

# Unresolved Problems of Posttribulationism

by John F. Walvoord

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*The sermon argues that posttribulationism is not a viable view due to its unresolved problems and contradictions.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 24:29

**Topics:** "Eschatology", "Tribulation"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the debate between pretribulationism and posttribulationism, emphasizing the importance of examining the total weight of supporting evidence in Scripture to determine the validity of each view. Posttribulationists present arguments such as historical context, the argument from silence, disagreements on the Book of Revelation, the nature of the church, a second chance for unbelievers, and the order of events at the Second Coming, but face unresolved issues in these areas. Ultimately, the pretribulationist interpretation is seen as offering a more coherent explanation of key passages and problems, asserting the imminent return of Christ for His saints before the tribulation period.

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## 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 12 in the book. The series will conclude with the January-March, 1978 issue.]

In the study of the relative merits of arguments supporting pretribulationism and posttribulationism, it becomes evident that not all the arguments for either conclusion are necessarily decisive. If either the pretribulationist or posttribulationist rapture was unequivocally taught in Scripture, it is doubtful whether worthy scholars would divide on the question. The conclusions reached necessarily are based on the total weight of the supporting evidence and the extent to which each view solves its problems.

Pretribulationists continue to believe that, on the whole, they have offered a better solution to the exegesis of the New Testament on the subject of Christ's coming for His church than the posttribulationists. Posttribulationists continue to hold that pretribulationists have not firmly established their point of view.

Summary of Posttribulationist Arguments

Most posttribulational arguments are in the nature of refutation of pretribulationism. Posttribulationists, however, have approached the subject from at least four major points of view, as mentioned previously, and both the premises and the supporting evidence vary a great deal. A summary of the more important arguments is helpful in weighing the relative merits of posttribulationism and pretribulationism. Because of variations in posttribulational interpretation, however, these need to be divided into two classes: (1) arguments on which posttribulationists agree; (2) arguments on which posttribulationists themselves disagree.

## Posttribulational Arguments Advanced by All Posttribulationists

### Historical Argument

Practically all posttribulationists charge that pretribulationism is a recent theory which surfaced in the writings of J. N. Darby about 150 years ago. Accordingly they argue that posttribulationism is the standard doctrine of the church, and they raise the question why pretribulationism was not advanced earlier if it is actually the teaching of Scripture. George E. Ladd, for instance, devotes a third of his book to the historical argument, and practically every writer on posttribulationism emphasizes and reemphasizes this point.[1] George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956). In offering this argument, posttribulationists generally ignore the fact that most modern forms of posttribulationism differ greatly from that of the early church or of the Protestant Reformers and are actually just as new or perhaps newer than pretribulationism.

### The Argument from Silence

Practically all posttribulationists appeal to the fact that the New Testament does not state in so many words a pretribulational rapture. Here they frequently refer to the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24-25 ), which does not mention the rapture in its list of endtime events. They also argue that in the rapture passages there is no clear statement of the great tribulation following the event. Writers like Robert Gundry repeat over and over this argument from silence as one of the most convincing arguments for posttribulationism.[2] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973). Almost invariably omitted, however, is the confession that the Bible is also silent on a posttribulational rapture and never mentions the great tribulation as preceding the rapture. It is a curious note that posttribulationists consistently deny pretribulationists the right to use the argument from silence while using the same argument to support their own viewpoints. by spiritualizing the great tribulation, those who take it literally must find some other explanation. Generally they tend to minimize the sufferings and to insulate the saints from the judgments of the great tribulation. Here posttribulationists flounder badly, and their major disagreement on the nature of the tribulation creates serious problems.

### Disagreement on the Book of Revelation

A major problem of posttribulationists is that they have no uniform interpretation of the Book of Revelation. Many posttribulationists spiritualize the great judgments described in Revelation 6-19 , while others attempt to take them somewhat literally. Most posttribulationists spiritualize the 144,000 of Israel as representing saints in general and tend to make Israel and the church the same spiritual entity. Gundry offers a unique interpretation, differing from other posttribulationists in portraying the 144,000 as orthodox Jews who are unsaved until the moment of the rapture.[8] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 81-83. Because of the wide variety of viewpoints among the posttribulationists on the Book of Revelation, their arguments are conflicting and contradictory.

## Disagreement on the Nature of the Church

Most posttribulationists tend to spiritualize the church as including saints of all ages. They argue that saints are in the great tribulation and therefore the church must go through it. Gundry is the exception to this in that he attempts to distinguish between the church and Israel in most instances. Most posttribulationists recognize that a major ground for pretribulationism is the distinction between the church and Israel; posttribulationists like Gundry, however, take an opposite view. The result is further confusion in the posttribulational argument.

## Disagreement On A Second Chance For Unbelievers At The Second Coming Of Christ

Gundry and a few others attempt to resolve the problem of saints in the millennium still in their natural bodies--in contrast with the saints raptured after the tribulation--by teaching a second chance to be saved after the rapture. While pretribulationists can point to an extended number of years during which people could come to Christ and qualify to enter the millennium in their natural bodies, posttribulationists do not generally postulate a second chance for those who are unbelievers at the time of the rapture. Gundry is one of the few who advance this position, which is unsupported in Scripture.

## Disagreement as to a Specific Order of Events at the Time of the Second Coming

Posttribulationists rarely offer a specific sequence of events in connection with the second coming of Christ. Although obligated to include the rapture in the descent of Christ from heaven to the earth, most of them do not defend it or explain it. The reason for this is that the rapture is, for them, an extraneous note in the events described in the second coming of Christ to the earth, and it introduces problems in the various Scriptures dealing with divine judgments. For instance, the resurrection of the tribulation saints is placed after Christ returns to earth, not in the process of His descent.

## Disagreement on the Nature of the Judgments at the Second Coming of Christ

While posttribulationists agree that there are judgments at the second coming of Christ, they disagree as to their time and order. Gundry places the judgment of the nations and the judgment seat of Christ at the end of the millennium.[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 163-71. Posttribulationists usually lump the various judgments at the second coming and if premillennial, place them before the millennium. There is no uniform teaching among posttribulationists on the final judgments.

## Disagreement on the Millennium

Posttribulationists are not agreed as to whether premillennialism, postmillennialism, or amillennialism is the correct view. Accordingly posttribulationism does not lend itself to a single system of eschatological interpretation and varies widely in its concept of the fulfillment of prophecy. It is difficult to find two posttribulationists who agree completely on the order of endtime events.

## Resulting Unresolved Posttribulational Problems

In most studies of posttribulational arguments, it is often overlooked that posttribulationists have not really solved their major problems. These fall into three major areas: (1) the silence of Scripture on crucial facts of posttribulationism; (2) the obvious contrasts between passages dealing with the rapture and passages relating to the second coming of Christ to the earth; (3) problems of contradiction, or teachings of posttribulationism that conflict with normal premillennial interpretation of Scripture. While these problem

areas in posttribulationism have been considered in various articles in this series, the force of them becomes more evident when they are summarized.

### Silence of Scripture on Facts Crucial to Posttribulationism

Posttribulationists usually make much of the charge that pretribulationism is based only on inference. Although the charge is partly true, they cover up the fact that posttribulationism is also based on inference.

First, posttribulationists have never been able to prove that the church as the body of Christ is actually in the period of tribulation, especially the one designated in Scripture as the "great tribulation." All agree that in the great tribulation there are people, referred to as "saints," who are saved Israelites or saved Gentiles. None of the usual terms is used such as the word church or synonyms which include both Jew and Gentile as the distinctive body of saints in the present age. Posttribulationists attempt to solve this by making Israel and the church the same or by using other evasive arguments. But they cannot cite a single passage that incontrovertibly places the church, the body of Christ, in the great tribulation. While the argument from silence has its limitations, it is strange that in the extended description of the great tribulation as found in Revelation 4-18, there is not a single reference to the church as being in the period. While posttribulationists have worked hard to place the church in the Olivet Discourse and have otherwise attempted to counter the force of this argument, the fact remains that they have never satisfactorily explained this.

Second, posttribulationists have never satisfactorily explained why the Thessalonian Christians were not warned of the coming great tribulation when the hope of the rapture was extended to them as a comfort.

Writers like James Montgomery Boice, for instance, find the argument of 1 Thessalonians 4 sufficiently convincing to settle the question of pretribulationism and posttribulationism. Boice says, the rapture of the church. In addition, Scriptures make clear that there will be great disturbances in the heavens and great catastrophes on earth, including earthquakes, famine, pestilence, and great loss of life, all of which constitute the horrors of the great tribulation. The second coming clearly is preceded by these events, but not a single passage dealing with the rapture ever anticipates such.

Second, details of the rapture vary considerably from the details of the second coming. At the rapture, saints meet Christ in the air, while at the second coming of Christ, the meeting with saints on earth follows His arrival on the Mount of Olives.

Third, as far as any rapture passage is concerned, there are no fundamental changes in the world situation at the rapture, while at the second coming there are devastating changes including the cleavage of the Mount of Olives (Zech 14:4-5).

Fourth, all agree that living saints are translated, and the dead in Christ are raised at the rapture. In no passage is there mention of translation at the second coming, and the saints who are raised are not identified with the church.

Fifth, posttribulationists have not satisfactorily explained John 14 with its promise of taking the saints to the Father's house. At the rapture, saints will fulfill this promise; at the second coming to the earth, there is no translation and no departure to the Father's house.

Sixth, when the rapture occurs, there is no indication of world-wide judgment, though it is followed by the judgment seat of Christ for the church. By contrast, at the second coming the whole world is judged,

including both Jew and Gentile, saved and unsaved living on the earth.

Seventh, at the rapture there is no indication that a millennial reign of Christ immediately follows. But major passages on the second coming of Christ picture the world, not only as judged, but as established in righteousness in Christ's kingdom on the earth.

Eighth, indications from 1 Thessalonians 5 point to the conclusion that the church will be delivered before the time of wrath overtakes the world, while at the second coming the deliverance comes for those who have believed in Christ during the tribulation after they have gone through this time of wrath.

Ninth, in keeping with the peculiar character of the church as the body of saints in the present age, the truth relating to the rapture is found only in the New Testament. This contrasts with events related to the second coming that are the subject of much prophecy in both the Old and New Testaments. posttribulationism has inherent contradictions, especially if the premillennial viewpoint be adopted.

First, these problems surface in such passages as 1 Thessalonians 5, where posttribulationists have to give a particular interpretation to the day of the Lord which is not supported by its usage in the Old and New Testaments. While pretribulationists have not been without fault in their interpretation of this phrase, the posttribulationists have certainly not solved the problem.

Second, posttribulationists have never come up with a satisfactory explanation of how the restrainer must be removed before the man of sin can be revealed. Although the exegesis of 2 Thessalonians 2 is not without its difficulties, as was pointed out in the discussion of this passage, the interpretation that the restrainer is the Holy Spirit in relationship to the church is superior to any other. If this is the case, then posttribulationists have a real problem of harmonizing this with their view.

Third, as illustrated by Gundry's treatment of the time of wrath, posttribulationists are hard put to explain how the church can go through a day of wrath and yet have comfort with the thought of translation at its end. Posttribulationists disagree among themselves as to how to solve this problem. Some of them spiritualize the great tribulation, as does J. Barton Payne[11] Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ.*; others try to evade the problem by declaring that while the world is the object of divine wrath, the church is not. Gundry's position--that the great tribulation is a time of satanic wrath--complicates rather than helps his position, as satanic wrath is vented only on believers, not on unbelievers. Posttribulationists have not solved this problem and have not offered convincing answers.

Fourth, posttribulationists who are premillennial have not solved the problem of transition from the tribulation to the millennium. According to Scripture, survivors of the tribulation--both Jews and Gentiles who are saved--enter the millennium in their natural bodies. They are described as having normal functions as people living in the flesh on earth. If so, posttribulationists have a major problem in explaining how these could be raptured and still have natural bodies. Most posttribulationists choose to ignore this, as do Ladd and Reese.[12] Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*; Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*.

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Gundry, as we have seen, attempts to solve the problem by a complicated explanation unique in the history of interpretation, but he actually never resolves the difficulty. It is not too much to say that this is one of the major problems of posttribulationism if premillennialism is assumed. How can saints go into the millennium in their natural bodies if, in fact, they were raptured while Christ was coming from heaven to

the earth? Gundry's postulate of a second chance at the second coming is without any scriptural support.

## Conclusion

It is too much to say that the stated objections to the posttribulational view prove that the pretribulational interpretation is right. But they certainly give adequate ground for the pretribulationist to reject posttribulationism. The pretribulational view offers a better explanation of key problems and passages than does posttribulationism. The fact that posttribulationists avoid their major problems is in itself a confession that in crucial areas they have not supported their conclusions. For this reason, along with the positive testimony of the truth of the rapture in the New Testament, pretribulationists continue to hold that the coming of Christ for His saints is imminent, an event that precedes the tribulation period as a blessed, comforting, and purifying hope.

Just as the distinctions between the first and second comings of Christ were not fully apparent to all until the first coming took place, so it is probable that the church at large will not recognize the distinction between the rapture and the second coming until the rapture itself takes place. Meanwhile, those who depend on Scripture relating to these unfulfilled prophetic events will need to weigh the evidence for these contradictory views. Both cannot be true, and the question can only be resolved by searching the Scriptures dealing with this prophetic hope.

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