of the church has already taken place, as they are already crowned.[3] According to the Authorized Version of Revelation 5:9-10, the twenty-four elders are described as redeemed by the blood of Christ and made kings and priests. This would unmistakably identify them as saints and in all probability the church in particular. In the text adopted for translation in the American Standard Version and the Revised Standard Version, the "us" of verse 9 is removed, and the "us" of verse 10 is made "them." This would make it possible to identify the elders as angels rather than men. Scholars are divided on the issue. Kelly declares the elders are the church. "They are clearly saints and at home in glory," a conclusion which he states "few will deny" (Lectures on the Book of Revelation, p. 98). James Moffatt in the Expositor's Greek Testament (V, 378) identifies the elders as angels and appeals to mythology for support. The interpretation ultimately rests on exegesis as the improved text leaves the question open. Many considerations would point to identification with the church. For further discussion cf. E. Schuyler English, Re-thinking the Rapture, pp. 92-98. A decisive evidence is found in Revelation 19:6-8 where the "wife" of the Lamb is declared to be arrayed "in fine linen, bright and pure: for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints" (Rev 19:8). The implication is evident that those who compose the "wife" are already translated or resurrected, and their righteous acts determined and rewarded. The marriage supper announced indicates that the marriage itself has already taken place. If the church is to be judged, rewarded, and joined to Christ in the symbol of marriage before the second advent, an interval of time is required.

(2) Intervening events on earth. If the premillennial interpretation of Scripture be assumed, it is evident that the tribulation period is a time of preparation for the millennium. Certain problems immediately arise if the church is not translated until the end of the tribulation. Nothing is more evident in the passage dealing with the translation of the church than the fact that every believer on that occasion is translated, that is, transformed from a body of flesh to an immortal body and caught up from the earth. The very act of translation also constitutes an absolute separation of all believers from all unbelievers. In a moment of time the greatest separation that could possibly be imagined takes place.

If the translation takes place after the tribulation, the question facing the posttribulationists is a very obvious one: Who is going to populate the earth during the millennium? The Scriptures are specific that, during the millennium, saints will build houses and bear children and have normal, mortal lives on earth. If all believers are translated and all unbelievers are put to death, there will be no one left to populate the earth and fulfill these Scriptures. While posttribulationism may satisfy the amillenarian who denies a future millennium, it presents a difficult problem to the premillenarian.

The Scriptures declare emphatically that life on earth in the millennium relates to a people not translated and not resurrected, a people still in the mortal bodies. Isaiah 65:20-25 states that there will be rejoicing in Jerusalem, a person dying at the age of one hundred years will be regarded as a child. It declares of the inhabitants: "They shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree shall be the days of my people, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth for calamity; for they are the seed of the blessed of Jehovah, and their offspring with them" (Isa 65:21-23). The passage closes with a description of millennial conditions, "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith Jehovah" (Isa 65:25). Obviously, only a people in mortal flesh build houses, plant, work, and have offspring. The concluding chapter of Isaiah continues the same theme. There will be judgment upon the wicked but peace to Jerusalem like a river. The description is not of a people translated or resurrected, but a people purged and judged worthy, though still in the flesh, of entrance into the millennial earth.

The best answer to the problem of who will populate the millennial earth is an obvious one. If the church is translated before the tribulation period, there is ample time for a new generation of believers to come into being from Jew and Gentile background to qualify for entrance into the millennial kingdom at the second coming of Christ. The problem of populating the millennium is thereby quickly solved and many relating Scriptures are given a natural and literal interpretation. It is significant that Alexander Reese in his closely reasoned attack upon the pretribulation position[4] *The Approaching Advent of Christ*. finds it convenient to ignore this major objection to posttribulationism entirely. What is true of Reese is true also of other posttribulationists.[5] No answer is given to this argument and it is not mentioned in Fromow's *Triumph through Tribulation*. The posttribulationist position leads logically to an abandonment of premillennialism altogether, or requires such spiritualization of the millennium until it becomes indistinguishable from an amillennial interpretation. Premillennialism demands an interval between the translation and the second coming to make possible a generation of believers who will enter the millennium.

This conclusion is confirmed by a study of the two major judgments which take place in connection with the establishment of the kingdom, which are related to the entire human race: (1) the judgment of Israel (Ezek 20:34-38), and (2) the judgment of the Gentiles (Matt 25:31-46). These judgments deal with the living Gentiles and Israelites who are on the earth at the time of the second advent.

According to Ezekiel 20:34-38, at the time of the second advent a regathering of Israel is brought about. It obviously takes considerable time--many weeks, if not months--to effect, but it is carried out precisely as the prophets indicate. Isaiah states that every means of transportation is pressed into use: "They shall bring all your brethren out of all the nations for an oblation unto Jehovah, upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters and upon mules, and upon dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, saith Jehovah..." (Isa 66:20). That the regathering is to be complete to the last man--obviously not fulfilled by previous regathering--is declared in Ezekiel 39:25-29. It is explicitly stated, "I have gathered them unto their own land, and have left none of them any more there," i.e., among the nations (Ezek 39:28).

The regathering process completed, a judgment of Israel is described in Ezekiel 20:34-38. God declares: "I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant; and I will purge out from among you the rebels, and them that transgress against me...they shall not enter into the land of Israel..." (Ezek 20:37-38).

In the light of the details of this judgment, it should be clear to any impartial observer that the judgment deals with Israelites still in the flesh, not translated or resurrected. Further, the process takes time because of the geographic regathering that is involved. It is an event related to the establishment of the millennial kingdom but is subsequent by some weeks or months to the actual second advent. It relates to Israel racially alone and includes both believers and unbelievers. The judgment consists in putting to death all the rebels or unbelievers, leaving only the believers to enter the promised land.

This multitude of details sets this judgment apart from the translation of the church as much as any two events could be distinguished. The translation takes place in a moment. The translation relates only to believers, and it leaves unbelievers exactly as they were before. The translation of the church has no relation to promises of the land of Israel. The Ezekiel judgment has the promises of possession of the promised land as a primary objective--determining those qualified for entrance. The translation of the church is followed by arrival in heaven. The believers of Ezekiel 20 enter the land, not heaven, in bodies of flesh, not immortal bodies. The translation concerns Jewish and Gentile believers alike. This judgment has to do only with Israel.

It should be further evident that, if the translation of the church took place simultaneously with, the second advent to establish the kingdom, the Ezekiel judgment would be both impossible and unnecessary as the separation of believers from unbelievers would have already taken place. It may therefore be concluded from the nature of the judgment of Israel that an interval is required between the translation of the church and the judgment of Israel during which a new generation of Israelites who believe in Christ as Savior and Messiah comes into being and who are waiting for His second advent to the earth to establish the millennial kingdom.

A similar conclusion is reached by the study of the judgment of the Gentiles described in Matthew 25:31-46. Taking the Ezekiel passage and the Matthew passage together, the whole population of the earth at the second coming of Christ is in view. If all Israelites are dealt with in Ezekiel, all the others described as the "nations" or the Gentiles are in the Matthew judgment. In the Matthew passage, like that of Ezekiel 20, no mention is made of either resurrection or translation, though both are often read into the passage by posttribulationists somewhat desperate to combine all the passages.

The separation of Matthew 25 is similar to that of Ezekiel 20. The unbelievers, described as the "goats," are cast into everlasting fire by means of physical death, whereas the "sheep" enter the kingdom prepared for them--the millennial kingdom. While the judgment in Matthew 25, as in Ezekiel 20, is based on outward works, it is true here as elsewhere in Scripture that works are taken as evidence of salvation. The good works of the "sheep" in befriending the "brethren" (the Jewish people) is an act of kindness which no one but a believer in Christ would perform during the tribulation when Christian as well as Jew is hated by all the world. Ironside interprets the passage: "But this judgment, like the other, is according to works. The sheep are those in whom divine life is manifested by their loving care for those who belong to Christ. The goats are bereft of this, and speak of the unrepentant, who did not respond to Christ's messengers." [6] H. A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 337-38. The result of the judgment of the Gentiles is the purging of all unbelievers, with the believers, who are thereby left, granted the privilege of entrance into the kingdom.

The judgment of the Gentiles is an individual judgment, though some premillenarians have seen in it a description of national judgment. This misconception has arisen from the English translation where the Greek word *ethne* is rendered "nation." It is, of course, the same word precisely as would be used for

Gentiles individually. Inasmuch as the nature of the judgment is individual, however, the use of "nation" in a political sense is misleading. No national group can qualify as a group as either a "sheep" or a "goat" nation, and no nation inherits either the kingdom or everlasting fire for its works. Eternal judgment must of necessity apply to the individual.

A comparison of this judgment of Gentiles again confirms the fact that this is an entirely different event than the translation of the church. This is, first of all, demonstrated by the time of the judgment. It occurs after the second advent and after a throne is set up in the earth. The translation of the church, according to all viewpoints, takes place before Christ actually arrives on earth. The judgment of the Gentiles results in the purging of unbelievers out from among believers. The translation of the church takes believers out from among unbelievers, and leaves unbelievers untouched. This judgment also distinguishes the individuals involved on a racial basis. coming designated as (b). (a) At the time of the translation, the saints will meet the Lord in the air. (b) At the time of the second coming, Christ will return to the Mount of Olives which on that occasion will undergo a great transformation, a valley being formed to the east of Jerusalem where the Mount of Olives was formerly located (Zech 14:4-5). (a) At the coming of Christ for the church, the living saints are translated. (b) At the coming of Christ to establish His kingdom, there is no translation whatever. (a) At the translation of the church, Christ returns with the saints to heaven. (b) At the second coming, Christ remains on the earth and reigns as King. (a) At the time of the translation, the earth is not judged and sin continues. (b) At the time of the second coming, sin is judged and righteousness fills the earth.

(a) The translation is before the day of wrath from which the church is promised deliverance. (b) The second coming follows the great tribulation and outpoured judgment and brings them to climax and culmination in the establishment of the millennial kingdom. (a) The translation is described as an imminent event. (b) The second coming will follow definite prophesied signs. (a) The translation of the church is revealed only in the New Testament. (b) The second coming of Christ is the subject of prophecy in both Testaments. (a) The translation concerns only the saved of this age. (b) The second coming deals with saved and unsaved. (a) At the translation, only those in Christ are affected. (b) At the second coming, not only men are affected but Satan and his hosts are defeated and Satan is bound.

While it is evident that there are some similarities in the two events, these do not prove that they are the same. There are similarities also between the first and the second coming of Christ, but these have been separated by almost two thousand years. These similarities confused the Old Testament prophets but are easily deciphered by us today. Undoubtedly after the church is translated, tribulation saints will be able to see the distinction of the coming for translation and the coming to establish the kingdom in a similar clarity.

Before considering the opposing schools of thought represented in the posttribulation and midtribulation viewpoints, it is necessary first to examine an offshoot of pretribulationism known as the partial rapture view. While rejected by the overwhelming majority of pretribulationists and considered by them a doctrinal aberration, its issues must be presented before leaving the general field of pretribulationism. To this the next discussion will be devoted.

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