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The Time of the Rapture as Indicated in Certain Scriptures

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1

The term *rapture* is commonly employed by Bible students to designate the translation of the church described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. The fact of the rapture is accepted by those who accept the Bible as the Word of God, and who believe what it says. That the rapture will occur as an element of those events related to the second advent of Christ is likewise accepted by those persons. The question is whether it will occur before or after the period of unbelievable tribulation which is described by the Lord as immediately preceding His second coming to earth (Matt. 24:16–30).

This tribulation is referred to by many Bible students as the great tribulation and, for sake of convenience, will be so designated in this study. It is mentioned or referred to in various places in the Old and New Testaments. The sixth to the eighteenth chapters of the Book of Revelation are believed to describe it in detailed but largely symbolic terms. In character it is absolutely without parallel as to its destructive and terrifying effects, and it is world-wide. If language has any real meaning, the terms used admit of no other or lesser conclusions.

PROBLEM OF THE TIME OF THE RAPTURE

There is serious honest disagreement among Christians who agree in their loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word, the Bible, as to whether the rapture occurs before or after the great tribulation. In view of such conflicting opinions, the question arises as to whether it is profitable to continue efforts to settle what possibly cannot be susceptible of settlement, and which is not by any means a fundamental or necessary article of the Christian faith. The answer to this question is not in doubt; we should continue. The fact that the problem exists and that only one of the conflicting opinions can be right should cause Christians to seek God's truth. If they approach the subject objectively, without emotional or prideful influences, they will certainly improve their knowledge of the Bible and it may be that as we all seek to learn God's truth He may give to the whole believing church a real and true understanding of the solution. As we approach the end of the age, the truth in this question becomes increasingly important to every believer and if there is an answer we should seek it.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Bible passage mentioned above and others indicate that the rapture takes place at the coming of Christ. The Lord is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father (Heb. 1:3) and will remain there until He comes again (Acts 3:19–21; Matt. 24:30; Acts 1:10–11). According to Strong's Concordance, three Greek words—*parousia* (coming or presence), *apokalypsis* (revelation), and *epiphaneia* (manifestation)—are used in the New Testament to designate Christ's second coming or advent. The first of these words, *parousia*, is used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 referring to the coming of the Lord at the rapture. It is also used in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 in referring to the destruction of the man of sin, or lawless one, which, as all agree, occurs at the second advent following the great tribulation. The second word, *apokalypsis*, is used of the church in 1 Corinthians 1:7 where it is said that "we are waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ." It is also used of the second advent itself in 2 Thessalonians 1:6–7. The third word, *epiphaneia*, is used of the second advent in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 where it refers to the brightness of Christ's coming when He destroys the man of sin. It is also applied to the manifestation or appearing of the Lord as the expectation and hope of the church (1 Tim. 6:14; Titus 2:13–14).

Since these three Greek words are employed to designate both that coming of the Lord which coincides with the rapture of the church and that one which is the second advent to the earth (Zech. 14:4; Matt. 24:30; Acts 1:10–11), it appears logical to many to conclude that the rapture occurs simultaneously, or practically so, with the second advent. A simple incident from life paralleling the pretribulation idea of the rapture shows that this conclusion is not necessarily true; rather that even used as the words are, they can (but may not) represent a coming, revelation, or manifestation of Christ which allows in the transit of Christ from heaven to earth a delay of any length necessary to accomplish any desired intermediate activities. In July 1956, President Eisenhower left Washington with the U.S. Embassy in Panama City as his destination. En route he stopped first at Tocumen Airport about fifteen miles from the city. There he was met by a selected, specially invited group and some time was consumed in greetings, ceremonies, and speeches. After using all the time necessary for this meeting, the President and others concerned, including the invited greeters, went by car to Panama City. En route thousands of people lined the streets and saw the President. Now, it is obvious that from the President's point of view and that of the journey as such, there was one coming, one revelation, one manifestation to Panama. Yet in this one operation he was met by two groups of people at different places and different times. In thinking or writing of the event, one would use the words *coming*, *revelation*, and *manifestation* in relation to the President's trip to Panama, but in a context appropriate to the experience of the particular group concerned.

Thus it is clear that the use of these words in reference to the rapture and second advent would be correct whether the rapture occurs before the great tribulation or after it at the advent itself. Their use as an argument for either point of view is therefore invalid.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

In view of this conclusion, the fact that nowhere does the New Testament expressly declare that the rapture does or does not precede the great tribulation leads to the further conclusion that the time of the rapture in relation to the great tribulation must be inferred from a careful analysis of those Bible passages which are relevant. But if that evidence shows us the answer, we should not reject it because it is contrary to past beliefs. The believer in Christ should desire and seek to learn the truth in this matter, but should have no personal preference for either the pretribulation or posttribulation position. The choice of the time of the rapture is God's, not ours. It is presumptuous of us to assume a combative attitude of proving or defending one human theory against another. To do this could appear to be primarily an effect of pride in a position we may have taken previously.

TIME OF THE RAPTURE IN FIRST THESSALONIANS

In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 the believers were informed that they would be delivered from the wrath to come. This epistle has a literary unity, therefore, the wrath so mentioned must be the same wrath which is mentioned in 5:9, and it must be that wrath manifested by the terrible destruction which accompanies the coming of the Day of the Lord. To assume otherwise would be to deny the consistency of the epistle.

The determining passage in this epistle is 5:1–11. This chapter follows the very clear and specific description of the rapture contained in the preceding chapter and opens with the statement that there is no need for Paul to write regarding the time of the rapture. The remainder of the passage gives the reason why it is not necessary so to write.

The destruction described in verse 3, which takes place at the coming or the initiation of the Day of the Lord, must refer to that manifestation of God's wrath which occurs during the great tribulation rather than to the day of vengeance mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 1:7–9 or the day of God's judgment of the lost described in Revelation 20:11–15. The former of these two judgments occurs at the second advent which in turn is immediately preceded by the great signs in the heavens and immediately before that by the great tribulation (Matt. 24:15–30). It is simply impossible that men could be saying at the end of the tribulation or during the heavenly signs such things as "peace and safety." In the first place, they would not have had time to recover from the time of the great tribulation and they would not even know that it had finished. In the second place, in Luke 21:25–27 it is quite clear that the heavenly signs themselves with the attendant conditions in human society cause men's hearts to fail from fear. At the time of the judgment of the great white throne in Revelation 20, those judged are the lost dead who are raised from hell and cast into the lake of fire. It is impossible that in hell these individuals should be saying "peace and safety."

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

In Revelation 15 and 16 we are informed that there is a final manifestation of God's wrath during the period immediately preceding the second advent. God's wrath in this period is manifested both by direct acts of God—such as the excessive heat from the sun (16:8–9) if this is to be taken literally; and by the indirect effect of God's wrathful judgment (Rom. 1:18–31) as manifested in the final war (16:12–16). Before the great tribulation begins, men could be saying “peace and safety.” It is apparent then that 1 Thessalonians 5:3 applies to the destruction during the great tribulation.

4

Verse 2 of the chapter states categorically “that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.” It is the Day of the Lord, not the destruction itself that is spoken of specifically. The destruction accompanies it and is its manifestation. The Day of the Lord is a definite, literal period of time which certainly reaches to the end of the millennium with the appearance of the new heavens and the new earth (2 Pet. 3:7–10). And it says that this day, this period of time, comes or begins in the night, as does a thief.

Night is a period of time, whether we think of it as being either a natural phenomenon or an indefinite time in which spiritual darkness reigns. Night also follows day which is similarly a period of time. Paul repeatedly makes it definitely certain that the church is of the day, not of the night, once in verse 4, four times in verse 5, once in verse 8. Taking *night* and *day* as periods of time, they cannot exist at the same time. Since the Day of the Lord begins at night, the church being of the day necessarily will not be present, having already joined the Lord in the air.

Another way of looking at this passage is that the day and night represent coexisting spiritual conditions rather than specific time periods, so that the unsaved of the tribulation period being in spiritual darkness would be unexpectedly surprised by the destruction while the believers being in the spiritual light would be present but not surprised. In this alternative, we note that when the Day of the Lord comes both the believers in the church and the lost would be present. Thus in effect the Day of the Lord would come as a thief in the night to the unsaved and as an enemy in the day to the saved since it would come to both at the same time. But the very idea of coming in the day or light (to the church people) contradicts the specific declaration that “the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.”

Of the two interpretations, the former appears to be more in conformity with the language of the passage. Its preference is further indicated by verses 9 and 10 quoted above. In these verses, it shows that the salvation mentioned is alternative to the wrath. As seen previously, this wrath is manifested by the great tribulation. Further, in verse 10 it shows that the purpose of the salvation is that, whether we are dead or alive in the body, we should live with Christ. Thus this purpose results in the exact conditions of the rapture as described in chapter 4. Even the words of comfort and exhortation in 5:10–11

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are practically identical with those in 4:17–18. Now, whether the rapture precedes or follows the great tribulation, it will surely take place and it will include all believers living at the moment. The “all” of 1 Corinthians 15:51 and the “we which are alive and remain” of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 admit of no exceptions. Therefore since the rapture must occur in any case and will include all living believers, why does Paul place it as a consequence of that salvation which is alternative to that particular wrath which is the great tribulation? The answer appears to be that it is by the rapture that the church is saved from the wrath of the great tribulation.

There is still another indication in 1 Thessalonians that the rapture precedes the great tribulation. In 1:10 it is stated that we will be delivered from “the wrath to come.” As seen above, the wrath under consideration is that during the great tribulation rather than either the vengeance at the second advent or the final judgment. Otherwise no limitation is indicated. Thus the wrath to come can be expected to include *all* of the wrath of the tribulation. This *all* implies all of the effects of the wrath because it is only by its effects, its judgments, that the wrath is manifested. The wrath falling in judgment on mankind during the great tribulation is not limited to that specifically designated as God’s wrath in Revelation 15 and 16. Chapter 15 opens with this verse: “And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvellous, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God.” It is noted that these seven plagues are not all of the plagues, only the last ones. It is also clear that they fill up the cup of wrath of God. Other translations improve on the expression “fill up,” but all show that these plagues complete or bring to an end the wrath. Thus the entire great tribulation with its terrible destruction is the manifestation of God’s wrath.

The sufferings resulting from God’s wrath in the great tribulation are of two kinds, those which are the direct result and others which are indirect. The direct judgments fall on unbelievers as indicated by Revelation 7:1–3; 9:4; 16:2, 5–11. In the great tribulation at the end of man’s age the natural evil in man, dominated by Satan and his demons, comes to its climax and is so vile that not even the terrible judgments of God’s wrath will cause them to repent. Those judgments prove that these unsaved men are absolute and forever rebels against God.

The nature and indirect results of God’s wrath in the great tribulation flow from the effect of Romans 1:18–31 as seen previously. The great tribulation includes wars, famines, pestilence, death (Rev. 6:4–8), and specifically for believers of that period (Rev. 7) martyrdom and persecution (Rev. 6:9–11; 11:7–10; 12:17; 13:7, 15–17; 16:14; 17:6; 20:4). These are the kinds of tribulation that the church has suffered throughout its history. That the believers on earth at any time do suffer these particular things, as they do now, is clearly proved by Matthew 24:15–22; John 14:22; Acts 14:22. In the great tribulation the

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severity of the suffering is multiplied beyond description. Then as now God's grace will be sufficient for them (2 Cor. 1:4; 12:9). But they are not delivered from this indirect judgment of God's wrath (Rom. 1:18–31), rather they endure to the end (Matt. 24:13). As are believers now, they will be witnesses to the saving power of God. On the other hand, the Bible says that the church is to be delivered from the wrath to come and without qualifying words this means all of the wrath to come, both direct and indirect. The complete delivery from this judgment can be only by death or the rapture. Therefore, the church, if living on the earth when the destruction of the great tribulation comes suddenly and unexpectedly as a thief in the night, must either die all at once or be translated. Since the Bible nowhere indicates that all the church is to die at one time, the delivery from the wrath can only be by the rapture, and that before the great tribulation.

Some may object to the idea that delivery from the wrathful judgments of the great tribulation implies that the church will have been removed by the rapture from their very presence. Therefore, the matter must be examined more closely.

The destruction is material and physical, as shown above, although of course there are also accompanying spiritual and psychological consequences. The first question is: Does the delivery from wrath refer only to safekeeping from spiritual defection or denial of Christ in tribulation by steadfast faith and spiritual victory? Now, this victory is already a certainty. Christians are kept by the power of God through faith (1 Pet. 1:5) and shall never perish (John 10:28). God will confirm them to the end (1 Cor. 1:7–8). Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (2 Cor. 4:17), and we always triumph in Christ (2 Cor. 2:14). In view of these wonderful promises, we are confident that the born-again Christians would be faithful unto death. The Holy Spirit dwelling in them will see to that. Nevertheless, let us assume that a Christian does live through and survive the tribulation in steadfast faith or that he is faithful unto death. He has been delivered or kept from spiritual apostasy or denial—but that is not the wrath. As shown above, the wrath of God is manifested in physical and material judgments. Thus the faithful Christian would have been delivered from his own weakness, but not from the wrath. But the promise is that he will be delivered from the wrath.

The injunction to live righteously and soberly, to put on “the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation” (1 Thess. 5:8) is always applicable to Christians under any conditions. Furthermore, the next sentence (v. 9) implies that we put on these qualities because God has not appointed us to wrath. In other words, we do not do these things in order to go through the tribulation trials victoriously but rather because of what God has already done for us in delivering us from the wrath to come.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

As seen above, the destruction at the coming of the Day of the Lord is physical and material. Those whom it strikes do not escape (1 Thess. 5:2–3). Here we note an interesting change in pronouns. In verses 1 and 2 Paul addresses the Christians as “ye,” but then he says: “when *they* shall say, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon *them*, as travail upon a woman with child, and *they* shall not escape” (v. 3; italics added). The inescapable conclusion must be that the church does escape, and for that reason there is no need for Paul to discuss the “times and the seasons” of the rapture (v. 1).

7

The question now arises: Does the escape mean security in the midst of the destruction, as that of Israel in Egypt prior to the Exodus, or does it mean absence from the very presence of the destruction as in the pretribulation position? It is recognized that God can do anything He chooses, and we know that in Egypt the Israelites were segregated in the land of Goshen, but in the great tribulation there is no indication of such segregation of Jews or any other disciples of any kind. In fact such segregation is foreign to the very idea of the world-wide preaching of the gospel. Furthermore, we know that during the tribulation the disciples are subjected to suffering and martyrdom and that those who are saved are those who endure (Matt. 24:7–13; Rev. 6:9–11; 13:7, 8, 15). The slaying of the martyrs in the great tribulation is the culmination and the most of that which the world can do to believers. When one’s life has been destroyed, no more can be done to hurt him. Therefore, martyrdom is the maximum effect of men’s wrath which is the consequence of God’s wrath. It is not delivery and cannot be so considered under any reasonable use of language. If the church is in the great tribulation, then some members are not delivered. This is contrary to the clear meaning of 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9 where no exceptions to the delivery are intimated in any way. The promise is for the whole church.

From the preceding discussion, it is concluded that the First Epistle to the Thessalonians establishes definitely that the rapture of the church occurs before the great tribulation. The validity of this argument is corroborated and strengthened by the analysis of the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians.

TIME OF THE RAPTURE IN SECOND THESSALONIANS

Verse 4 in the first chapter of this epistle shows that the church was in serious persecution and tribulation “so that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure.”

The deciding passage in this epistle is 2:1–12, and the understanding of it is dependent on verse 1. Here Paul is speaking concerning the coming of the Lord and the rapture. The word “concerning” is used rather than “by” as the proper translation in the Revised Standard Version, and “touching” in the American Standard Version. Thus we see what

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follows in the passage has a direct relation to the rapture. In fact, it may be said to be about the rapture.

In verse 2 it is evident that Paul had learned that the Thessalonian Christians were shaken in mind, disturbed or troubled, as the Day of the Lord was at hand. The condition of these people was not mere excitement or anticipation regarding the Lord's return and the rapture in connection with the Day of the Lord, but it was fear. This is clear from the use of the word "troubled." In the Greek dictionary of *Strong's Concordance* the Greek word *throeō*, translated "troubled," is given the meaning "to frighten." According to the same authority, this Greek word is used only twice elsewhere in the new Testament, Matthew 24:6 and Mark 13:7. In these verses the evident meaning of the word is that of fear caused by wars and rumors of wars. In translating *throeō* in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, Ronald Knox uses the word "terrify." In the Matthew and Mark references the word is translated "alarmed" by the RSV and Phillips, "disturbed" by Knox, and "troubled" by the ASV. It is evident that reports that the Day of the Lord was at hand were causing confusion and fear.

The question arises why should these people be afraid of the coming of the Day of the Lord and particularly as it concerned the rapture at the Lord's coming. The key to the solution appears to be in verse 2 in the phrase translated "at hand" in the Authorized Version. Phillips gives it as "almost here." Scofield in the margin gives it "now present." The RSV translates it as "has come." Knox uses "close at hand." Whichever one of these translations is the most nearly correct, it is evident that these Christians feared that they were either in the Day of the Lord or that it was so close that it was immediately imminent. That this Day of the Lord referred to the great tribulation rather than to the second advent itself becomes clear as we analyze the effect of these translations.

If we assume the proper translation to be "has come" or "now present" and if it refers to the second advent itself, then Christ would already be present on earth. The believers would be with Christ. They would previously have seen the great heavenly signs. Paul mentions none of these things; rather he mentioned the apostasy and the man of sin who undoubtedly corresponds to the abomination of desolation referred to by the Lord in Matthew 24:15. The revelation of this man of sin following the apostasy marks the beginning of the great tribulation described in Matthew 24:16–21. Therefore, as in 1 Thessalonians 5:2, the Day of the Lord refers to the great tribulation. It is clear from this discussion based on the translation "has come" that the Thessalonian Christians were

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ASV American Standard Version

RSV Revised Standard Version

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afraid that the great tribulation was already present. And since this belief and fear are directly concerned with the coming of the Lord and the rapture of the church, it becomes also clear that these people had been taught by Paul that their salvation from the great tribulation would be by way of the rapture. Yet, they feared that the tribulation was present and that they were in it. Apparently, to them, Paul's teaching was in error.

If we accept the translation "at hand" and if the Day of the of the Lord refers to the second advent, then a different situation results. The Christians being in great tribulation should not be troubled by the prospect of the Day of the Lord's immediacy but rather should rejoice because it would mean their almost immediate release by way of the rapture from their sufferings and entrance into the blessing of being with the Lord. Therefore, again the Day of the Lord cannot refer to the second advent but rather can refer to the great tribulation. And for the same reason as stated above the Christians must have expected to be saved from the tribulation by the rapture. It is no wonder that Paul so firmly warned them against false rumors of the Day of the Lord.

This in any case it must be concluded that Paul had taught and the Thessolonian Christians had believed that the rapture would occur before the great tribulation.

The remainder of the passage—verses 6–12—also points to a pretribulation rapture. The man of sin is Satan's man and comes by the working of Satan. He does not come now and cannot come until the appointed time, because there is one who presently restrains him. When this one who restrains him is out of the way, and not before, Satan reveals his man (2 Thess. 2:6–8).

As far as is revealed in the Bible, Satan is the greatest of created beings. He is a rebel against and enemy of God, the leader of demons and rebellious angels. He is referred to as "the prince of this world," the god of this age, and the "prince of the power of the air." The Christian must put on the whole armor of God to be able to withstand him. Only God can defeat or restrain him. Therefore, the only effective restraining power is that of God.

God is active in the affairs of men during the great tribulation as seen in 2 Thessalonians 2:11. While the restraining power must be God, yet He is God in a special sense, the sense that He can be removed. Since God is omnipresent, the only apparent way by which He can be removed is as the Holy Spirit indwelling the believers individually and the church as a body. As the Apostle John says, "Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world." Since the Holy Spirit never departs from the believer it appears that the removal of the restraining power can only refer to the removal of the church. Furthermore, the only good thing (other than martyrs in the tribulation period) that is to be removed prior to the second advent is the church at the rapture. If the one removed is not the church,

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

the body of Christ, then what could it be? There should be some satisfactory alternative but none is apparent.

An alternative interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:7 is interesting and if true is thought by some to invalidate the preceding conclusion. The verse itself reads in the American Standard Version: "For the mystery of lawlessness doth already work: only there is one that restraineth now, until he be taken out of the way."

10

The alternative theory is that the last part of the preceding verse should be generally: "until he come out of the midst." The "he" in this case is supposed to be the man of sin, or lawless one. Of seven translations of this passage (Authorized, ASV and RSV, Alford, Knox, Phillips, and Way) none uses the alternative mentioned above. All agree that it is the restraining power which is actually removed. Alford in his comment on this (*The New Testament for English Readers*) says the phrase, "be removed" is "used of any person or thing which is taken out of the way, whether by death or other removal."

Comment on this passage in *The New Bible Commentary*, page 1061, in discussing the Greek used in the phrase "to be taken out of the way" says: "Failure to recognize this idiom has led some to force upon the words here a literalist translation, until he (antichrist) become (i.e. appear) out of the midst; but this is not Paul's meaning."

It would seem also, that the ordinary sense of the passage would be illogical were the alternative translation used. Verses 6 and 7 show that there is active restraint which is all that prevents the appearance of the man of sin. That is, this man *cannot* appear until the restraint is removed. Thus when he does come it follows that the restraint must have ceased its active opposition. Therefore the alternative translation seems to have no merit, and even were it used it would imply that before the man of sin appears the restraint would have been removed.

Another problem is the question whether Matthew 28:20 prohibits the idea that the church can be removed from the earth before the end of the age, that is, the second advent itself which of course follows the great tribulation. Following the command to go and teach all nations this verse reads: "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world (age). *Amen.*"

Regarding the disciples to whom the Lord spoke directly, they died a long time ago and are now with the Lord even though their bodies have vanished in the grave (Phil. 1:21–23). The same can be said of all believers who have lived and died since then. These are

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not only with the Lord now but will be so until the end of the age and forever. As the age comes to its close there will be disciples of some kind on earth, the elect (Matt. 24:15–26, 31). The Lord will be with them too. If previously the rapture had occurred, there would be a new body of the elect but that fact would not invalidate the promise made by Christ.

The apostasy which with the man of sin is the sign of the coming of the Day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:2–3) also provides a convincing clue as to the time of the rapture. Apostasy is not new. According to *Strong's Concordance*, in the Greek dictionary, the Greek word *apostasia*, translated “falling away” or “apostasy,” means the state of defection from truth. Before the revelation of the man of sin in his true character, there will be the apostasy. The use of the definite article makes this apostasy a special or particular one. The particularity of the apostasy might relate to either the time of its occurrence or its character, or both. If the time were the primary feature, then there would be little need for the definite article. An apostasy would serve just as well. Therefore the character of the apostasy must be its true significance.

Apostasy is and always has been the spiritual attitude of the human race. The truth that God is a universal belief in mankind (Ps. 14:1; Rom. 1:19–20). Yet the human race as a whole is dead in sin. They have always rejected God and His truth and have been determined to deny Him in their will to be masters of their own destiny (Rom. 1:21–23, 25, 28). It is undeniable that mankind is in a state of apostasy and always has been. Further, apostasy has always existed in Israel and in the church. At one time in Israel there were only seven thousand men who were not idolaters (1 Kings 19:10, 14, 18; Rom. 11:2–4). The burden of much of what the prophets said was a denunciation of the apostasy in Israel. The history of the church shows much apostasy, probably never more than there is today. In its various forms, the defection may include modernism, formalism, mysticism, or anything else which denies or counterfeits the fundamentals of the apostolic faith as recorded in the Word of God. Persons subscribing to these denials or counterfeits, regardless of their church affiliation, are the unsaved or tares among the wheat, because a person who has been born again, being a new creation in Christ and eternally indwelt by the Holy Spirit, cannot defect from the faith or perish (John 10:27–30; 1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 5:17). Having never been born again, the apostasy of these self-styled Christians must be either a defection from a former profession of faith or an appropriation of the name Christian and membership in the visible Christian community even in the total absence of any such profession.

An idea of what *the* apostasy means can be gained by considering the state of men immediately after the rapture. At that time there will not be a single human being left on earth who is a real believer. Every one will be at enmity against God whether he is in what is left of the visible Christian organizations (Christendom) or is simply a pagan.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

That is, apostasy will be total. Any earlier state of apostasy must be less than total and all of them differing from one another only in relative degree and type. Therefore we conclude that the only apostasy which can be designated by the definite article *the* is that total one which is the direct and immediate consequence of the rapture. It follows that the rapture must precede the apostasy as well as the great tribulation.

An objection to this idea might be made on the grounds of Paul's use of the apostasy as one of the conditions precedent to the coming of the Day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:2–3). It might be thought that the apostasy is a sign to believers in the church. But that is not what he says. He uses the term only to show that the Day of the Lord had not come. He does not say they are to look for the apostasy. It is apparent that the apostasy will precede the Day of the Lord whether the church is present or not. If the rapture precedes the apostasy, then obviously the church will not see it when it subsequently comes. On the other hand, were the church to see it, then the question arises, could it be *the* apostasy (as discussed above). We believe not.

THE TIME OF THE RAPTURE IN THE LIGHT OF MATTHEW 24

As the days of Noah were. In Matthew 24:37–41 the coming of the Lord is compared to the days of Noah. The peoples of the world will have reached the very depth of sin without suspicion of Christ's coming. Then when the Lord returns judgment falls on them; some are removed and others left. Unless we violate the very essence of the comparison between the advent and the flood, we must believe that those who remain are the righteous (as was Noah). Those who are left will be left on earth as shown by their being in the field or in bed. This picture parallels exactly the scene at the end of the age as told by Christ in the parable of the wheat and the tares, which He clearly and definitely interpreted for His disciples (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43). In this discourse He said that first the evil ones would be taken out for destruction by fire. Then the righteous will "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt. 13:41–43). This shining forth is obviously on earth where they will be before the sinners are removed.

We see then that there will be some of God's people on earth as human beings (in the field, in bed) after Christ comes again. As regards the Church, however, it (all of it) is to be removed from the earth, (1 Thess. 4:13–17; 1 Cor. 15:51–52).

The interval between the end of the great tribulation and the heavenly signs is nil, as shown by the use of the word *immediately* in Matthew 24:29, and as the powers of the heavens are shaken, *then* shall Christ come. The time consumed by the shaking of heaven is not stated but the language clearly does not indicate more than a very short space. If the rapture takes place after the great tribulation, it must be in that very brief interval just before the actual advent of Christ to the Mount of Olives. That is, it would be at the end

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of the age and could precede the removal of the sinners by only an insignificant time at most. But in the parable of the tares it is the sinners who are removed first at the end of the age. Further, the righteous are not even removed, they shine forth on the earth. It seems clear from these facts that the rapture cannot occur in that very brief interval between the end of the great tribulation and the advent of Christ. Since it must take place, the rapture must be at some other and earlier time. That would place it before or during the great tribulation. It would have to be far enough before the end of the tribulation and advent to allow for the formation of a new body of "righteous." Furthermore, it must precede the great tribulation because the disciples who are in view as going through that period are to watch for the sign which precipitates the tribulation, the abomination of desolation in the temple.

Matthew 24:31 has been suggested as the mention of the rapture in the Olivet Discourse. This verse immediately follows that which describes the actual advent and the gathering action narrated evidently is an element or immediate consequence of that advent. This verse announces the gathering together of His elect. If verse 31 does apply to the rapture, who then are the righteous left on earth in verses 40–41? It is obvious that the reasoning applicable to those verses is valid for this one. Therefore, the verse cannot apply to the church. Thus, again the rapture must be placed in or before the great tribulation with sufficient time allowed for the accumulation of the righteous ones who are seen in verses 40–41.

The disciples of Matthew 24:15–26, 40–41. The preceding conclusion that the rapture must precede the great tribulation raises a perplexing question. Who are the disciples represented in the Olivet Discourse as being on earth during that period?

The Lord was speaking directly to men who were elect of God, true believers in Him, and members of the New Testament church which was shortly to be baptized by the Holy Spirit. The disciples of the great tribulation certainly have characteristics which are identical with those of the church today. The Lord speaks to them as His own (Matt. 24). Christ Himself is the only way to God and salvation (John 14:6). Therefore they must be believers in Him as Lord and Savior just as are Christians today. The martyrs of the great Tribulation period will be witnesses for Jesus as have been believers since Pentecost (Rev. 20:4). The new covenant, as distinct from the old covenant, the law of Moses, has been applicable to Jew and Christian alike since the cross (Heb. 10:1–22). Unbelievers will be judged at the second advent for disobedience to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 1:7–9).

Yet if the rapture precedes the great tribulation, these later disciples can not be members of that New Testament church to which Paul wrote. There ought to be a reasonable explanation. Right here a fundamental principle must be recognized. If the tribulation

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saints are only later members of the church of today, the two bodies must be identical in all respects, not merely in some or most, even though these maybe the most important. A simple illustration shows that close similarity does not imply identity. For example, a father may have a number of sons. They are all his, they all became his by the same general process, they all look to him as father, their family is different and separate from all other families. Yet there may be great differences among them. The father may choose or elect one to run his farm and inherit it. He may finance the medical education of another. Still another may handle the father's investments or operate the town business which he owns. Thus we see that these sons, for all their common characteristics, are not cast in the same mold. Neither is it necessary in God's dealing with men, individually or in groups, that He ordain the same experiences for all His own, even though they are all saved in the same way. Thus, if God chooses to translate the church as a body before the great tribulation and then save another body of believers by the same process of faith in Christ, there is no reasonable or Scriptural basis for rejecting the idea. Now, the rapture itself would be just such a distinction between groups and if it is plainly inferred from the New Testament there is no reason for rejecting it simply because the tribulation saints have the same spiritual characteristics as do members of the apostolic and twentieth century church.

Similarly, having applied the new covenant to the Jews after the cross, and having admitted the Gentiles into covenant relations with Himself, both in one body, the church (Eph. 2:11–22), there seems to be no reason for assuming that God could not remove that body of believers and then at a later date apply the same covenant to others. Therefore, the spiritual similarity of tribulation saints and the present church is not in itself a legitimate reason for rejecting the idea of a pretribulation rapture. That idea must stand or fall on the specific Biblical evidence for or against it.

The question still remains, however, who are the disciples seen in the tribulation in Matthew 24:15–26? We note that there is a temple (which can only be in Jerusalem) that Christ speaks through the twelve disciples to other disciples who will be in Judea and that there are strong repeated warnings against false Christs. All of this occurs during the great tribulation preceding Christ's second advent. On the other hand, as far as the church is concerned, the temple in Jerusalem is of little moment, Judea is a relatively insignificant Jewish locality with few Christians in it, and with our knowledge of the rapture so clearly described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17 there is no reasonable possibility that born-again Christians need to be warned against accepting any supposed Christ in the desert or any other place. The Jewish characteristics mentioned just above should be recognized as a hint to seek a solution in the Old Testament Scriptures which deal primarily with the nation of Israel.

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The discourse of the Lord recorded in Matthew 24 related to events near or at the end of the age including His advent and some attendant events. The narrative was initiated by questions asked by the disciples, one of which was: "What shall be the sign of thy coming and of the end of the world (age)?"

Since the Old Testament deals with matters preceding and following the second advent, the salient fact which it teaches on the subject should be understood before examination of the Olivet Discourse. That the Lord had mentioned the end of the age and His future coming is evident from Matthew 13:40–43, 47–50; 16:27. Just how much the disciples knew of the Old Testament teachings is not important because Christ knew and His teaching in Matthew 24 certainly must be consistent with the prophetic Scriptures.

The key prophecies are the earliest. Later ones added details or are repetitious, but the overall picture becomes clear as we study them.

The first is Genesis 17:6–8. In this God made an everlasting covenant with Abraham and his descendants and gave to them the land of Canaan (Palestine) as an everlasting possession.

In Leviticus 26:1–13 and Deuteronomy 28:1–14 Abraham's descendants, the children of Israel, were told of the blessings God would heap on them in their land if they obeyed His commandments. In Leviticus 26:14–39; Deuteronomy 4:24–28; 28:15–67, they were warned of the chastisement which would result from disobedience and idolatry, ending in a world-wide dispersion and persecution whose duration is not stated. In Leviticus 26:40–45; Deuteronomy 4:29–32; 30:1–10, we learn that in dispersion and persecution God would not allow them to be totally destroyed and that in the latter days, being in tribulation, they will turn back to God sincerely. This repenting will include acknowledgment of their own sinful disobedience and a real and full effort to obey the laws of Moses. That this is the meaning of turning to God is clear from Leviticus 26:38–41 and Deuteronomy 30:2. He will then return, restore them to their land (Palestine), and give them and their children (seed) a new heart so that they will love and obey Him. Then they will receive all of the blessings He has promised.

Later prophecies add details. From Zechariah 13:8–9; 14:1–5; Daniel 9:27 with Matthew 24:15; Joel 2:1–32; Zephaniah 1:14M–2:3 and other Old Testament references to the Day of the Lord, it is clear that prior to the Lord's return a portion of the people of Israel will have returned to Palestine in unbelief, will have a temple, will suffer terribly both by wars and persecutions. In Ezekiel 20:33–44 and Hosea 2:14–23 we see that prior to restoration to Palestine and full conversion, the children of Israel, still dwelling in other countries, will be gathered by God, brought to the wilderness and judged, rebels being purged out from among them and not entering into the promised land. The remainder will be

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restored to the land of Canaan, Full conversion and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit will occur after they are placed in their land (Deut. 30:5–6; Ezek. 36:24–27; Joel 2:27–29; Isa. 66:5–9). This coming of the Holy Spirit to them will be in the same manner as He came to the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:4, 16–18). After full conversion the Jews will never again turn from God, they or their descendants. This view of the conversion of Israel is supported by other evidences. Christ will not return to the Jews until they say “Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord,” (Matthew 23:29). It is when Christ returns and they see Him that they shall know that the crucified Jesus is their long expected Messiah (Zech. 12:9–14; Ezek. 39:21–22). It is in the day of His power that they will be willing (Ps. 110:3). This psalm surely points to the glorious advent of the Son of Man in power and glory (Luke 21:27; 1 Tim. 6:14–16).

The prophecies cited above apply to the nation Israel as a whole, in particular to it in its rebellious attitude. Joel 2:12–17 illustrates this truth. Yet always there has been a faithful remnant within the nation (Rom. 11:1–5). This remnant is seen in the Old Testament in various passages (Isa. 10:20–22; Jer. 15:11, etc.). Simeon and Anna were members of the faithful remnant as the New Testament record opened (Luke 2:25–38). As the end of the age approaches with its fulfillment of prophecy, there will be a faithful remnant (Isa. 26:20–21). Since the cross, the only way in which there can be a faithful remnant is through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who came to fulfill the Law. Therefore the great tribulation remnant will be born-again disciples of Christ, just as are church members today but, as seen above, they do not need to be members of the church which is seen in the Epistle to the Ephesians.

The preceding ideas about the remnant raise the question as to what is meant in Deuteronomy 30:2 which predicates the return of the Lord on the requirement that Israel in dispersion and tribulation obey all that the Lord commanded them in the law of Moses. Right here some may think that we are faced with a real problem regarding any future relevance of the law of Moses to Jews. Christ came to fulfill the law and is the end of the law to everyone who believes (Matt. 5:17; Rom. 10:4). The law does not and cannot save; rather it convicts of sin (Gal. 3:21; Rom. 3:19–20; 4:15). The believer is not under the law but is dead to it (Rom. 6:14; 7:4). The rule of godly living is not law but grace, doing the will of God as we “walk in the Spirit,” are “filled with the Spirit” (Rom. 8:2, 4), and “looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). On the other hand, Christ said that not the least part of the law will pass till all be fulfilled, which would include those prophetic declarations in Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 4 and 30 which have been already discussed (Matt. 5:17–18). Furthermore, we know that the purpose of the law was to lead Israel to Christ through faith since the law convicts of sin and demonstrates the guilt of men (Gal. 5:19–25). Only Christ can redeem. The Israelites, no better or no worse than the Gentiles, were given the law as witness of the deep-rooted sin

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of all mankind. Except for the believing remnant, they never understood the real significance of the law and were not under conviction of sin. The Jews did not believe the law. If they had they would have received Christ, as some did (John 5:45–46). Here we have a basis for understanding the application of the law of Moses before the second advent. The Jews in their own land and with a temple will be applying the law to themselves but in unrighteousness as in the days of the Lord's earthly ministry and as orthodox Jews do today. The terrible tribulation combined with the prophesied ministry of Elijah (Mal. 4:5; Matt. 17:10–13) will cause the Jews to see the true meaning of the law and of their own past dispersion and persecutions. They will repent and pray for the Messiah to come. They will be like those Jews who sincerely responded to John the Baptist's ministry. The close parallel between the ministry of John the Baptist and the first advent of Christ on the one hand, and the ministry of Elijah and the second advent on the other is obvious. The major differences are between the relative calm in Palestine and the rejection of Christ on the one hand, and on the other the great tribulation and the reception of Christ their King. Therefore, it seems safe to conclude that the prophesied repentance of Israel (the nation, as distinct from the faithful remnant) under the law at the end of the age is not inconsistent with what the New Testament teaches about the law in this age of grace. Rather it fulfills the purpose of God in giving the law (Isa. 46:8–11).

In none of the Scriptures cited above or anywhere else in the Old Testament has any indication been found that as the end of the age approaches or is reached there will be anything remotely resembling the translation of living believers such as described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17.

That there will be a salvation of Gentiles as well as Jews in the great tribulation is shown in Revelation 7, particularly verse 14 (ASV). They too can be saved only by faith in Christ, as we are today (vv. 9–17). They too will suffer martyrdom under the Beast (Rev. 13:7, 15). Some will undoubtedly live through the great tribulation and enter into the millennial kingdom.

There appears to be still another multitude of Gentiles who enter the millennial kingdom. These are seen in Matthew 25:31–46. Verse 46 shows that they enter eternal life, which requires the new birth through faith in Christ, but their initial acceptance by Christ is based on their treatment of His elect during the great tribulation. What a marvelous fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham this will be: "I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee" (Gen. 12:3)!

The foregoing picture of the people on earth gives us a situation quite similar to that today. There will be three groups of Jews: the faithful remnant, believers in Christ;

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orthodox Jews self-righteously standing on the law, and who will eventually be convicted of sin by the law, turning to Christ; pagan Jews; who will be purged out. We see the Gentiles also in three groups: believers in Christ; unbelievers, but compassionate people (such as we have today) who aid the “elect” in their distress and who will be converted to real faith by Christ; and the utterly lost. We thus discover that there appears to be nothing mysterious in the kinds of people who will be on the earth during the great tribulation. Yet, as has been shown, this fact does not prohibit a rapture of the church of the epistles before the great tribulation.

That the Gentiles also participate in the millennial kingdom is clear from Isaiah 2:1–5; 11:1–9; Micah 4:1–7, Zechariah 8:20–23; 14:16. During the initial thousand years of the kingdom (the millennium) there will be marriage and children (Isa. 11:6–7; Ezek. 37:25; Jer. 30:18–19; 33:7–11). Although the Gentiles who enter the kingdom at its establishment will undoubtedly be “born again” (Matt. 25:46), yet at the end of the millennium when Satan is released for a short time a greater number of their descendants will be deceived and try to destroy the Jews (or possibly all believers) (Rev. 20:7–9). This proves that those particular Gentiles will not have been “born again.” Thus after a utopia lasting one thousand years with the knowledge of the Lord filling the earth (Isa. 11:9), the natural heart of man will still be as evil as it ever was under its covering of superficial human righteousness. This is the final demonstration of the truth that “except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

Why is the rapture omitted from Matthew 24? Apart from verses 31, 40–41 of Matthew 24, there is no possible reference in that discourse to the rapture of the church. Yet that event must occur, so it must come earlier than the end of the great tribulation. Does the chapter provide a clue? It does. The disciples asked for the sign of the end of the age and of the Lord’s return. The only sign given was the appearance of the abomination of desolation in the temple. An effective sign must be definite and easily recognizable. The false christs (v. 5), the wars and their destructive consequences and the persecutions of verses 6–13 are general in nature not specific signs. The completion of the world-wide preaching of the gospel of the kingdom (v. 14) could not be a sign because no one could know when that preaching has been finished. Also, since the end itself comes at the completion of the witness, and since wars, physical disasters, persecutions, and false christs are clearly seen in other parts of the Bible to be elements of the great tribulation, all of these things are conditions or activities of that period but are not capable of use as signs other than in a most general way. The very language of Christ Himself in verses 15 and 16 shows that *the sign* is the abomination of desolation.

This sign, the desecration of the yet future temple by the man of sin (2 Thess. 2:3–4), as definite, clear and momentous as it will be, yet will be provided by one man. How much

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more startling and momentous will be the sudden disappearance of the church, probably millions of people! Yet in all the Olivet Discourse we can find no mention of it. The disciples asked for the sign, and the Lord gave them the answer, but it did not include this great sign, the rapture. We can only conclude that marvelous and as obvious as it will be, yet it will not be a sign of the end of age. Therefore it must take place sufficiently in advance of the great tribulation and the man of sin so that it will not constitute a useful definite sign of the coming of the end.

As discussed previously, the immediate consequence of the rapture will be a state of apostasy or rebellion against God such as the world has never known. It will be total. Thus the rapture not only precedes the apostasy (2 Thess. 2:3), but in a sense is the cause of its universality.

While the immediate consequence of the rapture is apostasy, its stupendous implications may be a contributing cause to salvation of the Jews and the Gentiles who during the great tribulation refuse to worship the Beast (Rev. 13:8, 15).

Conclusions bearing on the rapture. The foregoing examination of Matthew 24 shows that: (a) There is no direct or indirect mention of the rapture in the Chapter. (b) The disciples at the age end are Jews (in view in Matt. 24) and Gentiles, but are not the church. (c) A posttribulation rapture is inconsistent with the events at the second advent. (d) The rapture must precede the man of sin and the great tribulation by a considerable time in order that it can not be a sign of the end of the age and to allow formation of a new body of disciples following the total apostasy after the rapture.

THE TIME OF THE RAPTURE IN THE REVELATION

Relevance of the study. Even before studying the book of Revelation, it would appear reasonable to assume that it would give us at least a basis for a sound inference as to the time of the rapture of the church. The book is a prophecy and clearly points to the Second Coming of Christ. The title is "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." After a short opening statement showing that its message is from God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it points to the reader to the future Advent of Christ (1:7). The rest of the first nineteen chapters carry the reader finally to the description of that Advent (19:11–21). Although the message was addressed to seven specific churches in the Roman province of Asia it is obviously intended for all churches and for all true Christians (1:3; 22:6–7, 9–19).

A salient characteristic of the book is that its prophetic message is shown by signs (1:1) of which a great number are used. It would be a mistake however to assume that all of its statements are signs or symbols. The book contains many declarative affirmations in plain language and these together with the use of those same symbols in the Old

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Testament allow us to seek and grasp some real meaning in the book. An example of this combination of the symbol and the literal is seen in 1:20. Here the symbols are the seven stars and the seven candlesticks. Their meaning is stated by the angels of the seven churches and the seven churches respectively. Therefore, in seeking information about the rapture in the Revelation we must recognize that if mentioned it could be in the form of a declarative statement, a symbol, or a combination of both.

Have we a right to expect a mention of the rapture in the book of Revelation? We know from 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and Philippians 3:20–21 that the hope and expectation of the New Testament church is its union with the Lord. For still living (in the body) believers this union results from the rapture at the Lord's still future coming. It is difficult to minimize this doctrine of the rapture as far as today's believers are concerned. In the Revelation we have a prophetic book whose message was addressed to first-century churches and then reaches to the Second Advent and beyond. In the first nineteen chapters it describes in detail, although largely by signs, many events, personages or circumstances which precede the Second Advent. In view of these facts and that the book is specifically addressed to Christian churches (although its message is for all of God's servants), it seems practically certain that an event as startling and important as the rapture must be mentioned in some place in the book. The problem, then, is to find it and in the context in which it is found to determine whether it occurs before or after the great tribulation.

The great tribulation in the Revelation. This tribulation is clearly described in the Revelation. There are a number of reasons for this assertion. First, from the sixth to the eighteenth chapters the entire narrative is one of woe, suffering, torment, death, and satanic influences and activities. Taken together it would appear to describe the ultimate in satanic and human depravity, beyond which neither could go. Second, the beast of Revelation 13 and 17 so closely resembles the age-end prophecies of Daniel and the abomination spoken of in Matthew 24:15, and the great wars of Revelation 6 and 16:12–16 are so similar to the invasions of Ezekiel 38 and 39 and Joel at the end of the age that they must be the same. Third, the parallel between the end of the age as described in Matthew 24 and the judgments of the seals in Revelation 7 is obvious. In Matthew 24:6–7, we have the wars, famines, and pestilences of the second, third, and fourth seal judgments. In Matthew 24:8–13 is described a great persecution of disciples paralleling the vision of the persecutions of the fifth seal. In the sixth seal we find the exact heavenly signs described in Matthew 24:29. The false christs of Matthew 24:5 are similar to the rider on the white horse of the first seal, whereas the true Christ is not seen on His white horse until the nineteenth chapter. The description of the two are so dissimilar in grandeur that the rider in the sixth chapter must be the counterfeit.

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An interesting and helpful feature in this study is the structure of the narrative in Revelation as it shows the relationship of the three series of judgments, the seals (chap. 6), the trumpets (chaps. 8–9, 11:15–19) and the bowls of wrath (chaps. 15–16). As seen above the sixth seal introduces heavenly signs like those mentioned in Matthew 24:29 and Joel 2:31 as immediately preceding the Second Advent. As a result of the sixth seal (6:15–17) we see the anguish of men under the impending judgment (Joel 2:31; 2 Thess. 1:7–10; Matt. 24:30; Rev. 1:7). In subsequent passages in Revelation we see men carrying on their sinful ways without regard to the wrath of God (Rev. 9:20–21; 16:9–11). In chapter 8 the seventh seal introduces a short silence, a wait of half an hour, waiting for what? In Matthew it is the Advent. Therefore the conclusion is reasonable that the seal judgments cover the entire period of the great tribulation and the final signs preceding the Advent.

In the trumpet judgments the seventh announces the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 11:15). Nothing is left but for Him to appear at the Advent. In the vial, or bowl judgments the seventh announces a great voice from the throne of God, saying “It is done” (Rev. 16:17). With the same words Christ completed his suffering on the cross and dismissed His Spirit. Here, in Revelation, nothing is left to do but the coming of the Lord.

It seems clear that in the seal, trumpet, and vial judgments there are three concurrent series of judgments; at least, they reach their end at the same time. They are all part of the great tribulation. The seals appear to be judgments as seen by men. The trumpets call forth judgments as answers to the prayers of the saints and the vials are God’s wrath in action.

The rapture. Assuming that the preceding analysis is correct, it assists us in looking for mention of the rapture. If it comes after the great tribulation it should be found in connection with the sixth and seventh seals or the seventh trumpet or the seventh vial. If the rapture occurs before the tribulation its mention should come before the first seal, the first trumpet or the first vial. It might possibly be found among those descriptive chapters which apparently refer to personages, conditions, or events which relate to the series of judgments with which they are found. However, since these descriptions are all within the great tribulation period a mention of the rapture as a specific event is unlikely to be found among them. Because the rapture will translate all of the living church we would not expect to find a mention of the rapture as an event in the second or third chapter in the message to any one of the churches. The possible promise of a future rapture in 3:10 is not the event itself.

In looking for evidences of the time of the rapture, they may be discovered either in reference to the catching up of the living church to the presence of the Lord or in reference

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to the resurrection, since as far as the New Testament church is concerned they occur together.

The first search will be for indications of the catching up of the church after the tribulation. Within the seal judgments, before the seventh seal we find a host of saved persons who presumably suffered in the tribulation. But when we first see them they are before the throne of God (Rev. 7:9–17). At the end of the trumpet judgments we find the two witnesses who are caught up to heaven (11:12). Whoever they might be these satisfy conditions for neither the rapture nor its accompanying resurrection. They could not be in the rapture of the living church because they had been dead. They could not be the resurrection of the church because both were martyrs, whereas most of the church dead have merely died of natural causes. Further, they did not rise from the grave but had lain unburied for three and a half days.

At the end of the vial judgments (Rev. 16:12–21) there is no indication of either rapture or resurrection. Rather it is a judgment of destruction, including that of Babylon. The details relating to the Babylon of the age end and its destruction are given in chapters 17 and 18, but the only reference to saints shows them as martyrs (17:6; 18:20, 24).

In chapter 19 we find a great multitude already in heaven. In the multitude we find the bride or wife of the Lamb. It would appear that whatever others it might include (angels, Old Testament saints) the multitude must also include the New Testament church. The church is referred to in the epistles as the bride of Christ (Rev. 19:7; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25–32). The bride is clothed in white, the righteous acts of the saints (v. 8, ASV). The term *saints* is applied to the church over forty times in the epistles. Then these armies in white are seen coming with Christ at the Advent (v. 14). This must also include the church because on that occasion all the saints come with Him and it is not apparent how the New Testament church could be omitted from that “all” (Zech. 14:5; 1 Thess. 3:13; cf. Col. 3:4; Jude 14).

If the rapture takes place after the great tribulation we should expect to find it so indicated in one way or another in this nineteenth chapter because the seventeenth and eighteenth chapters of Revelation only describe the destruction of Babylon the event itself being placed under the seventh vial of God’s wrath (Rev. 16:19) in the last act of the great tribulation.

We find no mention in any form of the rapture in this chapter. Rather, “after this” (v. 1), that is, at the end of the great tribulation the great multitude, including the church, is seen already in heaven glorifying God for His judgment on Babylon. It would be illogical to

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draw any other inference from this chapter than that the rapture occurred certainly before the end of the great tribulation. Thus the posttribulation theory would be excluded by this passage unless we subscribe to the improbable theory that the rapture is totally ignored in the Revelation.

At the beginning of the various series of judgments, that is, at the beginning of the great tribulation, there is nothing which could possibly refer to the rapture. However, in 4:1–2 there is what many have believed to be the reference in this book to the rapture. It reads: “After these things I saw, and behold, a door opened in heaven, and the first voice that I heard, a voice as of a trumpet speaking with me, one saying, come up hither, and I will show thee the things which must come to pass hereafter. Straightway I was in the Spirit: and behold, there was a throne set in heaven, and one sitting upon the throne” (ASV).

There are a number of interesting features in this passage. In the first place, it follows immediately after the last message directed specifically to the churches. The importance of this fact results from the additional fact that apart from the heavenly scenes in chapters 4 and 5 the next chapters of the Revelation take up in detail the course of the great tribulation. Thus whether one considers the letters to the seven churches to refer only to those churches actually named or to the seven as representing the entire New Testament church from Pentecost to the rapture, the fact remains that this command to John does come between the churches and the great tribulation. Furthermore, chapters 4 and 5 include nothing to indicate that they cover a very prolonged period of time. In fact, chapter four is a scene of beings in heaven in the act of glorifying God, and chapter five shows us Christ in the brief prelude to the great tribulation demonstrating that He alone is worthy to judge the nations and peoples of the earth. From this one would say that the call to John preceded the great tribulation by a short interval.

Additionally, there are some similarities to 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17. In both the action initiates in heaven; in both there is more than one voice; in both there is the sound of a trumpet; in both the believer goes up from the earth; in both there is a change in the believer. In this connection, the body of the believer when translated will be a spiritual body like Christ’s body. One other hand, there are certain obvious objections to accepting this call to John as a symbol of the rapture. In the first place, there is no mention of the resurrection of the dead in Christ. It is doubtful that this objection is very weighty. The resurrection of the dead Christians and the rapture of the living believers are two distinct things although they occur almost simultaneously, the resurrection coming first. But since they are distinct acts and John was a living believer, it is not believed that the failure to mention the resurrection invalidates the symbolism of John’s call. But if this verse does

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refer to the rapture, then the resurrection of the New Testament church must be understood as occurring at the same time.

Another objection is that whereas the church at the rapture will be “ever with the Lord” in the glorious body, John is referred to later as being back on earth (Rev. 10:8–11; 11:1–2), and there is no reference to his new body. It should be noted however, that if this passage does refer to the rapture it was prophetic of a future event, and like so much of the Revelation described in signs. John was still a man in his earthly body after he had received all the visions. He was still on earth. Unlike the raptured church he had, for the purpose of the Revelation, to measure the temple on earth (11:1–2). Therefore, in a sense he would have to represent two persons, the believer translated and John who saw and recorded the Revelation. Thus, apart from some detailed explanation of the difficulty in the context the symbolism could not be complete in all details. It can be objected also that the call to John was individual whereas the rapture applies to the whole church. The answer to this however is that the whole church is a multitude of individuals and each will be called when the time comes. Thus John can be considered representative of the church.

From the preceding study it appears that if the call to John in 4:1–2 is not a sign or symbol of the rapture then not a single reference to it can be found in the Revelation. In view of the importance of the subject to the living church, and the fact that in chapter 19 the bride, the church, is seen in heaven at the end of the great tribulation the only inference based on positive indications is that the call to John is the reference to the rapture of the church in the Revelation. In any case there is no intimation of any kind that the rapture follows the tribulation. Since it must occur, the weight of evidence points to its occurrence before the tribulation.

The first resurrection in the Revelation. The first resurrection refers to that of saved persons, the just, and takes place at the coming of Christ (Luke 14:14; John 5:28–29; 1 Cor. 15:22–23).

In the Revelation the only specific references to a resurrection of believers are found in 11:11–12 and 20:4–6. The first of these has no application to the rapture as has been discussed previously. The passage in the twentieth chapter has been the subject of disagreements. The context in which it appears shows that this resurrection takes place at the second Advent of Christ to the earth. If the resurrection here described includes all of the first resurrection (Old and New Testament saints) then it would be evidence of a posttribulation resurrection, and rapture of the church.

The passage is quoted from the American Standard Version but the authorized and Revised Standard Versions are exactly the same in meaning, with only minor variations

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in wording: "And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, and for the word of God, and such as worshipped not the beast, neither his image, and received not the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they lived, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead lived not until the thousand years should be finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: over these the second death hath no power; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years" (Rev. 20:4–6).

In the first part of verse 4 in this quotation we see living beings already seated on thrones and responsible for judgment. A throne is the symbol of sovereign authority of a ruler in making official judgments. In the New Testament the word is used about fifty times in reference to the throne of God. In reference to human believers it is applied to the apostles in Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:29–30. In the American Standard Version these read respectively: "And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, that ye who have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." "And I appoint unto you a kingdom, even as my father appointed unto me, that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom; and ye shall sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

The Lord leaves us no doubt as to when He shall sit on the throne of His glory; it is when He comes again at the Advent (Matt. 25:31). Thus at that time the apostles will be enthroned, exercising judgment. In the epistles we find that the church will reign with Christ (2 Tim. 2:12) and that the saints will judge the world and angels (1 Cor. 6:2–3). In Revelation 5:10, referring to redeemed people, it states that they shall reign on the earth. In Revelation 2:26–27 in the message to the church at Thyatira the Lord promised, to those that overcome, authority over the nations. In Revelation 3:21, as the message to the churches are completed, He promises to the overcomer to sit with Him in His throne.

From the preceding facts it is unavoidable to conclude that whoever else may exercise judgment and authority, sitting on thrones, the New Testament church will do so. Therefore the church will undoubtedly be included in those persons described in Revelation 20:4. It is noted also that this scene is mentioned before there is any reference to the resurrection in the following verses.

In addition to the living persons functioning authoritatively in the verse just discussed, so indicated by the conjunction "and" (the Revised Standard Version translates it "also"), John saw the souls of the great tribulation martyrs. The verse is an obvious allusion to the souls of the martyrs seen under the altar in the fifth seal (Rev. 6:9–11). Of these it says that they lived (came to life, or lived again) and reigned with Christ.

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In view of the ordinary meaning of the language used, one would normally understand that we see two distinct groups here, the first already or previously raised from the dead, the second raised in connection with the Second Advent to the Mount of Olives and the binding of Satan. There is a real objection to this, however. Revelation 20:5 in part says that this constitutes the first resurrection. Therefore, since the first resurrection includes all the redeemed (the second being the lost), must we not agree that all of the redeemed must be raised from the dead along with the tribulation martyrs? A single example from life will show that such a construction is not necessary. The Army divisions in the Normandy invasion in June 1944 were all in the definite force assigned for the immediate operation, just as all the redeemed are in the first resurrection. Subsequently a build-up occurred, which as a specific force could correspond to the second resurrection and death. The fact is that the divisions in the initial invasion force did not all land at the same time but covered a period of time. One would use the term *the Normandy Invasion* of the whole group. This phase of the invasion was complete when the last elements were in Normandy. It is perfectly legitimate therefore to understand the use of the expression “this is the first resurrection” to signify the completion of a resurrection of the just which actually takes place in two units, the martyrs of the tribulation and an earlier group.

It seems clear from the foregoing that Revelation 20:4–6 describes two groups, first the raised and translated saints of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, and, second, the martyrs of the great tribulation. This conclusion conforms to that already inferred concerning the rapture in the Revelation.

In conclusion it is inferred that the Revelation points to a pretribulation rapture of the church.

CONCLUSION

The four portions of Scripture which have been examined, the two Thessalonian Epistles, the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew and the Revelation, all without any mutual contradiction inform us by cumulative evidence that the rapture and resurrection of the New Testament church precede the great tribulation. They also precede the apostasy and the man of sin. The full weight of this noncontradictory, cumulative testimony should be convincing.

The Christian should therefore be looking always for that blessed hope, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, without anticipating first the apostasy, the man of sin and the great tribulation.

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As events appear to be moving inflexibly and definitely toward a climax like that shown in the prophecies relating to the end of the age, the Christian should rejoice as the time of full redemption draws ever and rapidly nearer.¹

¹ Harrison, W. K. (1958). "The Time of the Rapture as Indicated in Certain Scriptures." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 114, 316–325; *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 115, 20–26; *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 115, 109–119; and *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 115, 201–211.