

Part 29: Midtribulationism

by John F. Walvoord

John F. Walvoord's sermon explores the midtribulationist perspective on eschatology, highlighting its theological implications and critiques.

Scripture: Daniel 9:27, Matthew 24:8, 1 Corinthians 15:52, 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Revelation 11:15

Topics: "Eschatology", "Tribulation Theology"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the midtribulationism interpretation of Scripture, focusing on the timing of the church's translation during the seventieth week of Daniel. Midtribulationism places the church's translation in the middle of this week, before the time of wrath and great tribulation, differing from pretribulationism and posttribulationism. This view attempts to reconcile certain prophecies and promises while requiring a unique interpretation of key Scriptures related to Christ's return for the church.

Transcript

Midtribulationism is a comparatively new interpretation of Scripture relating to the translation of the church. Its principal expositor is Norman B. Harrison. Accepting some of the basic premises of pretribulationism, such as the future character of the seventieth week of Daniel (Dan 9:27), midtribulationism places the translation of the church at the middle of this week instead of at its beginning as do the pretribulationists. In contrast to the posttribulationists, it holds that the translation takes place before the time of wrath and great tribulation instead of after it.

Midtribulationism is, therefore, a mediate view between posttribulationism and pretribulationism. As such it has commended itself to some who for one reason or another are dissatisfied with both pretribulationism and posttribulationism. It has also provided a place for certain prophecies to be fulfilled before the translation of the church instead of afterward, and at the same time is able to claim the promises of comfort and blessing which seem to be denied by the posttribulationists who take the church through the entire period.

Midtribulationists usually do not use the term of themselves, and prefer to classify themselves as pretribulationists--pretribulational in the sense that Christ is coming before the "great tribulation" which characterizes the last half of Daniel's seventieth week. Harrison refers to his view as teaching "His pre-Tribulation coming" (Norman B. Harrison, *The End*, p. 118). The term midtribulation is justified by the common designation of the entire seventieth week of Daniel as a period of tribulation even though pretribulationists can agree that only its latter half is properly "the great tribulation."

Important Issues

The midtribulation interpretation bristles with important theological, exegetical, and practical problems, and it differs radically from normal pretribulationism. Among the crucial issues are such questions as the following: (1) Does the seventh trumpet of Revelation mark the beginning of the great tribulation? (2) Is the rapture of the church in Revelation 11? (3) Is the seventh trumpet the "last trumpet" for the church? (4) Do the programs for Israel and the church overlap? (5) Is the hope of the imminent return of Christ unscriptural? In general, the midtribulation view requires a different interpretation of most of the important Scriptures relating to the coming of Christ for the church.

Does the Seventh Trumpet of Revelation Begin the Great Tribulation?

One of the crucial issues in the midtribulation theory is the question of whether the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11 begins the great tribulation. In fact, it is not too much to say that the whole teaching of midtribulationists depends upon this identification. The midtribulation view cites many other Scriptures, however. Harrison appeals to the following passages: Exodus 25--40 ; Leviticus 23; Psalm 2; Daniel 2, 7 , 9 ; Matthew 13; 24--25 ; 1 Thessalonians 4:13--5:10 ; 2 Thessalonians 2 (ibid., p. 35). It is clear from reading his discussion, however, that these are supporting passages, or problems which have to be solved in the midtribulation view, rather than the crux of the issue.

The midtribulation view requires the interpretation that the first half of the Book of Revelation is not the great tribulation. In general, the theme song of its adherents is that the church will go through the "beginning of sorrows" (Matt 24:8, A.V.), or "beginning of travail" (A.S.V.), but not through the "great tribulation" (Matt 24:21) as Harrison indicates in his "Harmonized Outline" of Matthew 24--25 and Revelation 1--20 (ibid., p. 54). It is their position that the events of the seven seals as well as the judgments of the first six trumpets are related to the first three and one-half years of Daniel's seventieth week and therefore are not a description of the "great tribulation."

Harrison states: "'Wrath' is a word reserved for the Great Tribulation--see 'wrath of God' in 14:10, 19 ; 15:7 ; 16:1 , etc." (ibid., p. 91). He implies that there is no wrath of God mentioned during the period of the seven seals and the first six trumpets. In his comment on Revelation 11:18, he states: "The Day of Wrath has only now come (11:18). This means that nothing that precedes in the Seals and Trumpets can rightfully be regarded as wrath" (ibid., p. 119). He further defines the tribulation as equivalent to divine wrath: "Let us get clearly in mind the nature of the Tribulation, that it is divine 'wrath' (11:18 ; 14:8, 10, 19 ; 15:1, 7 ; 16:1, 19) and divine 'judgment' (14:7 ; 15:4 ; 16:7 ; 17:1 ; 18:10 ; 19:2)" (ibid., p. 120). In both instances where Harrison gives extended lists of references to "wrath" in Revelation (ibid., pp. 91,120) he, with evident purpose, omits Revelation 6:16-17 and Revelation 7:14. The former passage refers to wrath in connection with the sixth seal, and the latter is the only reference to the "great tribulation" by that title in the entire book. Both of these passages fall in the section of Revelation which deals with the period preceding the trumpets.

The explanation given of the reference to "wrath" in Revelation 6:16-17 is certainly inadequate for such a crucial issue. Harrison interprets the sixth seal "as reaching to the day of Wrath" (ibid., p. 91), as if it were a future instead of aorist as it is in the text. No Greek tense would be more inappropriate to express this idea of Harrison's than the aorist, which usually is punctiliar as to kind of action, and present or past as to time. If "the great day of their Wrath is come" (Rev 6:17), it certainly cannot be postponed as to its beginning until after the seventh seal is opened and seven trumpets of various judgments are poured out

upon the earth.

Not only does Harrison exclude wrath, but the first three and one-half years are declared a relatively pleasant time. Harrison writes: "The first half of the week, or period of seven years, was a 'sweet' anticipation to John, as it is to them; under treaty protection, they [Israel] will be 'sitting pretty,' as we say. But the second half--'bitter' indeed..." (ibid., p. 111). Pretribulationists could accept the teaching that the first three and one-half years of Daniel's seventieth week is a time of protection for Israel, but they do not find this period described in Revelation 6--11 .

Even a casual reading of the seals and first six trumpets will make clear that the great tribulation begins with the early seals, not with the seventh trumpet. Certainly famine (Rev 6:5-6), death for one-fourth of the world's population (Rev 6:8), earthquakes, stars falling from heaven, the moon becoming as blood, and every mountain and island being moved out of their places (Rev 6:12-14) portray indeed "the great day of their wrath"--the "wrath of the Lamb" (Rev 6:16-17). This is no period of "'sweet' anticipation to John" (loc. cit.), but the unprecedented time of trouble. Add to this the first six trumpets with their bloodshed, destruction on the earth and the sea, and poisoning of the rivers with the result that "many men died" (Rev 8:11), climaxed by the great woes of Revelation 9--10 , and one has a picture of great tribulation such as the world has never experienced. According to Scripture, at that time "their torment" will be "as the torment of a scorpion, when it striketh a man" (Rev 9:5). Some will seek death in vain in order to escape (Rev 9:10). In the sixth seal, one-third of the remaining earth's population will be killed. If language means anything, this is the predicted time of unprecedented trouble.

Midtribulationists are obliged not only to explain away the explicit reference to wrath in connection with the sixth seal (Rev 6:16-17), but they must also slide over the only specific reference to the "great tribulation" in the entire Book of Revelation (7:14). This is made into a prophetic vision of the time to follow the tribulation. In the light of these references to wrath and great tribulation in a context as frightfully graphic as the events of the seals and first six trumpets, it should be obvious that the very foundation of the midtribulation theory is built upon sand. Few theories are more openly contradicted by the very Scriptures from which support is expected.

The efforts to evade these graphic Scriptures force midtribulationists to spiritualize and thereby nullify the force of these judgments. Harrison attempts to find fulfillment of the trumpet judgments in the events of World War II. He states in reference to the second trumpet, "The 'great mountain burning with fire' seems a clear reference to Germany, suddenly 'cast into the sea' of nations..." (ibid., p. 218). In the same paragraph he then suddenly makes "the sea" a literal sea in which literal ships are sunk: "The further reference to 'sea' and 'ships' (8:9) must betaken literally..." (loc. cit). It should be obvious that this interpretation also calls for a chronology in which the seventh trumpet will sound within a few years thereafter, involving a date-setting for the rapture which subsequent history has proven an error.

The evident fallacy of the whole midtribulation interpretation of Revelation 1--11 is that this view forces a spiritualization of the entire passage to find contemporary rather than future fulfillment. In doing so, a strained exegesis of the passages is achieved which is subjective and arbitrary. Even a simple reading of this section will give an impression of vivid divine judgment upon a sinful world which transcends anything which history has recorded. If the passage is intended to be taken with any serious literalness, its fulfillment is yet future.

The great tribulation actually begins in Revelation 6, not in Revelation 11. The seventh trumpet marks a point near its end, not its beginning. Posttribulationists make the seventh trumpet the end of the tribulation (cf. Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, p. 73). This is accomplished by ignoring the fact that the seven vials of judgment follow the seventh trump. It is curious, however, that both of these opponents of pretribulationism adopt such opposite views of the seventh trump, and, in effect, cancel out each other.

Is the Rapture of the Church in Revelation 11?

At no point does the midtribulation view manifest its dogmatism more than in the interpretation of Revelation 11. One midtribulationist contends for the view that the great tribulation is the first part of Daniel's seventieth week, that the rapture occurs in the middle of the week after this tribulation, and that the last half of the week is the beginning of the Day of the Lord. The rapture according to this view takes place at the sixth seal of Revelation 6:12-17 (cf. H. W. H., *The Church and the Great Tribulation*, 46 pp). This point of view is actually a variation of posttribulationism and is peculiar to the author. The more normal position for midtribulationism is to place the rapture at Revelation 11.

J.Oliver Buswell has expressed the midtribulational position in the following statement: "I do not believe that the Church will go through any part of that period which the Scripture specifically designates as the wrath of God, but I do believe that the abomination of desolation will be a specific signal for a hasty flight followed by a very brief but a very terrible persecution, and that followed very quickly by the rapture of the Church preceding the outpouring of the vials of the wrath of God" (extract from letter published in *Our Hope*, LVI, June, 1950, 720).

We are indebted to Norman B. Harrison for the most explicit exposition of this teaching. His interpretation of Revelation 11 claims that "all the elements involved in the Coming are here" (op. cit., p. 117). He submits the following tabulation:

Rev 11:3

The Witnesses

Acts 1:8

11:4

The Spirit

Acts 1:8; 2 Thess 2:7

Moses-Elijah

The Two Classes

"Dead"--"Alive"

11:7-10

The Dead

1 Thess 4:13-14

11:11

The Resurrection

1 Thess 4:16

11:12

The Cloud

Acts 1:9-11; 1 Thess 4:17

11:12

The Great Voice

1 Thess 4:16

11:12

The Ascension

1 Thess 4:16-17

11:15

The Trumpet

1 Thess 4:16

11:15-17

The Kingdom Received

Luke 19:15

11:18

The Servants Rewarded

Luke 19:15-17

11:18

The Time of Wrath

Rev 3:10-11

11:19

The Temple in Heaven

1 Cor 3:16

This tabulation (ibid., p. 117) is supplemented by the discussion which brings out the midtribulation interpretation. The two witnesses are symbolic of Moses and Elijah, "represent the Law and the Prophets" and more specifically according to their description in Revelation 11 as "two olive trees and two candlesticks" (Rev 11:4) they represent the witness of the saints of the Old and New Covenant (ibid., pp. 114-15). Harrison is not too clear as to his precise definition, and seems to waver between the idea that the two witnesses represent all the saints, especially Jew and Gentile, and the idea that they represent Moses and Elijah, viz., "The Two Classes 'Dead'--'Alive'" (ibid., p. 117). By this, apparently, he means that the two witnesses are the living church and the resurrected saints at the time of the rapture. He states, "Now, if the two witnesses are symbolic of a 'larger company of witnesses,' then their resurrection and ascension must be symbolic of the resurrection and rapture of that larger company" (ibid., pp. 116-17).

This interpretation is supplemented by further identification of "the cloud" as symbolic of the rapture: "'The Cloud' (11:12) is a definite reference to the Lord's presence-parousia" (ibid., p. 117). Because the future tense is omitted in the description of Christ in Revelation 11:17, Harrison concludes, "It seeks to tell us: He has come" (ibid., p. 118). The reference to the "reign" of Christ is declared by Harrison to be future, not present, as the third woe, viz., the vials, must be first poured out (loc. cit). The statement, "thy wrath came" (Rev 11:18, A.S.V.) is interpreted, on the basis of the Authorized translation, "thy wrath is come," as "has only now come (11:18)". This means that nothing that precedes in the Seals and Trumpets can rightfully be regarded as wrath" (loc. cit). Harrison overlooks that the verb "came" is in the aorist which emphasizes the fact but not the time of the action. It could just as well refer to the whole course of the wrath of God in the seals and preceding trumpets.

His interpretation of the opening of the temple (Rev 11:19) is that it "is a further reference to the Rapture. 'Know ye not that ye are the temple of God?'" (ibid., p. 119). Just how the church can be "opened in heaven" he does not explain. The concluding identification is that the "seventh Trumpet sounds for the pouring of the Bowls of wrath. While it brings glory to the Church, it brings Woe (the third) to the world" (loc. cit). The church goes through two woes which are not to be identified with the great tribulation, but not through the third woe which is so identified.

The fallacy of this entire exegesis of the passage is that there is no positive evidence that any of the identifications are correct. Similarities do not prove identity. The character of the two witnesses seems to indicate that they are actual individuals, not representatives of all the saints living and dead. The saints as a whole do not perform the miracles nor the witness designated of them (Rev 11:5-6). Nor are all the saints, especially the resurrected saints, killed by the beast. If all the saints are killed, then none would be living to be raptured. If the witnesses are only symbols, how can symbols be literally killed and lie in literal streets? Do the saints as a whole have men look on their "dead bodies" for "three days and a half," refusing them burial in a tomb (Rev 11:9)? The other identifications are just as strained and unsustained by the text. sounded by angels. The trumpet at the rapture is the "trump of God." The trumpets of Revelation are all connected with divine judgment upon sin and unbelief. The trump of 1 Thessalonians 4 and of 1 Corinthians 15 is a call to the elect, an act of grace, a command to the dead to rise.

The most damaging fact in the whole argument, however, is that the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11 is, after all, not the last trumpet of Scripture. According to Matthew 24:31, the elect will be gathered at the coming of Christ to establish His earthly kingdom "with a great sound of a trumpet." While posttribulationists hold that this is identical with the seventh trumpet, midtribulationists cannot do so. In fact, it is not too much to say that this one reference alone spells the doom of midtribulationism.

The use of "last" in reference to the trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15 is easily explained without resorting to the extremities of midtribulationism. H. A. Ironside interprets it as a familiar military expression: "When a Roman camp was about to be broken up, whether in the middle of the night or in the day, a trumpet was sounded. The first blast meant, 'Strike tents and prepare to depart.' The second meant, 'Fall into line,' and when what was called 'the last trump' sounded it meant, 'March away.'" (Addresses on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, p. 529). The last trump of God for the church, following the gospel call and call to preparation, will be the call to go to be with the Lord. Whether or not this explanation be accepted, it illustrates that there is no necessity of relating a trump for the church with trumpets of judgment upon the unsaved. Each trumpet must be related to its own order. Any child in school knows that the last bell for one hour may be followed by a first bell for the next hour. "Last" must be understood then to relate to the time order indicated by the context.

Midtribulationists are therefore unjustified in making the identification of the seventh trumpet with the last trumpet of 1 Corinthians. The seventh trumpet is not the last trump of Scripture anyway, and the events which they claim are related to it actually occur before the seventh trumpet is sounded according to the chronology of Revelation 11. On no point does the identification commend itself.

Do the Programs for Israel and the Church Overlap?

Another objection to the midtribulationist interpretation is that it confuses Israel and the church and requires an overlap of their two programs. Harrison's argument that the existence of the temple to A.D. 70 proves that Israel's program and that of the church overlaps is entirely untenable (cf. Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-53). According to Scripture the dispensation of the law ended at the cross (2 Cor 3:11; Gal 3:25; Col 2:14). Most students of the seventy weeks of Daniel who believe the seventieth week is future also believe that the sixty-ninth week was fulfilled prior to the crucifixion of Christ. Israel's program is therefore at a standstill and the continued existence of the temple had no relevance. Israel as a people and nation have continued throughout the present age, but their predicted program has made no specific progress since Pentecost. The necessity for such an overlapping program is not inherent in Scriptural revelation, but only a necessary adjunct of midtribulationist interpretation.

Is the Hope of the Imminent Return of Christ Unscriptural?

One of the important reasons why pretribulationists believe the refutation of midtribulationism is necessary is that it directly attacks the imminency of the Lord's return for the church much in the same fashion as is true in posttribulationism. Midtribulationism has this added feature, however, which is most objectionable: it sets up a definite chronology requiring date-setting. The events of the first three and one-half years of Daniel's prophecy are specific. They begin with a covenant between a Gentile ruler and Israel in which Israel is promised protection and Palestine becomes their national home. Such a covenant could not be a secret by its very nature as it would be heralded throughout Jewry and be of great interest to the entire world. Such a covenant would, on the one hand, make the coming of Christ impossible for three and one-half years, according to the midtribulationist, and, on the other hand, make an imminent coming impossible at any time prior to the covenant. If the restrainer of 2 Thessalonians is the Holy Spirit, it also sets up an impossible chronology--the Holy Spirit taken out of the world before the church is.

The date-setting character of midtribulationism is manifest in Harrison's exposition. He identifies World War I specifically "as that which our Lord Jesus envisioned, distinguishing it from other wars through the years..." (*ibid.*, p. 20). His calculations are detailed: "The evidence that the War Trumpets of Revelation 8

found their realization, initially at least, in World War II is striking and conclusive. Here are a few marks of identification (will the reader please familiarize himself with chapter 8): 1--Its Origin (vs. 1)--the Trumpets proceed from the Seals. World War II definitely grew out of World War I--practically but a second stage. 2--Its Timing (vs. 1)--'about the space of half an hour.' Some time notes are merely general; this is specific. The key to divine reckoning is Peter's 'one day is with the Lord as a thousand years.' A half-hour is 1/48th of a day; divided into 1, 000 years it yields 20 years, 10 months. This is the 'space' of 'silence' between the wars. Reckoned from the armistice of Nov. 11, 1918, it brings us to Sept. 11, 1939. But it says 'about'; World War II began Sept. 1, 1939; Hitler 'jumped the gun' by 10 days" (Harrison, His Coming, pp. 42-43). This far-fetched interpretation is its own refutation.

Harrison further identifies the second trumpet with Germany (The End, p. 218). It should be obvious, under his chronology, if this occurs during the first three and one-half years of Daniel's last week, that the rapture is now long overdue. This refutation from history does not seem to deter midtribulationists, like another date-setters, from making alterations in their system and making another guess at identifying current events with the seals and trumpets of Revelation.

Conclusion

To most students of prophecy, the midtribulation view falls for want of proof in its three strategic interpretations: its teaching that the great tribulation does not begin until the seventh trumpet, the identification of the seventh trumpet with the middle of the seventieth week of Daniel, and its further blunder of demanding identification of the seventh trumpet with the last trump of 1 Corinthians 15:52. Its arguments against imminency on other grounds (cf. Harrison, The End, pp. 231-33) are a repetition of familiar posttribulational arguments often refuted. While the question of the time of the return of the Lord for His church is not in itself a structural principle of theology as a whole, it certainly has a vital bearing on the interpretation of many Scriptures and is integral to the teaching of the imminency of the rapture. The great majority of expositors will continue to divide between the posttribulational and pretribulational positions, with the midtribulational and partial rapture viewpoints held only by a small minority.

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