

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

A Review of

The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church

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Recently there has emerged a strong frontal attack against the pretribulational return of Christ, written by one who claims to have held that view and preached it with conviction for some 35 years. It is entitled *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*¹ and is written by Marvin Rosenthal, former executive director of Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry. His 317-page book is generally well written and is attractively published, with 25 charts to clarify the various millennial and tribulational views, plus his own unique and somewhat complex position on the timing of the rapture.

Rosenthal is clearly a Bible-believing, conservative, and premillennial servant of Jesus Christ. He calls himself a “biblicist” who, though “not a scholar,” has invested his life in the preaching of the “whole counsel of God.” Under the prodding of a friend he began to reexamine his view of the rapture, particularly in its relationship to the coming Tribulation. The view he now espouses is no longer pretribulationalism nor is it midtribulationalism or posttribulationalism, but one he calls “Pre-wrath Rapturism.” Though it is radically different from standard viewpoints, Rosenthal predicts that within 5 years it will be a “recognized position,” and in 15 years “a major position of the believing church.”² This reviewer sincerely questions the validity of that ambition and the necessity of adding a fifth position to an already overcrowded rapture debate.

The primary thrust of the book is that the church of Jesus Christ will be removed from the earth by the rapture before the outpouring of the “wrath of God,” and that the correct timing of the rapture places it just before the fourth quarter of the “70th week of Daniel.” Speaking of God’s “final wrath on an unbelieving world,” he declares that “God’s children will be delivered from that day. That is the ‘blessed hope.’ ”³ Such a change of emphasis is unfortunate, for it moves the “blessed hope” of the believer away from the expectation and joy of being in the presence of Christ to the more human desire of escaping outpoured wrath in the coming judgment.

¹ Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990).

² *Ibid.*, p. 293.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

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Nor does this “pre-wrath” emphasis contribute anything particularly new. Rosenthal freely admits that all pretribulationists and midtribulationists expect to be caught up by the rapture before the outpoured wrath of God in the coming Tribulation. He points out that even Gundry’s variety of posttribulationism⁴ could qualify as “prewrath,” though Gundry does not use that designation.⁵ Gundry simply declares “the theological necessity that God’s wrath not touch a saved person.”⁶

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Further research would have revealed a wider agreement among posttribulationists. Ladd declares, “Everyone must agree that it is inconceivable that the Church will suffer the wrath of God.”⁷ Payne comments, “Post-tribulationists unite in affirming that, ‘The church will endure the wrath of men ... but will not suffer the wrath of God.’”⁸ Katterjohn writes, “Christians, it must be remembered, will be removed before God’s final anger falls.”⁹ Kimball says, “The Scriptures clearly teach us that the church will never suffer from the wrath of God.... This point is agreed upon by all.”¹⁰ And even so strong a posttribulationist as Reese states, “The essential fact for us to know is that Jesus by His death, has delivered us from the wrath to come, and that immediately prior to the full revelation of divine wrath, He will gather the saints to Himself.”¹¹ So the mere declaration that the rapture will be “pre-wrath” is hardly a spectacular discovery. It is solidly affirmed by almost all of pre-, mid-, and posttribulationist persuasion because of the clear declarations of Scripture at this point.

A New Position for the Rapture

It is evident that the *timing* of the rapture, and not its relationship to divine wrath, is uppermost in the mind of Rosenthal in the writing of this volume. Coming perilously close to advocating a date-setting scheme, he defends with enthusiasm the view that the rapture will be three quarters of the way through the “70th week of Daniel,” with divine wrath to be found only in the final quarter. His evidence for such conclusions is lengthy and complicated, based squarely on his personal division of the “70th week of Daniel” into three clearly recognizable periods, the “Beginning of Sorrows,” the “Great Tribulation,” and the frequently predicted “Day of the Lord.”

⁴ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973).

⁵ Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*, p. 59.

⁶ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 46.

⁷ George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), p. 122.

⁸ J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), p. 143.

⁹ Arthur D. Katterjohn, *The Tribulation People* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1975), p. 98.

¹⁰ William R. Kimball, *The Rapture: A Question of Timing* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 70.

¹¹ Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1937), p. 226.

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The rapture is then placed immediately between the Great Tribulation and the day of the Lord, which according to his definitions is after the Tribulation but is still “pre-wrath.” Rosenthal proceeds to support these views by some 200 pages of strong and somewhat overbearing argumentation, with a sharp attack against any response that reminds him of his previous pretribulation position.

His terminology and unique division of the “70th week” are central to his argument. He tries, with several notable exceptions on his own part, not to use the expression “the Tribulation period,” saying that it contains a predisposition toward pretribulationism when it is used of the entire 70th week of Daniel. Rather, he prefers to call the coming seven years of judgment and wrath the “70th week of Daniel.” These seven years he then subdivides as follows: (1) The first three and one-half years are “the Beginning of Sorrows.” (2) The first half of the second three and one-half years (which would be one and three-fourths years or 21 months), he calls “the Great Tribulation.” (3) The final 21 months, the fourth quarter of the seven years, he designates as “the Day of the Lord,” in which is found the “wrath of God.” Just before the day of the Lord, at the sounding of the “seventh trumpet,” the rapture will occur. Hence the rapture of the church takes place between the third and fourth quarters of the 70th week of Daniel, just before the outpouring of the wrath of God. Therefore to Rosenthal the rapture will take place at a sharply defined moment of prophecy, and it is posttribulation but pre-wrath.

The 13 chapters of argumentation in support of these claims are frequently tedious and repetitious, with a dogmatism that earns the book a unique place in the literature of the rapture debate. Rosenthal sets forth Walvoord, Pentecost, and Ryrie as his former “heroes” in matters of eschatology,¹² whose logic in his judgment is now faulty and whose exegesis can no longer be trusted. Rosenthal’s own opinions, however, are “indisputable” and “beyond refutation.”¹³ His facts “cannot be set aside,” and for his primary conclusions “there simply is no question.”¹⁴ The doctrine of imminence, which he calls “a major pillar of pretribulation rapturism,” is “untenable,” and that is a “clear, unassailable truth that cannot be dismissed.”¹⁵ He declares that pretribulationists are locked in an “unsolvable dilemma.”¹⁶ Such dogmatism is, to say the least, both unwholesome and irritating, for many of his statements warrant further investigation.

In all fairness it must be noted that there are some excellent sections in the book, especially chapters 2 and 4–7. Interestingly they are almost wholly irrelevant to the timing

¹² Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*, p. 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 105, 109.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

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of the rapture. Here much information is given on the history of Israel, together with her customs, feasts, and leadership. He discusses the credentials of the King and the certainty of Christ's second coming. Other subjects range from the virgin birth of Christ to modern humanism—themes taken no doubt from the author's Bible lectures. Perhaps the desired impression is that since the author appears to be gracious, godly, and biblical, he would assuredly be a safe and seasoned student of Bible prophecy, bringing trustworthy conclusions concerning the blessed hope of the church. The latter, however, is not the case.

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While it is an unhappy task to bring critical evaluation of a book where on many points there is substantial agreement, as graciously as possible it must be done. It should be recognized, though, that when an argument is as lengthy and complex as this, it would take a new volume of equal length to examine every detail. The following are some of the salient points that should be carefully evaluated by all serious readers of this volume.

The Tribulation Period

As previously noted, Rosenthal declares that the designation "the Tribulation period" should be omitted from any honest consideration of the time of the rapture. It cannot be used as a synonym for the entire 70th week of Daniel, for to do so, he says, predisposes one to pretribulationism, and the expression "Tribulation period" has no biblical justification.¹⁷ He believes that pretribulationists have coined a technical phrase and superimposed it on the Scriptures.¹⁸ If such is the case, it is fair to ask, Where is Rosenthal's biblical justification for the new expression "pre-wrath rapturism"? It is not found in Scripture and comes on the scene as recently as 1990.

Admittedly the King James Version of the Bible does not use the precise expression "Tribulation period," nor does it use the terms "rapture," "second coming," and "premillennial." But on at least six occasions it does speak of a coming "tribulation," and Rosenthal freely admits that it is a period to be measured in years. Like the other terms, "Tribulation period" is simply a widely used term of convenience, less cumbersome and less in need of explanation than the expression "70th week of Daniel," which also does not appear in the Bible. Indeed Rosenthal himself uses the term "Tribulation period,"¹⁹ and his own publisher uses it in the promotional material on the back cover of the book. However, his attempt to cancel the expression "Tribulation period" helps pave the way for his novel threefold subdivision of the same actual period of seven years.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 107, 117, 143.

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The Beginning of Sorrows

Rosenthal calls the first three and one-half years of Daniel's 70th week by the name "the beginning of sorrows," borrowed from Matthew 24:8, for he finds a rough parallel between the Matthew passage and the first four seal judgments of Revelation 6. But similarity is not identity, and the likeness is superficial. There is a world of difference between the "many deceivers" of Matthew and the devil's Antichrist of Revelation; between the "wars and rumors of wars" and battles so powerful they take peace from the whole earth; between the earthquakes of Matthew and the cosmic disturbances of Revelation 6:12–13. Nor does Matthew 24:4–8 even vaguely hint of martyred saints in heaven, nor of an outpouring of God's wrath so severe that a fourth of the earth's population is slain.

A view that deserves serious consideration is that "the beginning of sorrows" describes the prevailing conditions on earth at the close of the Church Age, before the rapture and the Tribulation. For those who wonder if these descriptions are relevant today, for famine, one may note Ethiopia. For pestilence, AIDS is evident. For earthquakes, one need only recall San Francisco and many other unfortunate cities. For nations rising up against nation, two World Wars testify to that reality. Calling the early half of the Tribulation "the beginning of sorrows" in Rosenthal's book is merely a device to minimize this period and shift what he calls the "Great Tribulation" to the third quarter of Daniel's 70th week.

It is a serious error to claim, as Rosenthal does, that "the first three and one-half years are not part of the Tribulation period"²⁰ because God's wrath does not start until "considerably further" into the 70th week. In his words, "the seals are not God's wrath; they are God's promise of eternal protection during *man's* wrath."²¹ Moreover, "the first five seals relate to man's activity under the controlling influence of Satan. God's wrath has not yet begun."²² But this is not entirely true, for the seals also reflect the judgment of the sovereign God. All seven seals are broken by Christ, and the riders of the first four seals and their accompanying judgments are initiated by four "living creatures" who descend from the very presence of God (Rev. 4:6–8). They are responding to divine holiness when they command these riders, not to "come and see," but simply to "come!"

The judgments of these four seals include the sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts, frequently used in Scripture as the expressions of divine wrath. Indeed, they are all included and named when God calls His "four severe judgments upon Jerusalem: sword, famine, wild beasts and plague" (Ezek. 14:21). This is likewise true in Leviticus 26:22, 25;

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 106–7.

²¹ Ibid., p. 145.

²² Ibid., p. 247.

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Deuteronomy 28:21–25; Jeremiah 15:2–3; 16:4; Ezekiel 5:12, 17, and many other passages.²³ It is a denial of Scripture to declare the first four seals the activity of men rather than judgment from God. And a rapture placed after the first six seals would certainly not be a “pre-wrath rapture.”

The Great Tribulation

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Rosenthal also has peculiar and erroneous views relating to “the Great Tribulation.” Similar to the first four seals, he makes the Great Tribulation “the persecution of God’s elect by wicked men,” namely, man’s wrath against man, but never God’s wrath against man.²⁴ He limits the Great Tribulation by declaring that it will be the third quarter of the seven-year period, and that somehow even these days will be “shortened.” He fails to relate the Great Tribulation to the detailed descriptions of the Book of Revelation. One can only conclude that if the first four seals are “the beginning of sorrows,” and the day of the Lord begins with the opening of the seventh seal,²⁵ then the Great Tribulation which comes between must be limited to the brief compass of the fifth and sixth seal. This is exactly Rosenthal’s position, illustrated by a chart on page 161. With such a view he stands alone. It finds no adequate place for the detailed teaching of Christ in Matthew 24:9–26 and makes the Great Tribulation simply the activity of Antichrist rather than judgment from God. Then to Rosenthal, the rest of the seven years, the final quarter, starts with Revelation 8:1 and becomes “the day of the Lord” or the final day of the Lord’s wrath.

Rosenthal is in serious trouble when he limits the Great Tribulation to the third quarter of the seven-year period. Christ linked the Great Tribulation with the action of Antichrist defiling the Jewish temple by setting up his image to receive worship, in fulfillment of the “abomination which makes desolate” in Daniel 9:27. This event in the middle of the “week” is the sign for the Jews to flee from the wrath of Satan, from whom they must be protected three and one-half years “from the face of the serpent” (Rev. 12:14). Thus the “time of trouble” for Israel (Dan. 12:1) and the desolation of “the great tribulation” predicted by Christ (Matt. 24:21) must extend for at least three and one-half years and not for a period of 21 months.

²³ Renald E. Showers, formerly associated with Marvin Rosenthal at Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, has written an unpublished 88-page “critique and objection” to *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*.

Academic, detailed, and highly scriptural, this critique includes six pages of Scripture and argumentation to demonstrate that “the first four seals of Revelation 6:1–8 involve a great outpouring of divine wrath.”

²⁴ Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*, p. 105.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

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Indeed, the finishing of Israel's "rebellion" and the end of the Antichrist's "desolation" are linked with the entirety of the 70 weeks and not with a small portion of it (Dan. 9:24, 27). Gabriel testified that the Antichrist's "war" with Israel should last until the "end" of the period under consideration, evidently with a "flood" of divine judgment (v. 26). The Antichrist will make war with Israel and all the saints, until he is judged and they possess the kingdom (7:22). He will defile the earth and lead the nations in the final rebellion and war of Armageddon right up to the power and glory of the second coming of Christ. In a word, Tribulation conditions cannot be limited to one fourth of that frightful seven-year period.

The Future of the Church

From the perspective of Rosenthal's book, how does all this relate to the future of the church? In brief, it insists that the church must pass through the first 42 months of the Tribulation period under the pretext that it is only "the beginning of sorrows." The church must then pass through an additional 21 months of Great Tribulation because divine wrath has not yet been poured out. Later, Rosenthal has the church back on earth during the seven vials of wrath, for "Christ will literally return to assume His kingdom at the seventh trumpet,"²⁶ right at the end of the "70th week." The notion that the seven vials will follow the Second Coming is clearly stated in Rosenthal's book on page 146 and charted on pages 147 and 276.

Of the seven-year Tribulation the church will miss only the small portion of 21 months Rosenthal entitles the day of the Lord. So whereas believers will not experience wrath, they will be on the earth during the severe judgment of the seals, according to Rosenthal. They will come under the dominion of the Beast and suffer and die at the hands of the Antichrist (Rev. 13:7), and even be present when the final seven vials of "God's wrath" are poured out. Little comfort or blessing is in an eschatology such as this!

All this can be avoided by recognizing that "the Tribulation," "the Great Tribulation," and "Daniel's 70th week" are all substantially the same thing, and share identical features. These terms are simply descriptions of a coming period, not technical names or definitions around which to build a prophetic theory. While granting that the last half of the Tribulation period is more severe than the first, it is all designated "great tribulation" (literally in the Greek, "tribulation, the great one," Rev. 7:14), simply because in the midst of earth's trials there is no other period like it (Jer. 30:7; Dan. 12:1). "Tribulation" and "great tribulation" are spoken of together and clearly equated in Matthew 24:21, 29. These

²⁶ Ibid., p. 146.

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descriptions have to do with the *content* not with *duration* of that period, and certainly do not designate the timing of the rapture.

The Day of the Lord

Pretribulationists normally place the beginning of the day of the Lord right after the rapture in conjunction with the start of the Tribulation. Rosenthal rather violently opposes such a placement and makes it “perhaps the single greatest error in the debate concerning the timing of the Rapture.”²⁷ To him, the day of the Lord must commence *after* the Great Tribulation is over. It fills in the final 21 months (half of three and one-half years) of the seven-year “Tribulation period,” beginning with the opening of the seventh seal.²⁸ But this misses the fact that there can be only one completely unprecedented day of sorrow in Israel’s future, and Joel 2:1–2 calls it “the day of the Lord,” while Daniel 12:1 calls it Israel’s “time of trouble,” and in Matthew 24:21 Christ identified it as “the great tribulation.” The three are one, not three periods that follow in sequence.

Rosenthal rightly reviews the frequent use of “the day of the Lord” in the Old Testament, but denies that it extends to “the new heavens and the new earth” according to 2 Peter 3:10–13. He commences it at Revelation 8:1 on the basis of cosmic disturbances under the sixth seal (Joel 2:30–31; Rev. 6:11–12). He argues that the day of the Lord’s wrath must begin immediately after the church is raptured, indeed “on the same day,” and cites the fact that the Flood began on the day Noah entered the ark, and fire and brimstone fell out of heaven the day Lot left Sodom. However, this is weak evidence to help establish a great New Testament doctrine.

A number of Scriptures unite to demonstrate that the day of the Lord does include the first six seals. While Rosenthal speaks of these seals as the wrath of man, the beasts of the earth and the heavenly bodies of Revelation 6:8 and 12 are not under the dominion of man, but of God. The darkness of Amos 5:18–20 matches the darkness of the sixth seal. The judgment on the proud and lofty in Isaiah 2:12, 17 finds fulfillment in Revelation 6:15, and the announcement of wrath in Isaiah 13:6–13 and Zephaniah 1:14–18 finds its counterpoint in Revelation 6:17. Isaiah 2:19 and Revelation 6:15 state that the wicked shall hide in the holes of the rocks and caves of the earth, a fact far too specific to be lightly ignored. Zephaniah 2:3 calls this period the day of the Lord’s fierce anger, surely fulfilled in substance at Revelation 6:8 with the destruction of one-fourth of the world’s population. It is wrong to declare that the day of the Lord begins with Revelation 8:1 when its predictions find such clear fulfillment in the seal judgments of Revelation 6.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 117.

²⁸ Ibid.

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How could the day of the Lord come unexpectedly, “as a thief in the night,” if the severe judgments of Revelation 6 must come first? Why could men be found crying “peace and safety” under such horrendous circumstances? Yet it is essential to Rosenthal’s prophetic system that the day of the Lord begins with the opening of the seventh seal,²⁹ which to him signals the end of the Great Tribulation and the moment of the rapture. It is far better to understand that the rapture precedes the entire Tribulation period, with the day of the Lord commencing soon thereafter. This is the order and emphasis of 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5, prime Scriptures on both prophetic themes. This writer has sought to demonstrate elsewhere³⁰ that the Old Testament predictions of “the day of the Lord” and their fulfillment in the Book of Revelation fit together like hand in glove, including the judgments under the first six seals. Placing the day of the Lord after the Great Tribulation is erroneous and artificial, and denying that it extends up to the new heavens and the new earth appears to violate 2 Peter 3:10–13. Certainly the day of the Lord, the theme of such extensive prophecy, is of greater significance and extent than 21 months or 630 days.

Rosenthal’s treatment of the three component parts of Daniel’s 70th week is entirely unsatisfactory. His view essentially ignores the first three and one-half years and artificially distinguishes between the Great Tribulation and the day of the Lord, compressing each into a mere one-fourth of the Tribulation period. This is a fractured foundation on which to build any trustworthy conclusions relative to the blessed hope of Christ’s return.

Six Events That Set the Timing of the Rapture

Rosenthal dogmatically divides the last half of Daniel’s 70th week into two parts, the Great Tribulation and the day of the Lord. Between the two he places the rapture, but that is not all he places at that moment of time. So important to Rosenthal is this prophetic juncture of Tribulation activity that he dedicates to it six chapters, each with a great prophetic event, all converging at the time of the rapture and demonstrating that the day of the Lord relates exclusively to the last quarter of the seven-year period. These are (1) cosmic disturbances, (2) the coming of Elijah, (3) the day of God’s wrath, (4) the sealing of the 144,000, (5) the last trump, and (6) the apostasy and the man of sin. He holds that the convergence of these six events before the seventh seal form an “impregnable” argument supporting a “pre-wrath” rapture three-fourths of the way through the 70th week. Such claims demand careful scrutiny. The vast majority of students of prophecy are still convinced that the rapture will be unannounced, unheralded by such signs,

²⁹ Ibid., p. 155.

³⁰ Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1956), pp. 75–83. (A revised edition of this book was published in 1990 by Schoettle Publishing Co., Box 594, Miami Springs, FL 33266. It includes reviews of 20 major books on the rapture debate, including Rosenthal’s book.)

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dateless but imminent. What then of the six signs Rosenthal says will be “the prelude of the Rapture of the church and the Day of the Lord wrath”?³¹

COSMIC DISTURBANCES

There shall be cosmic disturbances, according to Joel 2:31: “The sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.” Rosenthal identifies this with the sixth seal and uses it to date the rapture and the beginning of the day of the Lord. But that can hardly be dogmatized, for the predicted Tribulation will not be limited to one display of cosmic power (cf. Rev. 8:10–12; 11:19; 16:8, 21), making Rosenthal’s argument uncertain at best. In Matthew 24:27, Christ placed yet another great cosmic disturbance after the 70th week when He stated that He shall appear with clouds and great glory and Israel shall mourn as they finally identify Him as the long-awaited Messiah (v. 30).

Indeed if there must be a cosmic disturbance before the day of the Lord can commence, let it be during a brief transitional period after the rapture but before the announcement of the Antichrist. In Scripture such transitional periods are not hard to find. There was a period of 50 days between Calvary and Pentecost, between “law” and “grace.” Rosenthal himself makes much of a transition of 75 extra days between the 70th week and the setting up of Christ’s kingdom.³² The whole Church Age was thrust between prophecies of the two advents of Christ, as foretold in the Old Testament. Undoubtedly there will be time for the Great White Throne judgment between the millennial kingdom and the eternal kingdom. Similarly there is no urgency that demands a tight chronology of events following the rapture, and so Rosenthal’s argument concerning heavenly activity finds a ready answer. Indeed the immediate context of the prophecy he uses from Joel 2:30–32 seems to relate the heavenly wonders more to the coming of the messianic kingdom than to a pre-wrath cosmic disturbance (cf. Matt. 24:29).

THE COMING OF ELIJAH

Next Rosenthal teaches that Elijah must come, and if that occurs before a pretribulational rapture, “the doctrine of imminence is once again destroyed.”³³ He is not sure if the two witnesses are Moses and Elijah or Enoch and Elijah, or whether it is Elijah in the flesh or merely one in the spirit and likeness of Elijah. He supports the view that Elijah will reappear and have a ministry during the last three and one-half years of the Tribulation. Since the witnesses die in the sixth trumpet after a full three and one-half years of witness,

³¹ Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*, p. 153.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 273.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

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this makes it mandatory to place the seven vials of the wrath of God (according to Rosenthal's chronology) *after* the second coming of Christ, a radical view Rosenthal propounds and illustrates on his charts.

Rosenthal makes much of Malachi 4:5–6, which seems to relate to the second coming of Christ when He comes to “smite the land with a curse,” rather than to an earlier manifestation of the day of the Lord adjacent to the rapture. It must be noted also that, as recorded in Matthew 11:14, Christ declared that in a potential sense Elijah had already come in the person of John the Baptist. But if Malachi was indeed predicting the coming of one of the future two witnesses, the most probable understanding is that the prophecy places their coming early in the prophetic “week” before the day of the Lord is fully come. There is nothing here to date the rapture, even if one assumes it should be dated.

THE DAY OF GOD'S WRATH

Next Rosenthal uses the wrath of God to prove that pretribulationism has a problem, “larger than big—it is mountainous and unscalable.”³⁴ He makes the expression “the great day of his wrath is come” (Rev. 6:17, kjv) to mean, not a past experience, but a prediction of “an event about to occur.”³⁵ This, he declares, is a glaring problem for pretribulation rapturism, for “God's wrath cannot be understood to include the first six seals.”³⁶ “Wrath is impending. It is about to happen; it has not yet occurred.”³⁷

But the real problem lies at the door of Rosenthal. For he constantly asserts that the outpoured wrath of God does not commence until Revelation 8:1, the seventh seal, which immediately introduces the unprecedented judgments of the seven trumpets. However, his prophetic system is embarrassed, if not refuted, by the obvious fact that one of the strongest references to the wrath of God is recorded in Revelation 6:16–17 in conjunction with the sixth seal. But rather than revising his system, Rosenthal devotes eight pages of argumentation,³⁸ endeavoring to prove two points: that this declaration of outpoured wrath is a prophecy spoken by John, and not an agonizing cry on the part of the wicked who hide from the face of God in the rocks and the mountains; and that the use of the Greek aorist in the expression “the great day of his wrath is come” demonstrates that it

³⁴ Ibid., p. 164.

KJV King James Version

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 166–67.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 171.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 167.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 163–70.

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“refers, not to a past event, but to an event about to occur, and that in concert with the opening of the seventh seal.”³⁹

Even a casual reading of Revelation 6:12–17 reveals that the cry in verses 16–17 is a scream of terror from the wicked, rebellious human leaders who have endured war and famine, death and destruction, a shattering earthquake and a frightful disruption of heavenly bodies under the earlier seal judgments. Obviously they are responding to past judgments and not judgments yet to come, for wicked men have no ability to speak a prophecy. True the aorist tense normally has no time significance. But the verb ἦλθεν is in the aorist tense and indicative mood. When this occurs it refers to a *past* not a future action.⁴⁰ So the proper translation is “the great day of his wrath *is come*,” or as the vast majority of translators put it, “the great day of his wrath *has come*.” It is a major error to force the translation to declare, “the great day of his wrath *will come*.” One can only conclude that this strong reference to the wrath of God is the direct response of the wicked to their shattering *experience* under the first six seals, and not a veiled *prophecy* of coming trumpet judgments.

Besides being in error in this matter, Rosenthal proceeds to make matters worse by making the seals a symbol of ownership and protection, as though that is what God is doing in Revelation 6. While ownership and protection are certainly true for the church through the sealing ministry of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30), it is not even vaguely related to the Lion of the tribe of Judah loosing the seven seals of the book of Tribulation judgment.

THE SEALING OF THE 144,000

The fourth pillar Rosenthal uses to support his view on the time of the rapture relates to the sealed 144,000 and the “multitude which no man could number,” both found in Revelation 7. He holds that the 144,000 Jews are “sealed for protection” from God’s wrath, but not sealed for witness and evangelism. A more normal view is that Israel is beginning to turn back to the Lord, and that these are sealed for service and evangelism to fulfill their destiny as God’s witnesses and “a light to the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:6; 43:10, 12; 49:6).

Rosenthal is not sure if they are regenerated, saying that it is “a matter of speculation.” He flatly rejects the traditional view, as expressed by Walvoord, that they represent “the godly remnant of Israel on earth in the great tribulation.”⁴¹ He at least implies their

³⁹ Ibid., p. 167.

⁴⁰ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1950), p. 178.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 183.

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redemption when he says, "The 144,000 must be sealed for protection to go through the Day of the Lord.... God will not leave Himself without a people on earth."⁴²

Rosenthal immediately focuses attention on "the great multitude which no man could number" and makes this important identification: "This great multitude represents the true church which goes into the seventieth week of Daniel. They are raptured at the end of the Great Tribulation but before the Day of the Lord begins."⁴³ Here, finally, he reveals the rapture of the church, three-fourths of the way through the 70th week, just before the day of the Lord, and identifies it with the "innumerable multitude."

But the 70th week is a precise period of seven years, each half of which is 42 months, or 1,260 days. Thus from the Antichrist's covenant with Israel there will be, Rosenthal implies, 1,260 plus 630 days, a total of 1,890 days. From the beginning of the 70th week, the date of the rapture is precisely set. And if Rosenthal is correct that the 144,000 are "God's people," yet distinct from the "innumerable multitude," and they go through the day of the Lord which is the "wrath of God," then added to all this confusion is a partial rapture.

However, the innumerable multitude is not like the church, which will go to heaven as a group at the rapture. Rather, they are martyrs who one at a time lay down their lives throughout the seven-year period. The Greek present tense in Revelation 7:14 stresses that they "continually come" out of great Tribulation, and obviously do not go to heaven as a single group. It is likewise strange, if they do indeed represent the church, that John could not recognize them, for John was an apostle of Christ, a member of the early church and part of its essential foundation. Also the church is composed of all believers since Pentecost, and cannot be limited solely to Tribulation martyrs.

Let it be said as gently as possible: identification of the church with the great multitude of the Tribulation is wrong and in fact is radical eschatology. It teaches that the rapture is after the Tribulation, which is posttribulationism. It implies a divided church, some of whom are raptured while 144,000 of God's people go through the time of God's wrath. And though Rosenthal does not count up the exact number of days, his dating of the rapture is so precise that he has fallen into the trap of advocating a date-setting system.

THE LAST TRUMP

For his fifth supporting pillar Rosenthal turns to 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, calling it the clearest text in all the Word of God for determining the timing of the rapture. The four

⁴² Ibid., p. 185.

⁴³ Ibid.

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words, “at the last trump,” reveal in the clearest way the “precise occasion” when the rapture of the church will occur.⁴⁴ He points out correctly that both midtribulationists and posttribulationists identify the rapture position with the “last trump.” But pursuing his withering attack on pretribulationism, he declares, “Pretribulation rapturists do not make strong appeals to Paul’s statement that the Rapture will occur before the last trump to support their position.... If they mention 1 Corinthians 15 in a Rapture discussion, it is brief and without determinative significance.”⁴⁵ This is a highly prejudiced and erroneous statement.

While he does have a good discussion of the use of trumpets in the ritual of Judaism, he is content to make an emphatic statement which he supports by italics but not by evidence: “*The last trump will be nothing more, nothing less and nothing different than the final, climactic, eschatological outpouring of the wrath of God.*”⁴⁶ In Rosenthal’s thinking, this makes the “last trump” the equivalent of the entire day of the Lord. He declares that the rapture will occur “at the last trump,”⁴⁷ but also that “Christ will literally return to assume His kingdom at the seventh trumpet.”⁴⁸ This makes the “last trump” a period of 21 months, rather than a point in time to signal the rapture. This confusing position is obviously unacceptable. Rosenthal then returns to his main thesis, that the rapture must occur at the opening of the seventh seal and immediately before the beginning of God’s wrath.⁴⁹

This writer prefers a more simple solution: The “last trump” is not an Old Testament trumpet of Jewish ritual, nor the same as the seventh trumpet of Tribulation judgment. It is a unique trumpet which sounds for the church at the rapture, which is *at* the last trump (and not *before* the last trump as Rosenthal claims). There are evidently two trumpet blasts, one for the dead and another for the living. Hence the living are raptured at the second, which is the “last trump.” While this view may be too simple for some tastes, it emphasizes that the “trump” is a joyful signal and not a dreaded period of time. It records that the dead in Christ and living believers are raised in quick sequence, to enjoy reunion and recognition together in the presence of Christ. Its purpose is not to reveal the time of the rapture, a subject which God has chosen not to reveal. It does give assurance that those who have died in the Lord have not missed the rapture; if anything, they enjoy a slight time advantage because they are caught up just before the living (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 189.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 189–90.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 193.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 146.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 194.

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THE APOSTASY AND THE MAN OF SIN

The last of these supporting evidences for Rosenthal's prophetic program is given in chapter 15. This reviewer found it to be a strange mingling of truth, speculation, and falsehood. Equally troubling is Rosenthal's stepped-up attack against pretribulationism, assigning it "impossible-to-resolve problems" when it is examined in the light of 2 Thessalonians 2. It is claimed that these leave "pretribulation rapturism mortally wounded,"⁵⁰ and in addition he sounds his usual denial of imminency.

In brief what is true includes the foreshadowing of the Antichrist by the blasphemy and hatred of Israel under the Syrian leader, Antiochus Epiphanes. Speculative is his view of the Antichrist, who "once lived and ruled over a nation, then died, and will be raised to rule over the eighth empire."⁵¹ Also "doubtful" is his claim that all his evidence is "clear and compelling."

That which is false is more plentiful. It involves his declaration that in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, "the apostasy to which Paul referred ... will involve Israel, not the church."⁵² While the normative view of this passage is that the "apostasy" is a widespread departure from true biblical faith in the end time, in the light of 1 Timothy 4:1-3, Rosenthal insists that it is "a specific, definitive, identifiable event,"⁵³ "when many of the Jews will totally abandon the God of their fathers in the same way they did in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes."⁵⁴ This opinion he primarily supports, not from Scripture, but from various quotations from the Apocrypha.

Moreover, Rosenthal declares, the apostasy has a "very specific and limited meaning," a "total abandonment of Jehovah for a heathen god."⁵⁵ Hence he concludes that the falling away of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is an identifiable event at a specific point of time, limited to Israel, and associated with the Antichrist and his defiling the temple in Jerusalem at the midpoint of the Tribulation. The main thrust of all of this is that the day of the Lord cannot come until the second half of the Tribulation, "and the Rapture, which occurs at the very outset of the Day of the Lord, cannot possibly be pretribulationary." He concludes that this leaves pretribulation rapturism "mortally wounded."⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 196, 210.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 209.

⁵² Ibid., p. 206.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 199.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 201.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 210.

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These are highly questionable conclusions. Paul was not discussing a point of time or a final apostasy on the part of Israel, but a spiritual condition among professing Christians. In his previous epistle he had taught the Thessalonians that the dead in Christ had not missed the rapture and that living believers would not endure the wrath of the day of the Lord. Now in his second epistle, he was explaining that they had not entered the day of the Lord for several reasons. The Restrainer had not yet been removed, the final apostasy had not yet taken place, and the Antichrist with his world dominion had not yet emerged. All this is a direct refutation of posttribulation thinking, including the view of Rosenthal.

Moreover, almost every point of the summary chart on page 197 is open to question. A comparison with the chart on page 147 reveals that Rosenthal contradicts himself on the extent of God's wrath and the time of the second coming of Christ. While his sincerity may be beyond question, many of his definitions appear to be homemade and supporting evidence is completely inadequate. It is part of the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit to reveal to believers "things to come" (John 16:13), which normally produces within the church of Christ a certain agreement, a godly consensus even in the interpretation of prophetic truth. While believers do not always agree on the details, it is rare when truth must stand absolutely alone.

It is here contended that Rosenthal is in serious error when he attempts to set the time of the rapture three-fourths of the way through the seven years of judgment and wrath, some 1,890 days after the Antichrist makes his unparalleled covenant with Israel. Among evangelical Christians from all major rapture perspectives, Rosenthal walks an isolated path when he asserts that these six signs unite in setting the timing of the rapture. Believers are to watch for Christ's coming and live accordingly, for it is their blessed and purifying hope, evidently next on the prophetic program of God. The Lord's people should not be confused by vehement argumentation designed to set the day of His appearing, adding yet a fifth and doubtful position to an issue that has already been subjected to more than its share of debate.

The Prewrath Rapture

This closing section of the book consists of five chapters designed to give final justification for Rosenthal's unique position and a conclusive knockout blow against pretribulationism. In the judgment of this reviewer, who has followed the literature of the rapture-Tribulation debate closely for nearly 40 years, these final arguments as well as many of the former, range somewhere between "curious" and "radical." But those who consider them must exercise considerable caution, for they can be rightly evaluated only by those well established in biblical theology and well read in the area of eschatology. As

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always, the biblical rule is to “examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21), with much prayer and with strong dependence on the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:10–12).

Chapter 16 discusses the primary Greek words used for the return of Christ, in parallel with much that has already been written on this subject in the rapture literature. Rosenthal argues that there is only one “coming,” with the important feature that it includes not only the rapture but a “continuous presence” during which Christ judges the wicked in the day of the Lord. It also includes His final return in glory.⁵⁷ *“The Lord’s coming ... is a comprehensive whole. There is only one Second Coming. It includes the Rapture of the church, the outpouring of God’s wrath during the Day of the Lord, and Christ’s physical return in glory.”*⁵⁸ Furthermore Rosenthal holds that the “coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints” (1 Thess. 3:13) does not speak of Christ returning to earth with the “dead in Christ” or with raptured living saints, but rather His coming with His “holy ones,” namely, angelic beings. All this introduces another major problem.

Rosenthal does not explain the destiny of the church at the rapture. What will happen to all the raptured saints, both dead and living, in the 630-day interval when Christ has a “continuous presence” and is pouring out His wrath on the wicked? The position of this book demands that the church is not on earth during the time of outpoured wrath. But they are not raptured to heaven, for to Rosenthal that would imply “two comings.” Will the church triumphant which meets Christ “in the clouds” continue to float about in those clouds for one-fourth of a seven-year period while Christ has a “continuous presence” and performs His work of judgment on earth below? It is most significant that Rosenthal rejects the idea of raptured saints going to “the Father’s house.” Indeed, except for one mention of John 14:1–3 in a quotation of John Sproule, who calls it one of several “debatable Scriptures,”⁵⁹ Rosenthal does not refer to this important passage at all, for it cannot be brought into harmony with his prophetic scheme. What will happen to the church during Rosenthal’s 21-month “day of the Lord”? He gives no answer to this. He simply affirms that there will be one “coming,” which embraces everything from the rapture through the last quarter of the 70th week, right up to the final manifestation of the King.

A further questionable view concerns the “sign” of Christ’s coming, requested by the disciples in Matthew 24:3. Rosenthal writes that this sign will be “the manifestation of the glory of God” at His coming when “the natural light will be turned off and the

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 218.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 221–22 (italics his).

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 55.

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supernatural light (God's glory) will be turned on."⁶⁰ Most observers would locate this event within the eternal state following the millennial kingdom and the Great White Throne judgment (Rev. 21:23–25), and not with the opening of the sixth seal. Yet Rosenthal argues that this "sign" is sufficiently clear that "the doctrine of imminency is destroyed by the question posed by the disciples."⁶¹

Chapter 17 introduces the often-debated text of Revelation 3:10 and the disputed phrase, "kept from the hour." Rosenthal states that the dispute among commentators stems from the fact that they "have not generally understood that there are three sections to the seventieth week—the beginning birth pangs, the Great Tribulation, and the Day of the Lord."⁶²

This reviewer is disposed to agree with Rosenthal that "each scholar is inclined to interpret this phrase to substantiate his view of the Rapture," as he himself does. Posttribulationists understand "kept from the hour" as divine protection through the Tribulation, while pretribulationists interpret it as exemption from the Tribulation. The latter builds a stronger case, for the verse does not promise protection within the hour but exemption from the hour itself. This point has been well defended in pretribulationist literature.

Surprisingly Rosenthal takes a different approach to the issue, declaring that this watershed Bible passage in the rapture debate "in fact has nothing whatsoever to do with the Rapture." For the promise of Revelation 3:10 "refers to protection from the Great Tribulation, which occurs before the Rapture and the Day of the Lord begins."⁶³ Since he believes "the hour of temptation" begins in the middle of the 70th week, some who remain steadfast in the face of adversity "will be kept from that hour ... by physical removal" (a partial rapture?), while "others will be kept 'through the hour of temptation' by direct, divine protection."⁶⁴ So Rosenthal removes this promise from application to the rapture, applies both viewpoints to the prior Great Tribulation, and further confuses his readers by declaring that this promise to the church of Philadelphia does not belong to all Christendom. "It is only the church of Philadelphia which is promised exemption from 'the hour of temptation.'"⁶⁵ At best, he is suggesting that the Scriptures promise, "I will keep you in one way or another from the last 25 percent of the hour."

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 221.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 224.

⁶² Ibid., p. 233.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 234.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 239.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 237.

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In chapter 18 Rosenthal asks the question, “Are Pretribulation Rapture Arguments Really Unanswerable?” While admitting that “pretribulationism has more than its share of notables of the faith,” he adds that “church history is replete with men of distinction who had blind spots in their theology.”⁶⁶ Then he gives 11 pretribulationist arguments and his rebuttal of each, taking what comfort for his own position he can from each issue.

Space does not permit a further discussion of these arguments, nor a rebuttal of Rosenthal’s rebuttals. Suffice it to say that some of the arguments are not entirely representative of normal pretribulationist positions, and many valid pretribulationist arguments are not introduced at all. Both Walvoord and Pentecost present a substantial summary of pretribulationist arguments, and these issues have been abundantly discussed in the literature on the rapture debate. Moreover, Rosenthal’s rebuttals are largely a restatement of positions earlier defended.

According to pretribulationism the 24 elders of Revelation 4 represent the church in glory before the Tribulation. This position has been defended by the present writer in *Kept from the Hour*, and by other pretribulationist writers. Rosenthal argues that the elders are not the church at all, but rather “they represented the redeemed of the Old Testament economy,” even “redeemed Israel.”⁶⁷

But Israel is clearly identified in the Book of Revelation and except for 14:1–5 is always seen as being on earth and not as a unique group in heaven. However, the church, referred to 19 times in Revelation 1–3, does not appear on earth at all in chapters 4–18, the critical Tribulation passage. It is more than a coincidence that a new group appears in heaven and is presented in great detail before the opening of the first seal. All the evidence identifies these 24 elders as representing the raptured church. For they have been redeemed out of many nations and clothed in the righteousness of Christ. They have been crowned at the judgment seat of Christ and are now seated in the presence of the Lamb. Everything said in the song of the elders is true of the church. All the details argue that at this point the church rather than Israel is in view.

Also the normal pretribulationist position is that the Restrainer (2 Thess. 2:6–8) is the Holy Spirit, removed before the open revelation of the Antichrist, and taking the church with Him back to the Father’s house (John 14:2–3, 16). The normal posttribulationist position is that the influence that restrains human wickedness is some aspect of human law or government. Rosenthal rejects both of these, declaring that he who restrains until “he be taken out of the way” is actually the angel Michael, who “steps aside” and no longer

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 243.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 252, 254.

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hinders the Antichrist in his persecution of Israel.⁶⁸ This appears to be the very reverse of the teaching of Scripture that Michael will defend and deliver Israel in the coming unprecedented “time of trouble” (Dan. 12:1; cf. Rev. 12:7–16). He will not abandon them in the midst of Israel’s worst hour, but will save them from it (Jer. 30:7).

In chapter 19 Rosenthal asks, “Why This View Now?” He defends the thesis that his view is neither new nor novel, but only now systematized. His primary defense is from Daniel 12:4, which teaches that Daniel’s book would be sealed “to the time of the end,” when the knowledge of the book would be greatly increased. He draws the conclusion that it should not be surprising that “a new, more detailed systematic approach to the timing of the Rapture and the events of the seventieth week would be forthcoming.”⁶⁹

While it is self-evident that much of Daniel through history has been “sealed,” with far greater understanding of his prophecies being achieved as “the time of the end” approaches, this writer takes exception to Rosenthal’s idea that this sealing means that “God was guaranteeing its accuracy.”⁷⁰ Accuracy, not for one, but for every book in the canon of Scripture is guaranteed by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21) and does not require additional sealing. Nor can Daniel 12:4 be used to justify every new prophetic theory to come along. Nor does it justify Rosenthal’s particular view of the timing of the rapture, for the rapture is a New Testament “mystery” (1 Cor. 15:51), not found at all in the Old Testament, even in so wonderful a book as Daniel. It is self-serving for Rosenthal to claim support for his time of the rapture theories from Daniel 12:4.

A problem runs throughout this book. Continually Rosenthal quotes Scripture, which is commendable, but almost invariably in the midst of the quotation he interjects his own definition or explanation, sometimes in brackets and sometimes in parentheses. The impression is given that the reader cannot understand each Scripture passage unless he is helped along or prodded by Rosenthal. While separate commentary is legitimate, Scripture is inspired by the Spirit with the potential of being taught by the Spirit, even “the deep things of God” (1 Cor. 2:10–12). This is even true of prophetic material, for “when He, the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth ... and He will disclose to you what is to come” (John 16:13).

Rosenthal’s last chapter incorporates a final summary of his various positions, and also a final abrasive attack against pretribulationism and some of its leaders. The chapter sets forth the “pre-wrath rapture” view as a “catalyst for holy living,” without recognizing

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 256–57.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 278.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 269.

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that much of that catalyst is lost if 42 months of “sorrows” and another 21 months of battle and martyrdom from the Beast must come first.

It is reasonable to inquire about the effect of these new prophetic views on their author as he prepared them in written form for the Christian public. For this, it is essential to return to the opening chapter, perhaps the most dismal portion of the entire book. Rosenthal testifies that the writing of his book caused him “the most difficult, tension-filled, heart-wrenching two and a half years” of his life.⁷¹ He speaks of sleepless nights and excruciating tension, of strained and somber board meetings, of agony of soul and the trauma of lost friendships and a lost job.

While readers respond to this agony with deep regret and empathy, it is hardly the mark of being taught and led by the Spirit. One would think that a new clarification of a divisive problem of eschatology which has troubled the church for more than a hundred years, with the Spirit finally fulfilling the promise of Daniel 12:4 and shedding new light and understanding, would be accompanied by the joy of illumination and the peace of divine guidance. Such was evidently not the case.

Rosenthal should be commended for his diligence and thanked with appreciation for every insight which bears the clear stamp of truth. But the considered conclusion of this reviewer is that Rosenthal’s published views are a distortion of prophetic truth, sometimes curious, sometimes strange, and frequently false. Taken as a whole, they are an unworthy replacement for the blessed hope of Christ’s imminent return for the church at the rapture.⁷²

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 17.

⁷² Stanton, G. B. (1991). “A Review of The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church.” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 148, 90–111.