

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## A Case for the Posttribulation Rapture

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### INTRODUCTION: GETTING OUR BEARINGS

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In this essay I present an exegetical and theological argument for the view that the church, the new covenant people of God, will be raptured at the time of Christ's return in glory (the parousia) *after* the final tribulation. I will focus on key New Testament passages about the parousia, the final tribulation, and the reward promised to God's people at the time of Christ's return. My approach to these passages will be governed by certain assumptions and general theological perspectives that are important to get on the table at the outset of my argument. And none of these is more important than my perspective on the two key terms *rapture* and *tribulation*.

The word *rapture* is, of course, not a New Testament word. The English word comes from the Latin verb *rapio* ("seize" or "carry away"), which was used in the Vulgate to translate the Greek word *harpagēsometha*, "we will be caught up [to meet the Lord in the air]" in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In popular circles, the rapture (in accordance with its verbal sense) is often thought of in terms of physical movement: believers are physically moved off the earth into heaven by the Lord. Moreover, this physical "taking away" is also usually thought to be necessary to rescue believers from harm. But neither of these notions gets at the heart of the matter. To be sure, physical movement is pretty clearly implied in the 1 Thessalonians text—and perhaps in others. But the more important aspect of rapture in the New Testament is bodily transformation. Theologically, rapture is best seen as a parallel to resurrection. When the Lord returns, dead saints are raised from the dead; living saints are raptured. This parallelism is especially clear in 1 Corinthians 15:50–53:

I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 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 will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

The completed form of the kingdom that God will bring into existence at the time of Christ's return cannot be lived in by people in normal "mortal" bodies. So all of us must be "changed." Christians who have already died will be "raised imperishable," but the rest of us, those who are still alive when Christ returns, must also be "changed"—that is,

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“raptured.” Second, the physical movement that is involved in the rapture is not a movement to escape something but a movement to be joined to something. This is clear from the 1 Thessalonians text I cited earlier: believers are “caught up” in order to “meet the Lord.” Rapture is not the means by which we are taken away from something on earth so much as it is the means by which we are brought into the presence of Christ. In fact, there is only one text in the New Testament that might suggest that God will physically remove his people from the final tribulation (or tribulation of any kind)—Revelation 3:10—and I will argue below that even this text does not mean this.

If popular usage has shifted the theological idea of “rapture” away from the biblical perspective a bit, it is even more the case with respect to “tribulation.” I assume in this essay that the Scriptures predict a period of unparalleled distress for the people of God that will immediately precede the second advent. We will call this period the “final tribulation” in this essay. But it is very important to keep this future period of intense suffering in perspective. For many Christians, “tribulation” is something confined to this period of future time. But a quick look at the occurrence of this word in the New Testament shows how wrong this perspective is. The word *tribulation* (*thlipsis*) occurs forty-five times in the New Testament. Once it refers to the wrath of God (Rom. 2:5). The rest of the occurrences of this word refer to suffering experienced by believers. But note that thirty-seven of these occurrences indisputably refer to the “tribulation” that believers experience throughout this age. Paul and Barnabas warned the new converts in southern Asia Minor, “We must go through many hardships (*thlipseōn*) to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Jesus neatly summarizes the basic New Testament perspective: “In this world you will have trouble [*thlipsin*]. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). The word *tribulation* refers to a period of intense suffering at the end of history in, at most, seven texts (Matt. 24:9, 21, 29; Mark 13:19, 24; Rev. 2:10; 7:14). And I will argue below that it is quite possible that *none* of these refers to the final tribulation.

This point about “tribulation” is one facet of a much larger and very important New Testament perspective on “eschatology.” When we focus on the culminating events of this age, it is all too easy to lose perspective by setting them apart from the events of this age as a whole. The New Testament proclaims that the prophecies about the “last days” have begun to be fulfilled. Christ’s death, his glorious resurrection, and the pouring out of the Spirit on “all flesh” mark the inauguration of the “last days” (see, e.g., Acts 2:14–21; 1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 1:1–2; 1 John 2:18). Because, then, the age between the advents belongs to the “last things” (*eschata*), the entire period is “eschatological.” The decisive, foundational eschatological events have taken place—but, to the surprise of many in Jesus’ day, without the culminating judgment of the wicked and definitive rescue of the righteous. It is this “surprise” that Jesus seeks to explain in his parable of the weeds: Jesus sows the seed of the kingdom, producing children of the new age; but these righteous

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ones will live together with the wicked until the climactic judgment to come (Matt. 13:24–43). “Imminency” refers to the New Testament teaching that these culminating events could occur “at any time.” James encourages his readers by reminding them that “the Lord’s coming is near” (5:8). Peter announces that “the end of all things is near” (1 Peter 4:7). The New Testament Christians expected the events of the end—Jesus’ return in glory, final rescue of the saints, final judgment of the wicked—to occur at any time. In contrast to the claims of many New Testament scholars, I do not think that they were certain that Jesus’ return would occur within a set number of years. But they held an open-ended view of the future, sharing with their Lord uncertainty about the time of the final events (see Matt. 24:36) even as they hoped they would happen soon.

What is especially important for our purposes, then, is the realization that the New Testament writers did not view their own history and experience as fundamentally separate from the events of the end of the age. We often refer to the “last days” or “the end times” as something that is still future and reserve the language of “eschatology” for that future. We therefore tend to separate these future events from our present experience in a way that is foreign to the New Testament. Many discussions of the topic we are looking at make a fundamental error at precisely this point, assuming without argument that if a passage refers to “eschatological events” or to “the last days” that it must be speaking about the very end of history as we know it. This is simply not the case.

Do not misunderstand. I am not suggesting that the end of the age will be exactly like our present time. The New Testament clearly refers to an especially intense and worldwide time of suffering for God’s people that will come at the end of history, to a climactic person of evil—the Antichrist—who will challenge God and persecute his people, and to a climactic experience of God’s wrath. But my point here is to insist that Jesus and the writers of the New Testament see these events not as belonging to a new period in salvation history but as the climax to an era already begun. And they envisage this climax not as some distant series of events but as something that could emerge very quickly out of their own situation.<sup>1</sup>

With these preliminary, but very important, points established, I can turn now to my basic argument. Since the rapture is clearly revealed only in the New Testament, the decisive evidence for its timing with respect to the tribulation must come from the New Testament also. Furthermore, it is sound hermeneutical procedure to establish a doctrine on the basis of the texts that speak most directly to the issue. Thus the major part of the

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<sup>1</sup> For a good survey of this approach to eschatology, see G. K. Beale, “The Eschatological Conception of New Testament Theology,” in *The Reader Must Understand: Eschatology in Bible and Theology* (ed. K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliott; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1997), 11–52.

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paper will be devoted to an exegesis of these texts. However, some foundational issues must be addressed before this important task is begun.

## THE TRIBULATION AND THE SECOND COMING

### *The Nature of the Tribulation*

While “tribulation,” as we have seen, is the common lot of God’s people in this age, an especially intense and universal time of tribulation is predicted for the very end of history in both the Old and New Testaments. It is the nature of this “final tribulation” that I want to analyze in this section. Most scholars think that the final tribulation will involve both unprecedented worldwide persecution of God’s people by anti-Christian forces as well as the pouring out of God’s wrath on an increasingly wicked world. It is especially important to analyze the place of God’s wrath in this period. When we turn to the Old Testament, the situation is complicated by the fact that it is often difficult to discern whether a particular description of “tribulation” relates to the exile, the final judgment, or the final tribulation as such. The distinction between the latter two is not always recognized, but it is a very important one in discussing Old Testament texts. Passages that describe the horror of the end itself, which, in any eschatological scenario, *follows* the final tribulation, cannot be used as evidence for the nature of the final tribulation, which *precedes* the end. Since many of the relevant prophetic texts involve descriptions of the “day of the Lord” and do not indicate clearly whether the final tribulation or the end itself is envisaged, the problem is a real one. Caution is called for, then, in applying these descriptions to the final tribulation.<sup>2</sup>

When this distinction is kept in mind, I conclude that Old Testament texts that might with some degree of probability be describing the final tribulation are confined to Daniel 7–12 (7:7–8, 23–25; 8:9–12, 23–25; 9:26–27; 11:36–12:1). It is certainly possible that other Old Testament passages *may* describe the final tribulation—Deuteronomy 4:29–30; Isaiah 26:20–21; Jeremiah 30:4–9; Joel 2:30–31; and Zephaniah 1–2, to name a few. But none of the depictions of distress in these passages is clearly distinguished from the final outpouring of God’s judgmental wrath *after* the tribulation. In the interests of accuracy, then, it is important to use the texts in Daniel primarily in constructing the Old Testament concept of the tribulation and employ the other texts only as they corroborate the picture in Daniel. These chapters in Daniel undoubtedly have the greatest bearing of any Old Testament passages on New Testament eschatology. Unfortunately, they are also very

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<sup>2</sup> The doctrine of the final tribulation formulated by, e.g., J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 233–35, is largely dependent on texts having to do with the day of the Lord. Even if the final tribulation is a part of the day, it is illegitimate to apply to the final tribulation any imagery associated with the day.

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difficult to interpret, and we cannot here even begin to enter into the exegetical and theological difficulties they present. Suffice it to say that I think they contain prophecies from the sixth-century Daniel in which, in typical Old Testament fashion, predictions about the Maccabean period are mixed up with predictions about the ultimate establishment of God's kingdom. I take it, for instance, that the seventy "sevens" of Daniel 9:24–27 describe the process by which this kingdom will be established, with the seventieth "seven" referring to the entire package of events spanning the time from Christ's first coming to his second coming in glory.<sup>3</sup>

Two points of relevance for our topic emerge from the texts in Daniel. First, the sufferings of the saints during this period are uniformly attributed to an ultimate usurper of God (7:7–8, 20–25; 11:35–45). It is "the little horn" who "was waging war against the saints and defeating them" (7:21; cf. 8:25). These passages may refer, first of all, to Antiochus Epiphanes, the pagan enemy of Israel in the second century BC. But they ultimately refer to the end-time Antichrist. Second, Daniel 11:36 and (probably) 8:19 attest to the existence of divine wrath (*za'am*) during this period of intense persecution. But nothing is said about the extent or duration of this wrath, nor is it stated that the wrath falls upon the "saints," or holy people. But while Daniel is silent about the extent and objects of this tribulation wrath, it is significant that a related text, Isaiah 26:20–21, specifically depicts the selective nature of God's wrath: "Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until his wrath (*za'am*) has passed by. See, the Lord is coming out of his dwelling to punish the people of the earth for their sins." If this passage refers to the final tribulation, we possess clear evidence that God's people on earth are protected from the divine wrath. Even if one argues that the wrath of Isaiah 26 affects only Israel, it is still important to recognize that God's people can remain on earth while escaping the wrath. On the other hand, this text may not relate to the final tribulation at all—in which case the principle of selectivity in the exercise of God's wrath remains. At the least, then, Isaiah 26:20–21 establishes the possibility that God's people can escape divine wrath though present during its outpouring.

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel 9:25–27 is one of the most difficult passages in the entire Old Testament. The "seventy sevens," or "weeks," and their division into units of seven, sixty-two, and one, have generated countless and mutually contradictory chronological schemes. The identity of the "anointed one" is very uncertain, as is the antecedent of the pronouns in v. 27. For a discussion of the passage along the lines I am suggesting, see, e.g., Thomas Edward McComiskey, "Seventy 'Weeks' of Daniel against the Background of Ancient Near Eastern Literature," *WTJ* 47 (1985): 18–45; Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978), 168–78. One of the basic problems in Robert van Kampen's presentation of the "prewrath" position is his assumption that Daniel's seventieth week refers only to the end of history (Robert van Kampen, *The Sign*, exp. ed. [Wheaton: Crossway, 1993], cf. 87–95).

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We conclude that the depiction of the final tribulation in the Old Testament includes severe persecution of saints at the instigation of a powerful leader along with a revelation of divine wrath, undetermined in its extent and objects.

As we have seen, the word “tribulation” as such refers to what we are calling the final tribulation at most only seven times in the New Testament (Matt. 24:9, 21, 29; Mark 13:19, 24; Rev. 2:10; 7:14; of course, the final tribulation is referred to in other language as well). All seven come within the so-called Olivet Discourse or the book of Revelation. And it has been traditional to look to these two blocks of text, along with 2 Thessalonians 2:3–8, for the most extensive New Testament data about the final tribulation. Though I doubt that Mark 13:14–23 and Revelation 6–16 describe the final tribulation per se, I do think that both texts include reference to the final tribulation in their depiction of the sufferings of God’s people throughout the church age. In examining what these texts say about the nature of the final tribulation, two questions are especially significant.

First, do these texts, or others similar to them, suggest that the tribulations of the final tribulation are qualitatively different from the tribulation experienced by God’s people throughout history? Only if the answer to this question is yes does it make sense to think that the last generation of believers will be exempted from tribulation. For, as I have noted, the New Testament consistently predicts that believers will suffer tribulation. Nothing in these texts suggests that the suffering of the final tribulation will be any greater in degree than what many believers throughout the age must suffer. True, the extreme sufferings of the final period may be greater in extent, afflicting many more Christians than it does now, but this does not constitute a reason to exempt Christians from it. Moreover, history affords many examples of believers suffering horrendous tribulations because of their unshakable commitment to Christ. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine suffering that could be any more intense than some believers have already experienced and that other believers continue to experience. Why should a future generation of Christians be exempt from what Christians have already been experiencing? The degree of suffering in the final tribulation provides no grounds for a pretribulational rapture.

The second question to ask of these texts is whether their references to the wrath of God require that believers be physically absent during the final tribulation. The New Testament clearly teaches that believers are forever exempt from God’s wrath (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). If, then, the final tribulation includes the infliction of God’s wrath, must not believers be absent during it? It is only in the Revelation that there are references to God’s wrath that may be associated with the final tribulation (6:16, 17; 11:18; 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 19:15). Two aspects of the presentation in Revelation merit our attention.

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First, the references to God's wrath in the Revelation refer mainly, if not exclusively, to the very end of history and not to the final tribulation per se. This is pretty clear in several of the references (14:10, 19; 16:19; 19:15). I think several others also refer to the climactic scene of judgment based on my reading of the structure of Revelation. As I will argue below, Revelation 6–16 appears to follow a "recapitulative" structure. John portrays the events leading up to the parousia several times, with the result that the end itself is referred to several times in the course of these chapters. The parousia and associated final judgment on sinners appears therefore to be in view in Revelation 6:16–17, which describes cosmic disasters elsewhere associated with the parousia (Mark 13:24). And the same is true of 11:18. This leaves only the references to the "bowl" judgments in 15:1, 7 and 16:1. Significantly, John introduces the bowl judgments by claiming that "with them God's wrath is completed" (*etelesthē*; 15:1). This language strongly suggests that the bowl judgments are not simply one episode or series of events within the final tribulation but that they in some fashion describe the culmination of God's judgments in history.

The second aspect of God's wrath in Revelation that we must note is the selective nature of God's judgments and wrath. The demonic locusts of the fifth trumpet are ordered to harm "only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads" (9:4). The first bowl, while it is poured out on the "earth," nevertheless brings "ugly, festering sores" only on "the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image" (16:2). And the recipients of a number of the plagues are said to refuse to repent (9:20–21; 16:9, 11)—an indication that only unbelievers are affected by them. In other words, there is no place in which the judgment or the wrath of God is presented as afflicting saints, and there are indications on the contrary that God is purposefully exempting the saints from their force.

The New Testament thus paints a picture similar to that of the Old Testament. The final tribulation is presented as a period of severe persecution of saints then on earth. But (1) it is not clear to what extent (if any) the final tribulation itself involves the infliction of God's wrath, and (2) there are indications that God protects his own people from his wrath. To be sure, it may be asked how God can protect his people from the universal judgments associated with his wrath—for instance, the death of every sea creature (16:3). In response two points can be made. First, this constitutes a problem for *all* interpreters. Everyone agrees that saints of some sort will be divinely protected and preserved alive until the parousia—whether they be part of the church or the Jewish remnant saved during the final tribulation. Second, the history of Old Testament Israel would suggest that, although God's judgments are never directed toward those who truly belong to him, the judgments can indirectly affect them. Thus Noah and his family were, to say the least, inconvenienced by the flood. And did not Jeremiah and other true servants of God experience suffering, even death, as a result of God's wrathful judgment upon Judah

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through the Babylonians? Romans 1:18 affirms that “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Yet the present infliction of God’s wrath is clearly not incompatible with God’s protection of believers from his wrath during this same time.

An important conclusion emerges from this discussion of the nature of the final tribulation: there is nothing inherent in it that makes it impossible for the church to be present during it. All agree that no true believer will experience the wrath of God, but no description of the tribulation presents it as a time of wrath upon God’s people. All agree that the church experiences tribulation—at times severe tribulation—throughout its existence; but no description of the tribulation indicates that it will involve greater suffering than many believers have already experienced.

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## *The Vocabulary of the Second Advent*

Three words are frequently used in the New Testament to describe the return of Christ: *apokalypsis* (“revelation”), *epiphaneia* (“manifestation”), and *parousia* (“coming” or “presence”). The word *parousia*, which occurs most frequently (fifteen times), should probably be translated “coming,” but its associations with the concept of “presence” should not be ignored. Its appropriateness as a characterization of the Lord’s return is evident from the fact that it is used in the papyri to designate the special visits of kings. The word *epiphaneia* (five times with reference to the second coming) connotes a decisive divine appearance for the benefit of God’s people, while an allusion to the completion of God’s purposes is suggested by the term *apokalypsis* (five times).<sup>4</sup>

What is important to note about these terms is, first, that each is clearly used to describe the posttribulational return of Christ and, second, that all three also designate the believer’s hope and expectation. Parousia is indisputably posttribulational in Matthew 24:3, 27, 37, 39 and in 2 Thessalonians 2:8; *apokalypsis* has the same time frame in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, as does *epiphaneia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:8. On the other hand, the parousia of Christ is explicitly stated to be an object of the believer’s expectation in 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; James 5:7–8; and 1 John 2:28. The word *apokalypsis* is used to describe the believer’s hope in 1 Corinthians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:7, 13; 4:13, while all four references to *epiphaneia* in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1; 4:8; Titus 2:13) bear this significance. If, then, believers are exhorted to look forward to this coming of Christ,

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<sup>4</sup> On the background and meaning of these terms, see B. Rigaux, *Saint Paul: Les Epitres aux Thessaloniens*, Etudes Bibliques (Paris: Gabalda, 1956), 196–206; George Milligan, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, n.d.), 145–51.



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and this coming is presented as posttribulational, it is natural to conclude that believers will be present through the tribulation.<sup>5</sup>

However, this would be to proceed too quickly. It may be that the second coming must be divided into two stages: a “coming” of Christ *for* his church before or sometime during the tribulation and a “coming” *with* his church after it. Such a two-stage coming cannot be ruled out a priori. On the other hand, it cannot be accepted unless there is clear evidence for such a division. We have seen that such evidence is not available in the terms used to depict the second advent—each of them includes both the rapture and the posttribulational descent of Christ from heaven. The analogy of the Old Testament hope of the coming of the Messiah, which in the light of fulfillment can be seen to have two stages, is often brought into the argument at this point. Of course, the two-stage nature of the establishment of the kingdom cannot be used in itself to argue for a two-stage parousia. But even as an analogy it is of limited value, because we recognize the two stages of the establishment of the kingdom of God only in retrospect. Some argue that the New Testament suggests these two stages by speaking of Christ coming “for” his saints (before the final coming) and “with” his saints (at the final coming; see 1 Thess. 3:13; 4:14; Rev. 17:14; 19:14). Not all these texts are clearly relevant, since some of them may refer not to believers but to angels. Zechariah 14:5 predicts that “the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him,” and this text has influenced New Testament presentations of Christ’s return (see Matt. 13:41; 16:27; 25:31; 2 Thess. 1:7; Jude 14). This being the case, 1 Thessalonians 3:13 probably refers to angels who accompany Christ; and Revelation 19:14 may.<sup>6</sup> But more to the point is the fact that 1 Thessalonians 4:14 uses the “with” language to describe believers and the Lord *at the time of the rapture*.

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<sup>5</sup> On this point, see: Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ: An Examination of the Teaching of J. N. Darby and His Followers* (London and Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1937), 125–38; Henry W. Frost, *Matthew Twenty-four and the Revelation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924), 146–47; J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 47–48; George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 63–68.

<sup>6</sup> Most Thessalonians commentators prefer a reference to angels (e.g., Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, HNTC [New York: Harper and Row, 1972], 152–53; Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 145; Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 181; and see also Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953], 137; Payne, *Imminent Appearing*, 75–76). For the opposite view, see Milligan (*Thessalonians*, 45) and Leon Morris (*The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959], 114–15). Commentators on Revelation are more evenly divided about 19:14 (in favor of a reference to angels: George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], 255; in favor of a reference to believers: G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 960; in favor of reference to both: Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 684).

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Therefore, a study of the vocabulary employed in describing the return of Christ paints a uniform picture: believers are exhorted to look for and to live in the light of this glorious event. And, while some texts obviously place this coming *after* the final tribulation, there are *none* that equally obviously place it before the final tribulation. However, it may be that a closer look at the contexts in which these terms occur will reveal that there is, in fact, a pretribulational aspect to the second coming. It is to these texts that we now turn.

## THE RAPTURE—THREE BASIC PASSAGES

I turn now to those texts that are claimed to be “the three principal Scriptures revealing the rapture—John 14:3; 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52; and 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18.”<sup>7</sup> Since our study of the nature of the final tribulation has revealed nothing that would necessitate the removal of the church during that period, and the important terms used to describe the second advent give no indication that anything other than a posttribulational event is envisaged, we would expect to find in these texts clear indications of a pretribulational aspect of the advent if such an aspect exists.

In the Farewell Discourse of John’s gospel (chaps. 14–17), Jesus seeks to prepare his disciples for the time of his physical absence from them. In 14:1–4 Jesus encourages them by asserting that his “going” to the Father is for the purpose of preparing a “place” for them in the Father’s “house” (v. 2), and that he will come again and receive them to himself, “that you also may be where I am” (v. 3). While some think that John 14:2–3 refers to Jesus’ provision of a spiritual “resting place” with the Father, the passage likely does refer to the second advent and rapture.<sup>8</sup> But there is no indication in the text that any “coming” other than the posttribulational one described elsewhere in the New Testament is in Jesus’ mind. The fact that believers at a posttribulational rapture would rise to meet the Lord in the air only to return immediately to earth with him creates no difficulty, for the text does *not* state that believers will go directly to heaven,<sup>9</sup> but only that they will always be with the Lord. If it be argued that this is the inference of the text, it is hard to see how any other view can offer a more reasonable scenario. As Robert Gundry says, “The pretribulational interpretation would require us to believe that the

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<sup>7</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation: Study of Posttribulationism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 50.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 488–90; contra, e.g., Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 937–38.

<sup>9</sup> While Gundry has argued that the *monai* (“dwelling places”) are to be regarded as “spiritual abodes in [Jesus’] own person” (Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation: A Biblical Examination of Posttribulationism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 154–55; and in more detail in “‘In My Father’s House Are Many *Monai*’ (John 14:2)” (ZAW 58 [1967]: 68–72), the close connection with “my father’s house,” which almost certainly represents heaven, favors the traditional interpretation.

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church will occupy heavenly mansions for a short period of seven years, only to vacate them for a thousand years."<sup>10</sup> Neither is it true that a promise of deliverance only after the severe distress of the final tribulation could not be a "comfort" to the disciples. The "blessed hope" of being reunited with the risen Lord is surely a comfort, no matter what believers have previously experienced. Thus John 14:1–4 offers no indication at all about the time of the rapture.

In 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, it is Paul's purpose to indicate how living saints can enter the kingdom at the last day even though "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (v. 50). To do so, he affirms that, while "we" (believers in general) will not all die, we will all be "changed" — whether living or dead. That Paul calls this transformation a "mystery" indicates nothing about *who* will participate in it, only that it was not clearly revealed previously.<sup>11</sup> And in quoting an Old Testament verse (Isa. 25:8) with reference to the resurrection of *church* saints in this context (vv. 54–55), Paul may be indicating his belief that Old Testament saints participate in this "change."<sup>12</sup> Further indication that this transformation involves Old Testament saints (and cannot thereby be limited to a separate event for *church* saints) is found in the reference to "the last trumpet." As the commentators note, this does not refer to the last in a series, but to the trumpet that ushers in the "last day."<sup>13</sup> And this trumpet is a feature of the Old Testament day of the Lord at which time the Jewish nation experiences final salvation and judgment (cf. Isa. 27:13; Joel 2:1; Zeph. 1:16; Zech. 9:14). The Isaianic reference is particularly suggestive since the sounding of the "great trumpet" is associated with the gathering up of the Israelites "one by one" (Isa. 27:12). This is probably a description of the gathering of Israel in preparation for entrance into the millennial kingdom—an event that is always posttribulational. Furthermore, it is probable that the trumpet in 1 Corinthians 15:52 is the same as the one mentioned in Matthew 24:31. For when one finds only one reference throughout Jesus' teaching to a trumpet, and it is associated with the gathering of the elect into the kingdom, and further finds Paul making reference to the transformation of saints in preparation for the kingdom when he mentions a trumpet, the parallel can hardly be ignored. But the trumpet sound in Matthew 24:31 is manifestly posttribulational. Thus, while dogmatism is unwarranted, the reference to "the last trumpet" in 1 Corinthians 15:52 would suggest that the "transformation" Paul describes takes place at the time when the Jewish nation

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<sup>10</sup> Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 153. For the pretribulational interpretation, see Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1955), 55.

<sup>11</sup> Contra John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 34–35.

<sup>12</sup> Reese, *Approaching Advent*, 63.

<sup>13</sup> G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), 7:87, s.v. "σάλπιγξ"; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1296; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 744.

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experiences its eschatological salvation (Isa. 27:12–13) after the final tribulation (Matt. 24:31).

The third principal text relating to the rapture is 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. Clearly, Paul is here seeking to comfort the Thessalonian believers over the death of believers. Why were they concerned? It is possible that Paul's forced and sudden departure from Thessalonica had prevented him from teaching the Christians there about the future resurrection of dead believers.<sup>14</sup> However, it is perhaps likelier that the Thessalonians were worried that their deceased brothers and sisters would miss out on the benefits of being "taken up" to be with the Lord at the time of his coming.<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that the comfort Paul offers does not have to do primarily with the position of living believers; nor does he suggest that exemption from the final tribulation is a source of this comfort.<sup>16</sup> His encouragement lies solely in the fact that *all* believers, living or dead, will participate in the glorious events of the parousia and that they will as a result "always be with the Lord."<sup>17</sup> That such a hope, if it included a previous experience in the final tribulation, would not be a comfort to believers is manifestly untrue. For, in fact, these Thessalonians had already experienced very difficult times—they had been converted "in ... severe suffering" (1 Thess. 1:6) and were still undergoing such tribulation (3:3, 7). Nowhere does Paul seek to comfort Christians by promising them exemption from tribulation.

Are there any indications in this description of the rapture and accompanying resurrection as to when it takes place with reference to the final tribulation? The failure of Paul to mention preliminary signs is hardly relevant, for there is no reason for him to include them here—in the light of the extreme suffering that the Thessalonians were already experiencing, he hardly needed to warn them of this. He focuses exclusively on the great hope lying at the end of all earthly distresses. On the other hand, there are four indications that favor a posttribulational setting. First, while little can be definitely

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Colin R. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica: Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, SNTSMS 126 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 35–38; Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 247–51.

<sup>15</sup> James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912), 164; A. L. Moore, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, NCB (London: Nelson, 1969), 108–9; Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 166; Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 283–84.

Gundry's suggestion that the Thessalonians thought that the dead would have to wait until the end of the millennium to be raised (*Church and Tribulation*, 101) moves in the same direction but with a specificity that is probably not warranted.

<sup>16</sup> This seems to be assumed by Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, 96. The notion that the Thessalonians would have rejoiced in the death of loved ones if they knew that they would thereby escape the final tribulation (D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles: A Call to Readiness* [Chicago: Moody, 1971], 205) is self-refuting. Do all today who hold a posttribulational view rejoice when loved ones die?

<sup>17</sup> Reese, *Approaching Advent*, 142.

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concluded from Paul's reference to "a word of the Lord" in verse 15,<sup>18</sup> there are suggestive parallels between the parousia of 1 Thessalonians 4 and the parousia described by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse. Both refer to a heavenly event with angels (archangel in 1 Thessalonians 4), clouds, a trumpet, and the gathering of believers.<sup>19</sup> And while each of these mentions details not found in the other, none of the details are contradictory. However, the parousia of the Olivet Discourse is posttribulational.

A second indication that the rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4 may be posttribulational is found in the reference to the trumpet, which, as we saw in discussing 1 Corinthians 15, is an established symbol for the ushering in of the time of Israel's salvation and judgment. (And, in keeping with Paul's allusion to the trumpet of God, it should be noted that Zech. 9:14 specifically says that the Lord will sound the trumpet.)

Third, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–16 features a number of elements closely parallel to Daniel 12:1–2: the description of the dead as "sleepers"; the presence of Michael, the archangel (cf. Jude 9); and, of course, a resurrection and deliverance of God's people.<sup>20</sup> But the Daniel passage definitely places the resurrection *after* the final tribulation.

Fourth, the word used by Paul to describe the "meeting" between the living saints and their Lord in the air (*apantēsis*) occurs in references to the visit of dignitaries and generally implies that the "delegation" accompanies the dignitary *back to* the delegation's point of origin.<sup>21</sup> The two other occurrences of this term in the New Testament seem to bear this meaning (Matt. 25:6; Acts 28:15). This would suggest that the saints, after meeting the Lord in the air, accompany him back to earth instead of going with him to heaven. To be

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<sup>18</sup> This could indicate that Paul thinks of a specific word of Christ found in the Gospels (such as Matt. 24:31 or John 11:25–26 [for the latter, see Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 102–3]); of the tradition of Jesus' teaching on the parousia (David Wenham, "Paul and the Synoptic Apocalypse" [paper read at the July 1980 meeting of the Tyndale House Gospels Research Project, Cambridge], 6n1; Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 170–71); of an unknown saying of Jesus (Morris, *Thessalonians*, 141; Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair*, 38–41); or of a revelation received by Paul (Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 267–68; Milligan, *Thessalonians*, 58; Hiebert, *Thessalonian Epistles*, 195).

<sup>19</sup> For these parallels, see especially J. B. Orchard, "Thessalonians and the Synoptic Gospels," *Biblica* 19 (1938): 19–42; Lars Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted: The Formation of Some Jewish Apocalyptic Texts and of the Eschatological Discourse Mark 13 Par.*, ConBNT 1 (Lund: Gleerup, 1966), 188–89; Wenham, "Synoptic Apocalypse," 4–5; idem, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 305–16.

<sup>20</sup> Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted*, 188–89.

<sup>21</sup> See esp. Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 226–28; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 217–18; Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair*, 43–45.

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sure, the word does not have to bear this technical meaning, nor is it certain that a return to the point of origin must be immediate.<sup>22</sup> But the point is still suggestive.

It may be concluded that the details of the description of the parousia and rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 do not allow a certain conclusion as to when these take place with reference to the final tribulation. Such indications as there are, however, favor a posttribulational setting. This we have found to be the case also in 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, while John 14:1–4 sheds no light on the question either way. The implications of this must not be overlooked. We have discovered that the terms used to describe the second advent are all applied to a posttribulational coming and that believers are exhorted to look forward to that coming. Any indication that this coming is to be a two-stage event, in which the rapture is separated from the final manifestation, would have to come from passages describing that event. *We can now conclude that no evidence for such a separation is found in any of the three principal texts on the rapture.* On the contrary, such evidence as exists is in favor of locating the rapture after the final tribulation, at the same time as the final parousia. But there are other important passages related to the parousia yet to be examined before final conclusions can be drawn.

## 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

After the depiction of the rapture and parousia in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul turns to the subject of the “day of the Lord” in chapter 5. He introduces this topic with the phrase: “Now (*de*), brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you” (v. 1 TNIV). Since this “day” includes the destruction of unbelievers (v. 3), it is clear that a posttribulational event is described. The question to be asked, then, is this: does Paul intimate that the Thessalonian Christians to whom he writes may still be on earth when the day comes? Three considerations are relevant: the relationship between chapters 4 and 5, the meaning of “day of the Lord,” and the nature and basis of Paul’s exhortations in 5:1–11.

It is sometimes claimed that the *de* introducing chapter 5 demonstrates a transition to a wholly new topic and that it is therefore inappropriate to include the rapture (4:13–18) as part of the “day” in 5:1–11. Three considerations cast doubt on this conclusion. First, while *de* generally denotes a mild contrast, it also occurs frequently “as a transitional particle pure and simple, without any contrast intended”<sup>23</sup> (note the TNIV translation

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<sup>22</sup> Henry C. Thiessen, *Will the Church Pass through the Tribulation?* 2nd ed. (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1941), 42; Hiebert, *Thessalonian Epistles*, 202.

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<sup>23</sup> BDAG; cf. also Margaret E. Thrall, *Greek Particles in the New Testament: Linguistic and Exegetical Studies*, NTS 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 51–52.

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quoted above). Second, even if a contrast is intended by Paul, one must determine the *nature* of that contrast. Rather than distinguishing two separate events, Paul may be contrasting the effect of the same event on two different groups—believers and unbelievers. Third, observe how Paul speaks of “times and dates” in verse 1 without specifying the time or date of *what*. The omission of any specific event here could indicate that the previous topic is in mind.

Next, then, we must seek to determine what Paul includes in the “day of the Lord.” Can the rapture be part of that day? In the Old Testament, the day of the Lord (also “that day,” etc.) denotes a decisive intervention of God for judgment and deliverance.<sup>24</sup> It can refer to a relatively *near* event or to the *final* climactic event—it is not always clear that the prophets distinguished the two. Although the day is frequently described as one of judgment, deliverance for the people of God is often involved also (cf. Isa. 27; Jer. 30:8–9; Joel 2:32; 3:18; Obad. 15–17; et al.). In the New Testament, the term is almost universally related to the end. From the great variety of expressions that are used in the New Testament, it is clear that there is no fixed terminology<sup>25</sup> and that distinctions on that basis cannot be drawn.<sup>26</sup>

All agree that the final judgment is included, but is the final tribulation also part of the day of the Lord? Several factors suggest that it is not. First, no reference to the eschatological “day” in the New Testament clearly includes a description of the final tribulation. In fact, it is interesting that the only two occurrences in Revelation (6:17; 16:14) refer to the final judgment brought through the parousia. Second, Malachi 4:5 (the coming of Elijah) and Joel 2:3 (cosmic portents) place what are generally agreed to be tribulational

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel: Aspects of Old Testament Thought* (London: SCM, 1956), 178–200.

<sup>25</sup> It is probable that at least eighteen different expressions refer to this concept: (1) “The day”: Rom. 13:12; 13 (?); Heb. 10:25; “This day”: 1 Thess. 5:4; (2) “The great Day”: Jude 6; (3) “That day”: Matt. 7:22; 24:36; 25:13; Luke 17:31; 21:34; 2 Thess. 1:10; 2 Tim. 1:12, 18; 4:8; (4) “The last day”: John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48; (5) “The day of judgment”: Matt. 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:7; 1 John 4:17; (6) “The day of visitation”: 1 Peter 2:12 (?); (7) “The day of wrath”: Rom. 2:5; (8) “The day when God judges”: Rom. 2:16; (9) “The day of evil”: Eph. 6:13; (10) “The day of redemption”: Eph. 4:30; (11) “The day of God”: 2 Peter 3:12; (12) “The day of God Almighty”: Rev. 16:14; (13) “The day of the Lord”: Acts 2:20; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2; 2 Peter 3:10; (14) “The day of Christ”: Phil. 1:10; 2:16; (15) “The day of the Lord Jesus”: 2 Cor. 1:14; (16) “The day of Jesus Christ”: Phil. 1:6; (17) “The day of our Lord Jesus Christ”: 1 Cor. 1:8; (18) “The day of the Son of Man”: Luke 17:30.

<sup>26</sup> Note particularly the way Paul, when referring to the day, can combine “Lord” and “Christ” in one expression (1 Cor. 1:8); similarly “Lord” and “Jesus” (2 Cor. 1:14). Surely this suggests that since for Paul Jesus Christ *is* the Lord, he uses terms such as “day of the Lord” and “day of Christ” interchangeably. Walvoord makes an interesting admission in his argument for distinguishing “day of Christ” from “day of the Lord”: “If the pretribulational rapture is established on other grounds, these references seem to refer specifically to the rapture rather than to the time of judgment on the world” (*Blessed Hope*, 119). In other words, the terms by themselves offer no basis for such a distinction.

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events *before* the Day (cf. Acts 2:20). Third, Paul seems to suggest in 2 Thessalonians 2 that the day cannot come until certain, clearly tribulational, events transpire. There is good basis, then, for thinking that Paul uses “day (of the Lord)” language as generally interchangeable with the parousia.<sup>27</sup>

This being the case, it is not surprising to find that the New Testament associates the final resurrection of the saints with the day of the Lord. Five times in John’s gospel we find claims that Jesus will raise those who believe in him on “the last day” (6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24). And since the rapture occurs at the same time as the resurrection of believers, the rapture, too, must be part of that day. That this is so finds confirmation in the fact that Paul frequently describes the day as an event to which believers in this life look forward (1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; 2 Tim. 4:8; cf. also Heb. 10:25)—it is a “day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30).

Thus, in the New Testament, the day includes the destruction of the ungodly at the parousia of Christ, along with the rapture and the resurrection of the righteous dead. That is, for Paul as for the other New Testament writers, the “day” is “a general denotation of the great future that dawns with Christ’s coming.”<sup>28</sup> The fact that the final tribulation seems not to be part of that day suggests that it precedes all these events, but this is not certain. What is certain is that believers cannot be excluded from involvement in the events of 1 Thessalonians 5 simply because the day of the Lord is the topic.

In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul’s emphasis is undoubtedly on judgment, which comes suddenly and certainly on those not expecting it (v. 3). At the very time that people are proclaiming “peace and safety,” judgment comes upon them. Paul is probably dependent here on passages such as Jeremiah 6:14, which depicts Israelites who keep saying, “Peace, peace,” when the Lord claims there is no peace. As in Jeremiah’s day, people are finding false security in the face of imminent judgment.<sup>29</sup> Does Paul suggest that the Thessalonian believers may have a relationship to this judgment? If so, this would constitute strong support for the posttribulational position, because either (1) believers will be alive during

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<sup>27</sup> Note how Paul parallels “day” language with the parousia in his prayers that believers might be “blameless” (1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:10; 1 Thess. 3:13; 5:23) in his boasting about his churches (Phil. 2:16; 1 Thess. 2:19) and in his hope for salvation (1 Cor. 5:5; 15:23). See on this point Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair*, 51; J. L. Kreitzer, *Jesus and God in Paul’s Eschatology*, JSNTSS (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 112–29.

<sup>28</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 530–31. Cf. also George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 555.

<sup>29</sup> See esp. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair*, 54. The Jeremiah parallel also makes clear that people could very well be claiming such peace and security in the midst of the final tribulation (see E. Michael Rusten, “A Critical Evaluation of Dispensational Interpretation of the Book of Revelation” [PhD diss., New York University, 1977], 488–89; Norman F. Douty, *Has Christ’s Return Two Stages?* [New York: Pageant, 1956], 76–77).



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the final tribulation (if this is the judgment Paul thinks of), or (2) believers will be on earth when the posttribulational parousia occurs (if the judgment occurs then).

That Christians *are* associated with the day is the clear inference of 1 Thessalonians 5:4. Here Paul tells the Thessalonian believers, “But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief” (TNIV). Why, if believers are raptured *before* the final tribulation, would Paul have qualified his assertion with “as a thief”? Much more appropriate would have been the simple statement “that the day not overtake you.” If you had a friend visiting from another country who was worried about becoming involved in a war you both knew would soon break out, and if you knew that he would, in fact, be safely out of the country before it started, you would assure him by telling him, “Don’t worry—this war will not affect you.” Only if you knew that he would be present during it would you say, “Don’t worry—this war will not affect you as the kind of disaster it will be for citizens of this country.” In other words, what Paul rather clearly suggests is that the day overtakes both believers and unbelievers, but only for the latter does it come “as a thief”—unexpected and harmful.<sup>30</sup>

A second reason for thinking that believers will be present for the day of the Lord (after the final tribulation) is the close relationship between this text and two gospel passages that encourage watchfulness in view of the *posttribulational* parousia—Matthew 24:42–44 and Luke 21:34–36. The parallels between the latter text and 1 Thessalonians 5:2–6 are particularly compelling—both have as their subject the day, which, it is warned, will come upon those unprepared suddenly and unexpectedly (“like a trap,” Luke 21:34); both emphasize that there will be no escape (cf. Luke 21:35); both encourage believers to watch in light of that coming “day”; and both use the same verb (*epistēmi*, “come upon”) and the same adjective (*aiphnidios*, “suddenly”) about the day (the latter word occurs only in these two passages in biblical Greek).<sup>31</sup> There is every reason for thinking that the same event is depicted in both and, in fact, strong indications that one is dependent on the other. But if Luke 21:34–36 encourages watchfulness in light of the posttribulational coming (as both, e.g., J. Dwight Pentecost and John Walvoord argue<sup>32</sup>), there is every reason to think that 1 Thessalonians 5:2–6 does also.

Finally, the logical connection between Paul’s assertion in 1 Thessalonians 5:4–5 and the following exhortations is also better explained if the Thessalonians are to experience the

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<sup>30</sup> Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair*, 52–53; W. J. Grier, *The Momentous Event: A Discussion of Scripture Teaching on the Second Advent* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1941), 71; Payne, *Imminent Appearing*, 68–69.

<sup>31</sup> For these parallels, see especially Wenham, “Synoptic Apocalypse,” 10; idem, *Paul*, 307–11; Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted*, 192.

<sup>32</sup> *Things to Come*, 161–62; *Rapture Question*, 111–13.

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day. It is not Paul's point to encourage the believers to "watch" for the day so that they might escape it. The verbs Paul employs in his commands (vv. 6, 8) do not connote watching for something, but faithfulness to Christ, as incumbent upon those who belong to the "light" and to the day.<sup>33</sup> Nor can 1 Thessalonians 5:9 be used to argue that Paul promises believers such an escape. Paul never uses "wrath" without qualifiers to denote a period of time, and in view of its contrast with "salvation," it must indicate the condemning judgment of God associated with the day, not the day itself.<sup>34</sup>

To summarize Paul's argument: the salvation to which God has destined the Thessalonians (5:9), and which they already experience (5:5), should act as a stimulus to holy living—holy living that will enable them to avoid experiencing the day in its unexpected and destructive features. In other words, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to live godly lives in order that they might avoid the judgmental aspect of that day—not that they might avoid the day itself. Whether this day includes the final tribulation or, as is more probable, the climactic return of Christ at the end of the final tribulation, believers on earth are clearly involved in it; and only a posttribulational rapture allows for this. Finally, this interpretation provides a coherent explanation of the transition from chapter 4 to chapter 5—whereas Paul has comforted believers about the position of the dead at the parousia in chapter 4, he turns to exhort the living about their responsibilities in light of that parousia in chapter 5.

## 2 Thessalonians 1–2

Second Thessalonians was written by Paul shortly after 1 Thessalonians in order to correct some misapprehensions about eschatology, particularly with respect to the erroneous belief that the end had to occur almost immediately.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Paul in chapter 1 assures the Thessalonians of the certainty of the end, with the judgment it will bring on

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<sup>33</sup> On this meaning of the terms *grēgoreō* ("watch") and *nephō* ("be sober"), see esp. Evald Lövestam, *Spiritual Wakefulness in the New Testament* (Lunds Universitets Årsskrift, n.s., 55; Lund: Gleerup, 1963). The phrase "sons of the day" (v. 5) also probably associates believers with the "day of the Lord," since the eschatological dimensions of the term are to be included here (Lövestam, *Spiritual Wakefulness*, 49–51; Best, *Thessalonians*, 210; Morris, *Thessalonians*, 156). D. E. H. Whiteley, however (*Thessalonians in the Revised Standard Version*, New Clarendon Bible [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979], 78), takes the view that no such eschatological overtones are to be seen in the term.

<sup>34</sup> Cf., e.g., Frame, *Thessalonians*, 188; Best, *Thessalonians*, 216.

<sup>35</sup> I assume the majority view, that 1 Thessalonians was indeed written before 2 Thessalonians (see, e.g., F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, WBC 45 [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982], xli–xliv; contra, e.g., Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 37–44).

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those who are now “distressing” them. Then he seeks to calm their excitement over the nearness of the end in chapter 2.<sup>36</sup>

In 2 Thessalonians 1:5–7 Paul appears to provide strong support for the view that believers will not be raptured until the parousia of Christ at the end of the tribulation. For there can be no doubt that in verses 7–8 Paul depicts this coming in glory, “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.” Yet it is at this time that the believers who are suffering tribulation are given “rest.” In other words, it is only at the posttribulational parousia that believers experience deliverance from the sufferings of this age. Attempts to avoid this conclusion take two forms.

First, it is argued that since the Thessalonians were not in fact delivered at the time of Christ’s return (they died long before it) and their persecutors will likewise not be destroyed at the return (being dead, they will not experience judgment until the conclusion of the millennium), Paul must be saying that “God in His own time will destroy their persecutors.”<sup>37</sup> But not only does this interpretation fail to explain the fact that Paul obviously links both the “rest” and the destruction to “the Revelation of the Lord Jesus” (how can this mean “in God’s own time”?), it overlooks the fact that Paul consistently writes as if the generation in which he lived might be the last. In both 1 Corinthians 15:51 and 1 Thessalonians 4:15, he indicates that the participants in the rapture are “we who don’t sleep/are alive.” Does this mean that Paul cannot be describing the rapture in these texts? Moreover, the eschatological “rest” Paul describes here does come to all believers at the time of Christ’s revelation—for dead saints (including the Thessalonians) through resurrection; for living saints through the rapture. And that Paul associates the destruction of unbelievers with the “revelation” of Christ is likewise no difficulty: Scripture often associates events that will, in fact, be separated by the millennium (see John 5:29).

A second way of avoiding a posttribulation interpretation of these verses is to claim that the “rest” promised to the Thessalonians need not occur at the rapture.<sup>38</sup> While this point must be appreciated—believers who die before the Lord’s return are certainly delivered from earthly trials before the rapture—the clear temporal link between the rest and the “revelation” of Christ cannot be severed. The only satisfactory way of explaining this text is to assume that Paul addresses the Thessalonians as if they would be alive at the

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<sup>36</sup> Johannes Munck, “1 Thess. I. 9–10 and the Missionary Preaching of Paul: Textual Exegesis and Hermeneutical Reflexions,” *NTS* 9 (1962–63): 100.

<sup>37</sup> Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, 123–24.

<sup>38</sup> Allen Beechick, *The Pre-Tribulation Rapture* (Denver: Accent, 1980), 122.

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parousia—and he states that they experience “rest” only at the posttribulational revelation of Christ.

Second Thessalonians 2:1–12 is a minefield of exegetical difficulties. I will not have the space here to comment on them all, far less to “solve” them. Despite these problems, enough about the text is sufficiently clear to provide strong support for the posttribulational rapture position.

Paul’s eschatological teaching in this section is directed against some kind of false teaching that has led the Thessalonians to become “unsettled” and “alarmed” (v. 2). It is not clear whether these words connote an excited, agitated state or a state of alarm and fear.<sup>39</sup> The latter word, however (*throemai*), is used elsewhere in the New Testament only in the Olivet Discourse, where Jesus urges the disciples not to be “alarmed” about “wars and rumors of wars,” because “such things must happen, but the end is still to come” (Matt. 24:6; Mark 13:7). Paul’s point in 2 Thessalonians 2 is roughly similar: he urges the Thessalonians not to become alarmed about “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him” (v. 1), because, he goes on to argue, certain events must take place before the end comes. Paul says that the false teaching was claiming that “the day of the Lord has already come” (v. 2). I argued earlier that “day of the Lord” is essentially equivalent in Paul to the parousia (see v. 1). But how could it be that the Thessalonians were under the impression that the parousia had already occurred? One option is to translate the verb here “is about to come” (see KJV). But this would be an unprecedented translation of this verb in this form.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps, then, the final tribulation *should* be included in the day, and the Thessalonians regarded their extreme sufferings as evidence that they were in it. Their “alarm” may then have been caused by the belief that they had missed the rapture, which they knew to be pretribulational.<sup>41</sup> But the final tribulation can hardly be a part of the “day,” since Paul goes on to argue that the “day” cannot come until events usually associated with tribulation had already transpired. Another option is to think that the false teachers had adopted a “spiritualized” view of eschatological

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<sup>39</sup> The verb translated “unsettled” is from *salueō* and means “shake.” It is usually applied in the New Testament to physical phenomena, but note Acts 17:13, where Luke says that the Jews in Thessalonica were “agitating” the crowds against Paul. The second verb, “alarmed,” translates a form of *throemai*, which means “to be aroused” or “frightened” (BDAG). Many interpreters think that the verbs together connote “a continuous state of nervous excitement and anxiety” (Best, *Thessalonians*, 275), while others think they suggest fear (Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair*, 126–32).

KJV King James Version

<sup>40</sup> Contra the view I adopted in the first edition of this book (and see also Morris, *Thessalonians*, 216–17), the verb Paul uses here, *enistēmi*, seems always to mean “has come” when used in a past tense form (see, e.g., Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 240).

<sup>41</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, n.d.), 115; Hiebert, *Thessalonian Epistles*, 304.

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events, according to which Christ's coming, the resurrection of believers, and the rapture had all already occurred.<sup>42</sup> But it is perhaps likelier that they were being encouraged by the false teaching to think that their suffering meant that the complex of events included in the parousia had already begun (see NLT: "the day of the Lord has already begun"). However we explain this statement, one thing is clear—the Thessalonians had not experienced the rapture, yet they thought themselves to be in the day. How does Paul disabuse them of this notion?

Paul does so by citing events that must occur before that day comes.<sup>43</sup> According to the apostle, there are two of these: the "rebellion" and the revelation of "the man of lawlessness ... the man doomed to destruction" (2 Thess. 2:3). This "rebellion" (*apostasia*) should be understood as a religious rebellion against God, including a departure from the faith of many from within the church itself.<sup>44</sup> The "man of lawlessness" is probably to be identified as the eschatological Antichrist, a figure also described in Revelation 13:1–8 and based on the depiction of the usurper of God in the book of Daniel (Dan. 7:8, 20–25; 11:36–39).<sup>45</sup> Paul claims that this Antichrist 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." This language is very reminiscent of Daniel's prediction

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<sup>42</sup> G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 199–203. NLT New Living Translation

<sup>43</sup> Paul never furnishes an apodosis (a "then" clause) to complete his protasis ("If first the apostasy does not come and the man of lawlessness is not revealed") in v. 3. But there is general agreement that something like "then that day has not come yet" must be supplied (cf. TNIV; NASB; ESV; NLT; and especially the excellent discussion of Best [*Thessalonians*, 280–81]. Best offers a penetrating critique of the novel theory put forth by Charles H. Giblin [*The Threat to Faith: An Exegetical and Theological Re-examination of 2 Thessalonians 2*, AnBib 31 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), 122–35]).

<sup>44</sup> This interpretation of *apostasia* is based on the usage of the term in biblical Greek (Josh. 22:22; 2 Chron. 29:19; Jer. 2:19; Acts 21:21) and on the observation that a religious rebellion was frequently associated with the time of the end (as in Mark 13:6ff.). Cf., e.g., Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 115–16; Desmond Ford, *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979), 201–3; Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 203. A few scholars argue that the word should be translated "departure" and have seen in it a reference to the rapture. See most recently, H. Wayne House, "Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture?" in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Deny (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1995), 261–96; see also E. Schuyler English, *Re-thinking the Rapture* (Traveler's Rest, S.C.: Southern Bible Book House, 1954), 67–71; Kenneth S. Wuest, "The Rapture: Precisely When?" *BSac* 114 (1957): 64–66; Gordon Lewis, "Biblical Evidence for Pretribulationism," *BSac* 125 (1968): 217–18; L. J. Wood, *The Bible and Future Events* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 87–88; James Montgomery Boice, *The Last and Future World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 42–43. But such a translation is virtually impossible. See the full discussion in Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 114–18; and note that pretribulationist advocates Hiebert (*Thessalonian Epistles*, 305–6) and Walvoord (*Blessed Hope*, 135) also dismiss this view.

<sup>45</sup> Ford (*Abomination*, 199–200, 207) provides a good discussion of the parallels between Daniel and the portrayal of Antichrist in the New Testament.

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of an antigodly king who will “exalt and magnify himself above every god” (11:36). This same king, Daniel also says, will “with flattery” “corrupt those who have violated the covenant” (11:32)—and this sounds a lot like the “rebellion” Paul alludes to. Paul’s prediction here, then, appears to reflect a reading of Daniel that sees in his language a reference to an end-time antigodly leader. Paul’s claim that this last and greatest “antichrist” will take his seat in the temple may suggest that this Antichrist will work from within the church, since the New Testament suggests that the presence of God that was formerly found in the temple is now found in the new covenant community, the body of Christ.<sup>46</sup> But it is also possible that Paul envisages the Antichrist revealing himself in a literal Jerusalem temple.

What is crucial to notice in Paul’s response to the Thessalonians’ unrest is that he does not say anything about the rapture as a necessary antecedent to the day. If the Thessalonians were to be raptured before the day, we would expect Paul to say something like, “You know that your present sufferings cannot represent the final tribulation, because you will be taken to heaven before then.”<sup>47</sup> To use the illustration introduced earlier, if you knew that your foreign friend was to be safely out of the country by the time war broke out, and if he, in seeing great unrest beginning to happen, thought that he was becoming involved in it, would you calm him by telling him that certain events had to happen before the war without reminding him that he would be safely out of the country when it actually occurred? The fact the Paul points to the nonpresence of an indisputable tribulation event, the revelation of the Antichrist, as evidence that the day has not come, surely implies that believers will see it when it does occur. Furthermore, it cannot be argued in reply that Paul simply assumes the Thessalonians know that the rapture will occur before that day. The fact that the Thessalonians believe themselves to be in the day shows either that they had forgotten or were never taught that the rapture preceded it. In either case, it is difficult to see why Paul would not mention it.

Before leaving this text, one final argument brought against a posttribulational interpretation must be dealt with. It is often argued that the tribulational events described here by Paul cannot transpire until the church is physically removed, because it is the Holy Spirit through the church that now “restrains” the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:6–7). Three points need to be made with reference to this argument. First, it is unlikely that the Holy Spirit is the one whom Paul describes in these verses. There seems to be no reason for using such mysterious language if the Holy Spirit is intended, and it is not probable that

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<sup>46</sup> See esp. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 207–10; idem, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), 269–92.

<sup>47</sup> Although Walvoord (*Blessed Hope*, 118) gives this as essentially Paul’s answer here, there is simply no evidence in the text for such a reference.

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Paul would have spoken of the Spirit as being “taken out of the way.”<sup>48</sup> Neither does the fact that Paul uses both a masculine participle (“he who restrains”) and a neuter participle (“that which restrains”), sometimes adduced in support of this interpretation, favor it. I can find no place in Paul’s writings where he uses a neuter term to designate the Holy Spirit except where it is directly dependent on the term *pneuma* (“Spirit”; the Greek word is neuter). Second, even if the Holy Spirit is intended, there is nothing in the passage that would indicate that his restraining activity must be carried out through the church.<sup>49</sup> Third, and most important, it is improper to base very much on a text that is so notoriously obscure—the verb that Paul uses here (*katechō*) can be translated “hold back” or “hold fast,” “occupy,”<sup>50</sup> and has been understood as signifying, among other things, Rome/the emperor,<sup>51</sup> civil government,<sup>52</sup> God and his power,<sup>53</sup> Michael the archangel,<sup>54</sup> the preaching of the gospel/Paul,<sup>55</sup> Satan,<sup>56</sup> general evil forces,<sup>57</sup> a combination of benevolent forces,<sup>58</sup> the Jewish state and James,<sup>59</sup> or a mythic symbol with no particular content.

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<sup>48</sup> Morris, *Thessalonians*, 228–29. We are assuming, with most commentators, that the subject of the *heōs* clause in v. 7 is the restrainer. It is interesting to note that some of the church fathers already were refuting the view that the restrainer is the Spirit (Rigaux, *Thessaloniciens*, 261).

<sup>49</sup> Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 125–26.

<sup>50</sup> Frame, *Thessalonians*, 259–61; Best, *Thessalonians*, 301; D. W. B. Robinson, “II Thess. 2:6: ‘That which restrains’ or ‘That which holds sway,’ ” *Studia Evangelica* 2, Texte und Untersuchungen 87 (Berlin: Akademie, 1964): 635–38.

<sup>51</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 32, and many other church fathers; Otto Betz, “Der Katechon,” *NTS* 9 (1962–63): 283–85; Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 171–72.

<sup>52</sup> Milligan, *Thessalonians*, 101; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of I and II Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955), 181–82.

<sup>53</sup> Ladd, *Blessed Hope*, 95; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 524–25.

<sup>54</sup> See esp. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair*, 225–49; and also Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 214–17; Orchard, “Thessalonians,” 40–41; Rusten, “Revelation,” 449–57; F. Prat, *The Theology of Saint Paul* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1952), 1:80–83.

<sup>55</sup> In the early church Theodoret and Theodore of Mopsuestia; Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), 164–66; Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1959), 36–43; A. L. Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament*, *NovTSup* 13 (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 112–13; J. Christian Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 161.

<sup>56</sup> The view of J. Coppens, according to Giblin (*Threat to Faith*, 14).

<sup>57</sup> Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 252; Leas Sirard, “La Parousie de l’Antichrist, 2 Thess. 2, 3–9,” in *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus 1961*, *AnBib* 17–18 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963), 2:94–99; Giblin, *Threat to Faith*, 164–246.

<sup>58</sup> Ford, *Abomination*, 216–22.

<sup>59</sup> B. B. Warfield, “The Prophecies of St. Paul,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 473–74.

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## *The Olivet Discourse*

Many scholars have claimed that the Olivet Discourse is the most difficult portion of the Gospels to interpret. In investigating this discourse, it will be necessary to confine ourselves to those questions that are of relevance for our present topic: (1) What did the disciples ask? (2) Does the “abomination of desolation” and tribulation mentioned in conjunction with it refer to end-time events? (3) Is Jesus’ end-of-the-age parousia described in Matthew 24:29–31//Mark 13:24–27? (4) Does Matthew 24:31//Mark 13:27 refer to the rapture? (5) To whom is the discourse addressed?

Jesus has just shocked the disciples by predicting the complete destruction of the temple, which they have been admiring (Mark 13:1–2). In response to this, the disciples ask, “When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?” Matthew’s version of the same question shows that the disciples are associating the destruction of the temple with the events of the “end of the age”: “Tell us, when will this happen [the destruction of the temple], and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matt. 24:3). It is probable that the disciples, in keeping with much Jewish eschatological expectation, believed that the close of the age would include the destruction of the temple.<sup>60</sup> The relationship between these two events in Jesus’ answer constitutes one of the great difficulties in the discourse. Traditionally, many evangelicals have viewed the whole of the Olivet Discourse as a prophecy about events that will transpire at the very end of history: Jesus describes the final tribulation, with particular reference to the manifestation of the Antichrist (the “abomination of desolation”) and his climactic return in glory at the end of history. A few interpreters (growing in number) take just the opposite approach: they think that the whole discourse relates to events that took place in the first century. Most interpreters, however, think that some combination of these two approaches is necessary to explain all the data. I will argue for this general approach in what follows and then draw out the significance of my conclusions for the question of the timing of the rapture with respect to the final tribulation.

Jesus’ prediction in Mark 13:14 and Matthew 24:15 that “the abomination that causes desolation” prophesied by Daniel would stand in the “holy place” (that is, the temple) is the best place to gain entry into the discussion of Jesus’ reference in the discourse.<sup>61</sup> Is

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<sup>60</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, “St. Mark 13,” *SJT* 6 and 7 (1953, 1954): 6, 195–96; Lloyd Gaston, *No Stone on Another: Studies in the Significance of the Fall of Jerusalem in the Synoptic Gospels*, NovTSup 23 (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 12.

<sup>61</sup> This phrase is found in similar form in Daniel 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. Of these, Jesus’ use of the term has most in common with 9:27 (Beda Rigaux, “*bdelugma tes eremoseos* Mc. 13, 14; Matt. 24, 15,” *Biblica* 40 [1959]: 678–79; Ford, *Abomination*, 153–54). The phrase is usually taken to indicate a detestable idol that causes religious desecration (Cranfield, “Mark 13,” 298–99; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *A Commentary on Mark*



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Jesus envisaging an event that transpired in AD 70, when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed and desecrated by the armies of Rome? Or is he referring to the end-time Antichrist? Several indications could point to the latter interpretation. First, the phrase “abomination of desolation” clearly alludes to the same prophecies in Daniel that we have just seen Paul citing to describe the end-time Antichrist (in 2 Thess. 2:3–4). Second, Mark (13:14) suggests, by using a masculine participle after the neuter “abomination,” that he is thinking of a person—and, again, the similarities to the Antichrist described in 2 Thessalonians 2 are clear. Third, Jesus’ claim that this “abomination that causes desolation” will come in the context of “days of distress [or tribulation] unequaled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again” (Mark 13:19) points to an end-time event. The strength of this language suggests that only the final tribulation can be in view.<sup>62</sup> This appears to be confirmed by the fact that Jesus goes on to claim (in Matthew’s version) that this tribulation *immediately* precedes the parousia.<sup>63</sup>

On the other hand, several other factors suggest that Jesus associates the “abomination of desolation” with the events of AD 70, when the Romans, in putting down the Jewish rebellion, entered the sanctuary (thus desecrating it) and destroyed much of it. First, and most obviously, Jesus would have to refer to this event if he is being truthful in answering the disciples’ question. They asked when the temple they were looking at would be destroyed (not when some future temple might be destroyed)—and that temple was destroyed in AD 70. Second, Luke’s version of the Olivet Discourse appears to provide strong support for an AD 70 reference. In place of “the abomination of desolation,” he refers to “Jerusalem being surrounded by armies” (21:20). To be sure, this could refer either to AD 70 or to the end of the age. But he goes on to record as a consequence of this event the scattering of the Jewish people among the Gentiles (21:24)—and this only makes sense if he refers to AD 70.<sup>64</sup> Third, the warnings that Jesus issues on the basis of the

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13 [London: Macmillan, 1957], 55), but it may be that connotations of physical destruction should not be eliminated (Rudolf Pesch, *Naherwartungen: Tradition und Redaktion in Mk 13*, KBANT [Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1968], 142; Ford, *Abomination*, 167–68).

<sup>62</sup> John F. Walvoord, “Christ’s Olivet Discourse on the End of the Age,” *BSac* 128 (1971): 208. It is sometimes argued that this phraseology is proverbial and need not be taken in its literal force (Beasley-Murray, *Commentary*, 78).

<sup>63</sup> Contra Alfred Plummer (*An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* [London: Robert Scott, 1915], 335), Matthew’s “immediately” (*eutheōs*, 24:29) cannot be deprived of its temporal force in light of Matthean usage. Nor can “in these days” in Mark 13:27 be taken as a general expression for eschatological time (contra Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark* [1913; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997], 310–11; William Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 474).

<sup>64</sup> Luke seems to distinguish carefully between AD 70 and the time of the end; many would attribute vv. 8–24 to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and vv. 25ff. to the end (cf. M. J. Lagrange, *L’Evangile selon*

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presence of the “abomination” in both Mark and Matthew seem to envisage a local situation: “Let those who are in Judea flee” (Matt. 24:16; Mark 13:14); “Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath” (Matt. 24:20). And other warnings in this context do not fit with the magnitude of judgment that will come in the end time. Why would people faced with the universal disasters of the final tribulation have to worry about whether they were on the housetop or in a field when they took place (see Matt. 24:17–19; Mark 13:15–18)? Finally, a reference to AD 70 helps explain Jesus’ otherwise puzzling and problematic claim in Matthew 24:34 and Mark 13:30 that “this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” Attempts to make “this generation” mean something other than “those alive with me right now” are unconvincing, so Jesus must be claiming that events he has just described will take place within forty years or so of his speaking. If the first part of the discourse (Mark 13:5–23) describes events that took place before AD 70, his claim would be quite understandable.

Of course, this same point is used to argue that all of the events Jesus narrates in the discourse must have taken place before AD 70—including the parousia of Matthew 24:30//Mark 13:26. *Parousia*, it is argued, need not refer to the final “coming” of Christ in glory. It can refer to any “coming” or “appearance” of Jesus—and there are suggestions in the New Testament that the Roman destruction of Jerusalem was seen by early Christians as a “coming” of Christ in judgment on the city and on Israel.<sup>65</sup> But this view—the so-called “preterist” view—has some serious problems. First, the language of Jesus’ “coming” with clouds (dependent on Dan. 7:13) probably always has reference to the parousia in the New Testament.<sup>66</sup> Second, the cosmic signs of Mark 13:24–25 are held by the author of Revelation to be future (6:14–17)—and he is probably writing *after* AD 70. Third, and perhaps most important, is the virtually technical status that the word *parousia* had attained by the time Matthew and Mark wrote their gospels. This word, used in Matthew 24:27, 37, and 39, always, when it is modified by “Christ,” refers to the climactic

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*Saint Luc*, 6th ed. [Paris: Gabalda, 1941], 521; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978], 937).

<sup>65</sup> See esp. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 339–66; and also R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 497–503; idem, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1971), 228–39; Marcellus J. Kik, *The Eschatology of Victory* (Nutley, N.J.: Reformed, 1971), 60–144; R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 223–27; A. Feuillet, “Le discours de Jesus sur la ruine du temple d’après Marc XIII et Luc XXI:5–36,” *Revue Biblique* 55 (1948): 481–502; 56 (1949): 61–92.

<sup>66</sup> I say “probably,” because Mark 14:62 is debated, many interpreters thinking that it refers to Jesus’ vindication before the Father. I think it probably refers to the parousia.

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coming of Christ in glory at the end of history in the New Testament (1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:1, 8; James 5:7, 8; 2 Peter 1:16; 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28).<sup>67</sup>

If, then, the end-time parousia is indeed described in Matthew 24:29–31//Mark 13:24–27, then “all these things” in Matthew 24:34//Mark 13:30 will have to refer to events in the discourse preceding the return of Christ in glory. And, in fact, this makes very good contextual sense. For “these things” and “all these things” are used in the immediately preceding verse (Mark 13:29//Matt. 24:33) to describe events that take place before the parousia: when we see “all these things,” says Jesus, we will know that “it [or he] is near, right at the door.” In other words, Jesus here suggests that he has described a series of events that will take place within “this generation,” events that, having transpired, will indicate that the coming of Christ is “imminent.”<sup>68</sup>

We return, then, to the issue of the “abomination of desolation.” The evidence of the text appears to point in two directions: to an end-time event and to AD 70. One attractive option is to think that Jesus “telescopes” AD 70 and the end of the age in a manner reminiscent of the prophets, who frequently looked at the end of the age through more immediate historical events.<sup>69</sup> Others, naturally, argue that the reference here must be to the very end of history.<sup>70</sup> But I think the indications of an AD 70 reference (not least because of the Lukan parallel) are more compelling. I therefore suggest that Matthew 24:4–28//Mark 13:5–23 describes the entirety of the church age, which will be marked by great tribulation and by the important event of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem (= “the abomination that causes desolation”) in AD 70.<sup>71</sup> This must take place, Jesus

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<sup>67</sup> While Wright (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 360–67) thinks that all of Matthew 24/Mark 13 has an immediate historical reference, France (*Mark*, 541) thinks that Mark 13:5–31 is about the destruction of the temple while Mark 13:32–37 is about the parousia. I agree with France, but it seems difficult to think that a change in subject of this sort takes place between vv. 31 and 32. And note that in the comparable material in Matthew, “coming” (*parousia*) is used in both parts of the discourse (24:27, 37, 39).

<sup>68</sup> See, e.g., C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, CGTC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 407–8; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 363–64; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33B (Dallas: Word, 1995), 715.

<sup>69</sup> E.g., Cranfield, *Mark*, 402; Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 198–99; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 399–400; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 846–47.

<sup>70</sup> E.g., Edwards, *Mark*, 395–400; Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, WBC 34B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 316–20.

<sup>71</sup> D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, EBC, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:491–95; David Wenham, *The Rediscovery of Jesus’ Eschatological Discourse*, Gospel Perspectives 4 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984); Blomberg, *Matthew*, 352–60; Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 684–85; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993), 377–434. For a useful survey of interpretations, see David Turner, “The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1–41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments,” *GTJ* 10 (1989): 3–27.

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suggests, before his parousia; and once it has taken place, his parousia is “near.” Jesus may refer to the greatest distress of all time in this context (Matt. 24:21//Mark 13:19) as a hyperbolic way of emphasizing the suffering that the Roman destruction of the city would cause. But it is perhaps likelier that he refers to the sufferings of God’s people throughout the “church age.” Christ’s appearance to establish God’s kingdom causes an intensification in the age-old conflict between good and evil. Christ’s followers must be prepared to suffer severely for their allegiance to the one who was rejected by the world and its rulers. To fully appreciate the strength of this view, one must remember the important point about the New Testament eschatological perspective that I made earlier: the New Testament writers are not thinking in terms of long ages of history or of an ordinary “church age” followed by the “end time.” No, for the New Testament writers, all the church age, uncertain in length, is the “end time.” From this vantage point, it makes perfect sense to see Jesus warning his followers about the suffering and challenges they will face in these “last days” that his death and resurrection are initiating. I therefore slightly favor this “sequential” way of reading the Olivet Discourse. But, for our purposes, it does not matter a great deal whether we adopt this “sequential” reading or a “telescoping” reading.

In typical New Testament fashion, Jesus urges his followers to prepare for the suffering that lies ahead in view of their vindication at the time of his own parousia. He himself knows neither the day nor the hour when the parousia will take place (Matt. 24:36). He therefore addresses his followers as if they themselves might be present for all climactic eschatological events. Of course, they were not. Contrary to many New Testament scholars, this does not mean that Jesus spoke erroneously: he does not predict that they will be present for the eschatological climax but simply suggests that they might be. This way of presenting the parousia, as an event that could take place in any generation (what we have called “imminence” above), is found throughout the New Testament.

The fact that the people whom Jesus immediately addresses—the “Twelve”—were not present for all the events Jesus describes does not mean that his teaching loses its relevance. In typical gospel fashion, the disciples are addressed not only in their own persons but also as representative of others to come after them. And it is just at this point that the relevance of our discussion of the Olivet Discourse for the issue of the timing of the rapture becomes apparent. The “Twelve” in the Gospels are very commonly addressed as representative of all disciples. When Jesus speaks to them in the Olivet Discourse, we therefore naturally assume that they stand for Christians of every age. But, if this is so, the implication of the discourse is that Christians will be present during the final tribulation. And this is true on whatever view of the structure of the discourse we adopt. If Jesus is referring to the events of the end in Mark 13:14 and parallels, then he implies that disciples will be present to see the Antichrist reveal himself in the temple:

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Jesus says, “When *you* see ‘the abomination that causes desolation’ standing where it does not belong ...” (Mark. 13:14, emphasis added). This revelation of the Antichrist is usually seen to be a tribulational event; and disciples—“you”—will be present to see it. If, on the other hand, we adopt the “sequential” view (which I favor), then Jesus implies that disciples will be present throughout the “days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now” (Mark 13:19). I take this to refer to the entire “church age,” the “last days” when resistance to God and his people is particularly intense.<sup>72</sup> But the point is that the final tribulation must surely be included in this period of time—and disciples are, again, present during it.

One way of avoiding this conclusion is to argue that the disciples are addressed in the Olivet Discourse as representatives of Israel rather than as representatives of the church. And this is exactly what some pretribulational advocates claim.<sup>73</sup> Validation of this claim requires some very strong evidence indeed. For it is surely a legitimate assumption to think that the disciples in the Gospels are generally representative of *all* disciples—or else why do we accept Jesus’ teaching as relevant for the church in general? Only if the context clearly necessitates a restriction should any narrowing of the audience be suggested. Are there clear indications in the Olivet Discourse that Jesus did not intend his words to apply to all the people of God, including the church?

Perhaps the strongest reason for thinking that Jesus is viewing the disciples in terms of their ethnic, Jewish identity, is the local and Jewish-oriented nature of the warnings in Matthew 24:16, 20. In response to the appearance of “the abomination that causes desolation,” Jesus says, “those who are in Judea” are to flee to the mountains; and he urges his followers to pray that their flight will not be on the Sabbath. (Mark includes the former warning [13:14] but not the latter one.) As I suggested above, these references do, indeed, suggest that a local situation may be in view and that it affects Jews (or early Jewish-Christians) in particular. Pretribulational advocates would presumably argue that Jesus is referring to Jews who are converted during the final tribulation. And this would possibly explain why Jesus can call them “the elect” in Matthew 24:22—for the language of “elect” is consistently applied to Christians in the New Testament. At the same time, as I also suggested above, it would seem unusual to portray the events of the final tribulation—with its cosmic scope—in such local terms. Nor does it by any means require

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<sup>72</sup> Brian Pitre argues that the abomination of desolation signals the shift from the preliminary messianic tribulation to the climactic “great tribulation” (a distinction found also, he argues, in Jewish sources) (*Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile: Restoration Eschatology and the Origin of the Atonement* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 252–53, and 41–130, with summary on 129).

<sup>73</sup> Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, 86–87; Stanley D. Toussaint, “Are the Church and the Rapture in Matthew 24?” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Deny (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1995), 242–43.

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that the disciples throughout this text are being addressed as Jews rather than as disciples in general. In my view, Jesus' focus is local and Jewish in these warnings because he is predicting a local outrage—the entrance of the pagan Romans into the Jerusalem temple—and, because of its location, it will affect Jewish Christians. It is interesting in this respect, though by no means conclusive, that the Christian historian Eusebius notes that Jewish believers in Judea did, indeed, flee to the mountains as the Romans drew near to Jerusalem.<sup>74</sup>

Walvoord, for instance, also argues that the nature of the question in Matthew 24 excludes a reference to the church because the disciples were asking about the coming of the millennial kingdom. There are some real difficulties with this argument, however. First, it apparently demands that Jesus answered a different question in Mark and Luke than he did in Matthew. But where is the indication in the text of such a difference? The question relating to the temple is identical—word for word—in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Second, this view assumes that Jesus answered the question about the destruction of the temple and the question about the kingdom in virtually identical discourses. Doesn't this degree of resemblance indicate that it is improper to separate them in the way Walvoord suggests? Third, Walvoord claims that the disciples asked about the coming of the millennial kingdom, which has no relevance for the church. Not only is there no indication in the disciples' question or in Jesus' answer that the millennial kingdom is the topic, but Jesus in Matthew 28:20 promises the disciples that he will be with them "to the very end of the age"—and this is the same phrase used in the disciples' question in Matthew 24:3. It is difficult to see why the parousia of Christ and the consummation of the age would not matter to the church.

On the other hand, there are a number of indications that, taken together, make it clear that Jesus addressed the disciples as representative of *all* believers (we do not want to exclude Israel, but to include the church). First, the depiction of the end-time events in Matthew 24–25 is clearly parallel to the description of the parousia found in Paul's epistles, directed to the church. Some of these have already been noted, but it will be helpful to set them out in parallel columns.

Particular attention should be directed to the obvious parallels between the Olivet Discourse and both 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 (the parousia and the rapture) and 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 (the parousia and the judgment on the wicked)—in fact, there are closer parallels to 1 Thessalonians 4 than to 2 Thessalonians 2. Paul clearly describes in these two passages what Jesus depicts as one event<sup>75</sup>—showing that it is illegitimate to

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<sup>74</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.5.3.

<sup>75</sup> Beechick, recognizing the impact of these parallels with Paul, suggests that Jesus describes both the pretribulational *and* posttribulational parousia in the Olivet Discourse (*Rapture*, 233–63). But this

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separate the parousia of 1 Thessalonians 4 and the parousia of 2 Thessalonians 2 in time and making it overwhelmingly probable that Jesus addresses the church in the Olivet Discourse. For surely, if Paul addresses the church in the Thessalonian epistles, it is obvious that Jesus, who says virtually the same thing, is also addressing the church.

Another reason for thinking that the church cannot be excluded from that group represented by the disciples has to do with the nature of the exhortations addressed to the disciples at the end of the discourse. Matthew 24 describes the situation that will exist at the same time of the parousia of the Son of Man (certainly the posttribulational parousia) that has just been described. Yet the same exhortations appear in other contexts in the Gospels where it seems obvious that the disciples as representatives of the church are addressed (cf. Luke 12:39–46; 19:11–27). Furthermore, the same command addressed to the disciples in Matthew 24–25, “Watch!” (*grēgoreō*), is addressed to Christians elsewhere in the New Testament.

| <b>OLIVET DISCOURSE</b> |  |                             |
|-------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| <i>(Matthew)</i>        | EVENT  | PAUL                        |
| 24:5                    | warning about deception  | 2 Thess. 2:2                |
| 24:5, 11, 24            | lawlessness, delusion of the nonelect, signs and wonders                             | 2 Thess. 2:6–11             |
| 24:12                   | apostasy   | 2 Thess. 2:3                |
| 24:15                   | disturbance in the temple  | 2 Thess. 2:4                |
| 24:21–22                | tribulation preceding the end  | 2 Thess. 1:6–10             |
| 24:30–31                | parousia of Christ on clouds at the time of trumpet blast with angelic accompaniment | 1 Thess. 4:14–16            |
| 24:30–31                | coming of Christ in power  | 2 Thess. 2:8                |
| 24:31                   | gathering of believers   | 1 Thess. 4:16; 2 Thess. 2:1 |

explanation does not do justice to the clear temporal indicators in the discourse—the parousia occurs only *after* the tribulation.

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|                   |                          |                |
|-------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| 24:36, 42, 44, 50 | unexpected and uncertain | 1 Thess. 5:1–4 |
| 25:4              | exhortation to watch     | 1 Thess. 5:6–8 |

The inclusion of the church in the end events depicted in the Olivet Discourse would be conclusively proven if a reference to the rapture were found in it. There is some reason for finding such a reference in two places. As an event that transpires at the time of the parousia, Jesus describes a gathering of the saints “from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (Matt. 24:31; cf. Mark 13:27). This “gathering” takes place at the sounding of “a great trumpet” — a feature that Paul mentions in both of his presentations of the rapture (1 Cor. 15:51–52; 1 Thess. 4:16–17). Second, the verb “gather” that is used here (*episyngō*) is employed in its noun form to depict the rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:1. Since the verb and noun *together* occur only nine times in the New Testament and there are so many other parallels between 2 Thessalonians 2 and the Olivet Discourse, there is good reason to accord significance to this verbal contact. But it is probable that the “gathering” includes more than the rapture—inasmuch as the description seems to envision a great coming together of *all* God’s saints, it is likely that the resurrection of the righteous is included also. Thus Jesus would be depicting the great, final gathering of all saints—the dead through resurrection, the living through the rapture.<sup>76</sup> In a manner typical of the New Testament, Jesus takes the prophetic depiction of the posttribulational regathering of Israel (cf. Deut. 30:4; Isa. 27:12–13; 43:5–7; Zech. 2:6–13) and applies it to *all* the people of God.<sup>77</sup>

A second text that may refer to the rapture is the reference in Matthew 24:40–41 (parallel in Luke 17:34–35) to the “taking” of one in contrast to the “leaving” of another. It may be that the one “taken” is taken in judgment while the one left is allowed to enter the kingdom.<sup>78</sup> But the verb for “taking” is used of the rapture in John 14:3 (although, to be sure, it is also used in other ways), and it is significant that the verb for “take” in judgment in Matthew 24:39 is different than the one used in verses 40–41. And the analogy to the flood may suggest that just as Noah was saved by being taken away from the scene of

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<sup>76</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Commentary*, 93. Walvoord’s view, that this text refers to the gathering of peoples into the millennial kingdom (“Olivet Discourse,” 326) is adequate as far as it goes but fails to account for the parallels with Paul’s depiction of the rapture. Blomberg (*Matthew*, 363) doubts that there is any reference to the rapture.

<sup>77</sup> Feuillet, “Le discours de Jésus,” 75–78; Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted*, 158; Lane, *Mark*, 416–71.

<sup>78</sup> Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, 89–90.



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judgment, so believers at the parousia will be taken away, through the rapture, from the scene of judgment.<sup>79</sup>

I therefore conclude that Jesus in the Olivet Discourse is addressing his disciples as representatives of all believers. This leads necessarily to a posttribulational location of the rapture, since those addressed in the discourse are indisputably said to be on the earth until the posttribulational parousia.

## *Revelation*

With the concentration on the events of the end found in Revelation, we would expect that here, if anywhere, we could find clear evidence for the relationship of the final tribulation to the rapture. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Many would argue, in fact, that the rapture is never even mentioned in Revelation; all would agree that it is not described in direct temporal association with the tribulation. Therefore, evidence for the topic before us comes from three sources: promises and warnings made to the seven churches, specific texts in which the rapture may be indicated, and the descriptions of the saints who experience the final tribulation.

Before tackling these specific issues, however, a general orientation to the focus of Revelation is necessary. Interpreters generally speak of four general directions in the interpretation of the book as whole: (1) the “futurist,” which tends to view everything in chapters 6 and following as referring to the very end of history; (2) the “preterist,” which views the material in the book as a whole as directed to the immediate first-century situation of John’s readers; (3) the “historicist,” which posits a kind of chronological historical summary from John’s day to the parousia; and (4) the “idealist,” which avoids assigning specific referents to John’s visionary symbols. Most contemporary interpreters of Revelation combine two or more of these perspectives, and I (though by no means an expert on the book) tend to agree. The idealist approach rightly stresses the hortatory purpose of the book, a point that is too easily lost in discussions of the details of the visions. John seeks to encourage and strengthen first-century persecuted believers by reminding them of God’s sovereignty and by giving them, through his visions, a richly detailed picture of how God will certainly manifest that sovereignty in the events of history. Particularly important for our purposes, however, is the debate between the “preterist” and the “futurist” models. I would hesitantly suggest that this debate is to some extent misguided and perhaps not even necessary. I return to the fundamental point about New Testament eschatology that I made at the beginning of this essay. The

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<sup>79</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 720; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 668; Alan Hugh McNeile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1928), 357; Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 137–38.

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New Testament writers were convinced that they were already living in the “last days” and that the parousia and associated events could be occurring at any time. In at least one important sense, from this perspective, the difference between “preterist” and “futurist” approaches becomes somewhat meaningless. John’s visions relate both to first-century realities and to the end of the age—with John, like Jesus, not being able to distinguish clearly between the two. As we look at specific texts and issues in Revelation, then, we will work from this “both/and” perspective rather than from an “either/or” perspective.

Although attention is often given exclusively to Christ’s promise to the Philadelphian church in 3:10, there are, in fact, three other texts in Revelation 2–3 in which related promises and warnings are given. In the letter to the church of Smyrna, Christ warns the believers that they can expect the tribulation (*thlipsis*) for ten days (2:10). While it is probable that this is not referring to the final tribulation, it should be noted that believers are promised persecution and possible death. Similar to this verse is 2:22, only in this case those who engage in Jezebel’s sin are promised “great tribulation” (*thlipsin megalēn*; my translation). The lack of an article in this phrase suggests a reference to intense suffering in a general sense: see TNIV, “will ... suffer intensely.” Third, Christ exhorts the church at Sardis to repent and warns: “But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you” (3:3). The similarity between this language and 1 Thessalonians 5 and Jesus’ warnings about his posttribulational coming in Matthew 24:42–44—all three passages have “as a thief,” “watch” (*grēgoreō*), and the note of uncertainty—suggests that the church at Smyrna has exactly the same need as those addressed in Jesus’ parable and in Paul’s letter: to watch lest the coming of Christ in glory take them by surprise.<sup>80</sup> But this, of course, assumes that they will not be raptured previously.

Finally, we must consider that much-debated promise of Christ in Revelation 3:10: “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test those who live on the earth.” It is probable that the reference is to the final tribulation,<sup>81</sup> and all agree that the Philadelphian church is promised protection from it. The question is how: through physical removal in a pretribulational or midtribulational rapture or through divine safekeeping during the

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TNIV Today’s New International Version

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Rusten, “Revelation,” 204–5. Walvoord gives no reason for his assertion that this language should not here be applied to the parousia (John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* [Chicago: Moody, 1966], 81). Nor is it legitimate to confine the warning to unbelievers only (contra Beechick, *Rapture*, 172–73).

<sup>81</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 192–93; Beale, *Revelation*, 289–90. David Aune, however (*Revelation 1–5*, WBC 52 [Dallas: Word, 1997], 240), argues that the promise is for the Philadelphian church only, while Rusten (“Revelation,” 216–19) thinks of the period following the parousia, and Payne of a historical period of suffering (*Imminent Appearing*, 78–79).

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period of distress? The crucial language is the sequence “keep ... from” (*tērēsō ek*). The nearest parallel to this phraseology (and the only other place in biblical Greek where *tērēō* and *ek* are used together) is John 17:15—“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from (*tērēsēs autous ek*) the evil one.” Here it seems clear that Jesus prays for the disciples’ preservation from the power of Satan, even though they remain *in* the “world,” the sphere of Satan’s activity (cf. 1 John 5:19).<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, it is helpful to note that in only three other verses in the New Testament does *tērēō* (“keep”) have God or Christ as its subject and believers as its object—John 17:11, 12, 15. In each case, spiritual preservation is clearly intended. With these parallels in mind, it seems best to think that in Revelation 3:10 Christ promises the church at Philadelphia that it will be spiritually protected from “the hour of trial.”<sup>83</sup> In this interpretation, *ek*, “out of,” would denote, as it seems to in John 17:15, separation. That this spiritual preservation is to be accomplished through physical removal is not indicated, and had John intended physical removal, there were other ways of saying so that would have made it more obvious.<sup>84</sup> It is perhaps likelier that, as in John 17:15, believers are physically in the sphere of that from which they are protected.<sup>85</sup> But it must be said that neither view, nor any other that has been proposed, can be conclusively established. We must conclude that Revelation 3:10 neither offers clear-cut evidence for or against a posttribulational rapture.

Turning now to texts that may indicate the time of the rapture, we can rather quickly dismiss 4:1. The command to John to “come up here” (to heaven) is manifestly intended to suggest a visionary experience that John has while still in the body on the island of

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<sup>82</sup> In light of Jesus’ explicit assertion in the same verse that the disciples will remain in the world, it is difficult to see how John 17:15 could indicate noncontact with the “Evil One.” And there is no indication that the spiritual realm of Satan is intended (contra Jeffrey L. Townsend, “The Rapture in Revelation 3:10,” *BSac* 137 1980. : 258–59).

<sup>83</sup> The objection to this general interpretation to the effect that the suffering and even death of God’s people during the final tribulation is hardly compatible with this promise of “protection” (e.g., Jeffrey L. Townsend, “The Rapture in Revelation 3:10,” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Deny (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1995), 368–69) is easily met: the promise is not physical preservation but spiritual preservation. Or are we to suppose that God grants to the saints at the very end of history a protection from physical harm that he has not given to his saints throughout history?

<sup>84</sup> E.g., the combination *airō ek*, used in John 17:15, would have plainly indicated “take out of.”

<sup>85</sup> The combination of *tērēō* (“keep”) and *ek* is quite rare, but similar language in the LXX and classical Greek tend to confirm this interpretation. See, e.g., Prov. 7:5: “They will keep you from [*tērēsē apo*] the adulterous woman.” LSJ mentions a somewhat amusing possible parallel: *terein apo tou pyros*, “protect them from the fire, i.e., cook them slowly (*Bilabel Opsart*, p. 10).” Is John saying that believers will be “cooked slowly” during the final tribulation? For this general interpretation of Rev. 3:10, see, e.g., Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 240; Beale, *Revelation*, 290–92; Ben Witherington III, *Revelation*, NCB (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 106–7; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, NCB (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1974), 101; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 119; Schuyler Brown, “‘The Hour of Trial’ (Rev. 3:10),” *JBL* 85 (1966): 310.

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Patmos. As Walvoord rightly says, "There is no authority for connecting the Rapture with this expression."<sup>86</sup>

Of more significance is the depiction of events in chapter 11. Although there are many details that are obscure in this chapter, it seems reasonably clear that 11:11–12 describes a resurrection of the two witnesses. Does this resurrection have anything to do with the rapture? The fact that the two are said to go up "in a cloud" may suggest this, for clouds are consistently mentioned in descriptions of the rapture (cf. Matt. 24:30; Acts 1:9; 1 Thess. 4:17; Rev. 14:14). And, as elsewhere when the rapture is mentioned, a trumpet is found in this text (11:15). These indications are not, however, conclusive, and a connection between this event and the rapture and final resurrection of believers remains uncertain.<sup>87</sup> The most we can do, then, is to note the possible significance of this episode for the timing of the rapture. In this regard, there are many indications that strongly suggest that the very end of the final tribulation is reached in 11:11–19. The "great earthquake" that is said to take place immediately after the resurrection of the witnesses (11:13) is mentioned in only two other verses in Revelation, both of which describe the end—6:12 and 16:18. No one doubts that 16:18 occurs in a posttribulational setting, but it may be necessary to point out that 6:12–17, the sixth seal, also almost certainly depicts the end. John refers here to a "great earthquake," to the sun turning "black like sackcloth," to the moon being turned "blood red," to stars falling to earth, to the sky receding "like a scroll," and to "every mountain and island" being "removed from its place." The language, of course, is standard Old Testament apocalyptic imagery, and it need not refer to literal cosmic disasters. But the application of this imagery to events of the "day of the Lord" in the Old Testament and to Jesus' parousia in the New (e.g., Matt. 24:29–30) is telling. As G. R. Beasley-Murray says, "This language permits one interpretation alone: the last day has come."<sup>88</sup>

In addition to the "great earthquake," two other factors also point to the time of the final tribulation. The witnesses prophesy for forty-two months (11:2) and then lie in death for "three and a half days" (11:9). If the former reference is to the first half of the final tribulation period, the second reference could indicate the second half. But it must be admitted that this is far from certain. At the blowing of the seventh trumpet, there can be little doubt that the end is reached; the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of Christ (11:15), the Lord begins his reign (11:17), the time for his wrath and for judging

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<sup>86</sup> Walvoord, *Revelation*, 103.

<sup>87</sup> Norman B. Harrison (*The End: Re-thinking the Revelation* [Minneapolis: The Harrison Services, 1941], 116–21) argues that the rapture of the church is indicated here and that the time is the middle of Daniel's seventieth week. Among those who doubt a reference to the rapture of the church or the final resurrection of the righteous are, e.g., Osborne, *Revelation*, 432; Beale, *Revelation*, 597.

<sup>88</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 30–31.

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and rewarding comes (11:18), and the heavenly temple is open. If the seventh trumpet is chronologically related to the resurrection of the witnesses, then it is rather clear that the resurrection is posttribulational.

While it is therefore probable that the resurrection of the two witnesses is posttribulational, this would have decisive bearing on the question of the time of the rapture only if it could be shown that the witnesses represent the church. But this is not clear, and the most that can be said is that this verse could be suggestive if other similar indications are found.

In one of a series of visions that occurs between the depiction of the trumpets and the bowls, John sees “one like a son of man” seated on a cloud. He descends to “harvest the earth” (14:14–16). That the parousia is portrayed here is probable in light of the references to “son of man” and “clouds.”<sup>89</sup> But can the harvesting of the earth in verses 15–16 include the rapture? This may be the case—Jesus uses the image of harvesting to describe the gathering of God’s people into the kingdom (Matt. 13:30). Verses 17–20 would then be a description of the judgment of God on unbelievers. The precise reference in the imagery of the harvest is not altogether clear, however. Scholars debate whether the first harvest is solely for the righteous,<sup>90</sup> solely for the wicked,<sup>91</sup> or includes both.<sup>92</sup> However, it seems difficult to exclude the saints from this first harvesting, which, unlike the second, has no reference to God’s wrath. Therefore, if one holds that the church is addressed in these chapters of Revelation, the rapture would almost certainly be included as an aspect of this great ingathering of the saints at the end.

A final text that may indicate the time of the rapture is Revelation 20:4, in which John describes the “first resurrection.” The participants in this resurrection are not specifically named—there is no expressed subject of the third person plural verb *ezēsan* (“they come to life”). While some would want to confine the participants to the martyrs specifically mentioned in verse 4,<sup>93</sup> there are good reasons for including more than the martyrs in this resurrection.<sup>94</sup> First, in addition to the martyrs, verse 4 also describes those who sit on the

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<sup>89</sup> G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, HNTC (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 190; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 228; Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 83–84.

<sup>90</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 552; Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (1911; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 189–90; Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 83–88; Rusten, “Revelation,” 516–21.

<sup>91</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 770–72; David Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, WBC 52B (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 801–3; Witherington, *Revelation*, 196; Walvoord, *Revelation*, 221–22.

<sup>92</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 228; Mounce, *Revelation*, 279–80; Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (1919; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 662.

<sup>93</sup> Walvoord, *Revelation*, 296–97; Mounce, *Revelation*, 355–56.

<sup>94</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 999–1000. Osborne thinks the reference is specifically to the martyrs but, by synecdoche, includes all the saints (*Revelation*, 704–5).

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thrones and to whom judgment is given—the syntax clearly suggests that this is a group different from the martyrs.<sup>95</sup> Second, those who come to life are “priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him” (v. 6), and Revelation 5:9–10 stresses the fact that this group will include people “from every tribe and language and people and nation.” If, as is clear, the group in 5:9–10 includes the church, it is probably not legitimate to exclude the church in 20:4. Third, John describes only two resurrections in Revelation—the “first,” in verse 4 and the “second,” in which the wicked take part. The first resurrection in verse 4 must certainly have a temporal force, since it is used in conjunction with “second,”<sup>96</sup> and it is not easy to think that John’s language allows for any resurrection preceding this one. Observe also that those who do not participate in the first resurrection are labeled “the rest of the dead”—indication that John includes in his two resurrections *all* the dead. Finally, it is inherently unlikely that John, writing to churches (1:4; 22:16) would omit in his grand portrait of the end one of the most blessed and anticipated aspects of that period—the resurrection of believers.

For these reasons, it is probable that Revelation 20:4 depicts the resurrection of all the righteous dead—including church saints. Since the rapture occurs at the same time as this resurrection, and the first resurrection is clearly posttribulational, the rapture must also be posttribulational.

The third main line of investigation to be pursued in Revelation relates to the identity of the saints whom John sees experiencing the sufferings he describes in chapters 6–16. I do not think that these sufferings refer only to the final tribulation, since, as I have indicated above, it is likely that John is depicting the events of the entire church age, beginning with his own time and culminating in the parousia. But for our purposes, the point is that the final tribulation is certainly included in these sufferings. So our question is this: are believers of this dispensation, church saints, included in this group? A negative answer to this question is often given because the word *ekklēsia* (“church”) does not occur in Revelation 4–19. But this is hardly conclusive—John plainly has in mind the worldwide body of saints in these chapters, and *ekklēsia* is only rarely used in the New Testament to indicate such a universal group. John himself never uses *ekklēsia* other than as a designation of a local body of believers.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, it is important to note that John never

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<sup>95</sup> Since *tas psychas* (“the souls”) is accusative, it is best taken as a second object after *eidon* (Swete, *Revelation*, 262).

<sup>96</sup> Contra Roy L. Aldrich, “Divisions of the First Resurrection,” *BSac* 128 (1971): 117–19.

<sup>97</sup> This is probably why John in Rev. 13:9 omits “to the churches” from the familiar refrain, “He who has ears let him hear ...” (in response to Walvoord, *Revelation*, 103; and Beechick, *Rapture*, 179).

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in chapters 4–19 calls any group in heaven the church.<sup>98</sup> Thus the lack of reference to *ekklēsia* as such cannot decide this issue.

Nor does the structure of Revelation shed light on the question. It has been customary to think that Revelation 1:19 suggests a division of Revelation into three basic parts: “the things you have seen” (= chapter 1), “the things which are” (= Rev. 2–3); and “the things which are about to happen after these things” (4–22; all my translation).<sup>99</sup> There is considerable doubt about whether this is the intention of this verse.<sup>100</sup> But we can still assume that most of the events that John sees in his visions in chapters 6–22 lie in the (indeterminate) future. But it is, to put it mildly, a stretch to suggest that these events must follow the “church age.”

Therefore, it becomes necessary to ask whether we can identify any *particular* group in Revelation 4–19 with the church so as to enable us to determine its location during these events. In the heavenly throne room scene of chapter 4, a group of twenty-four “elders” is described, who surround God’s throne and wear white robes and crowns of gold (v. 4). Most commentators think a superior order of angels is depicted here,<sup>101</sup> but there is some reason to think rather that the “elders” are glorified human beings or at least some kind of heavenly figures who represent people.<sup>102</sup> However, there are sound reasons for refusing to confine the group to church saints alone. In Revelation 5:10 the “elders” address a group that includes the church in the third person—“them.” The wearing of gold crowns is certainly not restricted to the church—in Revelation 9:7 the demonic locusts wear “something like crowns of gold.” Neither do the white robes necessarily suggest a raptured church, since the Laodiceans are told to wear them on earth (3:18). If John’s own symbolism is to be followed, it would seem that the reference to “twenty-four” most naturally suggests the whole people of God, Israel and the church. Thus, in Revelation 21:12–14, the New Jerusalem is pictured as having twelve gates with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and twelve foundations with the names of “the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” But since Daniel 12 clearly shows that Israel is not vindicated until after the tribulation, the presence of the “elders” in heaven in Revelation 4 cannot be used to refute a posttribulational rapture. In this respect, it is significant that the “twenty-four

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<sup>98</sup> Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 78.

<sup>99</sup> E.g., Swete, *Revelation*, 21; Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 34.

<sup>100</sup> See esp. Beale, *Revelation*, 152–70; also Osborne, *Revelation*, 97.

<sup>101</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 228–30; Beale, *Revelation*, 322; Caird, *Revelation*, 63; Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 88; Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 75; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 114; Mounce, *Revelation*, 135.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. especially André Feuillet, “The Twenty-four Elders of the Apocalypse,” in *Johannine Studies* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1965), 185–94; J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, AB (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 72; Larry Hurtado, “Revelation 4–5 in the Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Analogies,” *JSNT* 25 (1985): 105–24; Witherington, *Revelation*, 117.

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elders” are always portrayed in visions of heaven that bear no clear temporal relationship to any earthly event—in a sense it is asking the wrong question to enquire about when these scenes take place.

I think it very likely that the 144,000 of Revelation 7:2–8 is to be identified with the church,<sup>103</sup> but the identification is uncertain enough that I will not make a significant point about it here. Similarly it is likely that the “bride” of the wedding supper in Revelation 19:7–9 must include the church. But this does not indicate that the rapture must have preceded the parousia of 19:11–22, for the visions of 17:1–19:10 appear to give proleptic views of the effects of the parousia. Too many interpreters assume a chronology of events in Revelation that is simply not intended.

Finally, there are some general indications that taken together provide good reason for thinking that the church cannot be eliminated from the body of saints pictured on the earth during the tribulations described in Revelation. The promises and warnings issued to the church saints in Revelation 2–3 are repeated again and again in chapters 4–22, suggesting that the same group is in view throughout. Thus, for example, the church at Smyrna is promised that believers will be spared from “the second death” if they “overcome.” But it is rescue from this “second death” that the first resurrection of Revelation 20:4–6 provides (cf. v. 6). A continual theme in the letters to the churches is the need to “be victorious” (seven times); Revelation 15:2 pictures “those who had been victorious over the beast and his image.” Four times in the letters the need for “endurance” is stressed; the same quality is demanded of the tribulation saints (13:10; 14:12). Other such parallels could be mentioned,<sup>104</sup> and whereas they cannot be considered decisive evidence (the same characteristics can be ascribed to two different groups), they do seem suggestive.

The reference to the parousia in 1:7 is also suggestive. If the church is not to take part in the events of Revelation 4–19, it seems incongruous that John should highlight this parousia, the great climax of these chapters, in the address to the churches (cf. 1:4). In 22:16 Jesus claims that he has sent his angel “to give you [plural!] this testimony for the churches.” It is difficult to see how the chapters about suffering could be a “testimony for the churches” if they are not involved in it.<sup>105</sup> Finally, it simply appears improbable that the event described at greatest length in Revelation (the sufferings of the righteous in chaps. 6–16) would have no direct relevance for those to whom the book is addressed.

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<sup>103</sup> See, e.g., Beale, *Revelation*, 416–23; Osborne, *Revelation*, 310–13.

<sup>104</sup> See Rusten, “Revelation,” 231–53.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 133–34.



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I conclude my discussion of the Revelation by attempting to indicate how my understanding of particular events in the Revelation fits into the overall structure of the book. It seems clear that the seventh in each series of seals, trumpets, and bowls brings us to the time of parousia. Interspersed among these series are visions of the heavenly warfare that is manifested in the tribulational distress (chap. 12), of the satanic power of that time (chap. 13), and of the protection and ultimate vindication of God's people (chaps. 7, 14). Immediately before the parousia we are given a proleptic vision of the judgment and salvation that the heavenly intervention brings (17:1–19:10). Following the parousia are portrayed the events that flow from it. In other words, it is the parousia of Christ that is the focal point of Revelation 6–20—all other events lead up to or follow from it, while periodic visions reveal different aspects of these events. Experts on Revelation disagree quite fundamentally about how to structure all the visions and events in the book. But I think it is tolerably clear, as I have argued above, that the events depicted in chapters 6–16 are not in chronological order.<sup>106</sup> There is simply too much repetition as the visions unfold and too many places where the language seems clearly to be describing parousia events to think that the progression is chronological. John therefore recapitulates the sequence of events to take place during the time of the church's tribulation. The important point for our purposes, then, are the several places where John possibly describes the parousia and associated events: especially 6:12–17; 7:9–17; 11:11–19; 14:1–5, 14–20; 17:1–19:10; 19:11–20:6. These passages describe several different events that occur at Christ's parousia: the deliverance of the saints (7:9–17); the resurrection of the faithful witnesses (11:11–12); the inauguration of the day of God's judgment and his eternal kingdom (11:15–19); the deliverance of the 144,000 (14:1–5); the final gathering of believers and the judgment (14:14–20); the condemnation of the evil world system (chaps. 17–18); the union of God and his saints (19:8–9); the binding of Satan (20:1–3); the first resurrection (20:4–6). All these events occur after the series of tribulations (including, though not limited to the final tribulation) that John describes in such great detail. The rapture must, then, also be posttribulational.

## Conclusion

As a result of this study of key biblical texts, I conclude that the parousia of Christ is a fundamentally single event at which time both living and dead saints of all dispensations go to be with the Lord and the wrath of God falls on unbelievers. The reconstruction of end events based on this hypothesis demonstrates a remarkable degree of consistency as we examine every important New Testament depiction of the end. I set out these events in chart form at the end of this chapter. Not every event is included in every text, of

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<sup>106</sup> Contra, e.g., John McLean, "Chronology and Sequential Structure of John's Revelation," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, 313–51. Van Kampen's assumption, without argument, that Revelation is basically chronological is another major flaw in his eschatological scenario (*The Sign*).

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course, for the different authors chose to mention only those events that were appropriate for their particular argument.<sup>107</sup> The fact that this reconstruction, founded upon a posttribulational rapture, fits every passage so naturally is a potent argument in favor of this position.

## ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

Advocates of the pretribulational rapture have often been influenced in their preference for this position by a theological concern that they think is deeply rooted in Scripture: the strict distinction between Israel and the church. “Progressive” dispensationalism has weakened this concern somewhat, but it is still a matter of importance. For if a disjunction between Israel and the church is assumed, a certain presumption against the posttribulational position exists. It would be inconsistent for the church to be involved in a period of time that, according to the Old Testament, has to do with Israel. However, it is important at the outset to note that a posttribulation rapture is not necessarily excluded by a view that keeps Israel and the church separate. Thus, if Scripture indicates that both Israel and the church are to experience the final tribulation, each could remain on earth during that time as separate entities. Even if it be concluded that the final tribulation is for Israel only, it is not a priori impossible to think that the church will remain on earth during that period without undergoing this climactic affliction.<sup>108</sup> In other words, a total and consistent separation of Israel and the church does not necessarily entail any specific view of the time of the rapture. Since this is the case, even a theological approach that continues to insist on a separation of church and Israel does not necessarily settle the matter of the timing of the rapture.

However, in our survey of this issue, we have encountered a number of texts in which language and prophecies that have reference to Israel in the Old Testament are applied to the church (e.g., the eschatological trumpet, the Antichrist, and most obviously, the tribulation itself). And, I would argue, this fits with the typical way the New Testament writers appropriate the Old Testament. Again and again, language and specific prophecies originally applied to Israel are applied to new covenant believers in general. To be sure, this does not necessarily mean that we can simply merge Israel into the church entirely. For instance, I interpret Romans 11 to teach that the nation of Israel still has its own role to play in the events of salvation history.<sup>109</sup> What is important, I would suggest,

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<sup>107</sup> Most of the differences cited as requiring a distinction between the pretribulational rapture and the posttribulational coming (cf. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 206–7; Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 101–2) are easily explained once this selectivity is recognized. Only if clear contradictions are involved do such differences establish a need to separate in time the parousia events.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 25–28.

<sup>109</sup> See Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 710–32.

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is that we distinguish carefully between prophecies directed to Israel *as a nation* (and which must be fulfilled in a national Israel) and prophecies directed to Israel *as the people of God* (which can be fulfilled in the people of God—a people that includes the church!). It should be noted that such an approach is not allegorical or nonliteral; it simply calls upon the interpreter to recognize the intended scope of any specific prophecy. It is our contention, then, that the final tribulation predicted for Israel by, for example, Daniel, is directed to Israel as the people of God. It can therefore be fulfilled in the people of God, which includes church as well as Israel.

## IMMINENCY

I want finally to revisit a matter that has surfaced several times in my essay: “imminency.” Since a posttribulational view requires that certain events must transpire before the parousia, it is often claimed that posttribulationism necessarily involves the denial of imminency.<sup>110</sup> In order to avoid this conclusion, J. B. Payne seeks to explain most events predicted to take place during the final tribulation in such a way that they could be present (or past) even now.<sup>111</sup> This attempt must, however, be deemed unsuccessful—the nature of some of these events, which are asserted to be recognizable by the saints when they occur (cf. e.g., 2 Thess. 2), precludes the possibility that they are “potentially present.”<sup>112</sup> On the other hand, Robert Gundry, convinced of the posttribulational rapture position, wants to do away with imminency altogether.<sup>113</sup>

However, one very important fact must be recognized: Gundry and Payne both appear to assume that *imminent* must mean “any moment.” This is simply not the case. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as its definition of *imminent*, “impending threateningly, hanging over one’s head; ready to befall or overtake one, close at hand at its incidence; coming on shortly.” Clearly this meaning does not require that there be no intervening events before something said to be imminent transpires. It is quite appropriate to speak of the adjournment of Congress, for instance, as being “imminent” even if some event(s) (such as a crucial roll-call vote) must elapse before it can occur. In this sense, the term can be applied to an event that is near and cannot at this point be accurately dated, but that will not occur until some necessary preliminary events transpire. Defined in this way, the “imminence” of our Lord’s return is a doctrine that should not be jettisoned. It expresses the supremely important conviction that the glorious return of Christ could take place within any limited period of time—that the next few years could witness this grand climax to God’s dealing with the world. Granted that imminence can be defined in this

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<sup>110</sup> Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 168; Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 82.

<sup>111</sup> Payne, *Imminent Appearing*.

<sup>112</sup> See the excellent refutation by Gundry (*Church and Tribulation*, 193–200).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–43.

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way, is this in fact the manner in which the hope of Christ's return is viewed in the New Testament?

The first point to be made is that none of the many words used to describe the nearness of the parousia, or the believer's expectation of it, requires an "any moment" sense of imminency. "Wait for" (*prosdechomai*) (applied to the parousia in Luke 12:36; Titus 2:13; Jude 21 [?]) is used of Paul's expectation of the resurrection of the just and the unjust (Acts 24:15)—yet the latter does not occur until after the millennium. "Eagerly wait" (*apekdechomai*) (used of the parousia in 1 Cor. 1:7), can refer to creation's longing for deliverance (Rom. 8:19), which deliverance comes only after the final tribulation. "Expect" (*ekdechomai*) is applied to the parousia by James in 5:7, but the analogy in the context is with a farmer who waits for his crops—certainly not "any moment." "Look for" (*prosdokaō*) (cf. Matt. 24:50; Luke 12:46 with reference to the second coming) is the word used by Peter to exhort believers to "look for" the new heavens and earth (2 Peter 3:12–14). "Be near" (*engizō*) and the adjectival form, "near" (*engys*), applied to the parousia in numerous texts, are used of Jewish feasts and the seasons of the year (e.g., John 2:13; Matt. 21:34)—and these, obviously, are not "any moment" events. A number of other terms (*grēgoreō*, "watch"; *agrypneō*, "be awake"; *nēphō*, "be sober"; *blepō*, "look at") are used to exhort believers to an attitude of spiritual alertness and moral uprightness in the light of the second coming but imply nothing as to its time.<sup>114</sup>

By themselves, then, these terms do not require that the expectation to which they refer be capable of taking place "at any moment." The context in which they are used is crucial. The most important of these contexts have already been examined, and it will not be necessary to repeat here the evidence that leads us to believe that a posttribulation rapture is consistently indicated. But some additional remarks should perhaps be added with respect to the Olivet Discourse.

In the hortatory section following Christ's depiction of the eschatological tribulation and parousia, Jesus makes three important points: (1) the disciples do not know when the Lord will come (Matt. 24:42, 44; 25:13); (2) they must therefore watch and be prepared (Matt. 24:42, 44, 25:13); and (3) when they see tribulational events, they can know that Christ is near (Matt. 24:32–33). What is particularly crucial to note is that all three statements are made with respect to the same event—the posttribulational coming of Christ. There is no basis for any transition from the posttribulational aspect of the parousia in Matthew 24:32–35 (or –36) to its pretribulational aspect in 24:36–25:46. Therefore all interpreters, whether they believe the discourse is addressed to the church or to Israel, face the difficulty of explaining how an event heralded by specific signs can

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<sup>114</sup> See particularly Gundry (*Church and Tribulation*, 30–32) for studies of these words.

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yet be one of which it is said “no one knows the day and hour.” One solution may be to understand Jesus’ words about the unknown day to apply to every generation except the last—that generation who, when it “sees these things happening,” knows that Christ is at the very gates (Matt. 24:33–34). Or it may be that while the exact time cannot be known, one will be able to know the general time of the advent after the tribulation has begun.<sup>115</sup> And in this regard, the statement about the tribulational days being “shortened” (Matt. 24:22) should be noted; it may be impossible to predict the time of the parousia even after the Antichrist has been revealed.

There are also indications that the New Testament authors could not have intended to portray the parousia as an event that could happen “at any moment.” Jesus frequently suggests that there will be a delay before his return (Matt. 24:45–51; 25:5, 19; Luke 19:11–27). Second, and more important, are specific predictions that could not have been fulfilled if Christ had returned immediately after his ascension. Most notably, in my view, is the desolation of the Jerusalem temple (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14). But there are others. Jesus promises his disciples that they will be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The gospel must be preached to all nations before the end comes (Matt. 24:14). Peter will die a martyr’s death as an old man (John 21:18–19). Paul will preach the gospel in Rome (Acts 23:11; 27:24). It is not sufficient to say that all these could have been fulfilled in the first century and therefore represent no barrier to an “any moment” rapture now.<sup>116</sup> For the point is to determine what the statements about the nearness of the parousia would have meant to those who first heard them. If the original speakers did not intend and the original hearers did not understand a particular statement to require an “any-moment” interpretation, that statement can hardly have such a meaning now.<sup>117</sup> Therefore, it does not appear that the imminence of the return of Christ can be understood in an any-moment sense. (The apostolic fathers also believed in a posttribulational rapture and expected to participate in tribulation events.)<sup>118</sup> It is better to define *imminency* as the possibility of Jesus’ coming for his people at any time—“time” being understood broadly as a short period of time. It is in light of that “anytime” coming that the church is called on to live out its calling. But, it is objected, doesn’t the denial of the any-moment coming of Christ for his church take away the force of those exhortations to right conduct? In negative applications of the return (as when people are warned to be careful lest Christ “surprise” them), an any-moment rapture adds nothing to the associated exhortations, for it is precisely and only those who do not

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<sup>115</sup> Cf. Frost, *Matthew Twenty-four*, 34–36; Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 42–43.

<sup>116</sup> Contra Payne, *Imminent Appearing*, 89–91; Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 150–51.

<sup>117</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology: A Study of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 142; Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 37.

<sup>118</sup> See, e.g., *Epistle of Barnabas* 4; Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 1:4, 1–3. I do not think that Payne (*Imminent Appearing*, 12–14) is successful in establishing an any-moment parousia in the Fathers.

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heed the warnings who will be surprised (cf. Luke 21:34; 1 Thess. 5:2–4). And the exhortations to “watch” because the time is not known require only that the exact moment is unknown for the force of the warning to be maintained. But the stimulus to holy living provided by the expectation of Christ’s return is based primarily on a positive application of the return in the New Testament. Believers are to remain spiritually alert and morally sober because they recognize that they will stand before their Redeemer to answer for their conduct. And the force of this appeal surely does not depend on the any-moment possibility of such an encounter.

The imminent coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is an important and indispensable element of biblical truth. I think (although I am by no means dogmatic about the matter) that this coming will take place before the millennium (Rev. 20:1–6). I also believe that the Bible predicts a time of unprecedented tribulation for the people of God at the end of time—though I would want to insist that this tribulation is not to be separated from the tribulation that believers experience throughout this interadvent period of time, the “last days.” Scripture also teaches clearly that believers can look forward to joining Christ at the time of his coming: the dead via resurrection and the living via rapture. All these are clear and important biblical truths. But the time of that rapture with respect to the final tribulation is nowhere plainly stated. No Old or New Testament author directly addresses that question or states the nature of that relationship as a point of doctrine. I have indicated in these pages what I think Scripture suggests on this matter. But because this conviction is founded upon logic, inferences, and legitimately debated points of exegesis, I cannot, indeed must not, allow this conviction to represent any kind of barrier to full relationships with others who hold differing convictions on this point. May our discussions on this point enhance, not detract from, our common expectation of “the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).<sup>119</sup>

| RECONSTRUCTION OF MAJOR END-TIME EVENTS |                      |                |                         |                            |
|---|----------------------|----------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Events</i>                           | <i>Matthew 24–25</i> | <i>John 14</i> | <i>1 Corinthians 15</i> | <i>1 Thessalonians 4–5</i> |
| <i>Wars</i>                             | 24:6–7a              |                |                         |                            |
| <i>Famine</i>                           | 24:7b                |                |                         |                            |
| <i>Apostasy</i>                         | 24:12                |                |                         |                            |

<sup>119</sup> Moo, D. (2010). “A Case for the Posttribulation Rapture.” In S. N. Gundry & A. Hultberg (Eds.), *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation* (Second Edition, pp. 185–242). Zondervan.

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|                                |                    |      |       |      |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|------|-------|------|
| <i>Preaching of the Gospel</i> | 24:14              |      |       |      |
| <i>Antichrist (in Temple)</i>  | (24:15)            |      |       |      |
| <i>Tribulation</i>             | 24:16–25           |      |       |      |
| <i>False Signs</i>             | 24:24              |      |       |      |
| <i>Cosmic Signs</i>            | 24:29              |      |       |      |
| <i>Parousia</i>                | 24:30              |      |       | 4:16 |
| <i>Trumpet</i>                 | 24:31              |      | 15:52 | 4:16 |
| <i>Angels</i>                  | 24:31              |      |       | 4:16 |
| <i>First Resurrection</i>      | 24:31              |      | 15:51 |      |
| <i>Rapture</i>                 | 24:31(?), 40–41(?) |      | 15:51 | 4:17 |
| <i>Judgment</i>                | 25:31–46           |      |       |      |
| <i>“With the Lord”</i>         |                    | 14:3 |       | 4:17 |
| <i>“Watch”</i>                 | 24:36–25:13        |      |       |      |

| <i>2 Thessalonians 2</i> | <i>Revelation</i> |                 |              |              |              |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|                          | <i>Seals</i>      | <i>Trumpets</i> | <i>12-14</i> | <i>Bowls</i> | <i>17-20</i> |
|                          | 6:3–4             |                 |              |              |              |
|                          | 6:5–6             |                 |              |              |              |
| 2:3                      |                   |                 | 13:3–4(?)    |              |              |
|                          |                   |                 | 14:6–7(?)    |              |              |
| 2:3–7                    |                   |                 | 13:1–8       |              |              |
|                          | 6:9–11 (?)        | 8:6–9:21        |              | 16:1–21      |              |
| 2:9                      |                   |                 | 13:13–14(?)  |              |              |

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|     |                              |          |          |  |            |
|-----|------------------------------|----------|----------|--|------------|
|     | 6:12-17                      |          |          |  |            |
| 2:8 |                              |          |          |  | 19:11-21   |
|     |                              | 11:15    |          |  |            |
|     |                              | 11:15    | 14:15    |  |            |
|     |                              | 11:11-12 |          |  | 20:4-6     |
|     |                              |          | 14:14-16 |  |            |
| 2:8 |                              | 11:18    | 14:17-20 |  | 17:11-19:3 |
|     | 7:9-17                       | 11:18    | 14:1-5   |  | 19:4-9     |
|     | <i>Throughout Revelation</i> |          |          |  |            |