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IS A POSTTRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE REVEALED IN MATTHEW 24?

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Matthew 24 is a crucial passage in the debate between pre- and posttribulationists. The context of Matthew 24 and especially vv 40-41 argues that a posttribulation rapture is not being taught. Rather Christ, on the analogy of Noah's flood, spoke of some being taken in judgment. Thus it can be concluded that no biblical text places the rapture after the tribulation.

* * *

INTRODUCTION

AMONG premillenarians, the question as to whether the rapture of the church occurs before or after the end time tribulation continues to be a live subject for debate. Among other eschatological points of view such as postmillennialism and amillennialism, it is assumed that the rapture is a part of the second coming of Christ and therefore is posttribulationist. Postmillenarians and amillenarians accept almost without question a posttribulationist rapture because they interpret prophecies of the events leading up to the second coming nonliterally. By contrast premillennialism depends upon a literal interpretation of prophecy.

Among premillenarians, however, the issue of pretribulationism continues to be discussed, and books continue to be published on the issues involved. The differences of opinion stem largely from the question as to whether end time prophecies are to be interpreted literally, especially as they distinguish Israel's future from that of the church, the body of Christ.

Both pretribulationists and posttribulationists are confronted with the fact that the Scripture does not expressly state either view. Pretribulationists find what approximates a direct teaching of their view in 2 Thessalonians 2 where the lawless one is said to be revealed only after the restrainer is removed. The traditional interpretation

among pretribulationists is that the restrainer is the Holy Spirit who indwells the church. Thus, it is the Holy Spirit (and by implication the church) who must be removed before the lawless one can be revealed.¹ If the lawless one is the end time ruler, he would be revealed at least seven years before the second coming of Christ. According to this interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2, then, the rapture occurs prior to the tribulation. Posttribulationists, of course, dispute this interpretation and interpret the passage in a manner that does not yield a pretribulational sequence of end time events.²

What is often overlooked in the discussion by posttribulationists is that they also lack a specific statement that the rapture of the church occurs at the time of Christ's second coming to set up his kingdom. It is quite common for posttribulationists to challenge pretribulationists to offer a single verse in the Bible that teaches their position. Pretribulationism counters by offering passages that imply it, such as 2 Thessalonians 2. Pretribulationists also point out that all the passages clearly identified as referring to the rapture name no preceding events. On the other hand, passages dealing with the second coming of Christ to set up his kingdom predict a complicated series of world-shaking events such as are described in Revelation 6–18 and other passages dealing with the end time.

Posttribulationists are also embarrassed by the fact that the most detailed account of the second coming of Christ, found in Revelation 19–20, nowhere mentions either a rapture or a resurrection in connection with Christ's coming from heaven to earth, and there is no legitimate place to insert the events of 1 Thessalonians 4. Accordingly posttribulationists recognize the need for a specific passage that will support the posttribulational view. This for many posttribulationists is found in Matthew 24. This chapter of the Bible, therefore, becomes a strategic *crux interpretum* in the debate between the two views. Those who hold a midtribulational view, that is, that the rapture will occur three and one-half years before the second coming of Christ, also turn to Matthew 24. The discussion of this portion of Scripture and its proper exegesis, therefore, becomes quite determinative in any conclusion as to where the rapture fits into the prophetic

¹E.g., see D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1971) 313–14; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 259–63; and John F. Walvoord, "Is the Tribulation before the Rapture in 2 Thessalonians," *BSac* 134 (1977) 107–13.

²E.g., see Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 122–28. For a recent discussion of the passage from pre-, mid-, and posttribulational perspectives see Gleason L. Archer, Paul D. Feinberg, Douglas J. Moo, and Richard D. Reiter, *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-tribulational?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 126–27, 189–90, 228–29.

scheme. Practically every author who attempts to refute the pretribulational view discusses in some detail Matthew 24 in an effort to find support for posttribulationism.³

THE CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 24

As the Gospels make clear, the Olivet Discourse, contained in Matthew 24–25, occurred only days before the death and crucifixion of Christ. Opposition to Christ and efforts to kill him on the part of religious leaders of the day intensified as the time approached for the death and crucifixion of Christ. All of this troubled the disciples because it did not fit into their expectation that Jesus Christ was their Messiah and Savior, the Son of God, who would deliver them from the oppression of the Roman Empire. They were further troubled by Christ's own statement that he was to die by crucifixion. This had been implied in his comparison of his own death and resurrection to the experience of Jonah (Matt 12:38–41). Then he had explicitly predicted his death and resurrection three times as recorded in all three Gospels (Matt 16:21; 17:22–23; 19:18–19; Mark 8:31–33; 9:30–32; 10:32–34; Luke 9:22; 9:43–45; 18:31–34). These predictions did not harmonize with the disciples' expectation that Christ would deliver Israel from the oppression of Rome.

The disciples were further disturbed by Christ's denunciation of the Pharisees (Matthew 23) when he pronounced seven woes upon them. He denounced them as hypocrites, as whitewashed tombs, and as vipers. He closed his denunciation with the reminder that their forefathers had killed the prophets God had sent them. Accordingly, because they rejected Christ, Jerusalem would also be left desolate. These prophecies did not fit in with the anticipation of a glorious kingdom on earth in which Christ would reign.

It was in this context that the disciples reminded Christ of the beauty of their temple, the symbol of their religion and national solidarity. Here again they were dismayed when Christ announced "not one stone here will be left upon another; every one will be thrown down" (Matt 24:2).

Things came to a head after Christ had crossed the brook Kidron with his disciples and had stopped on the western slope of the Mount of Olives. It was then that the inner circle of the twelve disciples (Peter, James, John, and Andrew, according to Mark 13:3) came to

³E.g., see Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 135–39, 158; George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 144–45; and Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1932) 29, 208, 214–15.

Christ privately with three major questions (Matt 24:3). These questions were (1) "when will this happen," (2) "what will be the sign of your coming," and (3) "(what will be) the sign . . . of the end of the age"? The first question, referring to the destruction of the temple, is answered in Luke 21:20-24 by a prophecy which was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Matthew does not record Christ's answer to the first question but does record the answers to questions (2) and (3) which both deal with the second coming of Christ. At this time the disciples did not understand the difference between the first and second coming of Christ. What they were really questioning was, what were the signs of the approaching kingdom? Their questions were prompted by their attempt to harmonize in some way the OT prophecies of the Messiah's death and resurrection with the promises of his glorious reign and the deliverance of Israel.

It is most significant that saints in the OT (including the writers of Scripture [1 Pet 1:10-12]) as well as the twelve disciples in the NT never understood clearly the difference between the first and second coming of Christ. It was only after Christ's ascension into heaven that the distinction was made clear. With the help of historical hindsight, today the difference between the first and second coming of Christ can be sorted out because in the first coming of Christ the prophecies relating to his birth, life on earth, miracles, death and resurrection were all literally fulfilled while the prophecies of his glorious kingdom reign still await future fulfillment. If major events like the first coming and second coming of Christ could be so mingled in the OT and even in the Gospels, it is not surprising that there should be confusion today between a pretribulational rapture and a second coming of Christ to set up his kingdom.

However, in contrast to the universal confusion of the first and second coming of Christ prior to Christ's ascension, many students of prophecy today firmly believe that the rapture of the church will be pretribulational. They do this on much the same grounds that the first and second coming of Christ are separated today—that is, they distinguish the two events because they are so different in many characteristics, including the events which precede the event itself, and the events which follow.

Taking all the facts available, it can be determined that the setting for the questions of the disciples was that they did not know how to harmonize events relating to the first and second coming of Christ. It is to this crucial question that Christ gave the answers recorded in Matthew 24-25.

CONTEMPORARY CONFUSION ON THE INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24

An examination of major commentaries on Matthew 24 demonstrates that there is disagreement as to what the passage really teaches.

Conservative scholars who accept a literal second coming of Christ are usually united in their interpretation that the passage in general refers to the second coming of Christ. This is because the passage is very explicit. The events described will climax in Christ's coming as stated by Christ himself—"they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory" (Matt 24:30).

The confusion arises in interpreting what Christ said about events leading up to the second coming. G. Campbell Morgan divides the Olivet Discourse into three divisions. He considers Matt 24:5-35 to be talking about Israel. He relates Matt 24:36-25:30 to the church "as the spiritual Israel of God." He interprets Matt 25:31-46 as a judgment that Christ pronounced on the nations.⁴ He holds that Matt 24:6-22 was fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem, but in his exegesis he skips almost completely the problems of interpretation that exist in Matt 24:1-44.

Robert Gundry illustrates the posttribulational interpretation of this passage. He directs attention away from the subject matter to the hypothetical question, "To whom is the passage directed?" He writes, "To what group of redeemed do the Jewish saints addressed by Jesus and represented by the Apostles belong, Israel or the church?"⁵ In his complicated answer to this problem, he needlessly misdirects attention. This point of view is adopted by other posttribulationists and mid-tribulationists. They also insert the hypothesis that the prophecies had to be fulfilled in the lifetime of the apostles—an erroneous approach since the second coming of Christ and the course of the entire preceding age is predicted.

The disciples were both Jews and the initial members of the church, the body of Christ. The answers to their questions concerned anyone who was interested in the events of the end of the age, and they are not limited to the apostolic age. While the disciples obviously were interested in how this related to the Jews, as illustrated by their questions, the answer that Christ gave is largely non-Jewish. It involves prophecies which affect the whole world with the Olivet Discourse specifically concluding with the judgment of the Gentiles. The issue at hand is not to whom Christ's answer is addressed, but the question of the content of the prophecy itself. Gundry never even mentions the three questions that are being answered in this discourse of Christ.

A typical amillennial interpretation is offered by R. C. H. Lenski. He holds that many of the prophecies of this passage, including the great tribulation, have already been fulfilled in connection with the

⁴G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (New York: Revell, 1929) 284.

⁵Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 129.

destruction of Jerusalem and the events which preceded it. In general he finds that the prophecies are largely fulfilled already historically, but that they obviously lead up to the second coming of Christ. He does not consider the question as to whether the subject of the rapture is being presented. Everything is related to the second coming of Christ as far as the consummation is concerned.⁶

The great variety of opinions on Matthew 24 indicate that this passage is difficult to interpret. The present discussion will focus on the contribution of Matt 24:31 and Matt 24:37-42 toward understanding the time relationship between the rapture and the tribulation.

THE GATHERING OF THE ELECT

Immediately following predictions of catastrophic interference with the sun, moon, and stars, Christ states,

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other [Matt 24:30-31].

Among conservative interpreters of Scripture, there is general agreement that this prophecy concerns a gathering of the elect in connection with the second coming of Christ. Some premillenarians limit the "elect" to the Jewish people because Christ is addressing the apostles in this passage. Others view the "elect" as including all the saved, whether OT or NT saints. Premillenarians, whether pretribulationist or posttribulationist, recognize that there will be a gathering of all the saints at the time of the second coming of Christ in order that they may all participate in the millennial kingdom. Amillenarians would agree with this, but they would add the resurrection of the wicked as indicated in Rev 20:11-15. Postmillenarians would have essentially the same view as the amillenarians.

The major question raised by premillenarians, whether pretribulationist or posttribulationist, is whether this event includes the *rapture* of the church. Even if the church is raptured earlier in the sequence of events, it nevertheless would be included in this gathering.

The two essentials of the rapture of the church are resurrection of the dead in Christ and translation of living Christians, as brought out clearly in central passages such as 1 Thess 4:13-18 and 1 Cor 15:51-58. The prophecy in Matthew, however, says nothing of either resurrection or translation and refers only to the gathering of the elect. It may

⁶R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943) 956.

be assumed that the elect so gathered have been either translated or resurrected, but it is not indicated when this occurs. Accordingly the passage cannot properly be used by either the pretribulationists or the posttribulationists as positive proof of their position, although the silence relative to resurrection and translation here would be in favor of the pretribulational position.

Most of the attention between pretribulational and posttribulational arguments, however, has centered on Matt 24:36-42. Here the time factor is specifically discussed. Christ states, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matt 24:36). This presents a problem for all eschatological views in that Christ states that he does not know the day or the hour, but that only the Father knows. Christ is emphasizing that the time has not been revealed. If Christ did not know it, neither can anyone else.

In the interpretation of end time prophecy, many premillenarians hold that the last seven years referred to in Dan 9:27 will culminate in the second coming of Christ. Even if prophetic years of 360 days are used, it is not clear what day or hour will actually signal the second coming of Christ.⁷ The final period of great tribulation leading up to the second coming of Christ is defined as one-half of the last seven years in Dan 9:27. In Dan 7:25 and 12:7 the expression "a time, times and half a time" is usually interpreted as three and one-half years. The same expression occurs in Rev 12:14. In Rev 13:5 the period is referred to as forty-two months. In Dan 12:11-12, the period is described as 1290 and 1335 days. Here the forty-two month period is extended thirty and seventy-five days to uncertain *termini*. While all of these should be interpreted as literal time periods, they do not reveal the day or the hour of Christ's return.

Expanding on the uncertainty of the day and the hour, Christ declares it will be like the days of Noah (Matt 24:37). While Noah was building the ark, it was obvious that the flood would not come until he had completed the project. Once the ark was completed the situation changed radically. As observers saw the animals going into the ark by two in a manner contrary to nature, it was obvious that this was a sign that something was about to happen. But the day or the hour still was not clear. Then as they observed Noah's family enter the ark and the door shutting, they still could not know the day or the hour, but it was obvious that the flood could come at any time.

⁷For dispensational discussions of the seventy-weeks prophecy see Paul D. Feinberg, "An Exegetical and Theological Study of Daniel 9:24-27," *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg* (ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg; Chicago: Moody, 1981) 189-220; and Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 115-40.

Because of the uncertainty of the time of the flood and their skepticism as to whether the flood was even going to occur, Christ describes them as continuing in the normal course of life "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark" (Matt 24:38). Christ goes on to say that when the flood came it "took them all away" (Matt 24:39).

Using this OT illustration, Christ compares it to the events which will occur at the second coming of Christ. Like the flood, the second coming will be preceded by specific signs which indicate the approach but not the day or the hour of the coming of the Lord. Like the flood, it will be a time of judgment. This is summarized in Matt 24:40-41, "Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left."

The similarity of this to the rapture of the church has caused many expositors, especially posttribulationists, to liken this to what will take place at the time of the second coming. Alexander Reese, whose major work is *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, cites these verses as proof that the rapture occurs in connection with the second coming of Christ. His book, on which he spent twenty-five years, has been the regularly-cited classic work on posttribulationism ever since it was published. There is a major problem, however, with this interpretation.

In the illustration of the flood which Christ himself used, the one who is taken is drowned whereas those who are left, that is, Noah's family, are safe in the ark. To view the one taken as the righteous one and the one left as the judged one is to reverse the illustration completely.

Reese, however, believes he has solved this problem and makes this a major argument for his posttribulationist position. He notes that there are two different Greek words used for "taken." In Matt 24:39 the verb used is ἔρεν from αἶρω. In vv 40-41 the verb παραλαμβάνεται from παραλαμβάνω is used. Reese claims that παραλαμβάνω is used in Scripture only in a friendly sense. In taking this position, he opposes Darby:

Darby, in one of the few instances where he allowed views to influence (and mar) his admirable literal translation, translated *paralambanō* in Luke xvii:34-5 by *seize*. The use of this word in the NT is absolutely opposed to this; it is a good word; a word used exclusively in the sense of 'take away with,' or 'receive,' or 'take home.'⁸

Reese and others have pointed out that παραλαμβάνω is used of the rapture in John 14:3. This is an illustration, however, that even a

careful scholar may make mistakes. Reese evidently failed to check John 19:16 ("the soldiers took charge of [παρέλαβον] Jesus"), where "took charge of" is hardly a reference to a friendly taking. As a matter of fact, it refers to taking Christ to the judgment of the cross.

Gundry is aware of this problem and attempts to settle the matter dogmatically by stating,

But granting that the context indicates judgment, we are not forced to conclude that 'one will be taken' in judgment and 'one will be left' in safety. The reverse may just as easily be understood: 'one will be taken' in rapture and 'one will be left' for judgment.⁹

However, the context completely contradicts Reese and Gundry. The context here is more determinative than the fact that the word παραλαμβάνω is used for the rapture in John 14:3 by a different-author.

Interestingly, after additional study, Gundry changed his mind. In his later work (*Matthew*) he reversed his opinion. He states, "But Matthew's parallelistic insertion of *airen* in v. 39, where judgment is in view, makes the taking judgmental in his gospel. Hence, being left means being spared from instead of exposed to judgment."¹⁰ In other words, he concedes what he formerly refuted and agrees with the pretribulational interpretation of this passage.

If there is any doubt as to the interpretation here, it should be settled by a parallel reference in Luke 17 where Christ, predicting the same event in the same context states, "I tell you, on that night, two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left" (Luke 17:34-35). Gundry also cites this passage¹¹ but significantly stops before 37, which would have made the matter clear. Here the disciples asked the question, "Where, Lord?" Christ replied, "Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather." It is clear that the ones taken are put to death. This actually is a preliminary stage of the judgment that is later detailed in Matt 25:31-46 where the unsaved Gentiles are destroyed.

CONCLUSION

Posttribulationists and midtribulationists as well have misread the immediate context of Matt 24:40-41 and have reached an unwarranted conclusion that there is a rapture in this passage. Instead, the passage teaches that the righteous will be left as Noah and his family were left alive in the ark, whereas all others will be taken away

⁹Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 138.

¹⁰Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 494.

¹¹Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 137.

in judgment. The argument for posttribulationism based upon this text, which even posttribulationists admit is the only passage approximating a direct statement of a posttribulation rapture, collapses upon careful analysis. Even Gundry has reversed his former view of this passage.

The fact that those who are left, are left alive to enter the millennial kingdom because they are saved is further confirmed by Christ in Matt 25:31–46 where the sheep are ushered into the kingdom and the goats are cast into everlasting fire. This indicates the separation of the saved from the unsaved at the time of the second coming. There is no rapture at the second coming because those who survive the period after this purging judgment of God enter the millennium in their natural bodies so that they can fulfill the Scriptures that describe them as living natural lives, bearing children, living, dying, and even sinning. All of these factors would be impossible if every saved person were raptured at the time of the second coming.

A careful study of the passage relating to the second coming of Christ in Matthew 24, therefore, gives no ground for a posttribulation rapture. In fact it confirms the concept that those who are caught up at the rapture are caught up to heaven to the Father's house as Christ promised in John 14. This will occur at a time preceding the events of Matthew 24–25 which must be fulfilled prior to the second coming of Christ. The rapture therefore is an imminent event which today may be expected momentarily.