

Toward a Biblical View
of the Rapture

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Introduction

The “rapture” of the Church refers to a future appearing of Christ in which he will return for his Church, the Body of Christ (*i.e.* all the redeemed of the Church age), resurrecting the dead and the transforming the living, and calling them out of this world and into heaven, an event that is to be nearly instantaneous and without signs or warning. While the Bible does not say when this event will occur, it does indicate that it is imminent, that is, that it could happen at any moment, and that it will occur before “the great and terrible day of the LORD” – the coming period during which God will judge the earth and its inhabitants and pave the way for the establishment of his promised kingdom on earth. (For a discussion of the coming kingdom see: *What the Bible Says About the Future*, by the author (Biblical Reader Communications, 2011.)

In recent history the most popular view on the timing of the rapture has been “pretribulationism,” the view that the rapture must occur before the beginning of the seven-year period often referred to as “the tribulation,” prophesied in Daniel 9:27, and elsewhere in both the Old and New Testaments (Psa. 110:1-7; Isa. 2:10-11; 13:6-16; 24:1-23; 26:20-21; 34:1-15; 63:1-6; 66:4-6, 14b-18; Jer. 25:30-38; 30:4-7, 23-24; Ezek. 38:1-39:24; Dan. 2:1-45; 7:1-28; 9:27; 12:1,5-12; Joel 2:1-11; 3:1-16; Amos 5:18-20; Mic. 5:10-15; Zeph. 1:2-3:11; Matt. 24:4-31; Mk. 13:1-37; Lk. 17:20-37; 21:34-35; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; Heb. 12:25-26; Jude 14-15; Rev. 4:1-20:3). Of course, there have been a number of views on the timing of the rapture.

In this brief volume we will survey the major views of the rapture and their principal arguments. We will then examine the biblical evidence and see that it doesn’t lead to

any of the classic views, but to a simpler understanding of the rapture that is imminent (meaning that it could occur today), and pre-wrath (meaning that it must occur before God pours out his wrath at the day of the LORD). Such a view is similar to pretribulationism, but unlike pretribulationism, doesn't make the assumption that the day of the LORD and the tribulation begin at the same time. Thus, if the imminent pre-wrath conception is correct, the rapture could occur either before the tribulation begins, or afterward; but it must occur before the day of the LORD begins. However, before we can determine the biblical view, we have much work to do. We will begin by trying to understand the landscape of contemporary rapture theology.

How we got to where we are in rapture theology

Prior to the popular revival of premillennialism that began in earnest in the late nineteenth century and continued in the twentieth century, most Christians simply believed that at some time Christ would return and there would be a general judgment, with the righteous inheriting eternal life and the unrighteous receiving eternal punishment. This view, referred to as either "amillennialism," or "postmillennialism," depending upon how literally one took the prophecies of the millennium, had the appeal of simplicity, if not strict biblical accuracy. However, premillennialism, with its face-value interpretation of future prophecy, envisions a future reign of Christ on earth in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and his descendants. Needless to say, premillennialism's view of the future is more complex in terms of sorting out what will happen, and when. For example, assuming premillennialism to be true, one must deal with the question of whether the tribulation is past or future, as this has everything to do with one's view of the rapture of the Church. If one happens to believe, as do some premillennialists, that

the tribulation prophecies were fulfilled in the first century destruction of Jerusalem or the early persecution of the Church, then one must necessarily hold to a “posttribulation” view of the rapture, in which the rapture will occur at, or after, the conclusion of the tribulation. However, many premillennialists believe that the Church will be raptured in advance of the second coming, prior to the outpouring of divine wrath at the day of the LORD. As has been stated, the most widely accepted of these views is pretribulationism—the belief that the Church will be caught up to be with Christ before the tribulation begins.

During the twentieth century several premillennial views of the rapture came into being; they are: partial rapturism, midtribulationism, and a particular pre-wrath view we will refer to as “Rosenthal’s pre-wrath view.” Midtribulationism places the rapture on the tribulation timeline at, or near the midpoint of the tribulation, but still prior to the outpouring of divine wrath; proponents view only the second half of the tribulation as divine wrath. Rosenthal’s pre-wrath view is an updated form of midtribulationism that places the rapture about three-quarters of the way through the tribulation; proponents hold that only about the last quarter of the period is divine wrath. Partial rapturism belongs in a category by itself, since it combines a pretribulation rapture with an Arminian view of salvation. Partial rapturists view participation in the rapture (which is a component of salvation) as based on certain works. They believe there will be a pretribulation rapture, but that only those who are faithfully watching and waiting for Christ’s appearing will be raptured; those believers who are not faithful at the time of the first rapture will be raptured later, or at the second coming.

Neither partial rapturism nor midtribulationism had been as popular as pretribulationism. Prior to the nine-

teen-nineties, if one were dispensational and premillennial, they probably subscribed to pretribulationism; in fact, since the mid-1900s pretribulationism has become almost a test of orthodoxy in some circles, and it is not uncommon to find it written into church confessions. In 1990, Marvin Rosenthal, former Director of The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, a conservative and pretribulationist missionary organization, published *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Thomas Nelson Publishers). That book was widely read, and some pretribulationists began to gravitate toward Rosenthal's view. As will be seen when we look at Rosenthal's position in detail, the supporting arguments are clearly defective; nevertheless, they appealed to many midtribulationists, and to some pretribulationists who were beginning to notice biblical and logical defects in pretribulationist arguments.

Confusing terminology

It's unfortunate that Rosenthal's view has been labeled as "pre-wrath rapturism," since both pretribulationism and midtribulationism are also pre-wrath views; they simply disagree on how much of the tribulation is divine wrath. Because of the almost certain confusion that might otherwise result from the use of the term "pre-wrath," Rosenthal's view will be referred to here as "Rosenthal's pre-wrath view" to distinguish it from pre-wrath views in general (*i.e.*, any view that places the rapture prior to divine wrath at the day of the LORD).

Another significant problem in rapture theology is the way the term "tribulation" is used. In pretribulationist parlance, "tribulation," when used in relation to future prophecy, has become synonymous with divine wrath (the wrath of God at the day of the LORD). Since pretribulationists believe the entire seven-year tribulation period to

be divine wrath (*i.e.*, the day of the LORD), it's easy to see how this terminological fusion arose. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Bible nowhere states, or implies that the entire seven-year period of tribulation falls within the scope of day of the LORD. (In fact, we will see in the discussion to follow there are good reasons to believe that only a portion of the tribulation period falls within the day of the LORD.) If we assume that the tribulation and the day of the LORD are the same, or that they begin at the same time, then by implication we assume that the entire tribulation period is a time of divine wrath. In the case of pretribulationism, that assumption results in a key argument, the wrath argument, being based on a mere assumption. (As we will see, this simple fault is the Achilles' heel of pretribulationism.)

What the Rapture Is All About

The rapture is of great significance to Church-age believers; it represents the completion of salvation—the final and ultimate redemption—the sanctification of the physical body. Paul wrote in Romans:

[8:22-25] We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we have been saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

The final redemption of the body is the great hope of every Christian. It is the teaching of the New Testament that for the Church-age believer, that hope will be realized in an instant when Christ suddenly appears to resurrect dead believers and transform living believers as they are caught up to be with him in glorified, eternal bodies (1 Cor. 15:51-53; 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

The biblical background of the rapture

Since the existence of the Church was not revealed in the Old Testament (Eph. 3:1-10), and since the rapture relates exclusively to the Church, we would not expect any reference to the rapture in the Old Testament. Christ was the first to mention the rapture (Matt. 24:36-25:30; Jn. 14:3), but he gave few details other than that the event is immi-

ment (*i.e.*, it could happen at any time) and disclosing that Heaven is the immediate destination of the raptured saints.

It was Paul who developed the rapture theme, mentioning it in eight passages (Rom. 8:20-23; 1 Cor. 15:35-38; Eph. 1:13-14; Phil. 1:6,10; 3:10-11,20-21; 1 Thess. 1:9-10; 4:13-18; Tit. 2:11-14). From Paul's statements we learn the following facts concerning the rapture:

1. The spirits of those believers who die prior to the rapture will be reunited with their resurrection bodies (1 Thess. 4:14).
2. The resurrected believers will rise first (1 Cor. 15:52-53; 1 Thess. 4:15-16).
3. Living believers will be changed (*i.e.*, their bodies will be transformed) and they will be "caught up" to meet Christ in the clouds (1 Cor. 15:52-53; 1 Thess. 4:17).

Paul also mentioned that the Church is not destined to experience the wrath of God at the day of the LORD, but to the obtaining of salvation (1 Thess. 1:1-10; 5:9, cf. Rom. 5:9).

James made reference to the rapture and associated it with personal accountability before Christ, possibly alluding to the judgment seat of Christ that follows the rapture (Jam. 5:7-9). Peter equated the rapture with the completion of the believer's salvation (1 Pt. 1:3-5). John mentioned the rapture twice and alluded to the transformation of the bodies of believers at Christ's appearing (1 Jn. 2:28; 3:2); he also indicated that the glorified bodies received by the saints would be like Christ's glorified, resurrection body (1 Jn. 3:2, cf. Phil. 3:20-21).

The description of the rapture

The only detailed descriptions of the rapture occur in three passages: Matthew 24:36-25:30, 1 Cor. 15:51-53, and 1 Thess. 4:13-18. In Matthew, Jesus said:

[24:36-44] “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

In 1 Corinthians, Paul gave the following description:

[15:51-53] Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will

sound, the dead in Christ will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.”

In 1 Thessalonians he said:

[4:13-18] Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

A number of observations flow from these three passages.

1. Jesus introduced the doctrine of the dual appearing (rapture, second coming), and taught that the rapture is an imminent event, *i.e.*, that it could occur at any time (not that it was imminent at the time he spoke, but that it would become imminent once he had returned to Heaven). [For additional information on the rapture in

Matthew 24:36-25:30 see, *The Olivet Discourse: A Reconstruction of the Text From Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with Commentary*, by the author (Biblical Reader Communications, 2010).]

2. Many of the details of the rapture were a mystery until revealed through Paul.
3. At the rapture, Christ will appear in the sky; he will not return to the surface of the earth, as he will at the second coming.
4. Christ will be accompanied by the souls of the saints who have died, returning to receive their resurrection bodies.
5. The rapture will be signaled by a shout from an archangel, and a trumpet call.
6. The dead in Christ will be resurrected, and then those who are alive will be changed.
7. Christ will call believers, both the resurrected and the transformed, to himself in the sky. Believers who are alive and transformed at the rapture will not pass through physical death.
8. The raptured saints will never be separated from Christ.

It appears that only Church-age saints participate in the rapture (*i.e.*, only those believers living from Pentecost A.D. 33 to the rapture); the Old Testament believers and anyone saved after the rapture will be resurrected at the second coming. In order to understand how this is possible,

we must grasp the unique nature of the Church, and how God's program for Israel and the Church differ.

The unique nature of the Church

It is God's plan to consummate the salvation of Church-age saints at the rapture, and it is the unique nature of the Church that makes that possible. Every believer has a part in the grand plan of God, but not every believer of every historical era is part of the Church. We are not speaking of the visible, organized church, which includes both saved and lost, but the Universal Church (the Body of Christ, cf. Col. 1:18,24). The Church did not come into existence until the Holy Spirit began baptizing believers into the Body of Christ on the day of Pentecost A.D. 33 (Acts 1:5 cf. 1 Cor. 12:13); therefore, the Old Testament saints, though having a place in the plan of God, are not part of the Body of Christ.

It is important that we do not confuse God's purpose and plan for the Church with his purpose and plan for Israel; these two are distinct, and if we confuse them we must abandon hope of finding any meaning to future prophecy. The Bible teaches that God did not abandon his program for the true descendants of Abraham, that is, those who are his children by birth and faith (Rom. 9:6-9); he has every intention of fulfilling his promises to Israel (cf. Psa. 105:8-11; Jer. 33:20-26; Rom. 11:1-36). This is the basis for belief in a literal, earthly kingdom beginning at the second coming and extending into eternity.

The fact that Israel, as a nation, rejected their Messiah, and that God, from both Jew and Gentile, forged a new entity, the Church, does not nullify God's promises to Israel; it merely postponed the fulfillment of those promises until Israel, as a nation, responds to God's grace in the

future. That's one of God's purposes for the coming tribulation—to bring Israel to faith in Christ. It's true that Church-age saints share in the distinction of being designated "children of Abraham." Abraham is, metaphorically speaking, the father of all who believe (Gal. 3:6-9,29, cf. Gen. 12:3). The blessings that the Church enjoys have their roots in the Abrahamic covenant (Gal. 3:8-9). However, it would be incorrect to interpret that to mean that Israel and the Church are the same, or that the Church is merely a continuation of Israel in some "spiritual" sense, or that Israel's promises have somehow been taken over by the Church (as is generally taught in covenant theology). While Church-age believers are called "children of Abraham," Israel is never called the Body of Christ. Galatians 6:16 is sometimes used as an example of the Church being referred to as "Israel." However, the Church is not mentioned in that passage; Paul was merely drawing a distinction between those who were outwardly Israelites by birth and tradition, and those who were "the Israel of God" by birth and faith. Thus, he nullified the argument of the Judaizers that one must be circumcised to be in right relation to God, for even the Jews had to be saved by faith. The presence of saved Jews in the Church, even if they are referred to as "the Israel of God," does not equate the Church with Israel; the distinction between these two entities is strictly maintained in the New Testament. In Romans 11:1-36 where Paul gave the analogy of the root and the branches, it is worth noting that he didn't picture the Church and Israel as the same, or attached to the root at the same time. Israel was attached to the root, but because of their rejection of their Messiah, they were broken off and the Church was grafted in. When Israel responds in faith to their Messiah (Zech. 13:7-9), they will be grafted back in again (Rom. 11:23-24). While both Israel and the Church share a common heritage in the faith of Abraham, and while both trace their blessings to the promises God made

to Abraham, they are nonetheless distinct, just as two children may have the same parent and be loved equally, but be born at different times, have different names, and have different expectations made of them by the same parent, and even receive a different inheritance.

Nowhere is the critical distinction between Israel and the Church more significant than in the study of prophecy. The reason is that both Israel and the Church occupy distinct places in God's prophetic program. The Old Testament promises to Israel are for a land, a nation, a throne, and a special and perpetual relationship with God. The fountainhead of those promises is the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1-3,6-7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-14; 22:15-18), which is further developed in the land covenant (Deut. 29:1-30:20), the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:12-17), and the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), as well as numerous prophetic passages dealing with the coming kingdom (Ps. 98:1-9; Isa. 11:1-12:6; 25:1-12; 32:1-8; 35:1-10; 40:3-11; 66:1-24; Jer. 33:10-26). The Church is nowhere promised a land, descendants, a nation, or national throne, though it does share in the promise of a special relationship with God, and a heavenly home (1 Jn. 1:3; 3:3; Jn. 14:1-3).

What is the Church, and who is included? As stated previously, the Church did not exist prior to the beginning of Spirit baptism on the day of Pentecost (A.D. 33); the biblical basis for this is as follows:

1. The Church is the Body of Christ (Col. 1:18,24), and Spirit baptism is the operation that makes one a member of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Since the Spirit's ministry of baptism did not begin until the day of Pentecost, A.D. 33, it is evident that believers who died prior to that time were not part of the Church.

2. The disciples recognized that Pentecost marked the beginning of the Church (Acts 11:15-16, implied).
3. Jesus indicated the Church to be a future reality from the standpoint of his earthly ministry (Matt. 16:18—note the future tense, “I *will* build my church”).
4. The nature of the Church age as parenthetical, distinct from God’s program for Israel, is reinforced by its complete absence from Old Testament prophecy, which expounds God’s program for Israel in detail. Note for example, how the Church age is completely absent from the prophecy of Daniel’s seventy “weeks” in Daniel 9:24-27, falling entirely between the 69th and 70th weeks. Likewise it is missing entirely from the descriptions of the first and second comings of Christ in Isaiah 61:1-3.

A common misinterpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

One rather odd doctrine that is sometimes encountered is that if a person hears, but does not respond to the gospel prior to the rapture, they cannot be saved afterward. This completely erroneous idea is based on a misinterpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, especially verses 10-12, which read as follows:

[2 Thess. 2:1-12] (1) Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, (2) that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. (3) Let no one in any

way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, (4) who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. (5) Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? (6) And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. (7) For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. (8) Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; (9) that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, (10) and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. (11) For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, (12) in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness. [NASB]

Some take the position that verses 10-12 refer to individuals who hear the gospel prior to the rapture but do not respond, to whom God will send a powerful delusion in order that they will believe what is false. However, the rapture is not in view in this passage, or anywhere else in Second Thessalonians. Paul was simply writing to correct

the mistaken belief that the day of the LORD had already begun. Apparently someone had misinformed the Thessalonian Church that Paul had said that the day of the LORD had come (v. 2); Paul denied having been the source of such information. He then proceeded to correct the misimpression that the day of the LORD had already arrived. Though we will discuss the particulars of this passage in greater detail later, Paul made the case that the day of the LORD cannot begin until sometime after the apostasy that follows the revealing of the Antichrist in the temple. (According to Daniel 9:24-27, the revealing of the Antichrist in the temple will occur at the midpoint of the tribulation.) Thus, Paul's argument is that since the day of the LORD will not occur until after the revealing of the Antichrist in the temple, and the Antichrist has not been revealed (v. 4 cf. v. 8), the day of the LORD could not have begun. In verses 6 through 12 Paul described the signs and wonders that will accompany the Antichrist once he is publicly revealed, and which will deceive those who previously rejected the truth (during the first half of the tribulation period). As can be seen, this passage does not refer to conditions before and after the rapture; it refers to conditions before and after the revealing of the Antichrist in the temple in the middle of the tribulation. What Paul said is that those who have rejected Christ in the first half of the tribulation up to the point at which the Antichrist is revealed, will fall into a delusion in the second half of the period. The delusion is the claim of the Antichrist to be God (v. 11 cf. v. 4). When this passage is correctly understood, there is nothing that should lead us to conclude that people hearing, but not responding to the gospel prior to the rapture, cannot be saved later. Such a view is also completely incompatible with belief in divine sovereignty—that a person comes to God when he, or she, is effectually called by the Holy Spirit.

Views on the Relative Timing of the Rapture

The date at which the rapture will occur cannot be known since scripture does not reveal the length of the Church age. Also, there are a number of competing views as to how the rapture relates chronologically to the tribulation period. (This issue is referred to as “relative timing.”) We will look at six views on the relative timing of the rapture; four of these views are associated with dispensationalism, and two are associated with covenant theology. [For information on dispensationalism and covenant theology, see: *What the Bible Says About the Future*, 2nd ed., by the author, (Biblical Reader Communications, 2011) pp. 41-54.]

Dispensational views

While we will not go into a full discussion of the differences between dispensationalism and covenant theology, it is important to know that one’s orientation on this issue will have profound consequences for the study of the rapture, as well as the study of future prophecy in general. (For an excellent discussion on this subject see: *There Really Is a Difference: A Comparison of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology*, by Renald Showers, available from The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry.) Covenantalists make no distinction between Israel and the Church, preferring to view all redeemed people as part of the same group, whether called “Israel” (as in the Old Testament) or “the Church” (as in the New Testament). Since the Bible plainly indicates that there will be saved people present on earth throughout the tribulation, covenantal interpreters take that to mean that the rapture will not occur until the second coming (that is, if they have a view on the rapture at all – some do not). All forms of covenant theology that take a

position on the rapture are therefore “posttribulational” — placing the rapture at the second coming. Among dispensationalists, who see a distinction between the Church and the redeemed of other eras, the pretribulational view (that the rapture must occur prior to the beginning of the tribulation) has been the predominant view. However, there are three other views associated with dispensationalism; they are: “midtribulationism,” which places the rapture in the middle of the tribulation; “Rosenthal’s pre-wrath view,” which places the rapture sometime in the second half of the tribulation; and “partial rapturism,” which places the rapture prior to the tribulation, but holds that only those believers who are faithfully watching will be raptured, the rest will be left to go through the tribulation. (Midtribulationism, which originated as a covenantal view, has both covenantal and dispensational adherents.)

Now let us look at each of these views and their primary arguments. It should be observed that all of these views depend on deductive reasoning, since there is no passage of scripture that explicitly states when the rapture will occur.

The pretribulational view

The following arguments are those generally employed in support of the pretribulational view. Only brief statements of the two main arguments are presented below, since a more detailed critique of pretribulationism will follow in the next chapter.

1. *The Bible indicates that the rapture is an imminent event, and the pretribulational position is the only view compatible with imminency.* In other words, pretribulationists contend that if the Bible teaches Christ might return for the Church at any moment, that fact would seem to imply a pretribulational rapture, since the other views require

at least some intervening events of the tribulation to take place before the rapture can happen. For example, neither the midtribulation view, nor Rosenthal's pre-wrath view hold to an imminent rapture, since both of those views require that certain tribulation events must occur before the rapture can take place, and the same could be said of the posttribulation view.

2. *The Church is not the object of God's wrath.* Pretribulationists believe that the entire seven-year period of tribulation is divine wrath, and since Paul was clear that the Church is not to be the object of God's wrath (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess.1:9-10; 5:9), they conclude that the rapture must occur before the tribulation begins. One of the principal passages used is 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10, where Paul said:

[5:9-10] For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

Given that this passage appears immediately after a discussion of the rapture (4:13-18) and the coming time of wrath (5:1-8), and that it alludes to the two conditions of the saints at the time of the rapture as those "awake" (alive) and those "asleep" (dead) cf. 4:14-17, it is apparent that Paul was referring to the Church's rapture prior to the outpouring of divine wrath. This same thought is also expressed in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, where Paul referred to the fact that the Thessalonians were waiting for Christ, "who rescues us from the coming wrath." Given the context (5:1-11), it is apparent that Paul had in mind the wrath associated with the day of the LORD.

The midtribulation view

Midtribulationists take the position that the rapture will occur near the middle of the tribulation. This view, which experienced limited popularity, has largely given way to Rosenthal's pre-wrath view. The basis for midtribulationism is a chronology of the tribulation that places the rapture in Revelation 11:11-15, equating the seventh trumpet of Revelation (11:15) with the trumpet of the rapture (cf. 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16). Revelation 11:11-12 says:

[11:11-12] But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.

According to midtribulationists, since the Church will not be raptured until the seventh trumpet of Revelation, which they view as occurring at the midpoint of the period, the seals and trumpets of Revelation cannot be equated with divine wrath (that would result in the Church suffering the wrath of God, and midtribulationism is a pre-wrath view). Midtribulationists generally view the seals and trumpets as human or satanic wrath, similar to persecution in any age, but more intense. Those familiar with Rosenthal's pre-wrath view will readily see the resemblance between that view and midtribulationism.

There are many problems with the midtribulational arguments. First, the passage cited as the rapture in Revelation 11:11-12 is not a description of the Church being raptured, but the two witnesses of God being resurrected

and caught up into heaven. Second, the sounding of the seventh trumpet of Revelation does not occur until 11:15, which is actually not associated with the supposed rapture event of 11:11-12. According to Paul's teaching, at the rapture the trumpet call precedes the event (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 4:16); in contrast, the midtribulational scenario requires the trumpet to sound well after the event has been completed. Therefore, the seventh and last trumpet of Revelation cannot be equated with the last trumpet of the rapture. Third, Revelation 11:11-12 occurs in one of the two chronologically recursive sections of the book, disconnected from the main timeline. Actually, the event to which Revelation 11:11-12 refers occurs very near the end of the tribulation, not in the middle—a chronological foible corrected by Rosenthal in his pre-wrath view. (For detailed information on the chronology of the book of Revelation see: *What the Bible Says About the Future*, 2nd. ed., by the author, pp. 159-165.) Fourth, the position that the trumpets of Revelation are not associated with divine wrath appears contrary to what is implied in the text; note the reference to wrath between the sixth and seventh seals in Revelation 6:16-17. There appears to be no sound basis for starting the wrath with the first bowl judgment other than to identify the seventh trumpet as the trumpet of the rapture, which as was pointed out, is clearly a misidentification.

Rosenthal's pre-wrath view

Rosenthal's pre-wrath view divides the tribulation into three distinct periods: the "beginning of sorrows," occupying the first three and a half years; the "great tribulation," beginning at the midpoint of the period and extending to approximately the breaking of the seventh seal (possibly eighteen to twenty-four months prior to the second coming); and "the day of the LORD," beginning at the breaking of the seventh seal and culminating at the second coming. According to this view only the day of the

LORD represents divine wrath. Since the Church need only escape the divine wrath, the rapture would not need to occur until just prior to the outpouring of wrath, or approximately eighteen to twenty-four months prior to the second coming. It is important to understand that this view doesn't just establish a final point at which the rapture could occur, it places the rapture at a specific point on the tribulation timeline, making a connection between the trumpet of the rapture and the trumpet judgments of Revelation. This view, along with midtribulationism and posttribulationism, are referred to as "contingent" (non-imminent) views, since they place the rapture within the tribulation sequence of events, viewing the rapture as contingent upon other tribulation events. (Note that according to the contingent views, the rapture can only happen after certain tribulation events have occurred.)

Rosenthal's view has many similarities with the midtribulation view, but is more complex. The arguments offered in support of this view are as follows:

1. The difficulties of the great tribulation (as defined by Rosenthal) are not divine wrath, but the wrath of man and Satan; therefore, it is not necessary for the Church to be absent from the great tribulation. (Recall that according to this view the great tribulation precedes the outpouring of divine wrath.)
2. The day of the LORD, during which the divine wrath will be poured out upon the world, does not begin until the breaking of the seventh seal. This is based on the observation that the seventh seal embodies the celestial judgments, which elsewhere in scripture seem to be characteristic of the day of the LORD (cf. Joel 2:30-31; Isa. 13:9-10). In fact, according to Rosenthal, Joel 2:30-31 implies that the day of the LORD cannot begin until

these signs are manifested. God, through the prophet Joel, said:

[2:30-31] I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD."

3. Malachi 4:5-6 indicates that Elijah will be sent before the coming of the day of the LORD. If Elijah is to be identified as one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11:3, then the day of the LORD probably could not begin until sometime after the midpoint of the period, since the two witnesses likely do not begin their ministry until sometime near the midpoint.
4. The last trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 is most likely a reference to the trumpet judgments embodied in the seventh seal. Believers will be raptured in connection with the trumpets of Revelation, but before the outpouring of divine wrath associated with the bowl judgments. (On this point note the close similarity with midtribulationism.)

Now let us look at the problems associated with each of these arguments.

1. Even if Rosenthal is correct that divine wrath is limited to the last seal, or a portion of it, that fact should not lead to the conclusion that the Church will necessarily be raptured late in the tribulation period. Since scripture does not indicate how far in advance of the day of the LORD the rapture will occur, even if divine wrath is limited to the latter portion of the tribulation, it is pos-

sible that the rapture could occur at any time prior to that point (including pretribulationally).

2. The assertion that the day of the LORD cannot begin until the celestial events are manifested is based on a faulty understanding of the word “before” in Joel 2:31. This argument depends upon the word “before” (Heb. *lipna*, meaning, “to precede in time”). However, *lipna* commonly means “at” or “in the presence of.” In other words, Joel was saying that these celestial events would be observed at or in connection with the day of the LORD, not necessarily prior to the day of the LORD. In any case, the point hardly matters since, as stated in the first point above, the rapture could occur at any time prior to the beginning of the day of the LORD; it need not occur immediately prior.

3. The argument that the day of the LORD cannot begin until Elijah comes, as one of the two witnesses in the tribulation, is faulty on two counts. First, there is no biblical evidence to establish that Elijah is to be one of the two witnesses in the tribulation. Revelation, which is the only book of the Bible to mention the two witnesses, does not state their identity (Rev. 11:3-13). Second, Christ declared on two occasions the Malachi 4:5-6 prophecy to be fulfilled, for as he said, Elijah did come, in the person of John the Baptist (Matt. 11:14; 17:11-12). Matthew 17:11 is not a prediction of a future coming of Elijah, but a recognition that he had already come typically in the person of John the Baptist; verse 12 makes that clear. However, even if the point were conceded that Elijah must personally appear before the day of the LORD, that would not mean that the rapture must occur immediately prior to the beginning of the day of the LORD. At most it would only establish the terminal point at which the rapture could occur, by establishing

that the day of the LORD begins sometime in the second half of the tribulation period.

4. The identification of the “last trumpet” in 1 Corinthians 15:52 with the trumpets of Revelation is erroneous. The trumpet call in 1 Corinthians 15:52, as well as 1 Thessalonians 4:16, precedes the rapture and announces deliverance, whereas the seventh trumpet of Revelation follows the event Rosenthal identifies as the rapture (Rev. 11:11-12) and announces judgment. Since the trumpets of Revelation are blown over a period of time, the last of these trumpets will be considerably removed in time from the event described in Revelation 11:11-12. The seventh trumpet (11:15) is clearly well within the day of the LORD, and thus could not announce a pre-wrath rapture. Rosenthal has attempted to deal with this problem by viewing the seven trumpet judgments collectively as the trumpet of the rapture. Of course, in order for the Church to experience a pre-wrath rapture, the rapture would need to occur at, or prior to the first trumpet, not the seventh. However, 1 Corinthians 15:52 does not refer to trumpets (plural), but to “the last trumpet,” which if connected with the trumpets of Revelation would require that it be the seventh, not the first trumpet. Viewing the trumpets of Revelation collectively as the trumpet of the rapture is exceedingly strained biblical interpretation. There is simply no sound interpretive basis for connecting the trumpet of the rapture with the trumpets of Revelation, though some have tried to make a connection based on the observation that both are either stated, or in the case of the Revelation trumpets, implied to be “last.” However, such identification is erroneous since “last” is a relative notion. We should also point out that the seventh trumpet isn’t even the last trumpet of the tribulation. The last trumpet of the tribulation is blown at the sec-

ond coming (Matt. 24:31); however, in relation to the particular events to which they pertain, they are all, relatively speaking, "last." The rapture trumpet is the last trumpet of the Church age, the seventh trumpet of Revelation is the last of the trumpet judgments, and the trumpet at the second coming signals the last great event of the tribulation period.

5. Rosenthal's view is inconsistent with Christ's teaching on the imminency of the rapture, since it places the time of the rapture after the sixth seal is broken, and connects the sixth seal with the trumpet judgments, thus implying that the rapture is contingent on the fulfillment of certain tribulation events.

The partial rapture view

Partial rapturists believe that there will be a rapture prior to the beginning of the tribulation (similar to pre-tribulationism), but that only those believers who are faithfully watching and waiting will be raptured, while the remainder will be left to go through the tribulation, or at least a portion of the tribulation. Support for the view is derived primarily from the following passages: Matthew 24:40-51; 25:1-13; Luke 20:34-36; 21:36; Philippians 3:8-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:6; 2 Timothy 4:8; Hebrews 9:24-28, and Revelation 3:3 and 3:10. Partial rapturists believe that each of these passages in some way indicates that only believers who are watching and waiting at the time of the rapture will be taken.

Matthew 25:1-13 is the parable of the ten virgins. While pretribulationists characteristically deny that this was spoken in reference to the rapture, it does appear to continue the theme from the previous chapter, which ends with a discussion of the imminency of the rapture (cf. 24:36-51). [Many pretribulationists deny that Matthew 25:1-13

refers to the rapture because they deny 24:36-51 refers to the rapture. Although we will discuss this matter in more detail later, it should be noted here that they do this for two reasons: 1) because they see problems for pretribulationism from the parallel passage to 24:36-44, which is Lk. 21:36; and, 2) they are uncomfortable with a discussion of the rapture in such close proximity to a discussion of the second coming in 24:29-31.] However, even acknowledging that the parable of the ten virgins refers to the rapture, this passage still does not support partial rapturism. The reason is that this is a parable of “the kingdom of Heaven” (25:1), and we know from other parables (cf. Matt. 13) that the kingdom of Heaven encompasses the invisible kingdom (those truly saved), as well as those who merely profess but are not redeemed. In the parables of the kingdom of Heaven in Matthew 13 the duality of saved and lost within the kingdom of Heaven is illustrated by: plants that yield fruit versus sprouts with no root, a tree versus birds lodging in the tree, wheat versus tares, dough versus leavening in the dough, good fish to be kept versus bad fish to be discarded. Based on a proper understanding of the nature of the kingdom of Heaven, we must conclude regarding the virgins who had no oil, and of whom Christ said, “I do not know you,” that they represent those who, while professing faith in Christ, have never been born again, *i.e.*, they are “reformed” but not “transformed.” (For additional discussion on this subject see: *The Olivet Discourse*, by the author, pp. 181-190.)

Matthew 24:40-51 and Luke 21:36 are parallel accounts from the same Olivet Discourse. The passage does not teach that participation in the rapture is conditioned on works, but rather on salvation. Note that the evil servant is not simply left behind, but “He [the Master] will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” which cannot

describe a redeemed person. Rather, these servants evidence the validity of their belief by their actions (cf. Jam. 2:18-20). In the parable, those who are evil only manifest that they do not belong to Christ. The parallel passage, Luke 21:36, says: "Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man." Pre-tribulationists generally counter the use of this passage by asserting that it, and the parallel passage in Matthew 24:36-44, were spoken in relation to the second coming, not the rapture. While this is a convenient solution, it poses even greater problems, and as we will see, is certainly incorrect. Even if this passage were spoken in relation to the rapture (and it will be argued later that it was), it still would not support partial rapturism since it says nothing about part of the Church being raptured. This passage is simply a general admonition to believers, as a group (Gr. *deomenoi*, "you {plural} implore"), concerning the future of believers, as a group (Gr. *katischusēte*, "you {plural} may be able to escape"). In order to apply this to individual believers one would have to argue the distributive use of the plurals (*i.e.*, "let *each one* of you pray that *each one* of you may be able to escape..."), and there is no support for that interpretation.

Luke 20:34-36 mentions those who "are considered worthy of taking part in that age (*i.e.*, the millennium) and in the resurrection from the dead." This passage refers to those who are resurrected to go into the millennial kingdom. There is no mention of the rapture, nor is there any link between particular works and entrance into the kingdom. Scripture teaches that one becomes worthy to enter God's kingdom by faith, not by works (Eph. 2:8-9).

In Philippians 3:11 Paul mentioned that his goal was to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Partial rapturists have interpreted this statement to indicate that

apart from works Paul could not count on being included in the rapture. The construction of this passage is somewhat complicated grammatically, since the long sentence that ends with verse 11 begins in verse 8. What Paul was saying is that faith in Christ results in four things: knowing him (Christ), knowing the power of his resurrection, knowing the fellowship of his sufferings, and being conformed to his death. This results in one's ultimate participation in the resurrection (Gr. *éi*, "so that" {A.V. "if by any means"} shows the conditional relation of resurrection to "becoming like him in his death"). Paul made a similar statement in Romans 6:5, where he said: "For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection." How does a person come to be united with Christ in the likeness of his death, or be conformed to his death? The answer is: "by faith" (Philp. 3:9). This is not something Christians strive for, but something that becomes a reality when a person exercises faith in Christ. Paul was arguing in both of these passages that a Christian's life ought to reflect the inner spiritual reality of union with Christ, not that Christians should strive to obtain such a union, for they already possess it. Far from implying uncertainty about his participation in the resurrection (and consequently the rapture), this passage is a confident assertion of the assured results of genuine faith.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:6 Paul contrasted believers with the unsaved who will be unaware of what is happening at the end of the age. Although believers are enjoined to be watchful, there is no hint that failure to do so might result in being left behind at the rapture.

In 2 Timothy 4:8 Paul made reference to the crown of righteousness that he and "all who have longed for His [Christ's] appearing" will receive. Some partial rapturists

have suggested that those who do not long for Christ's appearing will not receive the crown, because they will miss the rapture and be left on earth to go through the tribulation while the rest of the Church is in Heaven receiving rewards. First, we should note that the rapture is not mentioned at all in the passage. Second, "all who have longed for His appearing" is merely a descriptive title for true believers. Paul had been discussing the fact that he was ready to die (v. 6). He knew that God had a reward for him, and for all the saints, that is, for those who are longing for his appearing.

The argument from Hebrews 9:28 is the same as in 2 Timothy 4:8, and the answer is the same. "Those who are waiting for Him [Christ]," is simply a descriptive title for true believers, not an additional qualification for participation in the rapture.

Revelation 3:3, which occurs within the context of the letter to the church at Sardis, urges that church to remember and obey what they had received, else Christ might come suddenly to deal with them. The "coming" mentioned there is not the rapture. This is a stern warning that if this church didn't get back on the right path Christ would deal with it in discipline. Similar warnings were expressed to the churches at Ephesus (Rev. 2:5) and Pergamum (Rev. 2:16), and in neither of those cases were the warnings associated with the rapture.

The argument from Revelation 3:10 is that God promised the Philadelphian Church that he would keep them from the hour of testing because they obeyed his command to endure patiently. One difficulty with attempting to use this passage in support of a partial rapture is that the promise is to the entire church, not just to watchful individuals.

The principal flaw in the partial rapture view is its failure to recognize the unity of the Body of Christ, and the fact that participation in the rapture, which is the completion of one's salvation (Rom. 8:23), is conditioned only upon faith in Christ, not faith plus works.

Covenantal views

Covenant theology appears in three distinct forms: amillennialism, postmillennialism, and covenant premillennialism (as distinct from dispensational premillennialism). Amillennialists and postmillennialists generally hold to a view of the tribulation (and the millennium) that is highly "spiritualized," or allegorized, meaning that they interpret those prophecies to mean something other than what one would assume from a normal/objective understanding of the text. As such, for amillennialists and postmillennialists the rapture is not viewed as a distinct event, but part of the second coming (which according to both views happens at the conclusion of the millennium). Since they do not view the rapture as a distinct event, amillennialists and postmillennialists generally do not have a distinct doctrine concerning the rapture; they simply have a doctrine of the second coming. However, covenant premillennialism, commonly referred to as "posttribulationism," does have a rapture doctrine, and because this view is widely held, that doctrine is of considerable importance.

Classic posttribulationism

Posttribulationism (more descriptively referred to as "covenant premillennialism") is the belief that the Church will pass through the tribulation and be raptured in conjunction with the second coming. There are two major forms of posttribulationism; one is "classic posttribulationism," the other is "imminent posttribulationism." While

both of these views tend to allegorize many of the tribulation prophecies, classic posttribulationism allegorizes the prophecies to a lesser degree than does imminent posttribulationism. The arguments generally offered in support of classic posttribulationism are as follows:

1. The early Church did not teach pretribulationism.
2. Although the Church will suffer the wrath of man and Satan during the tribulation, the wrath of God is specifically directed against the unsaved.
3. The fact that Christians will be present in the tribulation proves that the Church is present. (Covenantalists define the Church as all believers, including those of both the Old and New Testament eras.)
4. The Bible does not teach that the return of Christ is imminent.
5. The resurrection occurs in connection with the rapture. Since a resurrection occurs at the end of the tribulation, this proves that the rapture also occurs at the end of the tribulation (cf. Rev. 20:4-6).
6. The New Testament uses the same words (Gr. *parousia* "coming," *apokalupsis* "revelation," and *epiphaneia* "appearing") to describe both the rapture and the second coming, indicating they are the same event.

Let's take a closer look at each of these arguments.

1. While it is true that early church literature does not appear to teach pretribulationism, it is also true that it does not teach posttribulationism, or any other view on

the rapture, though it seems clear that they did believe the appearing of the Lord to be imminent.

2. The idea that divine wrath exercised during the day of the LORD is directed only against the unsaved is highly inconsistent with a normal/objective interpretation of the events of the period. Most of the tribulation judgments are global and catastrophic; by their very nature they will indiscriminately affect both saved and unsaved. Only a highly spiritualized (allegorical) interpretation of tribulation prophecy could sustain the view that the Church might be present on earth during the period of divine wrath at the day of the LORD, and yet be unaffected directly by divine wrath.
3. The fact that saved people will be present during the tribulation does not imply the presence of the Church. As the case was made earlier, not all redeemed people are part of the Church. Just as the Church age had a beginning at Pentecost (A.D. 33), it will have a conclusion at the rapture. Those saved after the rapture will not be part of the Church; thus, the presence of saved people in the tribulation period is not an indication of the presence of the Church.
4. It appears that the New Testament writers, as well as some of the early church fathers, viewed the rapture as an imminent event. More importantly, Christ unequivocally taught the imminency of the rapture (Matt. 24:36-25:30 cf. Jam. 5:8). (For a more detailed discussion on this point, see: *The Olivet Discourse*, by the author, pp. 149-190, and pp. 251-264.)
5. Arguing that the rapture occurs at the close of the tribulation, because both the rapture and the second coming occur in connection with a resurrection of the dead, is

highly problematic for posttribulationism; the reason is this: The resurrection of the righteous that happens near the end of the tribulation, actually does not occur until sometime after the second coming. Note that Revelation 20:4-6 pictures the resurrection in connection with the second coming as occurring after the second coming and the confinement of Satan to the Abyss. Of course, posttribulationists don't really believe that the rapture follows the second coming. Their confusion on this issue may be due to the fact that they don't take the prophecies literally enough for the inconsistency of their position to come into sharp focus. In any case, this is a serious defect, and it illustrates that the resurrection associated with the second coming cannot be the same as the resurrection associated with the rapture.

There is also a collateral problem, since posttribulationists must explain how some in their natural (unglorified) bodies enter the millennium. At the rapture, the body of every saint will be glorified (1 Cor. 15: 51-58), *i.e.*, they will be transformed into their eternal form. The difficulty for posttribulationism is that if the rapture were to occur in connection with the second coming (or afterward), every living saint would enter the millennium in a glorified body, and none would enter in a natural body; yet scripture is clear that there will be people present in the millennium in natural bodies, as evidenced by the fact that some will reproduce, and some will even die (Isa. 65:17-25), neither of which, according to Christ, is possible for a person in a glorified body (Matt. 22:29-32). [Note also that although only saved people will enter the kingdom (Matt. 7:13-23; 25:31-46), there will be a multitude of unsaved people present near the end of the millennium (Rev. 20:7-9) whose presence in the millennium can only be explained by the fact that they will be born to parents still

in their natural bodies.] Generally, the explanation given by posttribulationists is this: At the moment of the rapture many unsaved people will realize what has happened, change their minds, and accept Christ before he fully descends to the earth in his second coming. This will allow for some to be saved after the rapture, but before the second coming is completed. This is a highly optimistic solution; note the assumptions: Such a view assumes that as Christ descends he will rapture his Church and then pause long enough for those left on earth to fully consider what has taken place and for many to place their faith in him. It also assumes a higher level of receptivity to the gospel at the extreme terminal end of the tribulation than previously. Such a view is clearly at odds with scripture. Both John and Paul indicated that as the tribulation progresses, men's hearts will be darkened, and they will fall under an ever deepening spiritual delusion, and will be hardened in their rejection of God (2 Thess. 2:6-12; Rev. 9:20-21; 16:21). This hardening is actually a form of divine judgment (2 Thess. 2:8-12). Also, as pointed out above, if the rapture does not occur until after the second coming (as posttribulationism implies), then even this strained explanation is of no help.

6. The argument that the rapture and the second coming must be the same event, since the same terms are employed, is faulty because none of those terms are technical designations. The terms *parousia* ("coming"), *apokalupsis* ("revelation"), and *epiphaneia* ("appearing") are simply generic terms that could be used of either appearing. On the other hand, a comparison of the particulars of the rapture and the second coming clearly demonstrates that they are not the same event (on this see: *What the Bible Says About the Future*, 2nd ed., by the author, p. 210).

Imminent posttribulationism

While classic posttribulationists view the tribulation as a clearly recognizable set of events (though somewhat less literally than dispensationalists), imminent posttribulationists hold that we could be in the tribulation already, without realizing it, and that the rapture and second coming could occur at any moment; hence, this view combines posttribulationism with a belief in the imminency of the rapture. This view offers the option of holding to an imminent view of the rapture, while still maintaining that the Church is a continuation of, or replacement for Israel, which is one of the central tenets of covenant theology. The difficulty with this view is that the events of the tribulation must be allegorized to the point of almost complete non-recognition in order for the view to work. In other words, imminent posttribulationists view the events of the tribulation so allegorically that they believe it is possible the church could pass through the tribulation and arrive at the second coming without really knowing that they had been through the tribulation at all. Jesus' teaching on the tribulation plainly implies that it will be possible to discern certain events from within the tribulation period, and that certain actions will be necessary for believers when the prophesied events come to pass (Matt. 24:15-25). How could Jesus make such statements if the features of the period are to be unrecognizable? Also, what is the justification for interpreting fulfilled prophecy literally (objectively), but expecting that tribulation prophecy will not be fulfilled in the same manner?

Pretribulationism

As we have seen, midtribulationism, Rosenthal's pre-wrath view, partial rapturism, and posttribulationism are defective views. However, this does not mean that pretribulationism is correct. It has long been understood, even by pretribulationists, that most of the common arguments for pretribulationism are weak arguments. In other words, some of the arguments are only helpful if stronger proofs are available. In the past, this has not been particularly worrisome, since most pretribulationists have thought that they had at least two strong arguments in their favor; those arguments are: 1) the argument from imminency; and, 2) the wrath argument. In this chapter we will examine the main arguments that have been offered for pretribulationism, and we will see that there are problems even with the two stronger arguments.

A critique of pretribulationism

We have briefly looked at the case for pretribulationism; we will now return to that view for a more complete critique. The following are the arguments one encounters in the writings of capable proponents of pretribulationism. Five of these arguments, while interesting, have always been marginal in terms of their value. Although John F. Walvoord lists fifty arguments for pretribulationism in his classic book, *The Rapture Question* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1976, pp. 191-200), most are either weak arguments, or mere points of consistency. Here we will discuss only five of the weak arguments, and then proceed to the two stronger arguments. While not all pretribulationists subscribe to all of these arguments, most do

subscribe to the two stronger arguments that will be examined last.

1. *The tribulation is a resumption of God's program for Israel and the Church has no place in the tribulation.* This is a point commonly made, and while it is a true statement that the tribulation concerns Israel, not the Church, that in itself does not necessitate a pretribulation rapture. It is possible that just as there was overlap between the existence of national Israel and the Church between A.D. 33 and 70, there could be overlap between Israel and the Church in the tribulation. This is a point that would make sense if one were already convinced of pretribulationism, but really offers no proof of the necessity of a pretribulation rapture.
2. *No passage of scripture in describing the tribulation ever mentions the Church.* This is a true statement, and indeed noteworthy; but we have already acknowledged the fact that the purpose of the tribulation relates to Israel, not the Church, so there is no particular reason that the Church should be mentioned in any tribulation passage. At best this argument is an argument from silence, and as such, it is inconclusive.
3. *The argument from the removal of the "restrainer" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-9).* This argument, while not held by all pretribulationists, has been popular in the writings of some; it postulates that the Church must be absent from the tribulation because the Holy Spirit, who indwells the Church, is to be removed prior to the manifestation of the Antichrist. This argument is based on several assumptions. First, the passage never mentions the Holy Spirit, nor is the identity of the "restrainer" given; it is only assumed that the Holy Spirit is the one referred to—an assumption that might,

or might not, be correct. Second, the passage says nothing about the Church or the indwelling of the Church by the Holy Spirit. Third, the passage does not indicate that the restrainer is taken from the earth. In fact, the Holy Spirit must be present in order for anyone to be saved after the rapture, or at any other time. Fourth, the passage says nothing about the rapture. This argument is really a set of dots with no connecting lines. If one is already committed to pretribulationism, then pretribulationist content can be read into the passage, but it would be impossible to argue pretribulationism from what the passage actually says.

A better interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9 is that it refers to the unveiling of the Antichrist at the midpoint of the tribulation, and the martyrdom and subsequent apostasy among professing Christians that will occur beginning shortly after the middle of the tribulation. Jesus in Matthew 24:4-28 described this very sequence of events. That being the case, this passage says nothing about a pretribulationist rapture, rather it indicates that the day of the LORD doesn't begin until sometime after the midpoint of the tribulation. Thus, far from supporting pretribulationism, this passage actually weakens the pretribulationist position by moving the onset of divine wrath at the day of the LORD to a point sometime in the second half of the tribulation period. (For a more detailed discussion, see: *The Olivet Discourse*, by the author, pp. 262-264.) We will say more about this later; for now, suffice it to say that there is nothing in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9 to support a pretribulationist rapture, and it may well be that this passage provides information that argues contrary to the pretribulationist's premise that the entire tribulation is divine wrath. We will re-examine 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9 after looking at the remaining pretribulationist arguments.

4. *The promise to the Philadelphian Church (Revelation 3:7-13).* This is another argument that is only seen occasionally. Some proponents of pretribulationism argue that Christ's promise to the Philadelphian Church in Revelation 3:7-13 is a promise of deliverance to the Church living at the end of the age. Revelation 3:7-13 says:

[3:7-13] "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. (8) I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. (9) I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. (10) Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, 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. (11) I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. (12) He who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. (13) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Pretribulationists who regard the letter to the Philadelphian Church to be prophetic of the Church living at the end of the age see this passage, especially verse 10, as a promise that the Church will be removed from the earth prior to the beginning of the tribulation. While even some pretribulationists are reluctant to view this letter as prophetic of the Church living at the end of the age, one cannot help but be struck by the apocalyptic tone of the passage. If the passage is not apocalyptic and relates only to the historic Philadelphian Church, in what sense was it fulfilled to them? Was the historic Philadelphian Church spared from [the] trial to come upon the whole earth “to test those who live upon the earth”? While some have interpreted the promise to refer to an escape from the impending persecution of believers in the second century, such an interpretation simply doesn’t seem to do justice to the passage. Note that Christ referred not to trials (plural), or some non-specific trial, but to “the” trial, implying that the recipients of this letter were already familiar, at least prophetically, with the specifics of this future event. We note also that the Lord referred to this particular trial as a global event, affecting not just the Church, but “those who live on the earth.” Thus, it seems most likely that this passage does provide a promise to the Church living at the end of the age that it will escape the coming trial. However, even if that is so, it does not prove that the rapture must occur pretribulationally. Why? Because, as we will explore in greater detail later, there is no way to know that the entire seven-year tribulation period is divine wrath (*i.e.*, the trial spoken of). It could be that the trial refers not to the entire tribulation period, but only to the divine wrath to be poured out sometime during the tribulation, possibly encompassing only a portion of the period. In other words, in appealing to this passage, the pretribulationist is

assuming: 1) that the passage has relevance to the Church at the end of the age; and, 2) that the entire tribulation period is divine wrath. Even if the first assumption were conceded, for the sake of argument, the second is not provable biblically or theologically. (The pretribulation wrath argument will be discussed separately below.)

While the letter to the Philadelphian Church is certainly an interesting passage, and should not be lightly dismissed, whether one takes it as prophetic of the Church at the end of the age or not makes little difference, as it does not prove pretribulationism unless the entire tribulation period is divine wrath, which is merely an assumption on the part of pretribulationists. If the passage is prophetic, at most it promises a pre-wrath rapture, which is not the same as a pretribulation rapture. On the other hand, if the passage isn't prophetic of the Church at the end of the age, it isn't relevant to the discussion of the rapture.

5. Concerning the argument that Jesus indicated the possibility of escape from the tribulation in Luke 21:36, Jesus said, "but keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." Even if this statement does pertain to the rapture, it is not a particularly useful argument for pretribulationism, since as in the case of the last argument above, at best it indicates only a pre-wrath (*i.e.*, pre-day of the LORD) rapture, not a pretribulation rapture.

Those are the five weaker arguments that will be examined here, and while there are other arguments (see Walvoord's work cited above), these illustrate the problems

inherent with such arguments. Now we come to the two arguments that most, if not all pretribulationists maintain are the strongest proofs of pretribulationism.

The imminency argument

The argument from imminency can be stated this way: The Bible indicates, and early Christians believed, that Christ might return for them at any moment; therefore, they could only have held to a pretribulational view, since any other view would require at least some intervening events of the tribulation period to take place before the rapture could occur. In this argument what the pretribulationist is saying is this: The other views cannot be correct because they are inconsistent with imminency, in that they place the rapture at some point on the tribulation timeline, making the rapture contingent on at least some tribulation event, or events. For example, if one places the rapture at the midpoint of the tribulation, the events of the first half of the period would need to occur before the rapture could happen; the case is likewise with Rosenthal's view and posttribulationism.

For the present, we will dismiss the partial rapture view, since it is based on a flawed understanding of salvation, and we will consider only the remaining five views that have been discussed. If we consider only those five remaining views, imminency could be used to rule out all but one view—pretribulationism. But notice the subtle condition necessary for this logic to work. In order for imminency to support pretribulationism, one has to be comparing pretribulationism only with contingent views (which are inherently incompatible with imminency). However, the views mentioned above are not the only possible views. Another possibility is that the rapture could be imminent up to the beginning of the day of the LORD (whenever that may be); such a view would not be contin-

gent since the rapture would not be viewed as an event on the tribulation timeline (since it's imminent). This possibility (which will be developed later) means that while imminency is compatible with pretribulationism, and incompatible with all contingent views, pretribulationism is not the only possible view compatible with imminency. Thus, while imminency rules out the contingent views, it cannot prove pretribulationism. All imminency tells us is that the rapture is imminent until it happens; it does not tell us that it must happen before the tribulation begins.

The Wrath Argument

The Church is not to be the object of God's wrath. That truth, so forcefully declared by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11, is without any doubt the quintessential fact with which all students of prophecy must reckon when it comes to the timing of the rapture. For those who assign any degree of literality to the meaning of scripture, Paul's statement can only be understood to mean that the rapture of the Church must occur prior to the outpouring of the divine wrath associated with the day of the LORD. In other words, the extreme terminal point at which the rapture could occur is the moment prior to the outpouring of God's wrath at the day of the LORD. It is interesting to note that on this point, pretribulationism, midtribulationism, and Rosenthal's pre-wrath view agree. It could rightly be said that each of these theories takes a pre-wrath view of the rapture; for each, according to its own view of the nature of the events of the tribulation, places the rapture prior to the outpouring of divine wrath. As indicated previously, the midtribulationist views only the second half of the tribulation as divine wrath, and those who hold to Rosenthal's pre-wrath position view only the last quarter, or so, as divine wrath. The distinctive feature of pretribulationism is its view that the entire tribulation is divine wrath (*i.e.*, that the entire seven years of tribulation fall entirely within the

day of the LORD), thus necessitating a pretribulation rapture.

The pretribulation version of the wrath argument proceeds as follows: The Church is going to be removed before God's wrath associated with the day of the LORD is poured out upon the earth; the entire seven-year period of the tribulation is divine wrath (the seven years falling entirely within the day of the LORD); therefore, the rapture must occur before the seven-year tribulation period begins. Notice that we have a complete syllogism.

Major premise: The Church will be raptured prior to the outpouring of divine wrath associated with the day of the LORD.

Minor premise: The entire seven-year tribulation is divine wrath (falling entirely within the day of the LORD).

Conclusion: Therefore, the Church must be raptured prior to the beginning of the tribulation period.

Of course, this is a deductive argument, and in order for the conclusion to be true, both premises must be true. However, many pretribulationists when asked to prove pretribulationism simply quote 1 Thessalonians 5:9, as if that constituted all the proof necessary. It doesn't. 1 Thessalonians 5:9 supports the major premise, but if this argument is to be sustained, the minor premise must also be established. Herein is the problem with the argument: there is no firm biblical or theological support for the minor premise. In fact, although the validity of the entire argument rests on the validity of that premise, one seldom hears the validity of the minor premise addressed in the support

of pretribulationism. One line of reasoning is that the tribulation is composed of seven seals, and since the last seal is clearly divine wrath (Rev. 6:16,17), it is reasonable to assume all the seals are divine wrath. This argument is based on an assumed literary homogeneity. The short form of this argument would be: a seal, is a seal, is a seal; if one is divine wrath, they are all divine wrath.

Is such a view of the seals valid? Of course the seals are part of a unified structure, and thus there is some sort of homogeneity to the seals, but it doesn't follow that they are all divine wrath. We could just as well suggest that the homogeneity consists in the fact that they are divisions of the same period (*i.e.*, Daniel's seventieth week, cf. Dan. 9:24-27). Some pretribulationists make the point that the book of Revelation pictures Christ, in Heaven, breaking the seals. That certainly indicates that the events that transpire during the time of each seal are divinely controlled, but that in no way suggests that they are all divine wrath. This illustrates one of the central problems in the support for pretribulationism—the tendency to make logical leaps where the Bible (or proper theological deduction) fails to connect the dots. Given the scarcity of biblical facts on this subject, proponents of the various positions sometimes fall prey to the tendency of covering gaps in biblical or logical support by stretching terminology (*e.g.*, tribulation = the day of the LORD = divine wrath). In relation to the seals of Revelation, the Bible doesn't mention wrath until 6:15-17, which is after the breaking of the sixth seal; attempts to characterize the earlier seals as divine judgment are based on incomplete data or faulty inferences. As we will see in the discussion to follow, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-9 appears to state that the day of the LORD, and by implication the wrath associated with it, cannot begin until sometime in the second half of the tribulation period.

In regard to viewing all of the seals as divine wrath, there is an additional problem. The fifth seal (Rev. 6:9-11 cf. Matt. 25:10) allows for the martyrdom of many of the most faithful saints. Pretribulationists have always been at a loss to explain how such an event could be attributed directly to an act of divine justice. On the other hand, if the fifth seal represents events that God decides to sovereignly allow, it will be the direct causes (Satan, his agents, and evil men), not God, who will be responsible for this evil. That the events of the fifth seal are evil allowed by God, rather than justice executed by God, can be seen from the fact that the martyred saints are pictured in Heaven imploring God for justice in avenging their unjust deaths (Rev. 6:9-11). To maintain that the fifth seal is God's just judgment is to implicate God as the cause of this evil. If God condemns the evil committed under the fifth seal (Rev. 8:1-6, esp. v.3, cf. 6:9-10), how can anyone maintain that the fifth seal represents God's righteous judgment? Does a righteous judge sentence the upright to death, and then condemn his own act? Suffice it to say that pretribulationists have failed to sustain the contention that the entire tribulation is divine wrath; especially with the argument that "a seal, is a seal, is a seal."

2 Thessalonians 2:1-9

Up to this point we have simply critiqued the arguments offered in favor of pretribulationism. Now we will focus on what may well be a very significant argument against pretribulationism. Previously we mentioned the problem of using 2 Thessalonians 2:1-9 as support for pretribulationism. The case will now be made that this passage provides one of the most potent reasons for rejecting pretribulationism's wrath argument, which is built on the premise that the entire tribulation falls under the day of the LORD and is therefore entirely a time of divine wrath. It is the position presented here that 2 Thessalonians 2:1-9

plainly states that the day of the LORD cannot begin until sometime after the apostasy associated with the revealing of the Antichrist at the midpoint of the tribulation. If this understanding of the passage is correct, it invalidates pre-tribulationism's wrath argument. How? Because if the day of the LORD does not begin until sometime after the middle of the tribulation, then the tribulation and the day of the LORD cannot begin at the same time—a key assumption in the pretribulationist wrath argument (see the statement of the argument on page 55). Second, if the day of the LORD doesn't begin until sometime in the second half of the tribulation, that leaves open the possibility that the Church could be raptured even after the tribulation begins. (Though there is no particular reason why the rapture could not happen at any time prior to that.) Remember, such a view is thoroughly consistent with imminency, as demonstrated above. Also, such a view does not require the rapture to occur late in the tribulation period, or even within the tribulation at all; it merely recognizes that the Bible does not teach that the rapture absolutely must happen before the tribulation begins. The Bible doesn't give us a point, but a "window" within which the rapture will occur, a window extending from the present (today), to the beginning of the day of the LORD. (Having said that, there is reason to believe that the rapture could not occur after the two witnesses of Revelation 11 and the hundred and forty-four thousand Jewish evangelists (Rev. 7: 1-8 cf. 14:1-19) arrive on the scene near the midpoint of the tribulation, since they must be present on earth for the remainder of the period.) Let's take a look at 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; Paul said:

[2:1-12] Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, (2) not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy,

report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the LORD has already come. (3) Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come, until the rebellion occurs and the Man of Lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. (4) He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. (5) Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? (6) And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. (7) For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. (8) And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. (9) The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, (10) and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. (11) For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie (12) and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

Note the following observations from this passage:

- 1) It's clear that Paul was talking about the final events for the Church in relation to the Lord's appearing (*i.e.*, his "*parousia*," v. 1).
- 2) Paul was responding to a report of some communication, mistakenly thought to have been from him, to the effect that the day of the LORD had arrived, (v. 2). It is easy to see how this might have caused considerable concern for the Thessalonian Church, prompting this apostolic letter.
- 3) Paul told the church not be deceived, he was really quite certain that the day of the LORD had not begun since neither the "*rebellion*" (Gr. *apostasia*, AV "*falling away*," NASB "*apostasy*"), nor the "*revelation*" (Gr. *apokalupsthē*) of the Man of lawlessness (*i.e.*, the Antichrist) had occurred (vv. 3-4).
- 4) He explained how the Man of lawlessness will be clearly revealed. It will occur in this manner: He will oppose the worship of anything or anyone else, and he will seat himself in the temple of God proclaiming himself to be God (v. 4).
- 5) Paul expressed surprise that the Thessalonians did not seem to remember what he had taught previously on this subject, (v. 5). This should have been common knowledge in the early church, since Christ had taught on this very subject (cf. Matt. 24:4-25); and while the Thessalonians might not have had any of the gospels at this early date, they would not have been unfamiliar with Christ's important teachings, having been communicated by the apostles.

- 6) He reminded them that the Man of lawlessness will be restrained from revealing himself until the one restraining is taken out of the way (vv. 6-7).
- 7) The revealing of the Man of lawlessness is to be in accordance with the work of Satan, displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders (vv. 9-10).
- 8) When the Man of lawlessness is revealed, God will send a delusion on those who up to that point have rejected the truth. They will be deluded to believe “the lie” of the Antichrist—*i.e.*, that he is God.

From these observations we can make several deductions. First, as was said previously, there isn't a hint of pretribulationism in this passage. In fact, the injection of pretribulationism into this passage serves only to obscure the meaning. If Paul had previously taught pretribulationism it is unlikely that the Thessalonians would have mistakenly believed themselves to be in the tribulation in the first place; and if Paul were teaching them pretribulationism in this passage, it hardly seems likely that he would take the approach we see here, describing specific tribulation events and in essence saying, “You can't be in the day of the LORD because certain tribulation events haven't happened yet.” Such an approach would certainly be prone to confusion and misinterpretation. Secondly, Paul stated emphatically that the day of the LORD isn't going to begin until after the Antichrist is revealed and the great “falling away” (NASB “the apostasy”) or “rebellion” takes place. Some pretribulationists have interpreted the falling away in this passage as a veiled reference to the rapture, and the revealing of the Man of lawlessness as a reference to the appearing of the Antichrist (possibly equated with the first seal of Revelation at the beginning of the period, cf.

Rev. 6:1-2). However, Paul clearly intended for his readers to understand that the “revealing” of the Man of lawlessness is his revealing when he desecrates the temple, and that event, according to Daniel 9:27, occurs not at the beginning but at the midpoint of the tribulation period. Since verses 3-5 form one sentence in the original and must be read together, and the grammatical structure necessitates that the “falling away” and “revealing” are temporally related events, the associated “falling away” or “apostasy” to which Paul referred must be the apostasy that will take place in conjunction with the Antichrist’s revealing in the temple (*i.e.*, the abomination that makes desolate, cf. Dan. 9:27 and Matt. 24:15).

[If we look for a parallel to these events, we don’t have to look far. In Matthew 24:3-25 the Lord outlined the events of the tribulation. In verses 4-8 he outlined the events of the first half of the period, and in verses 9-14 the events of the second half, with what appears to be a recursion (*i.e.*, a return) to the midpoint beginning in verse 15. The thing to notice is that the particulars of the events given by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 is the same set of particulars given by Christ in Matthew 24:9-25. Jesus said the abomination in the temple will be accompanied by false miracles and spiritual deception (v. 24) and will be followed by a great persecution and martyrdom of the saints (v. 9), along with a great “falling away” from the faith (vv. 10-13). Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 describes the very same set of events (the revealing of the Antichrist in the temple, with false miracles and spiritual deception, and the associated “falling away” or “apostasy”). If we allow Scripture to interpret itself, what we see is that both Jesus and Paul were describing the same set of events. That being the case, we have yet another proof that the apostasy mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 and Matthew 24:10-13 are the same apostasy, the one that will follow on the heels of the public

revealing of the Antichrist, when he desecrates the Jewish temple at the midpoint of the tribulation (cf. Dan. 9:27). (On the chronological structure of Matthew 24:4-31 see: *The Olivet Discourse*, by the author, pp. 103-105 and 245-246, and *What the bible Says About the Future*, also by the author, pp. 159-165.)]

The evidence from 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 is this: If the day of the LORD cannot begin until sometime after the midpoint of the tribulation, the pretribulation wrath argument is invalid. This is all the more significant when we realize that the wrath argument is currently the principal argument offered for pretribulationism.

The Timing of the Rapture

The contingent views, which include midtribulationism, Rosenthal's pre-wrath view, and posttribulationism, are inconsistent with Christ's teaching on the imminency of the rapture (Matt. 24:36-25:30), which is sufficient reason to reject those views; and as we have seen, the arguments put forth for pretribulationism have failed to prove the case. Nevertheless, the Bible does have something to say about the timing of the rapture. If we set aside the contingent views, due to their incompatibility with Christ's teaching on imminency, and partial rapturism, due to its flawed view of salvation, and we also set aside the unsustainable elements of pretribulationism and focus on what we know to be biblically supportable, it is possible to derive a biblically sound understanding of the timing of the rapture.

Toward a biblically sound view of the rapture

What do we know that is biblically certain that is relevant to the question of the timing of the rapture? We know at least two very important truths; we know that the rapture is imminent (cf. Matt. 24:36-25:30), and we also know that it will happen before God's wrath is poured out at the day of the LORD (1 Thess. 5:1-11). As we have seen, there is no sound evidence that has been produced that definitively places the wrath of God at the beginning, or anytime in the first half of the tribulation period; in fact, based on our examination of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 we can be fairly certain, if not absolutely certain, that the day of the LORD will not begin until sometime after the midpoint of the tribulation.

Using this information to reformulate our understanding of the timing of the rapture, we can derive a biblical view by limiting ourselves to what can be proven by direct biblical statements, or proper logical inferences from those statements. What we can know from scripture on the timing of the rapture is as follows.

The rapture is imminent

The rapture is an imminent event; on this the New Testament is clear (Matt. 24:36-25:30). Unfortunately, the current discussion of imminency has largely been framed by argumentation between pretribulationists and those holding to contingent views of the rapture. Pretribulationists argue in favor of imminency, and proponents of contingent views deny imminency. To make matters more complicated, pretribulationists, who in the past were the most ardent defenders of imminency, have since the mid-1900s almost universally abandoned the only direct biblical support for the doctrine, which is Matthew 24:36-25:30 (see in the Appendix, "How Pretribulationists Have Almost Destroyed the Doctrine of Imminency," pp. 77-82).

The fact that the Lord's return for his Church is imminent is clearly taught in Matthew 24:36-25:30, which is the definitive statement of the doctrine. In 24:36-44 Christ said:

[24:36-44] No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is

how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

This passage contains the most explicit statement of the imminency of the rapture found in the New Testament; any view on the timing of the rapture must be consistent with this truth. Unfortunately, pretribulationists have seriously mishandled the defense of imminency.

Matthew 24:36-44 (as well as 24:45-25:30) was spoken in regard to the rapture, and it unequivocally teaches the imminency of Christ's return at the rapture. (For a more complete discussion of this point, see: *The Olivet Discourse*, by the author, pp. 149-190 and pp. 251-264.) However, many pretribulationists fear that acknowledging this passage as a reference to the rapture might lend support to posttribulationism, since the immediate context of verses 36-44 is the tribulation and the second coming (cf. vv. 4-31), or that it might lend support to partial rapturism, since the parallel passage in Luke 21:36 (cf. Matt. 24:36-44) has been used as support by partial rapturists. As a result, many contemporary pretribulationists take the position that the rapture is not mentioned in the Olivet Discourse, and that Matthew 24:36-25:30 refers to the second coming. That

interpretation, however, makes the defense of imminency almost impossible, since Matthew 24:36-25:30 is the first and only clear statement on imminency in the New Testament. In fact, Christ's teaching was so clear on this point that apparently the New Testament writers saw no need to reiterate the truth. Proponents of the contingent views have been very quick to pick up on this, and in a strange twist of theology, pretribulationists who believe the rapture is imminent, have actually done far more damage to the case for imminency than their opponents who do not believe in imminency. Without the principal text of Matthew 24:36-25:30 to positively expound the doctrine, all that is left is mostly its non-contradiction from the remainder of the New Testament and a few statements from early church history, which interesting, are almost completely based on Matthew 24:36-25:30 (see the discussion on pages 79-80).

Without question, Matthew 24:29-31 refers to the second coming; on that point, all are agreed. So, how do we know that Matthew 24:36-25:30 refers to the rapture? The identification is simple; it must refer to the second coming or the rapture (since they are the only future "appearings" of Christ spoken of in the New Testament), and on the basis of comparison it seems quite impossible that this portion of the discourse could refer to the second coming. Why? Because the appearing of Christ described in this passage is secret (vv. 36,42,44), unannounced and unexpected (vv. 36-39, 43,44), and virtually instantaneous (vv. 40-41). Yet Christ, in the immediate prior context 24:1-31, stated just the opposite of this in regard to his second coming, which he described as public (vv. 27-28), and attended by many precursory events (vv. 4-29) and even a special universal sign in the sky (v. 30), not to mention that it will be possible to calculate the very day of Christ's return once the abomination occurs in the temple (based on information contained both in Daniel and in Revelation; see: *What the Bible*

Says About the Future, 2nd ed., by the author, pp. 154-161). Thus, it is apparent that this passage can only have been spoken in reference to the rapture. (For further discussion on this point see in the Appendix: "Why Matthew 24:36-25:30 Describes the Rapture, Not the Second Coming," pp. 83-88.)

Christ was the first to reveal the rapture of the Church, and he clearly taught that the rapture would be imminent once he returned to the Father; and as we have seen, imminency does not require the rapture to be pre-tribulational, but it does require that the rapture not be contingent upon any revealed future event. Any correct view of the rapture must be compatible with this well-established truth.

The rapture must occur before the divine wrath at the day of the LORD

The rapture must be "pre-wrath"; in other words, it must occur sometime before the day of the LORD begins. Even if the minor premise of the pretribulational wrath argument (see page 55) is unproven, there can be no doubt that the major premise (that the Church will be spared from divine wrath at the day of the LORD *via* the rapture) is biblically sound. As stated previously, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 is definitive in establishing that the rapture must be pre-wrath. Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10, "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him." This statement was clearly intended to teach that the rapture (described in 4:13-18) will occur prior to the time of divine wrath associated with the day of the LORD. Paul's reference in 5:10 to those who are "awake" (alive) and those who are "asleep" (dead) clearly harkens back to 4:15-18 (though employing different terminology in the origi-

nal), which describes the two states of believers at the time of the rapture. Paul explicitly said that the saints, both the living and the dead, will be caught up to meet the Lord before God's wrath at the day of the LORD begins. Thus, the extreme terminal point at which the rapture could occur is the moment prior to the outpouring of God's wrath at the day of the LORD (though, as stated previously, there are good reasons why the rapture would not likely occur after the midpoint of the tribulation, if it were to happen in the tribulation at all).

Not all of the tribulation will be divine wrath

There are good reasons to suspect that God's wrath is limited to a portion of the second half of the tribulation. Of the three major passages from which it is possible to discern any tribulation chronology (Daniel 9:27; Matthew 24:3-31; and Revelation 6-19), the only passages that specifically delineate elements of the tribulation as divine wrath are Revelation 6:16-17, 15:1, and 16:1. Revelation 6:16-17 says, "...and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has [is] come; and who is able to stand.'" [Explanation in brackets added; Gr. *ēlthe*, "is come" is a 2nd aorist, indicating "definitive," rather than past action]. This statement was made after the account of the sixth seal. Whether it was spoken in an actual or anticipatory sense is not clear. It may be that the sixth seal (violent physical disturbances in the sky and on the earth) is a harbinger of the wrath to come with the opening of the seventh seal. In any case, there can be no doubt that the seventh seal is divine wrath. (Revelation 15:1 and 16:1, both of which refer to divine wrath, were spoken in reference to the seven last bowl judgments, which will occur during the time of the seventh seal.)

In Revelation 7:1-8, John recorded information revealed to him concerning the sealing of the Jewish witnesses. Why are the 144,000 Jewish witnesses sealed at this point, between the sixth and seventh seals? If the sealing is some form of protection from at least some of the effects of divine wrath (Rev. 9:4), does the time of their sealing not suggest that the divine wrath had not yet begun? When John finally comes to the breaking of the seventh seal (8:1ff.), our attention is immediately arrested in the first verse, for here John records something of great significance that is said in relation to no other seal. He states in this verse, "And when He broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." What does that mean? How could there be silence in Heaven? What sounds are heard in Heaven other than the continual praise of an infinitely worthy God? Was there ever silence in Heaven since the creation? We don't know; scripture does not tell us; but one thing we do know is that this introduces something momentous, something unlike anything else in this period. As John proceeds with his description, we see seven angels standing before the throne of God, and each is given a trumpet. We also see another angel holding a golden censer filled with much incense and the prayers of the saints from the golden altar that is before God. John referred to this altar previously; it is the altar mentioned in Revelation 6:9, from which the saints who were martyred during the time of the fifth seal made their petition to God for vengeance (*i.e.*, wrath) upon those who unjustly killed them. The imagery is clear: God is now ready to answer those prayers and to pour out wrath upon the world. The implication is unmistakable: what has happened up to this point is that God has allowed evil people, with the help of demons, latitude to manifest their nature as never before in history; they have made war, caused destruction and death, and killed the saints. God now intends to judge them with

an unprecedented outpouring of divine wrath. How could we fail to see such an obvious transition?

The observations made above, combined with the information from 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 (previously discussed), which indicates that the day of the LORD will not come until after the revealing of the Antichrist at the midpoint of the tribulation, makes a compelling case that the wrath of God will not be manifested until sometime in the second half of the tribulation. Even if we were to disregard all of the preceding evidence, there would still be no way to prove that the entire tribulation period is divine wrath; and that proof is essential to the pretribulationist wrath argument. At best, the wrath argument proves only that the Church must be raptured prior to the day of the LORD, not as pretribulationists claim, prior to the tribulation period.

What does the Bible actually say and reasonably imply about the timing of the rapture?

With the information from 1 Thessalonians 5:9, and Christ's teaching in Matthew 24:36-25:30 we have the basis for a biblical view of the rapture that is quite simple. Whatever we decide to call such a view, it has two principal characteristics: it is imminent, and it is pre-wrath (rather than pretribulationist). I prefer to call such a view the "imminent pre-wrath rapture."

What is an imminent pre-wrath rapture? The concept of an imminent pre-wrath rapture involves not a contingent view, such as midtribulationism, Rosenthal's pre-wrath view, or posttribulationism, but rather an imminent rapture occurring within a window, sometime between the present (today) and the beginning of the God's wrath at the day of the LORD, or the midpoint of the tribulation (see the observations above), whichever comes

first. Accordingly, the rapture may well happen today, or any day before the tribulation begins, but it could just as well take place after the tribulation begins, as long as it occurs before the beginning of the day of the LORD and before any of the post-Church-age saints are saved (which begins near the midpoint), since those believers must be present on earth after the rapture. Beyond these simple facts we cannot venture far without going beyond the bounds of what the Bible says and reasonably implies about the timing of the rapture.

Final Thoughts

Although I have been somewhat critical of pre-tribulationism, I would like to acknowledge that we owe a great debt to pretribulationists (concerning whom I was one for thirty-five years); they have always been at the forefront in insisting that the Bible clearly distinguishes the rapture from the second coming—a point with which I hardily agree—and they have always insisted that the rapture must occur before the wrath of God at the day of the LORD—another point with which I hardily agree. In addition, pretribulationists have solidly maintained a belief in the imminency of the rapture, though recently they seem to be confused as to why that is so (see the discussion in the following appendices). On the really important issues, the pretribulationist view is right: the rapture is imminent and it will be pre-wrath. Its greatest shortcomings have been: 1) misunderstanding the implications of imminency (and in recent time, of failing to see the rapture in Matthew 24:36-25:30); and, 2) identifying the entire tribulation as falling within the day of the LORD.

There is certainly nothing wrong with the hope of a pretribulationist rapture, which of course, is not the same as pretribulation-*ism*, which insists that the rapture “must” be pretribulationist. All who believe in imminency are looking for the rapture to occur at any moment. To those who have the stewardship of teaching others, we should remind ourselves that the accuracy of our doctrine may soon be tested, and we ought to believe and teach only what is solidly biblical. We must not teach as doctrine assumptions that might manifest that we have been less than careful in handling God’s truth. If we say only what is solidly scriptural and the rapture occurs before the tribulation begins, we will all be very happy, but if we go beyond what scripture says

and reasonably implies, and we are proven in time to be wrong, we will lose our credibility and sow the seeds of confusion, doubt, mistrust, and unpreparedness, at a time when the Church most needs leadership and a clear voice.

Appendix:

How Pretribulationists Have Almost Destroyed the Doctrine of Imminency

[The following material was taken from the author's work, *The Olivet Discourse: A Reconstruction of the Text From Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with Commentary*, Biblical Reader Communications, 2010, and includes most of footnote 12 beginning on page 155.]

Pretribulationism underwent a subtle, yet significant transformation in the first half of the twentieth century. The earlier pretribulationism of J.N. Darby and C.I. Scofield began to be replaced by the pretribulationism of Henry C. Thiessen and Lewis Sperry Chafer, and later John F. Walvoord. The dividing line between these two forms of pretribulationism centers on the interpretation of Matthew 24:45-25:30. Earlier pretribulationists, while viewing Matthew 24:36-44 as describing the second coming, generally viewed Matthew 24:45-25:30 as a description of the latter Church age, culminating with the rapture. Consequently, they saw support in the Olivet Discourse for the imminency of the rapture. The newer form of pretribulationism differed on this point; proponents insisted that not only did 24:36-44 describe the second coming, but that the descriptions and illustrations given in 25:45-25:30 (*i.e.*, the wise servant in 24:45-51, the virgins in 25:1-13, and the servants in 25:14-30) pictured Israel awaiting the second coming, thus removing the Church and the rapture entirely from the scope of the discourse. While the new pretribulationists held strongly to the doctrine of the imminency of the rapture, they were forced to conclude that this discourse offers no support for the doctrine, since given their interpretation of Matthew 24:36-25:30, the rapture is not in view. (The

earlier pretribulationists could at least point to 24:45-25:30 as support for imminency.) The latter form of pretribulationism is mostly implied in the writings of Thiessen and Chafer, and was later formally defended by Walvoord (*Matthew*, Moody Press, 1974, pp. 193-195). Its presence in Pentecost's influential *Things to Come* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1958) is mainly implicit (note p. 281, and the complete absence of any reference to Matthew 24:36-25:30 in connection to the rapture; also see pp. 193-218). The significance of this shift in interpretation is impossible to overstate. Why did the new pretribulationists extend the description of the second coming all the way to 25:30? One reason was purely exegetical: they correctly understood the connection between 24:36-44 and the three illustrations following in 24:45-25:30—a point the earlier pretribulationists had failed to recognize. The other reason is both historical and theological. The new pretribulationists were deeply concerned about the advance of posttribulationism and partial rapturism, both of which drew support from arguments that viewed 24:36-25:30 as pertaining to the rapture. The correct solution to this problem would have been to acknowledge that all of 24:36-25:30 pertains to the rapture, but that would have been an uncomfortable solution since it would have acknowledged a discussion of the rapture on the heels of a discussion of the tribulation and the second coming. In the end, they opted to regard this entire section as pertaining to the second coming. Since most of the commentaries, having been written by amillennialists, supported such a view, and since the original pretribulationists had already taken the initial step in this direction by viewing 24:36-44 as the second coming, it was a convenient solution. Unfortunately, eliminating the rapture entirely from the Olivet Discourse had unintended consequences. The new pretribulationists failed to recognize the primacy of Matthew 24:36-25:30 (or at the very least, 24:45-25:30) to the doctrine of the rapture; for both the

particularity of the rapture as an event distinct from the regal appearing, and the doctrine of the imminency of the rapture, are contingent upon Matthew 24:36-25:30. Thus, by arguing that the entire passage pertains to the second coming proper, proponents inadvertently threw out any remaining support for the particularity and the imminency of the rapture. This crucial error has resulted in the virtual demise of pretribulationism in theology, at least at the scholarly level. However, this error didn't just jeopardize pretribulationism, it jeopardized all dual appearance views, that is, any view other than the unitary view of posttribulationism, which sees the rapture and the second coming as the same event. The new pretribulationist solution also resulted in another significant problem: Matthew 24:36-25:30 is explicit in teaching the imminency of the appearing there described. Thus, if one claims that the passage pertains to the second coming, they must conclude that the second coming will be imminent at such a time as described in the passage (*i.e.*, when people are going about the ordinary activities of life, unaware that they are in imminent danger of impending global judgment). Clearly, given the prophesied conditions of the tribulation period just prior to the second coming, such an interpretation is impossible from the standpoint of a normal/objective hermeneutic. Nevertheless, this is the interpretation offered by the new pretribulationists (for examples see: Chafer's *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4, p. 367; and vol. 5, pp. 129-140; and John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, pp. 22-24).

If one denies that Matthew 24:36-25:30 describes the rapture, an enormous problem results, since Matthew 24:36-25:30 contains the only explicit biblical support for imminency. This is particularly problematic since other avenues for proving the imminency of the rapture, whether historical or deductive, have been ineffective. Pentecost's

book, *Things to Come*, which since its publication in 1958 has been considered the *sine qua non* of dispensational eschatology, is a classic example of the new pretribulationist quandary regarding support for imminency (see pages 168-169, 180-181, and 202-204). Pentecost cites several New Testament passages in support of imminency (Jn. 14:2-3; 1 Cor. 1:7; Philp. 3:20-21; 1 Thess. 1:9-10; 4:16-17; 5:5-9; Tit. 2:13; Jam. 5:8-9; Rev. 3:10; 22:17-22 [sic]). However, upon examination none of these passages clearly supports the doctrine (though all are certainly consistent with it). Pentecost doesn't expound any of these passages; the weight of his evidence falls heaviest on the beliefs of the early church, for which he quotes from *2 Clement* and the *Didache* (pp.168-169). However, when the contexts of these two quotations are examined, it is apparent that they were both based on statements made in Matthew 24:36-25:30, which oddly, Pentecost and all of the new pretribulationists reject as pertaining to the rapture. The immediate quotation Pentecost cites from chapter sixteen of the *Didache* contains no less than fourteen allusions to the Olivet Discourse, and the quote from *2 Clement* chapter twelve specifically appeals to the Olivet Discourse as its authority. Walvoord does the same, citing the same passage in the *Didache*, and also *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* (book VII, section ii, paragraph xxxi), which contains six allusions to the Olivet Discourse (John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1957, pp. 53-56). Neither Pentecost nor Walvoord comments on the illogic of appealing to early church history, while at the same time denying the validity of the biblical basis the early church gave for their belief in imminency.

How did the new pretribulationists support the contention that Matthew 24:36-25:30 refers to the second coming? Strangely, the seeds of what was to come in the new pretribulationism were sown in the old pretribula-

tionism. Walvoord, just as Darby, took the position that Matthew 24:36-41 describes the second coming because in the illustration of Noah's day (vv.37-39) the ones the flood "took" were the unrighteous taken in judgment; hence, if one assumes a parallel between the ones the flood "took" away (in the Noah illustration) and those "taken" at the event described in verses 40-41, then those taken in verses 40-41 are taken in judgment, which could only be true if the event is the second coming. Starting from that point, Walvoord then argues that Matthew 24:45-25:30 is simply an extension of 24:36-44. Here Walvoord is correct about the connection between 24:36-44 and 24:45-25:30, but incorrect in identifying 24:36-44 as the second coming, for neither the Noah illustration nor the event described in 24:40-41 can refer to the second coming, since an appearing that is sudden, unexpected, and virtually instantaneous, and that occurs at a time when human conditions are described as being quite ordinary—a point explicitly made in the illustration (cf. 24:38-39)—cannot be the same as an appearing that is protracted, public, and predictable, and that occurs at the peak of cataclysmic global judgments at the end of the tribulation. We should also point out that Walvoord's analysis of the parallelism in the Noah illustration is seriously in error; the twin analogy of Lot's day, found in Luke 17:28-29, does not support Walvoord's view that the unrighteous are the ones removed. Thus, the assertion that Matthew 24:36-44 describes the second coming is demonstrably incorrect. The view Walvoord represents also implies an imminent second coming. How does he deal with this problem? Again, working from the perspective that those taken are taken in judgment, he argues from the Noah illustration that once Noah's ark was finished and all were safely inside, the unredeemed could have known, based on Noah's prophetic proclamation, that the flood was imminent; thus in like manner, the second coming will be imminent once all of the tribulation signs

have been fulfilled (*Matthew*, p.193). Hence, according to this reasoning the second coming can be viewed as imminent once all of the precursory signs are fulfilled (*i.e.*, only at the very end of the tribulation period, immediately prior to the second coming). But such an interpretation of the passage cannot be correct, since as has already been pointed out, this interpretation hinges upon 24:36-44 being a description of the second coming, which is logically impossible, and since 24:38-39 cannot be made to fit with any biblical description of earthly life immediately preceding the second coming. Thus, the new pretribulationism was simply a logical extension of the early pretribulationists' view of 24:36-44, extending that view to 24:45-25:30. Likely this entire string of flawed interpretation began with the mistaken presumption on the part of early dispensationalists that prophecy concerning the Church would not likely be found in such close proximity to a discussion of the second coming. However, any fully developed answer to the disciples' question in 24:3 would have been incomplete if it had not addressed the dual nature of Christ's future appearing, necessitating a discussion of both the second coming and the rapture. Failing to see that this passage implies a dual appearing leads inevitably to the unitary view of posttribulationism. The reason is that the very concept of a dual appearing is predicated upon the fact that one aspect of Christ's future appearing is described as imminent, while the other cannot be imminent. When we recognize that in this discourse Jesus introduced the concept of a dual appearing, then, and only then, we are able to discern a coherent theology of the rapture and the second coming.

Appendix :

Why Matthew 24:36-25:30 Refers to the Rapture, Not the Second Coming

[The following material is taken from, *What the Bible Says About the Future*, by the author (Biblical Reader Communications, 2011), pp. 328-331.]

The history of modern pretribulationism has already been discussed in the preceding appendix. Here we will simply summarize the reasons why Matthew 24:36-25:30 refers to the rapture of the Church, not the second coming as popularly taught by many contemporary pretribulationists.

1. The removal in both the Noah illustration (Matt. 24:37-39 cf. Lk. 17:26-27) and the Lot illustration (Lk.17:28-29) does not fit the second coming.

At the second coming the unrighteous will be removed, and the righteous will remain to inherit the kingdom (Matt. 13:30, 41-43, 49-50). However, in both the Noah illustration (Matt. 24:37-39 cf. Lk. 17:26-27) and the Lot illustration (Lk. 17:28-29) the righteous are removed from the sphere of judgment, and the unrighteous are left to be destroyed. It is frequently objected that in the Noah illustration it is said that the unrighteous are the ones taken; however, that is a misunderstanding of the metaphor “took them all away” (Matt. 24:39). This metaphor does not refer to the unrighteous being taken anywhere, but to their being destroyed; Luke’s account of both the Noah illustration (Lk. 17:26-27) and the Lot illustration (Lk. 17:28-29) make this quite clear. In contrast, the illustration of Noah’s deliver-

ance perfectly illustrates the rapture. Noah and his family were lifted above the waters of judgment and were returned after the judgment abated. Note how this fits perfectly with the Lot illustration (Lk. 17:28-29), both of which are appropriate analogies for the rapture.

2. The conditions described in the Noah and Lot illustrations are incompatible with the second coming.

These illustrations both make the point that life will be normal at the time of this appearing, with people going about their mundane activities of eating and drinking, marrying, buying and selling, planting, and building, right up to the moment that judgment falls on them unexpectedly; such cannot describe the conditions at the second coming. At the second coming the earth will be at the peak of catastrophic judgment, with the bulk of mankind having already perished and the earth left in ruins. According to Isaiah the judgments of the day of the LORD will make men "more scare than gold" (Isa. 13:13); the earth will be "completely laid to waste" (24:3); its inhabitants "burned up" (24:6); the earth will become "a desolation" (13:9); the sun, moon, and stars will fail to give light (13:10); the heavens and the earth will be shaken from their place (13:13), and the world will be in the midst of the most destructive war in history (Rev. 9:13-17), and men will be experiencing plagues so severe that they will be in great anguish (Rev.16:1-11). So terrible will this time be that Jesus said if it were to last longer than the appointed time all flesh would perish (Matt. 24:22). The normalcy prominently pictured in the Noah and Lot illustrations (which can also be deduced from the parable of the ten virgins) cannot be harmonized with the biblical description of the late tribulation period, which leads to the inevitable conclusion that these illustrations must pertain to a different appearing at a different time, prior to the out-

pouring of divine judgment. Note that these illustrations fit perfectly with the rapture.

3. The appearing described in Matthew 24:36-25:30 is sudden, unexpected, and imminent (cf. 24:42-44), but the second coming is none of these.

The second coming will be preceded by many definite signs over a period of seven years. (Is that not the principal idea communicated in Matthew 24:4-30?) Not only that, but once the abomination occurs in the temple, believers will be able to calculate the very day of the second coming (see: *What the Bible Says About the Future*, 2nd ed., by the author, p. 145). After the breaking of the sixth seal even the unredeemed will know that the end is near (Rev. 6:12-17, esp. vv. 15-17). How could anyone think that believers living in the terrible last days of the tribulation would not know that the second coming is near? The view that Matthew 24:36-25:30 is a warning to believers concerning the second coming borders on the absurd.

4. Jesus likened his appearing to a thief in the night (24:43). However, that analogy would be inappropriate if applied to the second coming.

At the second coming Jesus will not appear suddenly without warning, as does a thief. He will return on the heels of many signs in unspeakable splendor with the armies of heaven to rescue the righteous, destroy his enemies, and establish his kingdom. His advent will even be preceded by a special sign in the heavens (Matt. 24:29-30). However, the analogy of the thief is quite appropriate to the rapture when he will appear suddenly, unexpectedly, without signs or warning, to take his Church. In fact, one cognate of the word *harpazo* (the term used to describe the

rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17) is *harpagmos*, which refers to a “robber.”

5. In the parable of the virgins (Matt. 25:1-13), which illustrates the same truth as the Noah and Lot illustrations, it is the righteous who are taken and the unrighteous who are left behind.

The parable of the virgins cannot illustrate the second coming, since the righteous will not be removed at the second coming, leaving the unrighteous behind. It might be countered that the unrighteous will also be gathered once the righteous have been gathered; however, in the parables of Matthew 13, Jesus expressly indicated multiple times that at the second coming it would be the unrighteous who would be gathered out “first” (Matt. 13:30, 41-43, 49-50). If we took the parable of the virgins to describe the second coming, how would it be possible to gather the unrighteous from among the righteous if the righteous were already gone? Obviously the particulars of this parable do not fit the second coming. Also, the mixed profession of faith (believers and unbelievers professing a common faith) does not fit what we know of the tribulation period after the great persecution and apostasy (Matt. 24:9-10), but it fits well with the end of the Church age, just prior to the rapture; hence the warning in 2 Thessalonians 5:3-11.

Those who teach that Matthew 24:36-25:30 pertains to the second coming sometimes object that the Church did not exist when the discourse in Matthew 24-25 was spoken, and consequently the truth revealed there cannot pertain to the Church. This argument is without merit on the following grounds: 1) As we have seen, it is impossible that the description in Matthew 24:36-25:30 could be the second coming, since none of the details are compatible. 2) Since Jesus knew that his appearing is to be a dual event (rap-

ture/second coming), in order to give a proper answer to the disciples' question concerning his coming (Matt. 24:3) it was necessary to broach this truth. 3) The disciples to whom Jesus was speaking would become the pillars of the Church (Eph. 2:19-20) in less than eight weeks (Acts 2). Since Jesus had already revealed the future existence of the Church (Matt. 16:18), it is entirely appropriate that he would address a truth pertaining to the Church at this point. (Just two days after this discourse Jesus instituted the observance of the Lord's Supper; few would argue that the Lord's Supper does not pertain to the Church.) Thus, the objection that the rapture cannot be in view because the Church did not yet exist is without merit. (For further discussion of this topic, see: *The Olivet Discourse*, by the author, pp. 149-190.)

Conclusions

There can be no serious doubt that in his Olivet Discourse our Lord introduced the concept of a dual appearing (rapture/second coming), and there can also be no serious doubt that Matthew 24:36-25:30 pertains not to the second coming, but to the rapture of the Church. The early pre-tribulationists (Darby, *et al*) were likely influenced by the prevailing interpretation to view 24:36-44 as pertaining to the second coming, and the new pretribulationists, beginning with Thiessen and Chafer, simply carried that erroneous interpretation to its logical conclusion. However, one of the fundamental laws of logic (the Law of Identity) leads to the conclusion that a thing cannot be what it is not, and it could not be more clear, or certain, that the description given in Matthew 24:36-25:30 cannot be a description of the second coming. This regrettable string of failed biblical interpretation has done great injury to the doctrine of the rapture generally, and to the doctrine of imminency specifically. Sadly, this misinterpretation is deeply ingrained in

contemporary pretribulational teaching. Nevertheless, the truth is that this passage is the first clear presentation of the rapture of the Church contained within the pages of the Bible, and it was taught by the one who will someday return to fulfill all that he has promised.

