

# Preterism's Achilles's Heel

by Reggie Kelly

*Preterism's denial of the futurity of the great tribulation contradicts the uniform witness of the NT and denies the future fulfillment of prophecy.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 66:8, Jeremiah 31:34, Daniel 12:1, Joel 3:2, Zechariah 12:10, Matthew 24:21, Acts 3:21, Romans 11:26, 2 Thessalonians 2:1, Revelation 7:14

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

## Description

Reggie Kelly delves into the intricate connections between prophecies in Daniel, Jeremiah, and Matthew, emphasizing the futurity of 'the great tribulation' and the post-tribulational return of Christ. The sermon explores the undeniable link between the unequalled tribulation, the career of Antichrist, and the resurrection of the righteous dead, highlighting the significance of these events in eschatology. It challenges the interpretations of preterists who place these events in the past, stressing the importance of understanding the prophetic future of Israel and the ultimate divine deliverance.

## Transcript

The cornerstone of replacement theology is 'Preterism,' - "the belief that holds that the Tribulation prophecies occurred in the first century [A.D.], and thus are past" (Kenneth Gentry). The hallmark of Preterism is its denial of the futurity of 'the great tribulation' (specifically Mt 24:21). But compare closely the parallel relationships between Jer 30:7; Dn 12:1 and Mt 24:21. It is clear that the very language of Daniel's prophecy of an 'unequaled' tribulation borrows directly from Jeremiah's prophecy of the same event, [1] as Jesus not only describes the great tribulation by His own word for word reference to Daniel (compare Dn 12:1; Mt 24:21), but explicitly directs His disciples to pay attention to Daniel as the source prophecy for the events that signal His return (Mt 24:15; with Dn 9:27; 11:31; 12:11).

Any comparison of these texts, particularly in their larger contexts (e.g. Dn 7:21-25; 11:36-12:13 with 2 Thes 2:1-8; Rev 11-13), displays a clear and inextricable connection between (1) the 'unequaled' tribulation ("THE tribulation THE great" Dn 12:1; Mt 24:21; Rev 7:14), (2) the brief career of Antichrist (Dn 7:25; 9:27; 12:11; Rev 11:2; 13:5), and (3) the post-tribulational return of Christ (Mt 24:21-31; 2 Thes 2:1-3, 8). This complex of events starts with the 'abomination of desolation' (Mt 24:15, 21, 29-31), [2] lasts for 'approximately' 3 ½ years (Dn 7:25; 9:27; 12:11; Rev 11:2-3; 12:6, 14; 13:5), [3] and ends in nothing short of (1) Christ's glorious return (Mt 24:29-30), (2) the gathering of the elect (Mt 24:31; 2 Thes 2:1), (3) the final 'deliverance' of Israel ("thy people" Dn 12:1), and (4) the resurrection of the righteous dead (Dn

12:2). [4] To place any of these events in past history is to ignore their manifest proximity to the resurrection (Dan 12:1-2 with Mt 24:21-31). However, preterists of the so-called 'replacement' schools of prophetic interpretation (a-millennial, post-millennial, historical) are forced to deny the proximity of these events to a future resurrection.

Scholars agree that Dn 12:2 stands out as the most unambiguous reference to resurrection to be found anywhere in the OT. However, in order to avoid the implications of 'apocalyptic futurism,' preterists must interpret this otherwise clear reference to eternal resurrection as a non-literal metaphor standing for national revival (e.g. Ezk 37). [5] But Daniel, who sees a prolonged exile, puts the unequaled tribulation and subsequent resurrection at "the end". (7:25-26; 8:17, 19; 9:27; 11:27, 35, 40; 12:1-13). This, however, provides no deterrent at all to preterism's postulate of two distinct ends to two distinct ages, i.e., the 'Jewish age' and the 'church age'. [6] But there is no analogy in Israel's history for such an end as these passages so definitely specify. Even if Daniel's reference to resurrection is interpreted figuratively, it cannot be separated in time from the unequaled tribulation which preterists interpret as literal. Clearly, Daniel's vision looks beyond any transitory national revival to the ultimate eschatological salvation "at the end of the days" (12:1-2, 13). According to Daniel, 'Jacob's trouble' ends in the final deliverance of Israel and the resurrection of the righteous (Jer 30:7; Dn 12:1-2) which includes his own resurrection "at the end of the days" (12:13).

The exegetical force of this manifest interrelation of events is not lost on a minority of scholars that identify themselves as 'consistent preterists' vis-à-vis 'moderate preterist'. However, rather than admitting a future fulfillment of this indivisible complex of events, 'consistent preterists' feel justified in saying that the resurrection described in Daniel 12:2 is already past. This interpretation, however, contradicts the uniform witness of the NT. In virtually every text in the NT where the resurrection is mentioned, it is treated as an inseparable feature of the judgment that accompanies Christ's return at the still future 'day of the Lord.'

The time of the day of the Lord is made clear by noting that the stellar darkness that comes "immediately AFTER the tribulation of those days" (Mt 24:29) is shown in Acts 2:20 to precede and signal 'the great and notable day of the Lord' (Joel 2:31; 3:14-16). So the darkness is "AFTER" the tribulation, but "BEFORE" the day of the Lord, showing that the great tribulation ends with the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord does not include the tribulation, but follows it. Thus the 'thief-like' day of the Lord IS the post-tribulational advent of Christ (cf. Mt 24:43; 1 Thes 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10-12; Rev 16:14-15). However, a comparison of the following texts will show that the day of the Lord is consistently treated as marking the point of the Church's ultimate redemption (1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 1:14; 1 Thes 4:13-5:4; 2 Thes 1:7-10; 2:1-3, 8). These texts show that Christ's post-tribulational return cannot be separated from the day of the Lord, but neither can the day of the Lord be separated from the future hope of the church. [7]

Only the strength of a powerfully overriding presupposition can account for the decision to make the post-tribulational coming described in the Olivet prophecy and in John's Apocalypse the exception to all other NT references to Christ's coming and attendant resurrection. In all other NT texts, the resurrection is united to the 'blessed hope' of the Church. It is therefore the more curious that the only passages that are treated as exceptions happen to be those that make explicit or implicit prophetic reference to the Land of Israel. It is suggested that since the NT contains no clear reiteration of the land promise, this feature of 'the everlasting covenant' (Ps 105:10-11; Jer 32:40-41; Ezk 37:25-26) has been reinterpreted as completely fulfilled in Jesus, and thus the Land no longer retains its former significance.

But NT witness to the abiding prophetic significance of the Land would not be so 'missing' if the larger part of NT prophecy was not assigned to the past. Furthermore, it is not the New Testament's first interest to 'reiterate' everything that Jews of the first century naturally understood as irrevocable features of the covenant (Jer 31:35-37; Ezk 36:22, 32; Ro 11:29), deferred only "UNTIL the times of restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21). Rather, the NT's emphasis falls on the revelation of things formerly hidden, bound up in the mystery of Christ's twofold advent. All that related to a future "restoration of the kingdom to Israel" was never in question (only 'the times and seasons' Acts 1:6; 1Thes 5:1-2), and required no special reaffirmation; it was self-evident.

The real question to be decided is what the exegetical and historical evidence is for how Jesus, Paul, and John, all apocalyptically oriented Jews of the first century, would have understood the relationship of Daniel's unequalled tribulation to the resurrection? Both 'moderate' and 'consistent' preterists insist that Christ returned mystically in apocalyptic judgment "immediately after the tribulation of those days" (Mt 24:19, 22, 29), understood as the days of the Roman sacking of Jerusalem. But while moderate preterists interpret Daniel's reference to a post-tribulational resurrection as a non-literal metaphor of past fulfillment, so-called 'consistent preterists' go even further to say that living believers were translated and the dead in Christ actually rose around the time of Jerusalem's fall.

This is the price that 'consistency' must pay if the time of unequalled tribulation is to be placed in the past. Such strained interpretations force themselves whenever the time of 'unequalled tribulation' is placed in the past, simply because all exegetes are compelled to recognize the inseparable relationship of Daniel's reference to the resurrection in 12:2 with the 'unequalled tribulation' that precedes it in 12:1. Among 'moderate preterists,' however, there is usually the belief of a future unsigned return of Christ and a general resurrection that is not to be identified with the resurrection that Daniel describes as ending the unequalled tribulation (12:1-2). But this is to forfeit consistency, as it divides the indivisible (2 Tim 2:15).

The manifest interrelation and indivisibility of the events described in the above parallel passages reveals a basic eschatology common to both testaments, viz., a last days' anti-Christ persecution of the saints followed by Christ's return as the glorified Son of Man to destroy the Antichrist, and resurrect the righteous. The same eschatological structure stands behind Paul's 'little apocalypse' (2 Thes 2:1-12) and his comprehensive apologetic for the mystery of Israel's deferred salvation (Ro 9-11), since both prophetic scenarios assume as their goal the OT day of the Lord. For Paul, the 'day of the Lord' marks the great transition point in history that God has appointed to remove Israel's partial blindness (Ro 11:25) and to re-engraft the 'natural branches' into "their own" olive tree. This is also the time when the "deliverer comes out of Zion to turn ungodliness away from Jacob" (Ps 14:7; Joel 3:16; Isa 59:18-21; Ro 11:26-27).

Thus, at the moment of Christ's return the Antichrist is destroyed (2 Thes 2:8), the Church is raptured (cf. Mt 24:31; 1 Thes 4:13-5:4; 2 Thes 2:1; 1 Cor 15:51-52), and a nation is "born in one day" (Isa 66:8; Ezk 39:22; Zech 3:9), as the surviving remnant of Israel in penitent contrition "shall look upon Me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for Him, as one mourns for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for Him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn" (Zech 12:10 with Mt 23:39; 24:30; Rev 1:7).

Until then, the blinded nation (Israel) is subject to the "vengeance of the covenant" (Lev 26:25; Isaiah 10:6; Lk 21:22-23). Therefore, whether in or outside the Land, Israel must continue to pass under the rod UNTIL (Lk 21:24; Acts 3:21; Ro 11:25-29) final deliverance and new covenant transformation comes at the post-tribulational day of the Lord (Jer 31:31-37; 32:37-42; Ezk 36:26; 39:22-29; Joel 3:21). Until 'that day,' God's face remains hidden from the larger nation (see Ezk 39:22-29), as the people of the unfulfilled

covenant are delivered over to tribulation and flight (Mt 24:16; Rev 12:6), and the land, cities and holy places to desolations (Lev 26:31-32; Isa 10:5-6; 63:18; 64:10-11; Ezk 36:35-36; Mt 24:15; Lk 21:20).

This is the uniform perspective that becomes unmistakable in Jesus', Paul's and John's parallel use of Daniel. For all that the 'secret' of NT revelation (Ro 16:25-26) adds to the glory of God's eternal purpose, it does nothing to alter the essential framework of OT eschatology. Though so much concerning the ground of the eternal covenant in Christ's atonement and twofold advent has come to light in the revelation of the mystery, Paul is unable to conceive of the covenant's final vindication in history apart from the 'salvation of all Israel' at the day of the Lord (Jer 31:34; Isa 59:17-21; Ro 11:26).

In both testaments, the day of the Lord marks the point of ultimate divine deliverance that divides 'this present evil age' ("the times of the Gentiles") from 'the age to come' that begins with Christ's post-tribulational return to destroy the Antichrist (cf. Dn 7:11, 21-24; 11:31-12:1; 2 Thes 2:2-4, 8; Rev 16:13-16; 19:20; also Dn 2:44 with Rev 17:12 in light of Acts 1:6; 3:21). This is the pivotal point where the eschatology of both testaments converge. Even if a case can be made for the occurrence of a double, archetypal, or partial fulfillment of certain of the more 'apocalyptic' expressions of NT prophecy, one has still to contend with the NT's continued treatment of the day of the Lord as a yet future event.

A later spiritual application or enlargement of an OT prophecy does not nullify or preclude a future literal fulfillment that meets all the demands of context and original authorial intention, particularly when the still future 'day of the Lord' is its stated time of fulfillment. By what logic, then, can any presume that the future day of the Lord may not bring with it the great turning from ungodliness on the part of the 'natural branches' that Paul so clearly confesses in complete agreement with the entire eschatology of the OT? And if this much is true, what part of OT prophecy may not be interpreted literally? Such a wholesale overhaul of 'Jewish eschatology' (disdainfully referred to as "nationalistic" and "carnal") is based on unjustified presuppositions that must rule out a future post-tribulational coming of the Son of Man to change believers, raise the dead, and deliver Israel [8] all according to the mystery traced by Paul in Ro 9-11.

All that is new to the eschatology of the NT is what has issued out of the mystery of Messiah's twofold advent ("the mystery of the kingdom"). By this foretold but no less unexpected turn of events, a new tension was created that theologians, borrowing a famous term from Oscar Cullman's "Christ and Time," refer to as "the already and the not yet." Theologians of the so-called 'Heilsgeschichte' school of NT interpretation also subscribe to a kind of 'middle-view' among scholars called 'inaugurated eschatology.' It is basically the idea that in Christ, and through the spirit of revelation, 'the powers of the coming age' (Heb 6:5) have invaded the present, thus the title of George Ladd's "The Presence of the Future." It means that the decisive eschatological visitation has come in unexpected advance of the day of the Lord, creating a new center, and this new center is the hallmark of all NT eschatology. 'The already' is the 'inaugurated' kingdom as first-fruits; 'the not yet' is the kingdom's fuller conquest that comes with Christ's return, the yet awaited 'day of the Lord.' The kingdom is both here and coming, as also the powers of the 'approaching day' (Heb 10:25). This means that the revelation of the mystery does nothing to nullify the necessary 'not yet' of all that waits the still future 'day of the Lord,' nor does it justify a sweeping "reinterpretation" of any of the events and ends attained only with its still awaited arrival. An overly 'realized eschatology' is as unbiblical as an overly 'futurized' eschatology that fails to emphasize the power and presence of the kingdom that has come and is still coming.

Thus, the logic of Preterism is clear: Since the tribulation described in Daniel and the Olivet prophecy is past, and since it is without dispute that Jesus returns in glory 'immediately after the tribulation,' it follows that Christ has in some sense already returned. But according to the parallel passage in Daniel, if the tribulation is past, then so is the resurrection (12:1-2). But if the tribulation (depicted as brief, unequalled, and age ending) is not past, it is future; and a future tribulation that has its inception in the Land (Dn 11:41-45; Mt 24:16; Lk 21:24; Rev 11:2; 14:20; 16:16) carries all kinds of implications for the prophetic future of Israel.

One might even wonder if a latent anti-Semitic triumphalism is not the real attraction of Preterism. This is perhaps more possible than we are prepared to conceive. Both scripture and history attest to a deep and powerful natural aversion to God's electing prerogatives, and this is particularly exposed when it comes to the question of the Jew in history and prophecy. However, given the amazing story of the modern return of the Jews to a revived national existence that seemed to rise out of the ashes of the Holocaust, together with the ominous portents implicit in the ensuing Middle East crisis, it would appear that history is being positioned for the 'literal' fulfillment of prophecy.

Indeed, it is hard to see how any objective observer could possibly disregard the prophetic futurism implicit in Zechariah's amazing prophecy that depicts the final world crisis as centered upon the question of Jerusalem (Zech 12:2). This is precisely what we see on the world stage. Jerusalem is now and will increasingly become 'a cup of trembling' destined to sift all nations. The 'controversy of Zion' represents the great issues of covenant and election, and the sovereignty of the divine rule manifest through prophecy (Isa 46:10; Rev 19:10b). Indeed, the entire eschatology of Daniel is built around an age enduring war against "the holy covenant" (11:28, 30) led by an invisible host of 'principalities and powers' (4:17; 8:11, 13, 25; 9:25-26; 10:12-21; 11:18, 22, 12:1).

Therefore, according to the eschatology of both testaments, the final provocation of divine wrath comes in response to an ultimate arrogance of the nations against the covenant, particularly as it touches the question of the Jew and the Land (cf. Joel 3:2; Ezk 38:16-19; Dn 11:39; Zech 12:2; Mt 24:15-16). This is the eschatological context in which the gospel was first preached 'for a witness' to all nations; it must be so again (Mt 24:14 with Rev 19:10b). The first disciples lived under the shadow of an imminent, age-ending judgment of Jerusalem. We have come full circle!

[1] Working from Jeremiah's prophecy of the 70 years (see Dn 9:2), Daniel shows that Israel's final tribulation ("Jacob's trouble" Jer 30:7; "Zion's travail" Isa 66:8) does not soon follow the end of the exile, as might have been inferred from Jeremiah, but comes only at the end of an extended exile of seventy additional sevens (9:24-27; 12:1-2, 11). Thus, Daniel's message of an extended probation addresses the problem of delay. The exiles could not have known that the glorious conditions depicted by the former prophets in association with the promised return would be only partially realized. Much more was expected than a "day of small things" (Ezr 3:12 with Zech 4:10)

[2] Especially note the connecting and delimiting phrase "those days" in Mt 24: 19, 22, 29

[3] Because of the mysterious extension of days recorded in Dan 12:11-12, the precise time of the Lord's post-tribulational return must remain slightly indefinite, but the 'approximate' duration of the Tribulation is most certain.

[4] Compare also "the great sound of the trumpet" in Mt 24:31 with Paul's eschatological 'last trump' as a resurrection event 1Cor 15:51-54 (also Rev 10:7; 11:15). Note the clearly post-tribulational context of

Paul's OT references to resurrection and the 'great trumpet' in connection with the final deliverance (cf. Isa 25:6-8; 26:19-21; 27:13).

[5] Philip Mauro interprets the language of Dn 12:2 to signify nothing more than a national spiritual 'awakening' in the form of the contemporary preaching of the gospel by which the believer is 'spiritually' raised to everlasting life and the unbeliever sentenced to final judgment ("The Seventy Weeks and the Great Tribulation" 168-171).

[6] Interestingly, both preterism and pretribulationism share a common tendency to double the major events of eschatology. Such unnatural doubling of events is the result of a forced distinction and division between events that are exegetically indivisible.

[7] Such definite timing of the day of the Lord is equally troublesome for the pretribulational dispensational school of prophetic interpretation, because a principal pillar of this position is the view that Christ's special pretribulational coming 'for the Church' can occur any moment. It cannot therefore be contingent on any preceding events; it is imminent and unsigned. But in 1 Thes 4:13-5:4 Paul clearly associates the Church's hope of rapture with its expectation of the day of the Lord, which 'day' Paul says "shall NOT come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed ..." (2 Thes 2:1-3). Hence, the day of the Lord is NOT unsigned, and NOT imminent in the sense of pretribulationism.

[8] By the phrase 'all Israel shall be saved,' it is evident that Paul has two aspects of OT promise in mind. First, since Paul is clear that 'they are not all Israel who are of Israel,' it is only the elect remnant (Isa 4:2-4; 10:20-23; 11:11-16) that receives the quickening revelation of Christ at the post-tribulational day of the Lord (Zech 12:10; Ro 11:26). This penitent remnant will constitute the beginning of the renewed nation, as the greater part of the nation ('two thirds') will die amid the covenant judgments of 'Jacob's trouble' (Ezk 20:38; Amos 9:9-10; Zech 13:8-9). Secondly, the phrase 'all Israel' stands for the promise that EVERY member of the renewed nation (Ezk 36:25; Isa 66:8) will know the Lord "from that day and forward" (Jer 31:34; Ezk 39:22), and so continue 'forever' (Isa 4:2-3; 59:21; 60:21; 66:22; Jer 32:40 et al). Such sudden and radical transformation of the entirety of the surviving remnant stands in remarkable analogy to Paul's own divine arrest on the Damascus Road, and thus guarantees Jewish permanency in the Land, because the perennial cause of exile is permanently obviated.

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