

The Rapture in Relation to Endtime Events

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon explores the rapture in relation to endtime events, highlighting the differences between pretribulationism and posttribulationism.

Scripture: Daniel 9:27, Matthew 25:31, 1 Corinthians 15:51, Revelation 20:4

Topics: "End Time Events", "The Rapture"

Description

John F. Walvoord discusses the challenges faced by posttribulationists in establishing a clear order of events at the second advent, particularly focusing on the significance of 1 Corinthians 15 in relation to the rapture. He emphasizes the mystery of the rapture as a New Testament truth revealed by Paul, highlighting the transformation of believers at the last trumpet. Walvoord presents the pretribulationist order of events, detailing the emergence of a dictator, a period of peace followed by persecution, and the ultimate return of Christ in power and glory to establish His kingdom. He contrasts this with the posttribulationist order of events, where the rapture is depicted as the church meeting the Lord in the air before His arrival on earth, and discusses the challenges posttribulationists face in harmonizing endtime events.

Transcript

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Probably one of the most difficult problems a posttribulationist faces is to establish a well-defined order of events at the second advent. Posttribulationists tend to avoid this problem. Robert Gundry, more than others, makes an effort to state and solve the order of events. In the process, however, a number of acute problems in posttribulationism surface.

The Contribution of 1 Corinthians 15

Generally speaking, posttribulationists do not dwell at length on 1 Corinthians 15:51-58, one of the major passages on the rapture. The reason is obvious: This passage contributes nothing to the posttribulationist argument and, in fact, poses a serious problem.

First Corinthians 15 is one of the great chapters of Scripture and in many respects it is the central chapter of this epistle. Because of the numerous theological and moral problems in the Corinthian church, Paul dwells on correction of these problems in the first fourteen chapters of 1 Corinthians.

When Paul comes to chapter 15, he develops the central aspect of his theology, the gospel with its testimony to the death of Christ for sin and His resurrection. He then makes the practical application of the resurrection of Christ to the believer's faith and hope. The first fifty verses of 1 Corinthians 15 accordingly deal with the fundamental truths of the death and resurrection of Christ, and the resurrection of believers who die. Having laid this foundation, Paul then introduces the subject of the rapture of the church presented as "a mystery" in 1 Corinthians 15:51.

In referring to the rapture as a mystery, Paul is reaffirming that this is a New Testament truth not revealed in the Old Testament, a truth which, according to 1 Thessalonians 4:15, he had received by a special word from God. He summarizes what will happen at the rapture in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52: "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed--in a flash, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed" (NIV).

This revelation clearly confirms what had previously been revealed in 1 Thessalonians 4, but it adds some details. The rapture will occur in a moment of time. The dead who are raised will be given imperishable bodies. Living Christians will be changed and given bodies similar to those being raised from the dead. All this is in keeping with the principle laid down in 1 Corinthians 15:50 that our present bodies are not suited for heaven.

The rapture of the church is declared to be a great victory over death and a partial fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies that the saints will have victory over death and the grave. On the basis of the fact of the return of Christ for His own, Paul exhorts the brethren in 1 Corinthians 15:58, "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (NIV).

In presenting the rapture in this passage, it should first be noted that Paul declared it to be a mystery. The doctrine of resurrection is no mystery, for it is clearly revealed in both the Old and New Testaments. The mystery was that living saints would be transformed at the time of the rapture and given a body suited for heaven without going through the experience of death. Although this had been anticipated in the Old Testament--in the case of Elijah and Enoch, who were translated and did not die--there is no intimation in the Old Testament that such an event would take place when Christ returned to set up His kingdom. Accordingly the mystery is not resurrection, but translation of the living.

It should be clear that Paul is presenting this truth as an imminent hope. On the basis of its expectation, he urges the brethren to serve the Lord faithfully. In that expectation, there is not a syllable of warning that their only hope of achieving this goal would be to pass through the coming time of great tribulation. Silence about a tribulation following the rapture is understandable if the rapture occurs first, but if the great tribulation precedes the rapture, it would have been cruel for the apostle to hold out the hope of the coming of the Lord for them when, as a matter of fact, it would be impossible unless they survived the tribulation.

First Corinthians 15 confirms what is uniformly true in all the rapture passages, that not a word of warning is ever given concerning a preceding tribulation. Posttribulationists tend to ignore this passage because to them it is a problem rather than a help in supporting their point of view. In the order of events, 1

Corinthians 15 confirms that the rapture comes first, before other great prophetic events will be fulfilled.

Pretribulation Order of Events

According to pretribulationists, the rapture of the church occurs at the end of the church age. It is followed by a period of adjustment in which a dictator and a ten-nation group emerge in the Middle East. Then a time of peace follows as this dictator enters into a treaty with Israel, indicated in Daniel 9:27 as intended to last for seven years. However, after the treaty has continued for three and one-half years, half its intended duration, the treaty is broken and the peacetime abruptly ends, followed by a period of persecution.

According to Daniel 9:27 and Matthew 24:15, the dictator in the Middle East desecrates the Jewish temple of that day, stops the sacrifices, and begins worldwide persecution of the Jew. Concurrently he rises to world power and becomes a world ruler (Rev 13:7). He wields not only political power, but also religious power (claiming to be God) and economic power (permitting no one to buy or sell without his permission--Rev 13:8, 17). Because he blasphemes God and persecutes the saints, the judgments of the great tribulation follow.

As the great tribulation progresses, major areas of the world begin rebelling against the dictator. A gigantic war erupts with great armies from the north, east, and south converging on the land of Palestine. At the height of this conflict, Jesus Christ returns in power and glory. He first destroys the armies who unite to fight the hosts of the Lord, as described in Revelation 19. The world ruler and the false prophet associated with him are cast into the lake of fire. Revelation 20 records that the martyrs of the tribulation will be raised from the dead, and many believe that the Old Testament saints will be resurrected at the same time according to Daniel 12:2. A series of judgments will follow that include both Jews and Gentiles and deal with their eligibility to enter the millennial kingdom.

Once these judgments are fulfilled, the millennial kingdom begins, and for a thousand years Christ reigns on earth. The millennium in turn is followed by the new heaven and the new earth and the eternal state. Because the rapture of the church in this point of view takes place before these endtime events, the pretribulationist has no need to find a place for it in connection with Christ's coming to earth. But posttribulationists have no such option and must find a suitable place for the rapture of the church among the events of the second coming.

The Posttribulation Order of Events at the Second Advent

Posttribulationists seem to avoid itemizing events and their order at the second coming of Christ. Yet obviously, because the rapture is pictured as the church's meeting the Lord in the air, this must be inserted before Christ actually reaches the earth. As the heavenly hosts proceed from heaven to earth, the church, according to the posttribulationists, rises from earth and meets the Lord in the air; as the procession proceeds to the earth, the church joins with the coming King in extending His kingdom over the earth.

Amillenarians--who are uniformly posttribulationists because they deny a literal millennium--believe that Christ at His second coming introduces the new heaven and the new earth immediately after a general judgment of all men. They merge the judgment of the nations, the judgment of Israel, the judgment of the church, and the judgment of the great white throne as different aspects of the same event.

Premillenarians who are posttribulationists have certain problems. A most important fact all posttribulationists ignore is that the resurrection at the second coming is after the descent to the earth, not

during the event, as Revelation 20:4 makes clear. This contradicts the posttribulation order of events.

If all the righteous are raptured and all the wicked are put to death, posttribulationists also face the problem of who will populate the millennial earth. In premillennialism there is general agreement that there will be people in the flesh on the earth who will live normal, earthly lives, bearing children, planting crops, building houses, living, and dying. Most premillennial posttribulationists simply avoid this issue. Gundry is to be commended for making an effort to face this problem and attempt a solution. But his exegetical efforts to solve this problem also reveal the many complications a posttribulationist faces in ordering endtime events, so special attention should be directed to his contribution.

Gundry's View of the Judgment of the Nations

Unlike most posttribulationists, who avoid it, Gundry confronts the problem of the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25:31-46. According to the text, this judgment will follow the second advent of Christ and the establishment of His throne. Many expositors recognize that the separation of the sheep and the goats is the separation of the saved from the unsaved on the basis of the evidence of their salvation and how they treat the Jew. Though at present unsaved people may be kind to Jews, in the great tribulation, with anti-Semitism at its height, anyone befriending the Jews described as "brothers" of the king would do so only because he is motivated by faith in Christ. Thus while kind treatment of the Jew is not a ground for salvation, it is an evidence of it.

Gundry begins his objection to the normal pretribulation interpretation by citing the fact that in Matthew 12:50--many chapters earlier than Matthew 25--"Jesus defines His brothers as 'whoever shall do the will of My Father.'" [1] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), p. 166. It seems to be extreme exegesis to take a reference thirteen chapters away, occurring in time two years before, as a specific definition. However, the major problem Gundry faces is determining where this judgment occurs in the sequence of events.

Virtually everyone except Gundry, whatever the eschatological viewpoint, considers the judgment of the nations as occurring approximately at the time of the second coming of Christ. This, however, poses a problem to posttribulationists because, if the rapture occurs while Christ is coming from heaven to the earth, it would automatically separate all believers from unbelievers. Then there would be no sheep (representing believers) intermingled with goats (representing unbelievers) on the earth when Christ sets up His throne. With other standard works on Revelation, yet in general he holds a futuristic viewpoint.

While it is unnecessary to take up all the details, attention can first be directed to his section on the rapture in Revelation 4:1-2. Though many pretribulationists find in the catching up of John a symbolic presentation of the rapture of the church, the passage obviously falls somewhat short of an actual statement of the rapture. Accordingly Gundry has some grounds for questioning the validity of this argument. In the process, he makes certain dogmatic statements that must be challenged. He states, for example, "The book of Revelation treats final events in fuller detail than does any other portion of the NT. Yet, not a single verse in Revelation straightforwardly describes a pretribulation rapture of the Church or advent of Christ." [3] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Pretribulationists rightfully are impatient with this kind of dogmatism because it is also true that the Book of Revelation nowhere describes a posttribulation rapture of the church. The last book of the Bible is specifically dealing with the second coming of Christ to the earth as its major theme, rather than with the rapture of the church as such; thus if the rapture indeed is included in the second coming of Christ, the

silence of Scripture on this point becomes more eloquent than the supposed silence of a pretribulational rapture. Gundry's repeated arguing from silence in his book is quite unwarranted unless he is willing to concede the validity of the argument from silence as it relates to pretribulationism. Yet he affirms the argument from silence over and over again when it suits his purpose for his viewpoint.

One of the familiar pretribulational arguments based on Revelation 3:10 is debated at length by Gundry.[4] Ibid., pp. 54-61. Like most posttribulationists who discuss this subject, Gundry attempts to prove that the Greek preposition ἐκ does not mean from, but out from within. The preposition, however, does not stand alone but is used with the verb τηρεῖω, normally translated keep. A parallel passage in usage is found in John 17:15, where Christ prays that His disciples may be protected from the evil one. Gundry points out that in the believers' present experience they are not taken out of the world but protected from the evil of the world.

What Gundry and most posttribulationists do not take into consideration is that the Bible expressly reveals that saints in the great tribulation will not be protected, except in certain rare instances such as the 144,000, and that the only way they can be kept "from the hour of trial" (NIV) of the great tribulation is by being removed.

Accordingly, while Gundry displays a great deal of erudition in his discussion, it is another illustration of evading the most important point. The promise to the Philadelphian church was not that they would be kept through the tribulation. The promise is, "I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth" (NIV, italics added). The point is that they were promised to be kept from the time period of the tribulation.

Gundry discusses the word hour referring to the prayer of Christ in John 12:27--"Father, save me from this hour?" (NIV)--arguing that it is not simply a time period. Here again Gundry misses the point. The fact is, the Father did not save Christ from the hour, that is, the time of suffering. While Gundry states the posttribulational argument as well as it can be stated, it still falls short of proof that this is what Revelation 3:10 really means.

The problem of this passage turns somewhat on the question of whether the Philadelphian church is typical of the true church, the body of Christ. This may be debated, but the fact remains that even the Philadelphian church as it was historically in existence in the first century could not have been promised that they would be kept "from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth" (Rev 3:10, NIV) if, as a matter of fact, posttribulationism is the correct view. All agree that the Philadelphian church died before the tribulation began, but the question is whether the promise was valid. Pretribulationists can claim this text for whatever application is relevant. While the extent of its support of pretribulationism may be debated, it does not offer any proof at all for the posttribulational view. The issue is whether the church is kept through the tribulation or kept from this period. The Greek preposition δια should have been used if the concept of through were intended.

Gundry, like many others, debates whether the twenty-four elders stand for the church. This is an issue that most scholars agree cannot be finally determined. If the Textus Receptus is correct, then the twenty-four elders are clearly the church, as the first person is used in the song of the redeemed in Revelation 5:9-10. If, however, this is changed to the third person as other texts read, it leaves the question open as to whether these are angels or men. Thus while the passage offers no support for the posttribulational view, the support for the pretribulational view remains under question.

There is, however, the inference that the elders are wearing crowns of reward, and this implies that their judgment has already taken place. If they are angels, this is inexplicable, for it is quite clear that the judgment of angels is later. If they are the church and the church has been raptured earlier, then the rewards make sense. Gundry's argument--that if the crowns imply rapture, then John's being caught up could not symbolize the rapture--may point out an inconsistency, but for those pretribulationists who do not regard John's being caught up as the rapture, it is no clear refutation. Whatever evidence there is about the twenty-four elders is in favor of pretribulationism, not against it. This probably explains why Gundry devotes five pages to this rather tenuous argument. All that posttribulationists can do at this point is to raise questions; they cannot prove that the pretribulationists are wrong in their identification of the elders as the church.

To harmonize the Book of Revelation with posttribulationism, Gundry has his own way of combining the seals, trumpets, and bowls of the wrath of God. According to his diagram, the trumpets begin with the fourth seal; the bowls begin with the fourth trumpet; the seventh seal, the seventh trumpet, and the seventh bowl are simultaneous. All this is quite arbitrary, but it is hardly necessary to debate all the issues involved in order to determine whether the Book of Revelation is in harmony with the pre-or posttribulationist position. Gundry's position gives him a good deal of flexibility and tends to help him in his idea that the day of the Lord does not begin until the end. It should be evident to any reader, however, that Gundry is arranging the Book of Revelation to harmonize with posttribulationism and his peculiar view of it rather than interpreting it on exegetical considerations.

The usual pretribulationist argument that the church is not mentioned in Revelation 4-18 calls for four pages of Gundry's discussion.[5] Ibid., pp. 77-81. Some of Gundry's arguments may have partial relevance and force. But the fact remains that the church is not mentioned in this period. This does not prove pretribulationism, but it certainly poses a problem for posttribulationism which Gundry does not solve.

Probably the most important divergent view of Gundry is his interpretation of the 144,000 in Revelation 7:1-8 and 14:1-5 . Practically all posttribulationists spiritualize these twelve tribes that constitute the 144,000 as representing spiritual Israel, viz., the church. Because he distinguishes Israel from the church Gundry cannot use this method of equating the 144,000 with the church.

Gundry may be right that the 144,000 are not necessarily preachers of the gospel, but he tends to ignore the evidence that they are genuinely saved. He refers to them as bondservants (Rev 7:3), significantly omitting a reference to the fact that they are servants "of God." Thus Gundry offers the suggestion that the 144,000 are a Jewish remnant who are unsaved, who are not members of the church, and who are not raptured. He holds that when the rapture occurs and they see their Messiah descending to the earth, they suddenly are converted.

The Scriptures Gundry cites (Zech 3:8-9; 12:9-13:1 ; Mal 3:1-5; Rom 11:26-27) simply do not support the concept that there is a second chance for people on earth who are unsaved at the time of Christ's return. Most posttribulationists disagree with Gundry here. While Gundry attempts to establish this point of view, it is a weak argument. As far as the writer knows, no one in the history of the church has ever held that the 144,000 are unsaved, orthodox Jews. They hold either that they are members of the church and are converted or, as pretribulationists usually hold, that they are saved Israelites. Gundry further holds that the 144,000 "will include both men and women who will populate and replenish the millennial kingdom of Israel." [6] Ibid., p. 82.

While both posttribulationists and pretribulationists agree that there will be a godly remnant of Israel awaiting Christ at His return, Gundry's view of the 144,000 is absolutely unique and is another evidence of his somewhat desperate attempts to harmonize his very unusual views of posttribulationism with the Book of Revelation.

Gundry also spends some time refuting the view that the marriage supper of the lamb in Revelation 19 is another evidence for a pretribulation rapture. In a normal Oriental wedding, three stages can be observed--first, the legal stage; second, the bridegroom's coming for the bride; and third, the wedding feast. Pretribulationists stress that, if in Revelation 19 the wedding feast is announced, the two preceding stages, including the bridegroom's coming for the bride, has already been accomplished. Gundry replies, "To press woodenly the marital relationship of both Israel and the Church to the Lord would be to say that God is a bigamist." [7] *Ibid.*, p. 85. Such a statement suggests that Gundry is straining too hard to try to explain a point which, after all, is not decisive. Whatever weight this may have, it is no help to the posttribulationist.

Gundry's View of Armageddon

A peculiarity of Gundry's view is that he does not believe the day of the Lord begins until Armageddon. Although Armageddon is clearly the last hour preceding the second coming of Christ, Gundry would have us believe that none of the judgments preceding Armageddon are judgments of the day of the Lord. Gundry states, "Certain celestial portents will both precede the day of the Lord (Joel 2:30-31) and follow immediately upon the tribulation (Matt 24:29). Clearly, the day of the Lord will not begin with the tribulation or any part of it, for otherwise the heavenly portents after the tribulation could not be said to precede that day." [8] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

The logic of these and succeeding statements, as well as Gundry's rather tangled argument in support of his contention, are all open to question. The facts are that the Book of Revelation, beginning in chapter 6, makes very clear that there are a series of "celestial portents" and that they occur throughout the whole period, as well as in the climax that marks its close. Most readers will find Gundry's argument hard to understand at this point.

The Book of Revelation teaches that God will pour out His judgments on the earth over a period of years preceding Armageddon and that all of these judgments are properly a description of what the Bible refers to as the day of the Lord. Even if the various events of the Book of Revelation are shuffled to suit Gundry's view, as he attempts to do, it still comes through clearly that judgments in the day of the Lord occur long before Armageddon; with this comes the evidence that the day of the Lord itself is under way. Since this is one of Gundry's principal contentions and the view on which his whole superstructure rests, the questionable character of his evidence weakens his entire argument. If the Book of Revelation teaches anything, it teaches that God's judgments fall upon the earth beginning at chapter 6 and culminating in chapter 19. For most readers Gundry's view will not make sense.

Posttribulationism at Its Weakest Point

As the discussion of the rapture in relation to the endtime events has indicated, the problem of ordering events is a major one for posttribulationism and especially for the view of Robert Gundry. All posttribulationists stumble when trying to place the rapture in the order of events at the endtime because it does not fit naturally into the sequence. Amillenarians have less trouble than premillenarians. But posttribulationists are trying to establish an event not indicated in any passage dealing with the second

coming of Christ to the earth and without causal relationship to the events which follow.

The problem is compounded by Gundry's attempt to combine dispensationalism with posttribulationism. His view as a whole stands or falls on three major issues: (1) his view of the judgment of the nations; (2) his view of the 144,000; and (3) his view of Armageddon as preceding the beginning of the day of the Lord. It is not too much to say that Gundry's position is unique and is rather clearly the product of his problems in coordinating the endtime events. If Gundry is wrong in placing the judgment of the nations at the end of the millennium--as practically all expositors would hold--and if he is wrong in identifying the 144,000 as unsaved orthodox Jews who nevertheless are "servants of God," and if he is wrong in his attempt to delete all the judgments of God which precede Armageddon as not being in the day of the Lord, then his conclusions are also wrong. The ordinary posttribulational teachings that the judgment of the nations takes place at the second coming of Christ, that the 144,000 represent saved individuals, and that divine judgments fall on the earth before Armageddon are far more tenable than Gundry's point of view.

Nevertheless the problem of all posttribulationists comes out more graphically in Gundry than in any other posttribulational interpreter. The rapture of the church just does not fit endtime events unless it is made the first in the series and before the tribulation. The unique views of Gundry actually pose more problems to the posttribulationist than they do to the pretribulationist.

In attempting to relate the rapture to endtime events, the deep-seated problems of posttribulationism surface again and again. The basic problem of posttribulationists--that their theological inductions are not based on all the facts and that they tend to be selective in their supporting evidence, ignoring the problems--leaves their conclusions in question. Because of the comprehensive nature of scriptural revelation in both the Old and New Testaments on endtime events, for there to be a complete omission of the rapture in connection with the second coming of Christ becomes a most difficult problem. Gundry's argument is complicated by his attempt to be literal, which only results in entangling him in various conclusions which are unique to him and a practice of using principles that do not lead to his conclusions. If posttribulationism stands or falls on the reasonableness of his analysis of endtime events, it ought to be clear that posttribulationism fails to support its major contentions.

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