

The Rapture and the Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon explores the relationship between the rapture and the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5, arguing that the pretribulationist view of the rapture gives sense and meaning to this passage.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:2-9, 2 Thessalonians 2:2

Topics: "Eschatology", "Rapture Theology"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the debated relationship between 1 Thessalonians 5 and the rapture, focusing on the definition of 'the day of the Lord' and its connection to the rapture. The discourse explores the various interpretations of the day of the Lord, ranging from a specific event to an extended period encompassing the millennial kingdom. Posttribulationists like Alexander Reese emphasize that the rapture and the beginning of the day of the Lord occur simultaneously, presenting a detailed argument for their stance.

Transcript

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This series, begun in Bibliotheca Sacra with the January-March, 1975 issue, is now published in book form under the title *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976). This article is adapted from chapter 9 in the book. The series will continue through the January-March 1978 issue.]

The relationship of 1 Thessalonians 5 to the rapture has been debated by both pretribulationists and posttribulationists with an amazing variety of opinions. The problem centers in the definition of "the day of the Lord" and its relationship to the rapture. Because there are differences of interpretation among both pretribulationists and posttribulationists, generalizations are inadvisable. The center of the problem is, first of all, the question of what "the day of the Lord" means. A second question is why the day of the Lord is introduced immediately after discussion of the rapture. A third question is the meaning of specific statements relating to the time of the rapture.

The Meaning Of The Day Of The Lord

References to the day of the Lord abound in the Old Testament and occur occasionally in the New. Virtually everyone agrees that the judgments related to the second coming are in some sense a part of the

day of the Lord. Definitions of the word day vary from a specific event, such as a twenty-four-hour day, to an extended period of time stretching all the way from the rapture to the end of the thousand-year reign of Christ. Generally speaking, pretribulationists have identified the day of the Lord as the millennial kingdom, including the judgments that introduce the kingdom. This view was popularized by the 1917 edition of the Scofield Reference Bible.[1] Scofield Reference Bible, p. 1272, footnote. In this interpretation, for all practical purposes, the day of the Lord begins at the end of or after the great tribulation.

Pretribulationists who see the day of the Lord beginning at the end of the tribulation have difficulty harmonizing this with the pretribulational rapture. Posttribulationists point out that 1 Thessalonians 5, referring to the day of the Lord, immediately follows chapter 4, which reveals the rapture. As chapter 5 is dealing with the beginning of the day of the Lord, the implication is that the rapture and the beginning of the day of the Lord occur at the same time. Capitalizing on the confusion among pretribulationists in defining the day of the Lord, Alexander Reese spends a chapter of his classic work on posttribulationism, making the most of this argument.[2] Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1937), pp. 17-83. Cf. discussion by John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Co., 1957), pp. 161-72.

Reese holds that the use of the expression "the day" indicates that endtime events all occur in rapid succession, including the translation of the church and the various judgments of the saints and the wicked. He identifies the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5 with other references to "the day" as found in 1 Corinthians 3:13 and Romans 13:11-12. He likewise so identifies the expressions "in that day" (2 Thess 1:10; 2 Tim 1:18; 4:8); "the day of Christ" (Phil 1:6, 10; 2:16); "the day of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:7-8; 2 Cor 1:14); and "the day of the Lord" (1 Cor 5:4-5; 2 Thess 2:1-3). According to Reese, all refer to the same time and the same event.

Reese and other posttribulationists, as their argument unfolds, lump together all references to "the day," ignoring the context, arguing in a circle, assuming that posttribulationism is true. As is frequently the case with difficult points of exegesis, it is of utmost importance that the context of each passage be considered before terms can be equated with similar wording elsewhere. Reese pays little attention to the variety of contextual backgrounds.

The central problem, however, is that this kind of explanation assumes that "the day" is a simple and uncomplicated reference to a point in time, whereas in fact the total view of Scripture indicates something quite different. and the Persians, again gives graphic detail to the characteristics of the day of the Lord. It is described as "a destruction from the Almighty" (13:6). According to verse 9, "the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it." Next Isaiah describes the stars and sun as being darkened, a prophecy that will be literally fulfilled in the great tribulation. In Isaiah 13:11, he states, "And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible."

Beginning with verse 17, Isaiah describes the Medes as destroying Babylon. In one sense this has already been fulfilled. In another sense this will not have a complete fulfillment until the time of the great tribulation. It is this mingled picture of judgment, regardless of when it occurs, that characterizes the day of the Lord. Any period of extensive divine judgment in the Old Testament is therefore "a day of the Lord." All of them will be eclipsed, however, with the final judgment that culminates in the great tribulation and the battle of the great day of God Almighty at the second coming of Christ.

The other references cited contain similar material. Isaiah 34:1-8 seems to indicate that judgments will fall on the world in the events leading up to the second coming,

Probably the most graphic picture is found in the Book of Joel, most of which is dedicated to describing the day of the Lord. Included is the famous prophecy of the outpouring of the Spirit, quoted in Acts 2:17-21, which occurred on the day of Pentecost but will have its complete fulfillment in the days prior to the second coming of Christ. The judgments of God poured out on the earth, as well as disturbances in heaven, are graphically described by Joel. There will be great signs in the heavens (Joel 2:30-31), described in more detail in the Book of Revelation: "And I will shew wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD come." What is meant here is not that the day of the Lord will begin after these wonders in heaven, but that it will come to its climax when the judgment is actually executed.

The Book of Zephaniah adds another aspect to the day of the Lord. After revealing in some detail the judgments to occur at that time, the prophet describes the blessings that will follow (1:7-18). In Zephaniah 3:14-17 the prophet writes, "Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more. In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack. The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing."

The significant truth revealed here is that the day of the Lord which first inflicts terrible judgments ends with an extended period of blessing on Israel, which will be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom. Based on the Old Testament revelation, the day of the Lord is a time of judgment, culminating in the second coming of Christ, and followed by a time of special divine blessing to be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom.

Posttribulational Interpretation Of The Day Of The Lord

Generally posttribulationists like Reese and Gundry begin the day of the Lord at the end of the great tribulation. Gundry, who devotes a whole chapter to this, defines the day of the Lord in these words:

The "day of the Lord," with its corollary the "day of Christ," figures prominently in discussion of the rapture. In these phrases the term "day" does not refer to twenty-four hours, but to a longer period of time, a period which includes the millennium and the final judgment. With reference to the time of the rapture, the crux of the argument lies in the terminus a quo, the beginning point, of the day of the Lord, not in its millennial extensions.[3] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), p. 89.

In his discussion he attempts to refute the idea that the day of the Lord begins earlier than the end of the tribulation. His discussion is somewhat difficult to follow, but in general he tries to refute all the contentions that the day of the Lord begins before the end of the great tribulation.

All agree that the climax of the day of the Lord, as far as judgment on the nations is concerned, comes at Armageddon and is furthered by the destruction of the armies at the second coming in Revelation 19. Many believe it is brought to its climax in the judgment of the nations after the second coming, as recorded in Matthew 25:31-46. The question remains whether this is all that is involved in the judgments. already told the Thessalonians, and that specifically these events relate to the day of the Lord as a time period

with special characteristics. In verse 2 he declares, "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night." Much has been said about this figure of speech, and Paul expresses that they already knew what he meant by it. Obviously he is saying that they knew that the day of the Lord was certainly coming but, like a thief in the night, there was no way to date it.

In Paul's discussion that follows, a sharp contrast is drawn between the day of the Lord as it relates to the unsaved and as it relates to Christians. This is brought out in the use of the first and second persons--"we," "us," and "you" (vv. 1-2, 4-6, 8-11)--and the third person "they" and "others" (vv. 3, 6-7). In verse 3 the day of the Lord is pictured as coming on the unbelievers like travail on a woman with child, so that they cannot escape, just as a woman cannot escape birth pangs. Paul further states that their destruction will come at a time when they are saying "peace and safety." Gundry does not explain why they will be saying "peace and safety" toward the end of the great tribulation, as it does not fit into his view. Payne has no problem with this and regards it as a sense of false security that exists today in spite of atomic bombs and the danger of a holocausts.[5] J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), p. 108.

The idea that the expression "saying peace and safety" refers to the longing for peace and safety on the part of those who are in the great tribulation is not an acceptable explanation and is rejected by both posttribulationists and pretribulationists. The fact is that Gundry is faced with a real problem of trying to fit this into his scheme with the day of the Lord beginning toward the end of the great tribulation. First Thessalonians 5 states that people will be saying "peace and safety" before the great tribulation begins. This is in harmony with pretribulationism, but quite out of harmony with posttribulationism.

Paul states that the day of the Lord will not overtake the Thessalonians as a thief. Why does an event coming as a thief come unexpectedly on the world, but with proper expectation for believers? Paul explains this in verses 4 and 5: "But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness" (NIV). Here is a crucial point in Paul's explanation: the thief is going to come in the night, but the believers are declared not to belong to the night or the darkness. The implication is quite clear that believers are in a different time reference, namely, that they belong to the day that precedes the darkness.

On this basis Paul gives an exhortation. If the Thessalonians are of the day, they are not to be asleep or drugged; rather they are to be sober or self-controlled, "putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet" (v. 8, NIV). Paul concludes in verse 9, "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (NIV).

In the exegesis of this verse, pretribulationists and posttribulationists part company. Posttribulationists insist that the church is not appointed to wrath, and with this all pretribulationists agree. What the passage is talking about, however, is not wrath in the abstract, but a time of wrath. The judgments poured out in the tribulation do not single out unsaved people only, for war, pestilence, famine, earthquakes, and stars falling from heaven afflict the entire population except for the 144,000 of Revelation 7 singled out by God for special protection.

Here, however, the believer in Christ is assured that his appointment is not to this time of wrath. In attempting to explain this, the pretribulationist has the obvious advantage: if the church is raptured before this time of trouble, then all that is said in this passage becomes very clear; that is, the period of wrath will not overtake the church as a thief, because the church will not be there. If Gundry's use of the argument

from silence is valid, it would seem here that Paul's silence on the matter of whether the church must endure this period is again another indication that the church will not even enter the period.

When we take the total picture of this passage into consideration, the reason for Paul's introducing it becomes clearer. Although the events of the day of the Lord do not begin immediately after the rapture, the time period as such--following the symbolism of a day beginning at midnight--could easily be understood to begin with the rapture itself. The opening hours of the day of the Lord do not contain great events. Gradually the major events of the day of the Lord unfold, climaxing in the terrible judgments with which the great tribulation is brought to conclusion.

Taken as a whole, the pretribulation point of view gives sense and meaning to 1 Thessalonians 5 and explains why this is introduced after the rapture. In effect, Paul is saying that the time of the rapture cannot be determined any more than the time of the beginning of the day of the Lord, but this is of no concern to believers because our appointment is not the wrath of the day of the Lord, but rather the salvation which is ours in Christ.

Confirmation is given to this approach to 1 Thessalonians 5 in a study of 2 Thessalonians 2, where the day of the Lord is again introduced, this time in a context in which the Thessalonians misunderstood and needed correction.

A further word needs to be said concerning the relationship of the day of the Lord to "the day of Christ." Gundry argues at length that the various forms of the six occurrences of this phrase (1 Cor 1:8; 5:5 ; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 1:6, 10; 2:16) do not justify any distinction from the basic term "the day of the Lord." This is an exegetical problem that does not really affect the question of pretribulationism and posttribulationism. The contexts of these passages are taken by many to refer to the rapture as a specific event in contrast to the day of the Lord as an extended period of time. If the context of each passage, along with all the references to "the day," is taken into consideration, there is really no problem. Even if Gundry is right in holding that these passages refer to the day of the Lord, they can be understood to refer to the beginning of the extended period of time which follows. It is again begging the question to assume this teaches posttribulationism, as Gundry does.

Gundry summarizes his viewpoint in a way that misrepresents the pretribulation position. He states:

In the NT sixteen expressions appear in which the term "day" is used eschatologically. Twenty times "day" appears without a qualifying phrase. In view of the wide variety of expressions and the numerous instances where "day" occurs without special qualification, it seems a very dubious procedure to select five out of the sixteen expressions, lump together four of the five as equivalent to one another, and distinguish the four from the one remaining. There is no solid basis, then, for distinguishing between the day of Christ and the day of the Lord.[6] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 98.

The reference in 1 Corinthians 5:5 has a textual problem, and some texts read "the day of the Lord." Pretribulationists are justified in distinguishing the remaining five texts from the day of the Lord because the expression "the day of the Lord" is not expressly used. Pretribulationists do not claim that this proves the pretribulation rapture; what they point to is that if the pretribulation rapture is established on other grounds, these references seem to refer specifically to the rapture rather than to the time of judgment on the world. This is based on what each passage states. It is therefore manifestly unfair to accuse pretribulationists of arbitrarily lumping things together that have no distinguishing characteristics. On the contrary, the posttribulationist is lumping together a number of different phrases that are not quite the

same without any regard for the context or their precise wording.

Alexander Reese proceeds much on the same basis as Gundry when he declares that all references to "the day" refer to the day of the Lord.[7] Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, pp. 167-83. He does this without any supporting evidence. Yet the word day occurs more than two hundred times in the New Testament alone and only becomes an eschatological term when the context so indicates. The only way all these eschatological terms can be made to refer specifically to the day of the Lord is to assume that posttribulationism is true and argue from this premise. Pretribulationists rightfully object to this illogical procedure.

Taken as a whole, 1 Thessalonians 5--while not in itself a conclusive argument for pretribulationism--is more easily harmonized with the pretribulational interpretation than the posttribulational interpretation. The passage is quite strange as an explanation of the time of the rapture if, in fact, the Thessalonians were taught posttribulationism and already knew that they would have to go through the day of the Lord. The beginning of the day of the Lord under those circumstances would have no relationship to the rapture and would be no comfort to them in their sorrow. On the other hand, if the rapture occurs before the endtime tribulation and the day of the Lord begins at the time of the pretribulation rapture, then the discussion is cogent because the indeterminant character of the beginning of the day of the Lord is the same as the indeterminant time of the rapture itself.

Nowhere in 1 Thessalonians 4 or 5 is the rapture specifically placed after the great tribulation and as occurring at the time of the climax of the judgments which are brought on the world at the time of the day of the Lord. On the contrary, the Thessalonians are assured that their appointment is not a day of wrath, but a day of salvation, a concept easily harmonized with the pretribulational interpretation.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-f-walvoord/the-rapture-and-the-day-of-the-lord-in-1-thessalonians-5/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net