

THE PRE-TRIBULATION RAPTURE: FACT OR FICTION, TRUTH OR HOAX?

JESSE ACUFF, MA REL.

Pre-tribulation Rapture Theory History

When did it all begin? If you accept Walvoord's writings, John 14:1-3 is the first mention of the pre-tribulation rapture in the Bible. Much later, according to Walvoord, Paul was converted and God revealed the pre-trib rapture doctrine to him. It was after this that Paul began to incorporate the details of the new doctrine into his teachings. When he visited Thessalonica, he apparently introduced the pre-trib rapture doctrine for, Walvoord explains, "they posed theological questions about it." Consequently, Paul explained the pre-trib rapture at length in the letters to the Thessalonians.¹

However, the evidence indicates otherwise. Believers were never "rapture separators" during the first 18 centuries; i.e., they never separated the minor rapture aspect of the Second Coming of Christ from the Second Coming itself. Rather, they tied the Second Coming and the rapture together. Why? They knew that the Scriptures mentioned the catching up (*harpazo*, "rapture") specifically in only one passage in the New Testament (1 Thess. 4:13-18). They also knew that this is a resurrection passage, not a "secret rapture" passage, because it speaks of the dead in Christ in each verse. The catching up is only mentioned once (v. 17). There are hundreds of verses that touch on the Second Coming, but few that explain how we get together with the Lord on that occasion. Whenever we do find a brief statement about it, it is always of secondary importance.

Early Christians were post-tribulationists. Among the most prominent were Hermas, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Augustine. Later the following belonged to the same school: Adam Clarke, Finney, Nathaniel West, Thayer, Vincent, Erdman, Cameron, Brunner, Norman MacPherson, Earle, Ockenga, G.R. Beasley-Murray and Robert Gundry. Before the 1800s, Christians never used labels such as pre-trib, mid-trib, post-trib, or partial rapture. There was good reason for this: post-tribulationism was the only rapture view for 18 centuries. Therefore, it did not have to be distinguished from any other view.

¹ John F. Walvoord, *Prophecy*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993, 109-110.

The Scottish Connection

We have seen that John Walvoord maintains that his pre-trib view goes back much further than 1830. Evidence to the contrary indicates that Margaret Macdonald hatched the pre-trib rapture theory in Port Glasgow, Scotland in 1830. Her story appeared in a book by Dr. Robert Norton. His impressions of her revelation were that:

Marvellous light was shed upon Scripture, and especially on the doctrine of the Second Advent, by the revived spirit of prophecy. In the following account by Miss M. Macdonald, of an evening during which the power of the Holy Ghost rested upon her for several successive hours, in mingled prophecy and vision, we have an instance; for here we see the distinction between that final stage of the Lord's coming, when every eye shall see Him, and His prior appearing in glory to them that look for Him.²

Margaret Macdonald taught a secret coming that will be visible only to Spirit-filled Christians — clearly not the coming described in Revelation 1:7. Her unique revelation of a two-stage coming triggered a century-and-a-half development leading to what is today recognized as the pre-tribulation rapture view. However, John Walvoord states in his book *The Rapture Question* that Margaret Macdonald's earliest revelation contains no clear evidence of a pre-tribulation doctrine. Although the centuries-old historicist view was still in vogue in her day, a revival of futurism was occurring. Her revelation contained elements of both. There is some controversy as to whether she was the first to espouse the two-stage theory. According to some, there were two others who came up with the doctrine first, John N. Darby and Edward Irving.

Darby

John Darby was the famous organizer and promoter of the Plymouth Brethren movement. He never claimed that he originated the pre-tribulation theory. However, in commenting on 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2, he did write in 1850 that "It is this passage which, twenty years ago, made me understand the rapture of the saints before — perhaps a considerable time before — the day of the Lord (that is, before the judgment of the living)." Therefore it was in 1830 that he came to this conclusion. Thus he states that his pre-tribulation journey began in 1830. But where is the proof? MacPherson points out that Darby wrote an article published in December of 1830 in which he said he held to the historicist view (the year-day theory) and believed that the Church was already in the Tribulation.

The year 1830 was significant in that it produced the pre-tribulation theory in its embryonic form, witnessed the originator write down the details, and a

² Dave MacPherson, *The Great Rapture Hoax*, Fletcher, NC: New Puritan Library, 1983, 48.

Christian magazine began teaching the new outlook in September of that year. However, all of this occurred long before Darby wrote anything that faintly resembled the two-stage view. By 1834, the earliest that pre-tribulationists can produce any kind of documentation, Darby began teaching a two-stage interpretation. But something else happened that year on July 24th. It was in Dublin, Ireland that he admitted, “The thoughts are new.” It was a candid admission that the early Church embraced the Second Coming for 1800 years — a post-tribulation coming without stages. More than once, Darby expressed the pre-tribulation teaching as a new teaching. For example, “The rapture of the saints to meet the Lord in the air, before His manifestation to the earth...is happily attracting the attention of Christians. It has made sufficient way to be the occasion of a renewed opposition.” He also speaks on the same page of “The rapture of the saints before the appearing of Christ, strange as it may appear to some.”³

Five years before he died in 1877, Darby wrote a letter in which he said:

The Presbyterians, the Methodists, the Baptists, are minded to oppose. The first are unanimous, the ministers, as everywhere, opposing our work, and some write about it; the remainder study what this (to them) new movement means. The godly ones are disconcerted with the sermons...The truth is spreading...for some time the coming of the Lord has wrought in souls far and wide, and the doctrine is spreading wonderfully.⁴

The question still remains: Was Darby the first to espouse the doctrine? Was he the first Plymouth Brethren member to teach the pre-tribulation rapture theory? Did any other member of the group teach a secret rapture before Darby developed the secrecy doctrine in 1834? Harold H. Rowdon, a long-time faculty member of London Bible College, wrote that a naval captain named Percy Hall preached a sermon promoting a two-stage coming, the first stage of which was a secret rapture. This occurred in 1831. Thus, the secret rapture theory originated on British soil. Zealous Plymouth Brethren in Great Britain planted British pre-tribulationism around the world during the last century.

Thus far we have seen that Darby taught a two-stage coming of Christ as early as 1834, that he admitted “the thoughts are new,” and that another Plymouth Brethren member preached a sermon on these ideas as early as 1831. But were they the first? There is evidence that says no.

Irving

Edward Irving was Darby’s contemporary, and a famous London preacher during the 1820s. He was a charismatic, and like Darby, originally adhered to the

³ *Ibid.*, 55

⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

historicist view, but later began to change to futurism. How early, then, did Irving or any Irvingite publicly teach a two-stage coming? *The Morning Watch*, the official Irvingite journal of prophecy, contains an article published in September of 1830, which was authored by a man known only as T.W.C. The article declares that we should distinctly separate our Lord's epiphany from his advent or Second Coming. About the rapture he says, "The most important event (so accurately timed in the Bible as to leave no doubt that it takes place during the epiphany) is the resurrection of the dead in Christ, and the change both of them and the then living saints, in the act of their...rapture unto the Lord in the air."⁵ Everywhere else in the publication, the two-stage theory taught that the Philadelphia Church would be raptured prior to the tribulation. Thus, we see that Irving and the Irvingites taught the two-stage, secret rapture doctrine as early as 1830.

Just What Is the Pre-tribulation Theory?

Now that we have summarized the historical background we need to ask, "Just how do we define the pre-tribulation rapture theory?" In simple terms it states, "The Church, the body of Christ, in its entirety will, by resurrection and translation, be removed from the earth before any part of the seventieth week of Daniel begins."⁶

The pre-tribulation rapturists base their premise on one major point — the literal method of interpretation of the Scriptures. This method of interpretation states that each word has the same meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, and customary usage regardless of whether it is used for writing, speaking, or thinking. In other words, according to Cooper, "When the plain sense of the Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."⁷

When we relate the literal method of interpretation to prophecy we must keep in mind that if, as in the case of the Davidic Covenant, there was a past literal fulfillment, there must also be a future, literal fulfillment, the literal method being the true method of Scriptural interpretation.

However, when it comes to correctly interpreting the rapture question, the pre-tribulationists seem prone to ignore even the fundamental rules of literal interpretation. Instead, they opt for the allegorical method, concocting fanciful ideas and straying from the clear, usual, normal, ordinary, and customary usage

⁵ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

⁶ Dwight J. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964, 193.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

of the words of Scripture, thereby spiritualizing away the true meaning of the Scriptures.

It has been my experience that the would-be experts in prophecy have, almost to a man, one outstanding problem. They seem never to be able to distinguish between the nation Israel (Jacob), the house of Israel, and the house of Judah in prophecy. Inevitably, they lump them all together, including designating the 144,000 who are sealed as “Jews,” when Revelation 7:5-8 plainly names all of the twelve tribes of Israel, including the tribe of Judah who only are Jews. They seem not to be able to understand that all Jews are Israelites but not all Israelites are Jews.⁸

Daniel’s Seventieth Week

The entire pre-tribulation rapture theory revolves around Daniel’s seventieth week and its nature. We find the prophecy dealing with Daniel’s seventieth week in Daniel 9:24-27:

Seventy weeks of years are decreed concerning your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. Know therefore and understand that from the going forth of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off, and shall have nothing; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war; desolations are decreed. And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week; and for half of the week he shall cause sacrifice and offering to cease; and upon the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.

Pentecost says that Jeremiah 30:7 calls the final heptad of this prophecy “the time of Jacob’s trouble”⁹ and describes it as a period of wrath, judgment, indignation, punishment, an hour of trial, an hour of trouble, destruction, and darkness. He notes that the entire period, consisting of seven prophetic years, takes on this nature, not just a portion of it. However, Pentecost is mistaken. Harrison rightly limits the tribulation that Pentecost describes above to the last half of the week. It is not the entire seventieth week that is designated “Jacob’s trouble” but only the last half, the Great Tribulation. Jacob’s trouble includes all

⁸ In Ezra the term “Israel” applies to those who had returned from the captivity (i.e., Ezra 7:10), who were in fact mostly of the tribe of Judah — *ed.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

of the twelve tribes, the house of Israel (the ten northern tribes) and the house of Judah (the three southern tribes consisting of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi). However, Pentecost seems not to be aware of the difference because he continues, “This whole period then has special reference to Daniel’s people, Israel, and Daniel’s holy city, Jerusalem.”¹⁰

The Timing of the Rapture

The rapture can happen at any moment. It’ll be fast, in the twinkling of an eye. According to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, the rapture will positively happen before the Tribulation. As soon as the rapture happens, the “Day of the Lord” will begin. We won’t be on the earth during the Tribulation; that’s the time of God’s wrath. Revelation 3:10 is further proof of a pre-trib rapture. The Bible says the Lord’s coming is the “blessed hope,” but how can it be “blessed” if we have to go through the Tribulation first? Since we’re the generation of the rapture, it wasn’t necessary for God to reveal this truth to the Church fathers and reformers.¹¹

These statements by MacPherson come from the beliefs of pre-tribbers. Let’s examine each one closely.

The rapture can happen at any moment. Pre-tribbers base this statement on the assumption that the rapture (catching up) is separate and distinct, i.e., detached from Christ’s Second Coming. This is the root of the doctrine of imminence, which we will discuss later. Walvoord says that there is no biblical passage stating precisely when the rapture occurs in relation to the Tribulation or the Second Coming.¹² How can the pre-tribbers be so sure, then, that the rapture will occur at the beginning of Daniel’s seventieth week? They can’t, but that doesn’t deter them. They maintain that major prophecies point to the conclusion that only a pre-trib rapture can be a literal fulfillment of Scripture. And on what do they base their conclusions? On the fact that the prophecies make no mention of angels or attending hosts, and there is no mention of judgment to follow.

The rapture’s single purpose is to remove the Church from the earth and take it to heaven to be with Christ until the Second Coming. Apparently, in their thinking, the rapture will be a momentary event (in the twinkling of an eye), while the Second Coming will take place over many hours. Why? Because it will take that long to move the gigantic procession of millions of saints and angels from heaven to earth. This is supposedly described in Revelation 19:11-16. Furthermore, the prophecies make no mention of any preceding events relating to

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹¹ MacPherson, 97-98.

¹² Walvoord, 112.

the rapture. On the other hand, many events precede the Second Coming. Therefore, it is impossible to describe two events more distinct than the rapture and Second Coming.

The basis for the most powerful argument for a pre-trib rapture, according to Van Impe, is Matthew 25:31-36.¹³ This passage describes Christ returning to the earth to judge the nations. Two groups are present on the earth at this time — the lost and the saved. Van Impe argues that if the rapture is post-millennial, there would be no one left to reign with Christ on the earth. Why? Because believers receive their glorified bodies at the rapture (1 Cor. 15:51-53; Phil. 3:21; 1 Jn. 3:2-3). Supposedly, these glorified bodies remain in the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, which hovers above the earth for the entire one thousand years (Rev. 21:9-22:5)! However, post-trib adherents do not advocate a post-millennial rapture. Quite to the contrary, they advocate a pre-millennial, post-tribulation rapture. Thus, Van Impe's argument is moot.

Walvoord argues that post-tribbers seldom offer any substantial evidence to support their beliefs.¹⁴ He assumes that if Christians are present during the Tribulation, they will not escape the afflictions because the judgments, including pestilence, stars falling from heaven, war, and famine, are against the entire civilization, and events of this kind do not single out non-Christians to suffer such devastation while Christians are spared. Thus, all living people, regardless, will be included and exposed to Satan's wrath as well as the wrath of the world rulers. However, such affliction has one origin because the world rulers, including the Antichrist, will be under Satan's power and influence.

Unfortunately, Walvoord's and Van Impe's theories do not take into account God's sovereignty and power. If God protected the Israelites in Egypt during the plagues, He can do the same thing for Christians during the Tribulation. God placed a "hedge" around His people many times in the past. We find a prominent example in Job 1:10: "Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land." The word "hedge" is the Hebrew *sooch*, which means to entwine, i.e. shut in (for formation, protection or restraint), fence, (make a) hedge (up). We see here that God, indeed, had placed a "hedge" around Job for the purpose of protecting him from harm. God is capable of doing this at any time and in any place or circumstance. Who is to say that He will not do the same for the saints during the Tribulation? The pre-tribbers think in terms of manmade views of timetables and events, denying the possibility that God can do what He wants when He wants. Does He not say in Isaiah 55:8, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways"?

¹³ Jack Van Impe, *The Great Escape*, Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998, 24-25.

¹⁴ Walvoord, 113.

It'll be fast, in the twinkling of an eye. Pre-tribbers base this statement on 1 Corinthians 15:51-53. MacPherson says that the “twinkling of an eye” refers only to the speed with which the dead and mortal bodies change into immortal spirit ones, not the speed with which the rapture will take place.¹⁵ The rapture itself could take hours for all we know. Sadly, the pre-tribbers are loath to read beyond verse 53 because verse 54 alludes to the “when” and “then” of the rapture. Paul reveals in verse 54 when the rapture will occur. By “death is swallowed up in victory” he means that Isaiah 25:8 will finally be fulfilled. Thus, the rapture’s timing and Isaiah 25:8’s timing is the same, and the rapture must be post-tribulation.

The rapture will positively happen before the Tribulation. The only place the New Testament mentions the rapture is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Paul comforts believers whose loved ones have died, assuring them that Christ will give them first consideration in resurrecting them at his return. Sauer says, “The word *harpazo* means to snatch, seize, i.e., take suddenly and vehemently. In 1 Thessalonians 4:17, *harpagesometha* is translated ‘caught up.’ There is a notion of a sudden swoop and a feeling of a force that cannot be resisted.”¹⁶ Paul’s language is unmistakable. It requires a removal of believers from the earth at the time of the Second Coming only.

Try as hard as you may, you cannot find the Antichrist in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. How, then, can preachers and scholars be so confident that the rapture is pre-trib when they stop at verse 18? The passage can be easily understood if you don’t stop at verse 18. The first verses of chapter 5 are connected to the last six verses of chapter 4 by the conjunction “but.” In 1 Thessalonians 5:1 Paul says that the “times and seasons” of the rapture coincide with the time of “sudden destruction.”

With regard to the pre-trib view two-stage coming and secret rapture, it is strange that one can find no mention of a secret, pre-trib rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:16. Paul is hardly describing a “secret coming” here. There is no pre-trib rapture in these verses. Rather, a pre-trib rapture is an assumption read into Scripture. The pre-trib rapture is an event in which believers receive their resurrection bodies without seeing death. They are “caught up” from the earth, and with the risen dead who precede them, they enter a new realm of existence in a glorified state. The rapture (*harpazo*, to snatch away) takes place at the Second Coming, and the Church accompanies Christ as he immediately returns to the earth to establish his millennial kingdom. The pre-tribbers call this the “yo-yo” theory.

Van Impe says that all believers who have ever died “in Christ” during the last two thousand years are already with Christ (2 Cor. 5:8). “Why,” he

¹⁵ MacPherson, 98-99.

¹⁶ Val J. Sauer, *The Eschatology Handbook*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981, 66-68.

continues, “should a handful of believers experience God’s wrath while millions who lived and died during the last two thousand years enjoy the blessings of heaven during the Tribulation?”¹⁷ But is this what 2 Corinthians 5:8 implies? Does the verse say that we go into the presence of Christ immediately upon death? If so, why the need for a resurrection of the dead? The idea is that Christ will bring those millions of saints with him from heaven at his return, place them back into their mortal bodies and resurrect them with immortal, glorified, resurrection bodies. Does that make sense? If they are already in heaven with Christ they have immortal, glorified bodies for they cannot come into the presence of God in any other form (1 Cor. 15:50). Those in the grave are in the grave, not with the Lord or in the presence of the Lord. Job pleads with the Lord, “O that thou would hide me in the grave, that thou would keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou would appoint me a set time, and remember me” (Job 14:13). The set time Job refers to here is the resurrection. Why does Job plead for God to remember him? So that He won’t leave him in the grave! David says of the state of death and the grave, “For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?” (Ps. 6:5). If those in the grave do not remember God, i.e., have no memory of God, and are unable to give God thanks or glory, how can they be present with the Lord? Again, David asks, “Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave?” (Ps. 88:11). In Ecclesiastes 9:10, Solomon declares, “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.” It is obvious from these verses that there is no consciousness beyond the grave until the resurrection.

Lenski says of 2 Corinthians 5:8 that Paul is speaking of the hope of the resurrection to be with the Lord, not that he expects to be immediately with the Lord when he dies.

To be sure, “out of the body” means that the body will be left behind; it will go to the grave. To say this will be the end of it, to deny the resurrection of the body on the strength of this phrase, is untenable. The proposal that we should believe that Paul has given up all that he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15, the most magnificent presentation of the resurrection of the body in the entire Bible; that Paul has now come to believe that the body will not be raised up at the Parousia, is unacceptable to us. At one time we are to believe that Paul wanted his body to be transformed at the Parousia and then that, if he died, his body would never be raised or transformed. Yes, there is a separation from the body; but 4:11 has

¹⁷ Van Impe, 22-23.

already told us that in due time the body will be made to share in the home with the Lord: “and will present us together with you.”¹⁸

This speaks of the resurrection at the Second Coming.

Van Impe, however, is not convinced. He staunchly maintains that the Church and the Bride of Christ must go through a time of examination called the Judgment Seat of Christ. According to the post-tribulationist teaching, this is impossible because there is not enough time for it to take place:

The post-tribulation adherents teach a “yo-yo theory” — up and down, going to meet Christ and returning instantly — and have no time interval for His judgment-seat examination or marriage. It takes time to investigate God’s people (2 Cor. 5:10). This is an impossibility in the post-tribulation arrangement of events because millions cannot be investigated in less than one second or “the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52).¹⁹

Apparently, Matthew 19:26, Mark 10:27, Luke 1:37 and Luke 18:27 did not come to mind when Van Impe wrote this statement. He thinks the “bob up to meet him and bob down to reign” theory wipes out the intervals of time demanded for the judgment seat of Christ and the marriage. Has Mr. Van Impe not read Zechariah 14:1-4? Verse 4 says, “And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south.”

It would be foolish for anyone to deny that 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 refers to anything but the Day of the Lord. Paul confirms it in 1 Thessalonians 5:2. It is the same day that Zechariah 14:1-4 speaks of. Thus, Van Impe’s intervals of time demanded for the judgment seat of Christ and the marriage of the Lamb are wiped out, and his “yo-yo” theory has no merit!

As soon as the rapture happens, the “Day of the Lord” will begin. When the pre-tribulation theory developed in the 1830s, the pre-tribbers placed the Day of the Lord at the end of the Tribulation. The only thing they “stretched forward” was the rapture. This view remained for the better part of a century. Darby and Scofield were both pre-tribbers and both maintained that the Day of the Lord would not begin until the end of the Tribulation. By the early part of the 20th century, pre-tribbers had to make a decision. They could either push the rapture back to the post-tribulation Day of the Lord or stretch the Day of the Lord forward in order to hook it up with their pre-trib rapture. They chose the latter and relegated some of the Day of the Lord verses to their “inactive files.”

¹⁸ R.C.H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament, Interpretation of First and Second Corinthians*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, 1012.

¹⁹ Van Impe, 22-23.

We won't be on the earth during the Tribulation; that's the time of God's wrath. Pentecost quotes a passage from William Kelly's book *Lectures on the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ*, in which he deals with such passages as Matthew 24, Daniel 12, Luke 21, Mark 13, Jeremiah 30, and Revelation 7. Kelly concludes, "The view here maintained follows on a close investigation of every distinct passage that Scripture affords upon the subject of the great tribulation. I should be obliged to any one who will produce me other passages that refer to it; but I am not aware of them. I demand of those...whether they can point out one word, which supposes a Christian or the Church on the earth when the great tribulation arrives?"²⁰

Evidently Mr. Kelly has not looked at Revelation 13:7: "And it was given unto him [the Antichrist] to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations." Who does Mr. Kelly and other pre-tribbers think the saints are if not the Church? Saints are mentioned dozens of times in the New Testament, referring to the genuine members of the Church, the body of Christ. As a matter of fact, the word "saints" appears 61 times in the New Testament! Acts 9:13 speaks of the "saints" at Jerusalem. Paul in Romans 1:7 calls the church members "beloved of God and saints" (see also 1 Cor. 1:2; 6:1, 2; 14:33; 16:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2; Heb. 6:10, etc.). The Greek word for saint is *hagios*, which means sacred, physically pure, morally blameless or religious, holy.

If, then, a saint is all of this, how can Mr. Kelly and other pre-tribbers say with such confidence that the Church is not present during the tribulation? Pentecost adamantly states, "It must be concluded with the above author, since every passage dealing with the tribulation relates it to God's program for Israel, that the scope of the tribulation prevents the church from participating in it."²¹

Despite proof to the contrary, then, the Church won't be here on the earth because "that's the time of God's wrath"! If all other arguments fail, this is the one the pre-tribbers use. MacPherson has it right when he says, "Even if the Tribulation were exclusively divine wrath, the Church wouldn't have to be off the earth to keep from being objects of such wrath, for genuine believers are never subject to it (see Rom. 8:1-3)."²²

What do we know about the Israelites in Egypt during the plagues? They weren't the objects of divine wrath. God protected them right where they were! Look also at Psalm 91:7. When God's protection comes between some close calamity and us, we are millions of light years removed from any harm as far as He is concerned.

²⁰ Pentecost, 196.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

²² MacPherson, 103.

When has God ever removed the Church from suffering and persecution? Scripture is full of examples of the hardships the Church has endured through the ages and God never once removed her from the tribulation. Rather He has protected her in it. Jesus said to his disciples, “And ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved” (Matt. 10:22; see also Jn. 15:18-19). He further told them, “Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake” (Matt. 24:9). In John 15:20 he said to them, “Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.”

If true believers (the Church) aren’t supposed to be on the earth when God brings His wrath, why doesn’t He rapture them as soon as they accept Christ? That way they would never have to undergo the hatred, suffering, persecution, death, and martyrdom he describes in Matthew 24:9. Look at Revelation chapter 6. Many pre-trib leaders have admitted that this chapter is a table of contents of what follows in the rest of the book. Scofield connects verses in chapter 6 to verses in chapters 7, 16, 19, and 20. He also connects the “Great Day of Wrath” to Revelation 16:12-17 and 19:11-21.

Pre-tribbers often quote 1 Thessalonians 5:9 as proof of a pre-trib rapture: “For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ.” They think that the word “wrath” is the equivalent of the word “tribulation.” The word “wrath” is the Greek *orge*, which means punishment resulting from anger, indignation, vengeance, or wrath. In Matthew 3:7 when John the Baptist sees the Pharisees coming to where he is baptizing, he pointedly asks them, “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” The word used here is also *orge*. Was John the Baptist referring to the Tribulation? Hardly! If he were, that would mean that God would have to resurrect those Pharisees in order for them to undergo the Tribulation. Again, we read in John 3:36, “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.” In this case the wrath of God remains on the unbeliever even before he goes through the Tribulation. Romans 5:9 says, “Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.” The “wrath” referred to in all these verses, including 1 Thessalonians 5:9, is not the Tribulation but, rather spiritual death in the lake of fire as a result of the sin of unbelief (cf. Matt. 3:10). These are salvation verses, not Tribulation verses.²³

Revelation 3:10 is further proof of a pre-tribulation rapture. Another verse that pre-tribbers use to prove the Church won’t be on earth during the Tribulation is Revelation 3:10: “Because thou hast kept the word of my patience,

²³ See Lenski, Hendricksen, Dunn, et al.

I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.” However, throughout the history of the Church no one ever interpreted the verse this way. Before 1830, everyone believed that the phrase “keep them from” meant “preservation from” on the earth. Further, since 1830, even the greatest Greek scholars — those whom even the pre-tribbers exalt the most — have dittoed the earlier authorities.

Lenski explains, “The verbs match: ‘thou didst keep — I too will keep.’ Both are used in the sense of *bewahren*, guard, hold, keep, preserve against loss, damage, etc.”²⁴ Aune says:

This verse has been a crux for the modern argument between the pre-tribulation and the post-tribulation views on when Christ will return. Unfortunately, both sides of the debate have ignored the fact that the promise made here pertains to Philadelphian Christians only and cannot be generalized to include Christians in the other churches of Asia, much less all Christians in all places and times. Furthermore, to be “preserved from the hour of tribulation” means not that they will be physically absent but rather that they will not be touched by that which touches the others.²⁵

The Bible says the Lord’s coming is the “blessed hope,” but how can it be “blessed” if we have to go through the Tribulation first? Walvoord says:

Any realistic view of the future time, which Christ referred to as the Great Tribulation, includes the realization that a rapture climaxing the tribulation is hardly a blessed hope. A doctrine that teaches otherwise does not fit with Christ’s command to “let not your hearts be troubled” (Jn. 14:1), Paul’s exhortation to comfort and encourage (1 Thess 4:18), or the concept of the rapture being a “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13). The Thessalonians...would hardly have been comforted if they had been told they had to go through an extended period of suffering, during which most of them would be killed, before the rapture would occur. No such warning regarding the rapture can be found in Scripture.²⁶

“Such reasoning,” says MacPherson, “fails even to consider Christ’s own crucifixion and resurrection: blessed events, to be sure, but accompanied with and preceded by much heartache and anguish!”²⁷ In other words, Walvoord’s argument does not hold up in view of the suffering of Christ and his reason for going to the cross and his resurrection. The fact that the Church has to endure the

²⁴ R.C.H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament, Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, 143.

²⁵ David E. Aune, *Revelation, Word Biblical Commentary*, Dallas: Word Books, 1997, vol. 52A, 240.

²⁶ Walvoord, 113-114.

²⁷ MacPherson, 105.

Tribulation does not take away her “blessed hope,” for that blessed hope, after all is accomplished, is not that the Tribulation is ended, but that the resurrection and the translation of the saints is the final stage in their salvation.

Van Impe disagrees. Like others of his ilk, he believes that the “blessed hope” is the fact that the Church escapes the Tribulation.²⁸ He attributes this to Jesus’ teachings and backs it up by quoting Luke 17:26-37. However, Christ is not here referring to the rapture but to the tribulation and the death of many of the inhabitants of the earth. Thus, many bodies will lie dead and vultures will come to feed on them. These verses nowhere speak of the rapture. However, Van Impe will not be moved from his position. He goes on to quote Revelation 6:17, Romans 2:5 and 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9. He says that the great day of wrath will fall upon sinners who store up, treasure up, or accumulate “wrath against the day of wrath.” It is true that the Tribulation will affect end-time sinners in this manner. However, what can we say about sinners who, over the past two thousand years, have stored up wrath “against the day of wrath”? Will they have to be resurrected and placed in the Tribulation for this to be fulfilled? We have already addressed the deliverance from the wrath to come in 1 Thessalonians 1:10. It is the wrath of God that assigns the incorrigibles to the lake of fire and spiritual death. The same is true for 1 Thessalonians 5:9. Nevertheless, Van Impe insists that the salvation spoken of in these verses cannot be eternal deliverance from hell (fire) because the Christian receives that without Christ’s return. “The moment a Christian believes,” he asserts, “he is delivered from condemnation and ‘is passed from death unto life’” (Jn. 5:24). The result of this is that “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Rom. 8:1).²⁹ True, these verses speak of salvation, not the Tribulation. Jesus Christ said we will enter the kingdom only after much tribulation (Acts 14:22), and that includes those alive during the Tribulation. It is true that Christ delivers the Church from the hour of testing, but not by rapturing it before the tribulation begins. This is not, as Van Impe believes, how God will keep the Church from the hour of temptation and testing.

This sort of reasoning is selfish. It refuses to identify with past centuries of suffering, affliction, separation from fellow disciples, and death endured by the Church in past ages (see Heb. 11:35-38). The Church will not be raptured before the Tribulation; she will be protected in it.

Since we are the generation of the rapture, it wasn’t necessary for God to reveal this truth to the Church fathers or reformers. There is a hidden confession in this statement. It is that the pre-trib rapture theory wasn’t heard of until relatively modern times. This begs the question, “Why, if we are the rapture generation, and God did not find it necessary to reveal the doctrine until now, did

²⁸ Van Impe, 20-22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

He reveal the truth as early as 1830? Was His timing off by 150 years? And if we had to wait 150 years before, how do we know we don't have to wait another 150 years?" And no one knows for certain if contemporary Christians will live to see the Second Coming.

How do the pre-tribbers answer this? Well, the theory was only "rediscovered" or "recovered" in the 1830s. The New Testament writers taught what we see today, but it dropped out of sight in the second century. If this is true, if the New Testament writers did indeed teach a two-stage coming with a full seven-year gap, why did pre-tribbers "rediscover" only a small gap and then take decades to dogmatically settle on a seven-year gap? Only one conclusion is possible — the Bible never did espouse such a doctrine. The division of the Second Coming into two stages did not exist before the 1830s. Even Darby admitted that it had never been done before, that it was new.

The King James scholars were post-trib rapturists, and they produced the King James Version without being aware of pre-trib rapture doctrine. For ten long years after the birth of the doctrine, the gap between the rapture and the Second Coming was still a far cry from the modern version. According to MacPherson, Robert Norton, the chief recorder of its origins, wrote in 1839, "...the well-known period of 1260 days. We have next to remark that at the conclusion of this period, and immediately previous to the last judgments and woes of the Apocalypse, a most important event intervenes. VIZ., the translation of the saints, and their consequent exemption from these woes."³⁰

It is amazing how quickly some change their minds and beliefs. It took Norton only a year to change from a rapture at the end of the 1260 days to one at the beginning:

The principal...and most important portion of Scripture, showing that the translation and first resurrection of the saints, or at least, of the first fruits, is to be expected previous to the final reign of Antichrist in the twelfth chapter of Revelation...That the man child thus caught up to the throne previous to the 1260 days of the Dragon's "great wrath," and who is to rule all nations with a rod of iron, is the mystical body of Christ, is evident.³¹

The Church isn't mentioned once in chapters 4 to 18 in the book of Revelation. The word "church" may not be mentioned in these chapters, but the word *ecclesia* is. The Greek word *ecclesia* is the word for "church." It means the "elect" or "called out ones." MacPherson takes the pre-tribbers to task over this statement:

³⁰ *Neglected and Controverted Scripture Truths*, London: John F. Shaw, 1839, 275, cited in MacPherson, 105-107.

³¹ *The Memoirs of James & George Macdonald, of Port-Glasgow*, 21, cited in MacPherson, 105-107.

They don't tell their listeners and readers that *ecclesia* isn't found once in the same chapters in any heavenly or in-the-air scenes! If they're going to start their argument with a literal mention of "church," why don't they stick with literalism? Instead, when trying to show where they claim the Church is during these chapters, they switch over to symbolism and point to the 24 elders!³² They change in the middle of their argument to symbolism and arbitrarily choose the heavenly elders, ignoring the earthly saints in the same section and ignoring the fact that "saints" is used dozens of times in the rest of the New Testament when referring to genuine members of the Church! Israel isn't literally mentioned in much of the same part of Revelation either. But of course pre-tribs see Jewish persons there, don't they?³³

A case in point is Jack Van Impe's explanation of the "elect." Says he, "Post-tribulationists (those who believe the Church of Jesus Christ will endure the terrible period of the Tribulation) like to use this verse (Matt. 24:22)...saying this passage proves the Church will remain on earth because we are the 'elect.'"³⁴ His next statement is absurd in the extreme! "Nothing could be further from the truth. Many do not realize that God has two elect groups on earth. There is the Church (see Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:2), but that is not the group referred to in Matthew 24:22."³⁵ The same word *eklektos* is used in 1 Peter 1:2 and Matthew 24:22, and indeed in Matthew 22:14, "Many are called but few are elect." Would God use the same word to designate two different groups? If so, how would we differentiate between the two? "How do I know this?" he asks. He then quotes Isaiah 42:1 and says it speaks of the Jews as God's elect. However, even a casual perusal of this verse shows that it is not talking about the Jews but about Jesus Christ. It is a Messianic passage. Does God ever describe the Jews this way? Did they ever do the things described in verses 2-7? Those are the things that Christ Jesus accomplished during his mission and ministry on the earth. He adds, "So does Isaiah 45:4; 65:9, 22." Isaiah 45:4 does not limit the "elect" to Judah (Jews) but includes all twelve tribes (Gad, Reuben, Asher, Simeon, etc.). Van Impe limits Isaiah 65:9 to the Jews but it speaks of Jacob *and* Judah and is a future, millennial prophecy. Isaiah 65:22 is another millennial prophecy depicting the land as a Garden of Eden where the people enjoy peace and prosperity and long life.

Another case in point where the pre-tribbers lump all of Israel together and call them Jews is the sealing of the 144,000. According to Van Impe, "There will be a great revival. It will occur during the seven-year Tribulation period when the

³² See Pentecost, 207-209.

³³ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

³⁴ Van Impe, 33.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

144,000 Jews (Rev. 7:4-8) will circle the globe, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, declaring the good news: The King is coming! At that time, the Bible says, ‘All Israel shall be saved’ (Rom. 11:26). That means the Jews.”³⁶ Van Impe does quote Revelation 7:4-8 as proof that the 144,000 are Jews, but evidently he didn’t read farther than verse 4, for verses 5-8 name the tribes individually in the order of their birth. Judah only, of these twelve tribes mentioned, are Jews.

Pentecost is just as confused. “During the seventieth week the Church must be absent, for out of the saved remnant in Israel God seals 144,000 Jews, 12,000 from each tribe, according to Revelation 7:14.”³⁷ Are all twelve tribes of Israel “Jews”? Obviously not, if you read the verses correctly. If they were all Jews there would be only one tribe, not twelve! And what about Revelation 7:14? Is this still talking about the 144,000 or has the scene shifted? The scene has shifted! Revelation 7:14 talks about a multitude, which no man could number, from all nations, tribes, tongues, and peoples (v. 9), who have accepted Christ and his all-sufficient sacrifice, and claimed him as their Lord and Savior. If the great multitude of Revelation 7:9-14 is so large that no man can number them, how can they be just the 144,000? These are not just Jews who have been saved to some sort of “Jewish relationship” with God and Christ as Pentecost maintains, but the saved, the Church, the elect, who have endured the Tribulation, kept the faith, and come out of it with their sins washed clean by the blood of Christ, having received the crown of life.

The Doctrine of Imminence

There is yet one doctrine to be discussed regarding the pre-trib rapture theory — the doctrine of imminence. Though not mentioned specifically, we have seen it hinted at throughout this article. The doctrine of imminence (an at-any-moment coming) states simply that the rapture could happen at any moment, without warning, and without precursory events announcing its impending presence.

Pentecost says that Israel received many signs in Scripture that would precede the Second Advent. These signs were a cause of a life of expectancy, a looking forward to the time when Christ would return. They could not know the day or hour when this would occur, but they could, by these signs, know when their redemption was near. However, God, in His Word, gave the Church no such signs. He simply told them to live in the light of Christ’s imminent coming to change them and bring them into his presence.³⁸ He proof-texts this hypothesis by quoting several verses (Jn. 14:2-3; Acts 1:11; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; Phil. 3:20, etc.), all of which refer to the Second Coming, not a secret rapture prior to the Tribulation. Pentecost states further, “Such passages as 1 Thessalonians 5:6;

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

³⁷ Pentecost, 214.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 202.

Titus 2:13; Revelation 3:3 all warn the believer to be watching for the Lord himself, not for the signs that would precede his coming.³⁹ How can one watch for the coming of the Lord himself without being aware of the signs that announce his imminent coming? These very signs tell us that his return is near, and cannot be separated from the advent itself. Revelation 3:3 says that if we don't watch, Christ will come upon us as a thief in the night, indicating that we would never know that he was about to come or that he had come. The antithesis of this is that if we stay awake, alert, and aware, i.e., "watching" for, and correctly interpreting the signs, we can know that his coming is near and he will not overtake us as a thief in the night.

Although John Darby "clarified," systematized, and popularized the doctrine of imminence, it was not a new thing with him. Thiessen says that the early Church held a pre-millennial view and regarded Christ's coming as imminent, the Lord having taught them to expect his return at any moment. He concludes, therefore, that "the early Church lived in constant expectation of their Lord, and hence was not interested in the possibility of a Tribulation period in the future."⁴⁰ It is because of this sort of interpretation of Scripture that the pre-tribbers believe so strongly that the Church will not be present during the Tribulation. Pentecost sums up by saying:

The doctrine of imminence forbids the participation of the Church in any part of the seventieth week. The multitude of signs given to Israel to stir them to expectancy would then also be for the Church, and the Church could not be looking for Christ until these signs had been fulfilled. The fact that no signs are given to the Church, but she, rather, is commanded to watch for Christ, precludes her participation in the seventieth week.⁴¹

In contrast to this, scholars such as Alexander Reese, George Ladd, and Robert Gundry show that the early Church and the early church fathers were interested in the possibility of a Tribulation period in the future because, if they were anything, they were post-tribulationists.⁴²

In an attempt to counter the historical arguments of Reese, Ladd, and Gundry, Walvoord comes up with only three sources from the early Church era — sources that he claims "really" teach the kind of imminence he wholeheartedly endorses. The first quote that Walvoord proffers is that of Clement of Rome who lived and wrote about 40-100 AD. Clement writes, "Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall his will be accomplished, as the Scriptures also bear witness, saying, 'speedily will he come, and will not tarry'; and 'The Lord shall suddenly come to his temple, even the Holy One, for whom ye look.'" The second source

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴⁰ Quoted by Pentecost, 203.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁴² MacPherson, 37-38.

is the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles in the Didache: “Watch for your life’s sake. Let not your lamps be quenched, nor your loins unloosed; but be ye ready, for ye know not the hour in which the Lord cometh.”⁴³ A third source quoted by Walvoord is the Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, which originated in the early Church period. It says, “Observe things that are commanded you by the Lord. Be watchful for your life. ‘Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning, and ye like men who wait for their Lord, when he will come, at even, or in the morning, or at cock-crowing, or at midnight. For what hour they think not, the Lord will come; and if they open to him, blessed are those servants, because they were found watching.’”

According to MacPherson, Gundry has shown that in Walvoord’s (1954), Stanton’s (1956), and Pentecost’s (1958) writings, they have broken the Didache quote off at the very same spot after the second sentence. They do so in order to prove the any-moment imminence they so strongly propose.⁴⁴ Gundry goes on to show that the omitted remainder of the quote is antithetical to the pre-tribulation quote. He adds that Walvoord also breaks off the quote found in the Constitutions of the Holy Apostles immediately after the word “watching,” and ignores the rest of the passage which is post-tribulation.⁴⁵ Walvoord, however, believes the omission of much of the Didache quote isn’t all that serious. Why? Because, “only the ‘creation of men’ is going through the Tribulation — and not the ‘Church.’”⁴⁶ “But isn’t the Church,” MacPherson counters, “part of the human race? Besides, if the entire Didache quote is as harmless as Walvoord now seems to feel, why doesn’t he imitate Gundry and publish the [rest] of it?”⁴⁷

Walvoord attempts to trace his pre-trib view to the early Church. According to MacPherson, Walvoord’s equation consists of three points: (1) Imminence is the heart of the pre-tribulation rapture theory. (2) Imminence can be found in the earliest centuries of the Christian era. (3) Therefore, the pre-tribulation rapture theory (in undeveloped form) existed in the same early centuries.⁴⁸ Walvoord, however wavers somewhat in that he admits that not all imminence doctrine in the early Church has been of the pre-trib variety. “There have been occasions,” he says, “when church members have held to an imminent coming because they believed that they were enduring the Great Tribulation, or that the fulfillment of ‘all these things’ had been accomplished.”⁴⁹

⁴³ James A. Kliest, *The Didache*, New York: Paulist Press, 1948, 24.

⁴⁴ MacPherson, 39-40.

⁴⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973, 175, 177.

⁴⁶ John Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, Zondervan, rev. ed., 1979, 53.

⁴⁷ MacPherson, 40.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁹ Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, 51, 69.

However, even Walvoord contradicts himself in his defense of pre-tribulationism. He clearly teaches in his book *The Rapture Question* that (1) The concept of a pre-trib rapture isn't found in the Old Testament.⁵⁰ (2) A pre-trib rapture isn't found anywhere in Matthew, Mark, or Luke (or any part of the Olivet Discourse).⁵¹ (3) A scholar should never take from a source only those facts that support his view and ignore anything contradicting it.⁵²

The Bible verses quoted by Clement in the *Didache* come from Habakkuk 2:3 and Malachi 3:1. The others are connected to Matthew 24:42-44, Mark 13:35, and Luke 12:35-37. Thus, Walvoord's first source violates his first principle and the other two counter the second one. Even Scofield, a pre-tribber, acknowledges that Habakkuk and Malachi referred to the Second Advent. The Second Advent, therefore, could hardly have been imminent if the first advent and the coming of "my messenger" — John the Baptist — had not yet taken place. In addition, the last two quotes Walvoord uses are based on the first three Gospels, and specifically the Olivet Discourse and the Second Coming.

In conclusion, let's take a look at the emphasis Matthew 24 places on the Second Coming. Hal Lindsey, on the back cover of his book *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*, quotes a few verses from Matthew 24. He places three dots in the middle of the quotation. MacPherson suggests that these dots stand for three thoughts that Jesus repeats in this passage.⁵³ "First of all," MacPherson begins, "he talks about or implies coming deception in several verses including 4, 5, 10 (one meaning of 'betray' is 'deceive'), 11, 15 (the Antichrist will be a super deceiver), and 24. Christ also emphasizes (vv. 6, 8) that the end won't happen before its time." There is a repeated mention of "all these things" in verses 6, 33, and the last verse adds the word "see" to the expression. Verse 15 reveals that one of the items his followers will see is the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet. These three things — the deception, the "all of these things," and the abomination of desolation — are related and will come into sharp focus immediately prior to the Second Coming.

When you put it all together, there can be no doubt that just before Jesus' Second Coming there will be many deceivers claiming to be Christ's representatives. They will "stretch forward," if you will, the end (the Tribulation), and change "all these things" to read "some of these things." By this they hope to escape the worst (Tribulation), and teach their constituents the same. As we have seen, the best way to do this is to have a secret rapture or evacuation of the Church before the Tribulation begins. However, Jesus clearly tells his

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 34-37, 204, 206-207.

⁵¹ Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, Zondervan, 1976, 86-93.

⁵² Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, 9, 39, 58, 62, 68, 80, 82, 85, 93, 142, 146, 156.

⁵³ MacPherson, 112.

followers that he won't come for them secretly, but openly and visibly like a vivid display of lightning (24:26-27)!

Preachers, teachers and writers spend a lot of time on the "what" of the Tribulation. They quote such verses as Joel 2:2 — "A day of darkness and gloominess" — but they seldom spend an adequate amount of time on the "when." They assert that the Day of the Lord includes the Tribulation and begins when the Tribulation begins. Largely, they ignore the "when" verses such as Joel 2:31, Malachi 4:5, and 2 Thessalonians 2:3, which depict things which must happen before the Day of the Lord can ever begin. For example, in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, Paul says that Antichrist is revealed first. In addition, Joel declares that the sun and moon will be darkened. Jesus avers in Matthew 24:29 that this will occur after the Tribulation. The Joel passage, regardless of the pre-tribbers' machinations, was important to early Christians and Christian leaders. Peter quoted it on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-20). From the outset Christians knew that their hope (the resurrection and completion of their salvation at the Second Coming) would follow the Tribulation.

What if a preacher or teacher quoted 1 Thessalonians 5:4, and then said, "Thank God, that day won't overtake us!" Would that be misleading? Yes, it would. I like MacPherson's take on it. Says he, "Imagine yourself catching the end of a sportscast that's announcing: '...but the players didn't win the game very quickly.' Would you assume that the players didn't win at all? Of course not! If the players lost, there would be no need to add 'very quickly' as a modifying phrase. Using the phrase indicates a game that is won, while not using the phrase indicates a game that is lost." In other words, he is saying that the modifying phrase in the Thessalonians passage is "as a thief." If the Day of the Lord won't overtake believers (the Church or the elect), why use the phrase at all? By this Paul confirms that the Church will in fact see the Day of the Lord, but it will not overtake them "as a thief." The Church will not be ignorant of its coming unless she is taught and accepts the teaching that she will not be on the earth during the Tribulation.

As a final thought on this subject I might add that the pre-tribbers need to take a close look at 2 Thessalonians 1:4-8 which speaks of the just retribution of God upon the persecutors of the saints at Christ's second coming. After declaring that he, Silvanus, and Timothy ought to always give thanks to God for the brethren at Thessalonica because of their faith and love for one another, Paul concludes in verse 4: "Therefore we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure." "This" (the persecutions and afflictions that they endure), he further proclaims, "is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering." Notice that it does not say "worthy of heaven" as a reward for their suffering nor that they will be worthy of being

taken out of the Tribulation at the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week so as to not suffer in order to be worthy of the Kingdom. Suffering, as Christ plainly teaches the disciples, is part of the territory and part of the cost of following him and his teachings.

Paul assures them in verse 6, "For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you." In this verse he speaks directly to the Thessalonians, but in the following verse he jumps ahead to Christ's Second Coming and declares, "and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."

Can it be any plainer that Paul is referring to the Second Coming and afterwards the Day of the Lord in which God's wrath will be poured out on the earth? The words "to give relief" are very interesting. Thayer says that it denotes relief, rest, from persecutions. In other words, the Parousia will finally give relief or rest to the persecuted saints who, contrary to the inveiglements of the pre-tribbers, will still be on the earth during the Tribulation. The "relief" comes only "when the Lord Jesus is revealed...in flaming fire." There is no pre-trib rapture here. Nobody is going to be "secretly raptured" to heaven to spend seven years with Jesus and then return with him at the end of the Great Tribulation. This scenario does not square with Scripture.

Could the pre-trib rapture theorists, then, be the "deceivers" of this age, teaching the Church not to worry about the Tribulation because she won't have to endure it? If so, they are doing grave harm to the Church. If believers buy into this theory they will not prepare for the Tribulation and it will come upon them like a thief in the night. If that happens, woe unto the Church, for she will not have prepared herself for the greatest trouble the world has ever known until this time or ever will know.