

CHAPTER 14

TRIBULATION SYSTEMS WITHIN PREMILLENNIALISM

Over the last century and a half there have developed various methods of relating the church to the tribulation period spoken of in the OT prophets, the Olivet Discourse, Revelation 6-19, and other passages. The historic titles for the various positions are based on the relative time of Jesus' coming for the resurrection of the just and translation of living saints: pre-tribulation or post-tribulation being the most prominent views.

Major works

Bibliographies

Peters, *Theocratic Kingdom* 2:#130, "This kingdom is preceded by a translation of the saints"; early biblio. of pre-trib. works, pp. 324-25. Note his unusual view in 3:#166, "The rudimentary reorganization of this kingdom will be made at Mt. Sinai"; Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism, British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (1970); esp. the bibliography, pp. 283-310; good summary of views in Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Paul D. Feinberg, Douglas J. Moo, and Richard R. Reiter, *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?*

Pre-tribulational works

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* 4: ch. 21-22, pp. 360-78 (1948); John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (1957); J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 156-339 (1958); Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, ch. 8, "Dispensational Eschatology," pp. 156-76 (1965); John A. Sproule, *A Revised Review of The Church and the Tribulation by Robert H. Gundry* (1974); Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (1976); John Reis Master, *The Tribulation: In or Out* (response to Gundry; n.d., after 1976); Allen Beechick, *The Pre-tribulation Rapture* (1980); chapters in *Issues in Dispensationalism* (1994): Ch. 10, "An Exegesis of Rapture Passages" by Thomas R. Edgar; Ch. 11, "Dispensational Theology and the Rapture" by Paul D. Feinberg; Ch. 12, "The Imminent Return of the Lord" by Earl D. Radmacher

Mid-tribulational works

Norman B. Harrison, *The End* (n.d., discussed in Walvoord, RQ, ch. 12); James Oliver Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 2:445-60 (1962); Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (1990); Robert van Kampen, *The Rapture Question Answered: Plain and Simple* (1997), and *The Sign* (1992, 1999).

Post-tribulational works

S. P. Tregelles, *The Hope of Christ's Second Coming* (1864); Robert Cameron, *Scriptural Truth About the Lord's Return* (1922); Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* (1937, repub. by Kregel, 1975); George H. Fromow, B. W. Newton and Dr. S. P. Tregelles, *Teachers of the Faith and the Future* (n.d., after 1954; forward by F. F. Bruce); George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (1956); J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (1962); O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, ch. 8, "The Second Advent Parenthesis and Pretribulationism," 192-217 (1964; amil.); Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (1973); Gundry, "An Open Letter to Dr. John F. Walvoord" (1977); Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, ch. 13, "The Nature of the Second Coming," 164-72 (1979; amil.)

Historical introduction

For conflicting views of the opinions of the early church fathers, see

Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, 52-56
Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 172-88

While the fathers expected to experience the tribulation, they also anxiously looked forward to the second coming of Christ. Therefore, Walvoord sees evidence of the doctrine of immanency.

For early history of pretribulationism, see Reese, 17-30, and especially Sandeen.

It is not best to trace the beginning of pretribulationism to "strange spirits" speaking in an Irvingite church meeting, as Tregelles has done (Fromow 42) and as popularized by Dave MacPherson. It appears that Darby was the first to systematically present this doctrine, after considerable personal study of the Bible; cf. Reese 316-17.

[For an interesting debate between preterist and dispensational futuristic views of the tribulation, see Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Great Tribulation, Past or Future?* (1999).]

Arguments for pretribulationism

Some of the arguments listed would only be valid for one holding dispensationalism; others are based on exegesis of biblical portions or logic.

Purpose of the tribulation

Dispensationalists hold that the tribulation predicted in Daniel, Matthew, and Revelation is the same as the seventieth “seven” in Dan 9, and is designed to purge Israel and to bring her to repentance and faith in the Messiah.

Since the NT church already believes in Christ, there is no need for it to experience the tribulation. Indeed, the church or those “in Christ” are not mentioned as being present in the tribulation. Note verses in *The Rapture Question* 193, #6-8.

Nature of the church

Dispensationalists also hold that the church is a unique body, begun at Pentecost, which has heavenly rather than earthly concerns. The church looks forward to being taken from the world to heaven by Christ, the bridegroom. Israel looks forward to her Messiah coming to them on the earth.

Rev 4-5 pictures the 24 elders in heaven during the tribulation; they represent the church. The wedding feast of Rev 19 likewise is before the second coming.

No wrath for the church

According to Rev 6:17 the tribulation is a time of God’s wrath being poured out on the world. On the other hand, God has promised that the church would not experience his wrath, Rom 5:9; 1 Thess 1:9-10; 5:9 (main argument of John Sproule, *In Defense of Pretribulationism*, 1980).

Rev 6:17, “For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

1 Thess 1:9-10, “for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

1 Thess 5:9, “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Other passages also teach this escape for the church, Luke 21:36; Rev 3:10 (Chafer's main verse).

Luke 21:36, "Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."

Rev 3:10, "Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth."

God would not put his church through the great sufferings of the tribulation period. The church is the beloved bride of Christ, and is pure in him. It would be inappropriate to require further sufferings.

Imminent coming, comfort and inspiration

Whereas posttribulationism requires signs to take place before the coming of Christ, Christians are told to be ready at any time for the coming of the Lord. According to 1 Thess 4 the return of Christ and the rapture are to be a comforting hope; if the tribulation comes first, it would be a dread of the future. Likewise, we are to purify ourselves because of our expectation of Christ's return; if his return is not imminent, that motivation is gone.

Progressive revelation

The OT and the Synoptic Gospels teach only about the posttribulational coming of Christ to the earth. Only John 14:1-3 introduces the secret rapture, at the end of Jesus' life on earth. The other rapture passages are 1 Cor 15:51-52 and 1 Thess 4:13-18 (Walvoord, *RQ* 166, *BHT* 91).

Note that the most prominent pretribulational writers do not use any of the "sudden" or "unexpected" passages in the Olivet Discourse or elsewhere in the Synoptics as evidence for the rapture; these passages are too closely linked to the coming of Christ to the earth to judge the wicked and establish his kingdom.

Beechick expands this idea to say that Paul did not know about the pretribulational rapture when he wrote the Thessalonian epistles (81-160, esp. 81, 84, 151).

The "falling away"

Some pretribulation writers have used the term “falling away” in 2 Thess. 2:3 (ἀποστασία *apostasia*) as a reference to the rapture, not to the final apostasy. Since the term has the article, it refers to something already known to the Thessalonians, as the rapture discussed in 1 Thess 4. Cf. *RQ*, 71-72.

2 Thess 2:3, “Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion [lit. ‘departure’?] occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.”

Who occupies the millennium?

Since there will be mortal saints in the millennium (Isa 65:20-25), and since all living saints are glorified at the beginning of the millennium (Matt 25:31-46), posttribulationists have no way to explain how mortal believers will enter the kingdom—and, if unbelievers are condemned at the outset of the kingdom, how any mortals at all could enter it.

Arguments for midtribulationism

This view is that the “seven” of Dan 9:27 is the final tribulation period, which is divided into half, with the antichrist revealing himself as such and beginning real persecution in the middle of the period. The second half (3½ years) is the “great tribulation” mentioned by Christ. The rapture occurs at the beginning of that time.

Daniel 9:27, “He will confirm a covenant with many for one ‘seven.’ In the middle of the ‘seven’ he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing *of the temple* he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.”

The final trumpet of Rev 11 is identified with the final trumpet in Matt 24:31 and 1 Cor 15:52. See Buswell for detailed defense; also Robert van Kampen, *The Sign* (1999).

The more recent “pre-wrath rapture” view of Sid Rosenthal is very similar to the midtribulation view.

For a defense of Buswell’s view being compatible with Reformed theology, see Jeffrey Khoo, “Dispensational Premillennialism in Reformed Theology: The Contribution of J. O. Buswell to the Millennial Debate,” *JETS* 44:4 (Dec 2001) 697-717.

Arguments for posttribulationism

Jesus' return in the gospels and epistles

The Olivet Discourse (Matt 24 = Mark 13 = Luke 21) and other gospel statements of Christ clearly teach that the disciples are to be on the earth until the glorious return of Christ to judge the nations (cf. *RQ 77* on Acts 1:6). They are to endure the tribulations and persecutions that will precede that day. Only a dispensationalist would say that the disciples were being considered by Jesus as representatives of Israel, not representatives of the church.

It is wrong to distinguish the coming of Christ spoken of in the gospels from that spoken of in the epistles. Exactly the same things are said about both comings. See the chart in Reese 259-61, inspired by Zahn *Introduction to the NT* 1:23-24, note 4. This note lists the similarities of eschatological statements in the gospels and Acts to 1 Thessalonians especially.

Terms used for the last day

Biblical terms such as “the day, the end, the day of the Lord, the day of Christ” all speak of the Christian’s expectation. These terms include the raising of the righteous dead, the judging of the nations, and the coming of the Lord to the earth (cf. Reese, ch. 8).

NT terms for Jesus' coming

Study of the major terms used to describe Christ’s coming reveals that these terms do not distinguish various “phases” or “stages” of Jesus’ coming. Rather, they describe the Christian waiting for the final coming of Christ to raise the dead and establish his kingdom. Note the NT usage:

παρουσία *parousia*

coming, official state visit of king to his domain (cf. Moulton and Milligan, *A Vocabulary of the Greek NT* & Deissmann *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 368)

Matt 24:3, 27, 37, 39, sign of coming of Messiah

1 Cor 15:23, they that are Christ’s at his coming

1 Thess 2:19, Christ at his coming, our hope and crown

1 Thess 3:13, coming of Christ with all his saints (“holy ones,” could be angels)

1 Thess 4:15, remain unto coming of the Lord

1 Thess 5:23, preserved until coming of our Lord

2 Thess 2:1, beseech you by coming of Lord & our gathering unto him

2 Thess 2:8, brightness of coming

Jas 5:7, patient unto coming of Lord

Jas 5:8, coming draws near

2 Pet 1:16, power & coming (1st coming?)
2 Pet 3:4, where is promise of coming?
2 Pet 3:12, coming of the day of God
1 John 2:28, when he will appear (φανερῶ *phaneroō*), not ashamed at his coming

Cf. Koine usage of the word for the “meeting” with him in the air in 1 Thess 4:17 (ἀπάντησις *apantesis*); see MM 53, “The word seems to have been a kind of technical term for the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary—a usage which accords excellently with its NT usage.” The term is used also in Matt 25:6 and Acts 28:15, and the related term ὑπάντησις *hupantesis* in Matt 8:34 and John 12:13. In all these cases, the people go out to meet the dignitary in order to provide a proper escort back to the place they came from (see Moulton, *Grammar* 1:14, n. 4).

1 Thess 4:17, “After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

Matt 25:6, “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’”

Acts 28:15, “The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged.”

Matt 8:34, “Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.”

John 12:13, “They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,
“Hosanna!
“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
“Blessed is the King of Israel!”

ἀποκαλύπτω *apokalupto*, reveal

Luke 17:30, when Son of Man is revealed
Rom 8:18, glory shall be revealed in us
2 Thess 2:3, 6, 8, Antichrist revealed
1 Pet 1:5, salvation ready to be revealed
1 Pet 5:1, glory that shall be revealed

ἀποκάλυψις *apokalupsis*, revelation

Rom 2:5, rev. of righteous judgment of God in day of wrath
Rom 8:19, glory shall be revealed in us

1 Cor 1:7, waiting for the rev. of our Lord
2 Thess 1:7, in the rev. of the Lord Jesus from heaven
1 Pet 1:7, 13, glory at the rev. of Jesus
1 Pet 4:13, rejoice in the rev. of his glory
Rev 1:1, rev. of Jesus Christ

ἐπιφάνεια *epiphaneia*, manifestation, appearing

2 Thess 2:8, splendor (*epiphaneia*) of his coming (*parousia*)
1 Tim 6:14, keep commands until appearing of Lord Jesus
2 Tim 1:10, (first coming)
2 Tim 4:1, judge living & dead at his appearing & kingdom
2 Tim 4:8, love his appearing
Titus 2:13, blessed hope—glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ

Revelation wrath at end of Tribulation

Revelation's plagues seem to be cyclical, each ending with the return of Christ and pouring out of wrath on the ungodly nations. Cf. Rev 6:12-17 with Matt 24:19-31; see Rev 11:15-19; Gundry 74-77, and even Beechick 177-78. There is no need to say the church will suffer the wrath of God; the church will be with Christ when he returns.

Intervening events

The NT predicted other events in the near and distant future, which had to be fulfilled before the second coming of Christ (e.g., the death of Peter in the near future, John 21:18-19). As long as they remained unfulfilled, Christ's coming was not "imminent." Yet the first generation Christians lived in expectation of his coming. This argument is used by the preterite view, which views Christ's coming as the conquest of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70.

Natural interpretation

In addition to the terms used themselves, several passages are most easily understood with a posttribulational rapture. Examples:

1 Thess 4:13 – 5:3, speaking of the same event
2 Thess 1:4-10, Christians rewarded posttrib.

2 Thess 2:1 and 2:8, speaking of same event

1 Pet 1:3-12, Christians glorified posttrib.

Rev 20:4, resurrection posttrib. (Walvoord admits, separates OT & NT resurrections, RQ 153-55)

The value of the tribulation for the church

It does not seem that God seeks to protect his church from trouble and tribulation, but rather that often he uses tribulation to sanctify his church and to give it an opportunity to glorify him by its loyalty to him in trying times.

Acts 14:21-22, “They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. ‘We must go through many hardships (“tribulations,” θλίψεις *thlipsis*; same word used in Matt 24:21) to enter the kingdom of God,’ they said.”

2 Tim 3:12, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (passive of διώκω *dioko*).”

Suffering for Christ is a sign of God’s love and care for his church (Phil 1:29; Heb 12:4-13). Note that the church in Smyrna, which was persecuted, was beloved by God more than the church of Laodicea, which lived in peace and prosperity.