

Part 28: Posttribulationism (Continued)

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon discusses the doctrine of posttribulationism and its arguments against pretribulationism, with a focus on the denial of imminency and the significance of the resurrection of the saints.

Scripture: Matthew 24:40, John 14:3, 1 Corinthians 15:23, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:1

Topics: "Eschatology", "Pretribulationism"

Description

John F. Walvoord addresses the denial of the imminency of Christ's return, particularly focusing on the arguments presented by posttribulationists against pretribulationism. He refutes these arguments by highlighting the resolved hindrances to Christ's imminent return, the belief and teaching of first-century Christians in the imminent return of Christ, and the significance of Scripture exhorting believers to be watchful for His return. Additionally, he discusses the resurrection of the saints after the tribulation, the confusion surrounding the Day of the Lord, the role of the Restrainer in 2 Thessalonians 2, and the doctrine of the end as evidence for pretribulationism.

Transcript

Denial of imminency of the return of Christ. The teaching that Christ could come for His church at any moment is a doctrine of pretribulationism often singled out for attack by posttribulationists. Obviously, if the church must go through the tribulation, the imminent translation is a vain hope. Posttribulationists therefore labor either to deny imminency or to invest the word with a different meaning which does not require immediacy. Their denial of imminence is a major aspect of their argument against pretribulationism.

Posttribulationists are wont to give considerable space to this argument--more than can be allowed in rebuttal. (Cf. Robert Cameron, *Scriptural Truth about the Lord's Return*, pp. 21-69.) The following arguments are usually included in the posttribulationist statement: (1) the promise of Christ to Peter that he would die in old age (John 21:18-19); (2) various parables which teach a long interval between the time the Lord leaves and the time He returns (Matt 25:14-30); (3) intimations that the program for the present age is extensive (Matt 13:1-50; 28:19-20 ; Luke 19:11-27; Acts 1:5-8); (4) Paul's long-distance plans for missionary journeys and his knowledge of his approaching death, a tacit denial that he believed in the imminent return of Christ; (5) the prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, preceding the second advent (Luke 21:20-24); (6) the specific signs of the second advent given to the disciples (Matt 24:1--25:30). The problem is further complicated for the pretribulationist in that nineteen hundred years have elapsed,

indicating that it was, after all, the purpose of God to have an extensive period before the coming of the Lord. How then can these objections be answered?

At the outset it must be observed that most of the hindrances to the coming of the Lord at any moment in the first century no longer exist. A long period has elapsed; Peter and Paul have gone home to the Lord; only the specific signs of Matthew 24--25 remain to be fulfilled. Most of the difficulties to an imminent return have been resolved.

However, the question is whether the first-century Christians believed and taught the imminent return of Christ in the sense that it could occur at any moment. Most of the difficulties raised by posttribulationists dissolve upon examination. Peter was middle-aged at the time the prophecy of John 21:18-19 was given. By the time the teaching of the imminent translation of the church was fully preached and received in the church he was already well past middle life. The prophecy as recorded in John 21 apparently was not common property of the church until long after he died anyway and constituted no obstacle to belief in the imminency of the Lord's coming for the great majority of Christians. Even if known, the dangers of martyrdom as illustrated in the early sudden death of James and the difficulties of communication would leave most of the church with no knowledge on a given day whether Peter was alive or not.

The long period pictured by the parables could certainly be fitted into the doctrine of imminency. A long period for a journey might occupy only a few years, as far as the first-century Christians could determine. The extensive preaching of the gospel in the first century might likewise seem to satisfy the program of preaching to the ends of the earth. The coming of the Lord was in no wise contingent upon the gospel actually reaching every person. Under the pretribulational interpretation, time is allowed for events to be fulfilled after the translation of the church. While the destruction of Jerusalem took place in A.D. 70, as far as first-century Christians could see it might have been delayed until after the rapture. In any case, the specific signs of the second advent could follow the translation. That Paul should receive specific revelation immediately before his death that he would die rather than be translated may have removed the imminency of the Lord's return for him in his last days but no more.

As has been shown in previous discussion of the doctrine of imminency in connection with pretribulational arguments, the positive fact remains that Scripture abounds with exhortation to be looking for the return of the Lord. These positive commands, which are meaningful largely as related to imminency, are evidence far outweighing the difficulties raised against the doctrine. The return of the Lord if imminent justifies such descriptive words as blessed, comfort, purifying, and the like. If the posttribulationists are right, the hope of the Lord's return is reduced to the hope of resurrection, as few of the saints who would enter the tribulation would escape martyrdom.

Argument that the resurrection of the saints occurs after the tribulation. Alexander Reese in his major work attacking pretribulationism uses as his principal argument the resurrection of the saints as an event which follows the tribulation. (Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, pp. 34-94.) Reese points out that Darby believed that the resurrection of the Old Testament saints took place at the same time as the translation and resurrection of the church. Therefore, if it can be proved that the Old Testament saints are raised after the tribulation it would also prove that the church is translated at the same time. Reese states: "Now concerning the Rapture there are only three undisputed texts in the Bible that deal with it, namely: 1 Thess iv.17 , 2 Thess ii.1 , and John xiv.3 ; but there are many passages in both the O. and N. Testaments that speak of the resurrection of the holy dead, which, Darbyists assure us, takes place in immediate connexion with the Rapture" (ibid., p. 34). Reese then proceeds to pile up proofs that the resurrection of

the Old Testament saints occurs after the tribulation period.

While many pretribulationists have attempted to refute Reese on this point, there is a growing tendency to review the question of whether the Old Testament saints are, after all, raised at the same time as the church. Most of the old Testament passages of which Daniel 12:1-2 is an example do indeed seem to set up a chronology of tribulation first, then resurrection of the Old Testament saints. On the other hand, the passages dealing with the resurrection of the church in the New Testament seem to include only the church. The expression "the dead in Christ shall rise first" (1 Thess 4:16) seems to include only the church. The Old Testament saints are never described by the phrase "in Christ." The fact that the "voice of the archangel"--Israel's defender--is heard at the rapture is not conclusive proof that Israel is raised at that time. The tendency of followers of Darby to spiritualize the resurrection of Daniel 12:1-2 as merely the restoration of Israel, thereby refuting its posttribulationism, is to forsake literal interpretation to gain a point, a rather costly concession for premillenarians who build upon literal interpretation of prophecy. The best answer to Reese is to concede his point that the resurrection of Old Testament saints is after the tribulation, but to divorce it completely from the translation and resurrection of the church. Reese's carefully built argument then proves only that Darby was hasty in claiming the resurrection of the Old Testament saints at the time of the translation of the church. If the translation of the church is a different event entirely, Reese proves nothing by his argument.

The point at issue is the question when the translation and resurrection of the church will take place. There is not a single Scripture in either the Old or New Testament which relates the translation of the church to a posttribulational coming of Christ. While Old Testament saints may be resurrected at Christ's posttribulational coming, no mention is made of a translation of living saints. The reason that posttribulationists attempt to throw the burden of proof for a pretribulational rapture on their opponents is that they themselves have no proof to the contrary. The fact that Old Testament saints and tribulational saints are resurrected after the tribulation according to explicit Scriptures (Dan 12:1-2; Rev 20:4) raises the question why neither the translation nor the resurrection of the church is mentioned in this event. While silence is not explicit, it is nevertheless eloquent in this case. If posttribulationists had one positive Scripture on the time of the translation, it would save them much complicated argument.

Argument that the principal words for the return of Christ refer to a posttribulational coming. Both pretribulationists and posttribulationists have been guilty of confusing the real issue by injecting technical meaning for certain words referring to the return of Christ. The principal words cited are *parousia*, usually translated "coming"; *apokalupsis*, translated "revelation," and *epiphaneia*, translated "appearing."

Posttribulationists have rightly argued that all three of these terms are used in connection with the return of Christ after the tribulation. The error lies in the attempt to make these words technical expressions referring to the second advent. A simple concordance study will demonstrate that these are general rather than specific terms and that all three of them are used of the coming of Christ at the translation and also of His coming at the second advent. Their common use no more proves that the two events are one and the same than the use of any other ordinary word (cf. John F. Walvoord, "New Testament Words for the Lord's Coming," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 101:283-89, July-September, 1944).

The "coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus," Paul's friends (1 Cor 16:17), "the coming of Titus" (2 Cor 7:6-7), the "coming" of Paul himself (Phil 1:26, A.V., R.S.V.), the "coming" of the lawless one (2 Thess 2:9), and "the coming of the day of God" (2 Pet 3:12) are certainly not one and the same "coming." The use of *parousia* in these passages proves it is not a technical word. The same word is used

of the coming of the Lord at the translation (1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 2:19; 4:15 ; 5:23 ; 2 Thess 2:1; James 5:7-8; 1 John 2:28). Some pretribulationists have erred in claiming the word *parousia* as a technical word referring to the rapture. That this is not correct is shown by its usage in passages referring to the coming of Christ after the tribulation (Matt 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Thess 3:13; 2 Thess 2:8; 2 Pet 1:16).

The other words, *apokalupsis* and *epiphaneia*, translated "revelation" and "appearing," are likewise used of both events. *Apokalupsis* is used of the revelation of Christ to the church at the rapture in a number of passages (1 Cor 1:7; Col 3:4; 1 Pet 1:7, 13). The church will "see him even as he is" (1 John 3:2). The world will see the glorified Christ when He returns after the tribulation (Luke 17:30; 2 Thess 1:7; 1 Pet 4:13).

Epiphaneia refers to the appearing of Christ. It is used of the incarnation of the Son of God (Luke 1:79; 2 Tim 1:10). As related to the translation of the church, it is used in 1 Timothy 6:14 and 2 Timothy 4:8. As relating to the coming of Christ after the tribulation, reference is found in 2 Timothy 4:1 and Titus 2:13.

The posttribulationist argument on these words proves only that the three words are used of both events. It does not prove that both comings are one and the same, and it is therefore worthless as a refutation of pretribulationism. While posttribulationists often ridicule the teaching that there should be more than one "coming" of Christ, there is no more reason why there should not be more than one future coming than there is against their own doctrine of a past coming and a future coming. To the Old Testament saint the division into one coming for suffering and another for glory and judgment was equally difficult to comprehend.

Argument from the parable of the wheat and the tares. Posttribulationists use the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13 both because of its general and its specific teaching. The parable, describing as it does the course of the present interadvent age, implies by its description of the growth of the wheat and the tares that a considerable time period must elapse. McPherson uses this phase of the parable to refute the doctrine of imminency: "Here again we find the implication of a very considerable passage of time" (Norman S. McPherson, *Triumph Through Tribulation*, p. 48).

Reese devotes an entire chapter to the subject, dealing mostly with details of the parable. He dwells on the statement that the tares are gathered out "first," just the opposite of what occurs at the rapture as the pretribulationists regard it: "But if anything was lacking to refute Darbyists' explanation of the parable, it is found in their treatment of the burning of the tares. The wording of the parable, 'Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn' (v. 30), and the words of the Lord's interpretation (vv. 41-3), that the professors are gathered for judgment at the same crisis as the transfiguration of the righteous, naturally caused great embarrassment to men who separated them by several years" (Reese, *op. cit.*, p. 98).

It is undoubtedly true that pretribulationists are partly to blame for the confusion on this point in their identification of the harvest as the rapture. The *terminus ad quem* in Matthew 13 is not the rapture at all, in the opinion of the writer. The period in view is the entire interadvent age--the period in, which the kingdom in mystery form would be on the earth, the entire time between the first and second advent of Christ. The church age as such is included, but the period in view in Matthew 13 begins with the first advent and extends to the second and is a longer period, having different termini than the church age. The point is that the translation and resurrection of the church is not the subject of this passage at all. If this suggested interpretation be adopted, it supplants the rather inadequate explanation of pretribulationists who try to

harmonize the end of the age in Matthew 13 with the end of the church age.

However, Reese completely overlooks that his argument on the tares being gathered first is also a refutation of posttribulationism. According to the posttribulationist position as set forth by Rose and many others, the translation for them also precedes rather than follows the judgment on the wicked. In Matthew 13 itself, under the parable of the good and bad fish, the "good" fish are gathered in "vessels" first and then the bad fish thrown away (Matt 13:48). Any argument on the order of events based on this passage creates as many problems for the posttribulationist as for the pretribulationist. The best answer is that the passage is dealing with the fact of separation, not the order of it; the division has to do with saints living at the end of the age, not saints who lived and died during the age, nor the church raptured before the age closes. The kingdom in mystery form existing during the entire period between the two advents of Christ does not end with the rapture of the body of Christ. Professing Christendom, a large aspect of the kingdom of heaven, goes right on without interruption. Saints who believe in the tribulation period are included in the kingdom. The precise terminology of the passage should be respected. The parable of the wheat and tares along with other similar parables has no definite bearing on the question of whether the church will go through the tribulation.

Argument from the Day of the Lord. There are few prophetic subjects about which there is more confusion than the theme of the Day of the Lord. The older pretribulationists such as Darby and the Brethren writers in general identified the Day of the Lord with the millennium and placed its beginning at the return of Christ to establish His earthly kingdom, an interpretation later popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible (Scofield Reference Bible, note, p. 1272). Under this viewpoint, the Day of the Lord begins after the tribulation. Brethren writers were therefore hard pressed to explain how the Day of the Lord could be an event which came like "a thief in the night" (1 Thess 5:2), i.e., unexpectedly and unannounced, as it would be preceded by such events as the great tribulation and other notable signs. Further, it jeopardized their teaching that the translation of the church was uniquely an event unheralded and imminent. Such passages as 1 Thessalonians 5, discussing the Day of the Lord, seemed to be connected with the translation of the church in the preceding verses (1 Thess 4:13-18). Post-tribulationists were not slow to take advantage of this area of confusion to drive home their own arguments. Reese, for instance, devotes a whole chapter to the subject in which he capitalizes on this apparent weakness (Reese, op. cit., pp. 167-83).

The argument of Reese, while quite detailed, is summed up in this: that all references to "the Day" in Scripture refer to the Day of the Lord (ibid., p. 167). Proceeding upon this sweeping generalization, he demonstrates that the translation of the church, the judgment of the saints, and the coming of the Day of the Lord occur at the same time--on "the Day." In doing this he argues that the following Scriptural expressions are one and the same: "the day" (1 Thess 5:4; 1 Cor 3:13; Rom 13:11-12); "in that day" (2 Thess 1:10; 2 Tim 1:18; 4:18); "Messiah's day" or "day of Christ" (Phil 1:6, 10; 2:16); "the day of our Lord Jesus Messiah" (1 Cor 1:7-8; 2 Cor 1:14); "the day of the Lord" (1 Cor 5:4-5; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:1-3).

To the unwary reader, his argument seems quite cogent. To those who analyze his argument, it will be apparent that he is guilty of begging the question. The only way that these various expressions occurring in different contexts could be made identical would be to assume first that the posttribulationists are right--the very point he is attempting to prove. The contexts of the various passages give no justification whatever for malting the word day a technical word meaning in every instance the day of the second advent. Far more reasonable is the approach which takes every instance according to its context, recognizing that the word day is a general word made specific only by the context in which it occurs. The

"day" in view, accordingly, is the day pictured by each passage--in some instances an event occurring in a specific period compared to a twenty-four hour day, as in the day of judgment of Christians (1 Cor 3:13; 2 Tim 4:8). In other instances it is the Day of the Lord, a period including the entire millennial reign of Christ.

The problem left unsolved by the early pretribulationists in their discussion of the Day of the Lord has, however, a very simple solution which at one stroke lays to rest the wordy arguments of posttribulationists on this phase of the subject. The Day of the Lord as presented in the Old and New Testament includes rather than follows the tremendous events of the tribulation period. There seems some evidence that the Day of the Lord begins at once at the time of the translation of the church (cf. 1 Thess 5:1-9). The same event which translates the church begins the Day of the Lord. The events of the Day of the Lord begin thereafter to unfold: first the preparatory period, the first half of Daniel's last seven years of Israel's program preceding the second advent--the revelation of the man of sin, the formation of the revived Roman empire, finally reaching the stage of worldwide government, possibly as the last half of the period begins. Then there is the outpouring of judgments from on high, the seals of Revelation are broken, the trumpets of judgment sound, and the bowls of the wrath of God are poured out. The climactic event is the second coming of Christ to establish His kingdom, and the millennial age continuing the Day of the Lord is brought into being. In a word, the Day of the Lord begins before the tribulation time. When the day of grace ends with the translation of the church, the Day of the Lord begins at once. This interpretation gives a cogent explanation of the multiplied Scriptures which relate the Day of the Lord to the tribulation period and at the same time solves all the problems raised by the posttribulationist view of the Day of the Lord.

Argument from the Restrainer of 2 Thessalonians 2. Pretribulationists frequently use the chronology of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 as evidence for the pretribulational translation of the church (cf. previous discussion under Pretribulationism of the "Argument from the nature of the work of the Holy Spirit in this age," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January-March, 1955, pp. 6-10). In refutation, some posttribulationists teach that the passage denies an imminent return of Christ by its declaration that two signs must be fulfilled first, namely, the rise of apostasy and the appearance of the man of sin. McPherson asks, "...why should Paul be so greatly concerned that no man deceive the Church concerning an event that allegedly has nothing to do with the Church?" (McPherson, *op. cit.*, p. 56). The answer to this question is not difficult to find. The Thessalonians evidently had received the erroneous suggestion that they were already in the Day of the Lord and that their present persecutions were those anticipated for this period. Paul's answer is, in effect, that they are not in this period because it could not even begin before the two events mentioned were fulfilled. While no doubt apostasy had already begun, the man of sin had not been revealed. The cogency of Paul's argument should be immediately apparent. He was demonstrating that the predicted Day of the Lord was still future. The passage is no comfort at all to posttribulationists, however, even though they deny the pretribulational interpretation of it. Some posttribulationists concede that the restrainer is the Holy Spirit (cf. John J. Scruby, *The Great Tribulation: The Church's Supreme Test*, p. 194). If so, the inference is obvious that the church must be translated first before the Day of the Lord and time of fearful persecution begin. Whatever bearing the passage has on the argument, its evidence is for pretribulationism. Even if the restrainer is not the Holy Spirit, the passage has no support for posttribulationism.

Argument from the doctrine of the end. Reese in his argument for the posttribulational position cites the doctrine of the end as evidence (Reese, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-24). His argument is that the term the end is always used in Scripture for the end of the age, viz., the second coming of Christ to the earth. He claims to have agreement of the early Brethren writers on this score. As the term is used of the church, his claim is

that this proves that the hope of the church is not translation before the tribulation but deliverance at its end. Reese cites five texts in support of his argument (1 Cor 1:7-8; Heb 3:6, 14; 6:11 ; Rev 2:26). After claiming the Brethren concede his position and agree with him, Reese then chides them for saying nothing at all on most of these passages--which it would seem would contradict his claim of their agreement. *paralambano* in Luke xvii.34-5 , by seize. The use of this word in the N.T. is absolutely opposed to this; it is a good word; a word used exclusively in the sense of 'take away with' or 'receive,' or 'take home'" (ibid., p. 214-15). Reese goes on to illustrate the usage in John 14:3, where it is used of the rapture. Once again, however, Reese is guilty of a hasty generalization which a simple concordance study would have eliminated. The truth is that *paralambano* means only "to take with" (Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 484). The word does not in itself indicate whether the action is good or bad. The generalization that it is always used in a good sense is shattered, however, by the use of the word in John 19:6 where it refers to Jesus being taken to the cross by the soldiers. Reese's objection to the pretribulationist interpretation of this passage falls with his unsustained generalization. Matthew 24:40-41 simply states that one is taken away. The fact that those taken away are judged and those who remain enter the kingdom is taught explicitly in the context (Matt 25:31-46). The pretribulationist interpretation is therefore more in keeping with the usual premillennial interpretation of events at the beginning of the millennium.

Summary. It is not necessary to recapitulate the dozen common posttribulation arguments considered and their refutation. Suffice it to say that pretribulationists have an adequate answer for each posttribulation contention. Most important is the fact that posttribulationists have not a single Scripture passage where the church as the body of Christ is found in the events of the tribulation time preceding the second coming. The precise teaching of the translation of the church is never found in passages dealing with the return of Christ to establish His kingdom on earth. It has been shown that the arguments for posttribulationism depend upon identification of the church with tribulation saints--which they assume but never are able to demonstrate. Frequently their whole argument is based on confusing the great tribulation still future with the common trials of the saints throughout the age. An examination of the posttribulationist arguments most commonly advanced has revealed no need of retreating one step from the blessed hope of the imminent return of Christ for His own.

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