

WHAT IN THE END OF THE WORLD IS GOING TO HAPPEN?

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CHAPTER ONE

THE FIRST COMING OF JESUS

The End Is Near

When is the end of the world? How will it all unfold? And why does it feel as though everything could change at any moment?

Growing up in the 1990s, I was fairly certain James Cameron's Judgment Day would arrive on August 29, 1997. That was the date when *Terminator 2* said an artificial intelligence called Skynet would become self-aware and begin humanity's war against the machines. That date came and went. The artificially intelligent Austrian death machine did not take over the world; instead, the actor who played him eventually became governor of my home state. Yet with the recent explosion of artificial intelligence, autonomous weapons, deepfakes, global surveillance, and machines that can imitate human conversation, The Terminator does not feel quite as far-fetched as it once did.

I became a Christian in 2004 and began reading the Bible for myself. Almost immediately, I was fascinated by the end of the Book. I wanted to understand the Antichrist, the Tribulation, Armageddon, the return of Jesus, and the new heaven and new earth. I still do not know exactly what role artificial intelligence will play in the final chapter of human history. The Bible alludes to some modern technologies that will set up the one-world control of the Antichrist. This present world is not wandering without direction, and it will not continue forever in its present condition. God has appointed an end to evil, a day of judgment, and a future in which Jesus Christ makes all things new.

If the end of the world frightens you, I want to point you toward the ancient Scriptures - not to intensify your fear, but to give you hope. Biblical prophecy was never intended to turn believers into panicked date-setters hiding from society with canned beans and batteries. It was given to make us watchful, faithful, holy, courageous, and hopeful. My purpose in this book is not to persuade you to fear tomorrow. It is to introduce you to the One who already stands at the end of history and calls you to trust Him today.

The King Already Came

Perhaps you have heard someone say, 'Jesus is coming back.' What does that mean? Why does it matter? And when will it happen?

Simply put, Jesus Christ of Nazareth was a historical human being who lived within one hundred miles of His birthplace in Bethlehem. He died a horrific death on a Roman cross, rose bodily from the grave, and ascended visibly into heaven. He is going to return bodily, visibly, and gloriously. He will not return merely as an idea, an influence, or a spiritual feeling. The same Jesus who walked the shores of Galilee, touched lepers, welcomed children, confronted hypocrites, calmed storms, died at Calvary, and walked out of the tomb will come again. When He does, He will judge evil, vindicate righteousness, fulfill His promises to Israel, establish His kingdom, and ultimately make every wrong right.

Jesus told us plainly that no one knows the day or hour of His return. Any person who sets a date is claiming to know more than Jesus. Yet Jesus also commanded His followers to watch, remain ready, and recognize the signs of the times. We cannot circle the date on a calendar, but neither are we permitted to live as if He will never come.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive study of every detail of biblical prophecy. There are many worthy books on that subject, and there are sincere Christians who disagree about portions of the prophetic timeline. My primary focus is the return of Jesus Christ and the Rapture of the Church. Historic Christianity has consistently confessed that Jesus will return personally and bodily. Christians may disagree about the timing of the Rapture, the nature of the Millennium, or how particular passages fit together, but anyone who takes the New Testament seriously must reckon with its repeated promise: the King who came once is coming again.

Scripture's Center Is Jesus

Before we consider the Second Coming, however, we need to look carefully at the first. The Bible was given to humanity for many reasons. It tells us who created the world, why human beings exist, what is ultimately wrong with the world, how we are to live, and where history is going. Yet the Bible's great purpose is to reveal the God of heaven and His plan of redemption. A. W. Tozer famously wrote, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." What we believe about God shapes everything else we believe about ourselves, our sin, our future, and our need for salvation.

Jesus taught that the Scriptures testify about Him. After His resurrection, He walked with two confused disciples on the road to Emmaus and explained "*in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself*" (Luke 24:27). He later told the gathered disciples that everything written about Him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms had to be fulfilled (Luke 24:44). The Bible is not a random collection of religious sayings. It tells one great story, and Jesus stands at its center.

The religious leaders did not finally condemn Jesus merely because He gave controversial sermons. At His trial, the high priest asked whether He was the Christ, the Son of the Most High God. Jesus answered by identifying Himself with the Son of Man who would sit at the right hand of Power and come with the clouds of heaven. The high priest tore his clothes and declared that Jesus had spoken blasphemy (Mark 14:61-64). The issue could not have been clearer: Jesus claimed to be the promised Messiah and shared the identity, authority, and deity that belong only to God.

The Messiah Foretold

To understand that claim, we must understand prophecy. Predictive prophecy is woven throughout Scripture, and some have estimated that over a quarter of its contents is prophetic in nature. In the Old Testament, God revealed a developing portrait of the coming Messiah. Some passages are direct predictions. Others form patterns, pictures, promises, and types that find their fullest meaning in Christ. Depending on how those categories are counted, Christian writers have identified hundreds of Old Testament passages that point to the Messiah and His work.

The cumulative picture is astonishing. The Messiah would come from the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and David. He would be born in Bethlehem. A messenger would prepare His way. He would bring light to Galilee, teach with divine authority, heal the broken, enter Jerusalem as a humble King, be rejected, betrayed, pierced, and buried with the rich. He would bear the sins of others, rise from the dead, reign as King, and bring God's salvation to the nations. These promises were written across centuries by different human authors living in different circumstances, yet they converge in one life: Jesus of Nazareth.

So You're Saying There's A Chance

Peter W. Stoner, a twentieth-century mathematics and astronomy professor, attempted to illustrate the cumulative force of fulfilled prophecy in his book *Science Speaks*. He selected eight messianic prophecies and asked what the probability would be of one person fulfilling all eight by chance. His students proposed estimates for each event, and Stoner deliberately adjusted them to be conservative. He concluded that the chance of one person, living from the time of those prophecies to the time of his writing, fulfilling all eight was approximately one in 10^{17} - one chance in one hundred quadrillion.

His eight examples were these: the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1-6; Luke 2:4-7); a messenger would prepare His way (Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:1-3; John 1:23); He would enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 21:1-11); He would be betrayed and wounded in the house

of His friends (Zechariah 13:6; Psalm 41:9; John 13:18); He would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:14-16); the betrayal money would be thrown in the house of the Lord and connected with a potter (Zechariah 11:13; Matthew 27:3-10); He would remain silent before His accusers (Isaiah 53:7; Matthew 27:12-14; Mark 15:3-5); and His hands and feet would be pierced (Psalm 22:16; Luke 23:33; John 20:25-27).

Stoner tried to make one hundred quadrillion visible. Imagine covering the entire state of Texas two feet deep with silver dollars. Mark one coin with an X, bury it somewhere in that sea of silver, and thoroughly mix the coins across the state. Then blindfold one person, allow him to travel anywhere in Texas, and tell him he may bend down once and choose a single coin. The chance of his selecting the marked coin would illustrate the probability. Again that is only eight of the hundreds of fulfilled prophecies. Imagine the probability of all the prophecies being fulfilled.

One Messiah, Two Comings

I have heard that there are 316 prophecies that Jesus fulfilled, but there are apparently 456 prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament. I am okay with this because Jesus fulfilled enough of them, while the rest of the prophecies describe His Second Coming. The prophecies describing His First Coming describe a suffering Servant who bears sin. The prophecies of His Second Coming describe a conquering King who judges evil and rules the nations. The Jewish people of Jesus' day often struggled to understand how both portraits could belong to the same Messiah. The New Testament reveals the answer: one Messiah comes twice. He came first in humility to save. He will come again in glory to reign.

Jesus Reads Isaiah

One of the clearest demonstrations of this appears at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Luke 4. After His baptism and forty days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness, Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit. News about Him spread throughout the region, and He taught in the synagogues. Then He came home to Nazareth.

On the Sabbath, as was His custom, Jesus entered the synagogue. In modern language, a synagogue was something like a satellite campus where the Jewish community gathered for Scripture reading, prayer, instruction, and worship. Jesus stood to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Luke does not tell us that this was the first time Jesus had ever read publicly, nor does he tell us who selected the passage. He simply says that Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place He intended to read. Then Jesus read: "*The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because*

He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD” (Luke 4:18–19).

Those words come primarily from Isaiah 61:1-2, with language that also echoes Isaiah 58:6. They perfectly summarize the ministry Jesus was beginning. He came with good news for the poor, healing for the brokenhearted, freedom for captives, sight for the blind, and liberty for those crushed beneath the weight of sin and suffering. He came proclaiming “***the acceptable year of the LORD***” - language filled with the hope of Jubilee, when debts were released, captives were freed, and lost inheritance was restored.

No wonder people love Jesus. He moves toward the hurting. He touches those others avoid. He speaks dignity to the ashamed and hope to the hopeless. He does not merely give advice to captives; He opens the prison. He does not merely describe light to the blind; He gives sight. He does not merely sympathize with sinners; He saves them.

When Jesus finished reading, He rolled up the scroll, returned it to the attendant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on Him. Then He said, “***Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing***” (Luke 4:21).

Imagine the silence. Jesus was not merely saying, “That was a beautiful passage.” He was saying, “Isaiah was writing about Me. The Spirit-anointed Messiah is standing in front of you. The promised day of salvation has arrived.”

At first, the people marveled at His words, but familiarity quickly turned into unbelief. “***Is this not Joseph’s son?***” they asked. Jesus exposed their demand for hometown privilege and reminded them that, in the days of Elijah and Elisha, God’s mercy had reached outsiders: a Gentile widow in Sidon and a Syrian commander named Naaman. That is when admiration erupted into rage. The people drove Jesus out of town and led Him toward the brow of a hill, intending to throw Him down. Yet Jesus passed through their midst and went His way. No one could take His life before the appointed hour.

Jesus Has More To Do

The scene is dramatic, but the most revealing detail may be what Jesus did not read. In Isaiah 61, the sentence continues beyond “***the acceptable year of the LORD***” with these words: “***and the day of vengeance of our God***” (Isaiah 61:2). Jesus stopped before that phrase. He closed the scroll in the middle of Isaiah’s sentence.

That was no accident. Jesus was declaring the purpose of His first coming. He came first to seek and save the lost, to bear our sins, and to offer mercy to a rebellious world. As John later wrote, “***God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved***” (John 3:17). The acceptable time had arrived. The door of grace stood open.

But Jesus did not erase the rest of Isaiah’s sentence. He postponed its fulfillment until His return. The day of vengeance is not an outburst of uncontrolled divine temper; it is the settled, righteous judgment of a holy God against evil. Jesus is coming again to confront rebellion, defeat every enemy, vindicate those who belong to Him, and execute perfect justice. The One who first came as the Lamb will return as the conquering King.

This helps us understand why some Old Testament passages seem to place the suffering and glory of Messiah side by side. The prophets saw both mountain peaks, but they did not always see the long valley of time between them. Isaiah 61 moves in a single sentence from grace to judgment. Zechariah 9 moves from the King riding humbly on a donkey to His dominion extending from sea to sea. The first part has been fulfilled literally. The rest remains equally certain. Jesus stopped at the comma because He came first to save. When He returns, He will finish the sentence and come in righteous judgment.

The apostle Peter described the same pattern as “***the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow***” (1 Peter 1:11). The suffering belongs especially to His first coming. The unveiled glory belongs to His return. Bethlehem, Calvary, and the empty tomb are not disconnected from the Second Coming; they guarantee it. Every promise God fulfilled in the first coming gives us reason to trust every promise that remains.

This Same Jesus Will Return

After His resurrection, Jesus spent forty days appearing to His disciples and teaching them about the kingdom of God. Then, as they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. While the disciples stood staring into heaven, two heavenly messengers in white apparel appeared and said: “***This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven***” (Acts 1:11).

In other words, He will come back as surely and as truly as He left. Jesus ascended bodily, visibly, and in the clouds. He will return bodily, visibly, and with the clouds. “***Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him***” (Revelation 1:7). Zechariah says that His feet will stand upon the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:4). The Second Coming is not poetic - it is the promised return of Jesus Himself.

The first coming happened in history just as God promised. Jesus was born, lived, ministered, suffered, died, rose, and ascended. The Second Coming is just as certain. The biblical writers do not say He might return. They say He will. That truth should do more than satisfy our curiosity. It should confront us. Before Jesus returns as Judge, He offers Himself to you as Savior. You are living in what Scripture calls “*the accepted time*.” Paul writes, “*Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation*” (2 Corinthians 6:2). Not someday. Not when you have answered every question or cleaned yourself up. Today.

Today Is The Day Of Salvation

Your Creator loves you. He proved His love by sending His Son. Jesus died for your sins, rose from the dead, and offers forgiveness and eternal life to everyone who turns from sin and trusts in Him. Christianity is not the promise that decent people can improve themselves enough to reach heaven. It is the announcement that God came down to rescue sinners who could never save themselves.

Have you trusted Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins? Not your religious background. Not your good intentions. Not your church attendance. Not a prayer you once repeated without surrender. Jesus alone is the way, the truth, and the life.

If you are ready to turn from your sin and entrust your life to Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords, you can speak to Him now. These are not magic words, and reciting them cannot save you. Jesus saves. But this prayer can help you express genuine repentance and faith:

*Father in heaven,
I have sinned against You.
I cannot save myself.
I believe You sent Your Son Jesus because You love me.
I believe He died for my sins.
I believe He rose bodily from the dead.
Today I turn from my sin and confess that Jesus is Lord.
Forgive me, make me new, and teach me to follow You.
Whether You take me home or Jesus returns in my lifetime,
Fill me with Your Holy Spirit that I might live for You until that day.
In the mighty name of Jesus, amen.*

Romans 10:9 promises that “*If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*” A few verses later, Scripture says, “*Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved*” (Romans 10:13). And the most famous verse in the Bible declares, “*For God*

so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

If you have sincerely turned to Jesus and placed your faith in Him, your confidence does not rest in the perfection of your prayer or the intensity of your emotions. It rests in Christ and His promise. Tell another Christian what you have done. Begin reading the Gospel of John. Find a Bible-teaching church. Be baptized. Learn to pray. Turn away from the old life, and begin walking with the One who gave His life for you.

My prayer is that you will live in daily repentance and joyful faith until the day you die or the day Jesus comes. The world may feel out of control, but history is not. The future does not belong to Skynet, politicians, dictators, billionaires, armies, or algorithms. It belongs to Jesus Christ.

He came once exactly as promised. He is coming again.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS

The First Coming And The Second

Imagine if Elvis came back after all this time. What if he really didn't die, or if he did, he came back to life. Let me be clear, I'm not in this camp, nor do I really care. I think this would be exciting news, but he would be over 90 years old. I just don't think he would have the same following or vigor with his hip-swinging to make his second coming better than his first. Not so with Jesus. The second coming is gonna be even more spectacular than His first coming.

The first coming of Jesus was quiet enough for most of the world to miss. Although angels made a huge deal from heaven - only the despised shepherds got to experience the heavenly worship concert. A poor teenage girl gave birth in a Bethlehem cave instead of a palace. Wise men eventually arrived from the East with presents. An old man and an old woman recognized Him in the Temple. Meanwhile, emperors governed, armies marched, merchants traded, and most people went to bed unaware that the Creator had entered His creation. The Second Coming will not be like that.

No one will need to follow a star to find Him. FOX and CNN won't spend three days debating whether He really returned. Jesus said His coming would be like lightning flashing from east to west. Every eye will see Him (Matthew 24:27; Revelation 1:7). The nations will mourn. Heaven will open, the King will descend, and human history will meet the One it has spent millennia trying to ignore.

At His first coming, Jesus was wrapped in swaddling cloths. At His second, He wears a robe dipped in blood. At His first coming, He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. At His second, He rides from heaven on a white stallion. At His first coming, soldiers pressed a crown of thorns onto His head. At His second, He wears many crowns. At His first coming, rulers judged Him. At His second, He judges rulers. At His first coming, He stood silently before Pilate. At His second, one word from His mouth ends the rebellion of the nations. At His first coming, a sign above His cross mocked Him as King of the Jews. At His second, the title is tattooed on His thigh all gangster: ***KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS***.

Before we go further, I want to tell you where I am coming from. I am a pre-tribulational, pre-millennial Christian. Those are long churchy words, and we will unpack both of them. I did not choose them because they look impressive on a doctrinal statement or fit nicely on an end-times chart. I hold them because, after

studying the passages and the competing interpretations, I believe they best explain the whole counsel of Scripture. But I also know godly Christians who read some of these passages differently. They love Jesus, believe the Bible, preach the gospel, and may be more faithful than people who can draw a perfect prophetic timeline on a whiteboard. The Bible is inspired. My end-times chart is not.

In the following chapters we will look at the major views of how Jesus is to come back. We will allow them to make their best biblical case before I explain more fully why I remain convinced of a pre-tribulation Rapture and a future thousand-year reign of Christ. For now, I want to begin with the truth that stands at the center of historic Christian hope: Jesus Christ will return personally, bodily, visibly, powerfully, and gloriously back to planet Earth.

My goal in this chapter is to give you a reliable map: the Tribulation, the rise of the Beast, the judgments of God, the gathering of the nations, the visible return of Jesus, the millennial kingdom that follows, and how we will live with Jesus for all eternity.

How To Read Revelation

The last book of the Bible is called Revelation ... singular. There are plenty of revelations inside it, but the title points to one great unveiling: “***The Revelation of Jesus Christ***” (Revelation 1:1). The Greek word *apokalypsis* means an unveiling or disclosure. Our culture uses the word apocalypse to mean the destruction of everything, usually with zombies, an asteroid, or very poor decisions made by scientists in a secret laboratory. Biblically, the Apocalypse is first an unveiling. God pulls back the curtain so we can see Jesus as He truly is and history as it truly will be.

That means the main character of Revelation is not the Antichrist. It is not the dragon, the mark of the Beast, Babylon, the four horsemen, or a red heifer. The main character is Jesus. Revelation begins with Jesus among His churches, moves to Jesus as the Lamb who alone is worthy to open the scroll, and reaches its climax when Jesus rides out of heaven as the conquering King. An angel tells John, “***The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy***” (Revelation 19:10). If our study of prophecy makes us fascinated with Antichrist but bored with Christ, we have missed the point.

Revelation also speaks through symbols. A dragon appears in heaven. A woman is clothed with the sun. Beasts rise from the sea and the earth. A prostitute sits on many waters. Some symbols are explained in the text, while others draw upon images from Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and the rest of the Old Testament. We should not take every symbol into automatic literalism, but neither should we use the existence of symbols as an excuse to make the text mean anything we want as an allegory. A symbol represents something real. The dragon is symbolic, but Satan is real. The

Beast is described symbolically, but his authority, blasphemy, deception, and persecution are real.

Revelation does not always move like a stopwatch. At times John advances the story. At other times he pauses, zooms out, looks behind the scenes, or retells the conflict from another perspective. Some Christians therefore understand the seals, trumpets, and bowls as largely parallel cycles that revisit the same period. I see a basic forward movement and intensification: the seventh seal opens into the trumpets, the seventh trumpet leads toward the bowls, and the bowls bring the present age to the return of Christ. Even within that general sequence, chapters 10-14 contain interludes and flashbacks. I am not going to pretend every arrow on every chart is equally certain. What is certain is the destination. The Lamb opens the scroll. God judges a rebellious world. Satan's counterfeit kingdom rises and falls. Jesus returns. Satan is bound. Christ reigns.

Daniel's Final Week

The Old Testament gives us an important frame for this period. In Daniel 9, the angel Gabriel announces "*seventy weeks*" concerning Daniel's people and holy city. The Hebrew expression refers to seventy units of seven, commonly understood in this prophecy as 490 years. After sixty-nine of those units, Messiah is cut off and Jerusalem is destroyed. Daniel then describes a coming ruler who confirms a covenant for one "*week*" and, in the middle of that period, brings sacrifice to an end and sets up an abomination (Daniel 9:24-27).

Jesus points back to Daniel when He warns of "*the abomination of desolation*" standing in the holy place. He says this event will be followed by "*great tribulation*" unlike anything before it (Matthew 24:15-21). Revelation repeatedly gives us matching time periods: forty-two months, 1,260 days, and "*a time and times and half a time.*" Each describes approximately three and a half years. In the futurist reading I believe best fits these texts, Daniel's final seven-year period still awaits fulfillment, and its second half is the Great Tribulation in the narrowest sense.

Some Christians use 'Tribulation' for the entire seven years. Others reserve the 'Great Tribulation' for the final three and a half. I will use both terms in that way. Where the Rapture belongs in relation to those years is the question we will address later. I do not want to sneak my answer into the timeline and then congratulate myself for proving it. For this chapter, we begin where Revelation begins its earthly judgments: with the Lamb opening the seals and preparing to take His rightful throne on planet Earth.

The Lamb Opens The Scroll

Revelation 4 takes John into the throne room of heaven. Revelation 5 introduces a scroll sealed with seven seals. No created being is worthy to open it, and John begins to weep. Then an elder tells him not to weep because the Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed. John looks for a Lion and sees a Lamb standing as though it had been slain. Jesus conquers as the Lion because He first gave Himself as the Lamb.

He takes the scroll, heaven erupts in worship, and the judgments begin. That detail matters. Revelation is not the story of Satan stealing control from a helpless God. The Lamb opens every seal. The judgments unfold under divine authority. Evil is active, Satan is enraged, rulers rebel, and human beings make real choices, but no one knocks God off His throne. The world may look out of control from earth. It never looks that way from heaven. Jesus is currently in control of everything as the King of kings.

Revelation chapters 6-19 speak of this Tribulation and/or Great Tribulation in great detail. Without getting sidetracked from the focus on the return of Jesus, I want to summarize these chapters to accomplish three things: to educate you or remind you of what the Bible says about the end of the world, to whet your appetite to read the book of Revelation, as it is the only book that promises a blessing, and to set the stage for why and how the Lord Jesus is going to come back to earth.

The Seal Judgments

I think of this period of time as the demo-day so Jesus can properly remodel the earth. I, like Jesus, grew up with a Jewish carpenter as a father. As we prepared to remodel homes we would have to destroy the existing home. Sometimes, after demolition, only one wall would be standing. Then we could execute the blueprint to the 'new' home. That is what Jesus is doing through these chapters - getting ready to build the New Heavens and the New Earth.

The remodel process begins in chapter 6. I believe that the 'Seal Judgments' are judgments upon the earth through the hands of sinful humanity. When the first seal opens, a rider appears on a white horse, carrying a bow and receiving a crown. He goes out conquering and to conquer (Revelation 6:1-2). Some interpreters identify this rider with Christ or with the victorious spread of the gospel. I do not believe that is the best reading. Jesus does not ride out as the unmistakable King until Revelation 19. This earlier rider carries a bow, is given a single crown, and begins a sequence of conquest, war, famine, and death. I understand him as a counterfeit conqueror - the early rise of the ruler later revealed as the Beast or Antichrist. He offers the kind of peace fallen humanity has always wanted: unity without God and security purchased through submission to government.

The second seal releases a fiery red horse. Peace is taken from the earth, and people slaughter one another. The third releases a black horse whose rider holds scales. Food becomes scarce and painfully expensive. A day's wage purchases barely enough grain to survive, while oil and wine remain untouched - showing the vast divide between upper-class and lower-class. War is followed by famine, and scarcity does not fall evenly. The poor starve while luxury somehow survives. Human civilization has repeated that pattern often enough for us to recognize it, especially when observing communist nations run by dictators. The fourth rider sits on a pale, corpse-colored horse. His name is Death, Hades follows behind him, and authority is given over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, hunger, death, and wild beasts (Revelation 6:7-8). We should resist the urge to rush past that fraction. John is describing death on a scale beyond any war or disaster the world has known.

The fifth seal moves the scene back to heaven. John sees the souls of martyrs who were killed for the Word of God and their testimony. They cry, "***How long?***" That prayer is not faithless. It is the cry of people who know God is just and ask when His justice will be seen. They are given white robes and told to rest a little longer. God has not forgotten one faithful witness, one secret execution, one prison cell, or one drop of innocent blood.

The sixth seal is a great event that shakes the earth. This could be an earthquake, but my personal opinion is that this will be Oppenheimer's fear coming to fruition through nuclear war at the hands of man against man. The sun becomes black, the moon appears like blood, stars fall, the sky recedes, and mountains and islands move. Zechariah 14:12 mentions what we have observed in the blast of nuclear warfare: "***Their flesh shall dissolve while they stand on their feet, Their eyes shall dissolve in their sockets, And their tongues shall dissolve in their mouths.***" Kings, commanders, wealthy people, slaves, and free people hide in caves and beg the rocks to cover them. Human rank disappears in the midst of suffering when the world begins to come apart. They will blame God for their own godless actions. They call it "***the wrath of the Lamb***" and ask, "***Who is able to stand?***" (Revelation 6:12-17).

That phrase is deliberately unsettling: the wrath of the Lamb. We picture lambs as gentle, harmless animals. Jesus is gentle, but He is not harmless to evil. The hands once pierced for sinners will judge those who finally refuse His mercy. The Lamb who was slain is also the Lion who reigns.

Salvation During The Tribulation

Before the seventh seal opens, Revelation 7 pauses. Judgment is restrained while 144,000 servants of God are sealed - twelve thousand from each of twelve named tribes of Israel. Christians disagree about whether the number is literal or symbolic

and about the precise mission of this group. The text explicitly calls them servants of God from the tribes of Israel, and I see no reason to turn Israel into someone else when John takes the trouble to name the tribes. They are marked as belonging to God before the next judgments fall.

John then sees a second group no one can number, drawn from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They stand before the throne and the Lamb in white robes, praising God for salvation. John is told they have come out of the Great Tribulation (Revelation 7:9-17). That scene keeps us from imagining that the Tribulation is seven years in which grace disappears. God judges, but He also saves. People from every nation will wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb. Many will pay for their testimony with their lives, but not even Antichrist can stop the gospel from reaching those God intends to redeem.

The Trumpet Judgments

When the seventh seal opens, heaven becomes silent for about half an hour, which I believe is the grief experienced by God as Ezekiel 33:11 says, ***“I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live.”*** Heaven was once filled with thunder, worship, voices, and song - now heaven falls quiet. It is the silence before the storm. Seven angels receive seven trumpets, and the prayers of the saints rise before God like incense. Then fire from the altar is thrown to earth, and the trumpet judgments begin.

The ‘Trumpet Judgments,’ I believe, are judgments through the hands of demonic beings no longer held back by the hand of God. The first four trumpets strike the natural world. Hail and fire mingled with blood burn a third of the trees and the green grass. Something like a great burning mountain is thrown into the sea, turning a third of it to blood, killing a third of its creatures, and destroying a third of the ships. A blazing object called Wormwood falls upon rivers and springs, making waters bitter and deadly. Then a third of the sun, moon, and stars are struck, darkening a third of the day and night (Revelation 8:7-12).

The final three trumpets are so severe that they are introduced as three woes. At the fifth trumpet, a fallen star, or fallen angel, is given a key to the Abyss. Smoke pours out, and demonic beings like locusts emerge with power to torment people who do not have God’s seal. They are commanded not to kill, but their torment is so terrible that people seek death and cannot find it. Their ruler is the fallen angel of the Abyss, called Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek - both names connected with destruction (Revelation 9:1-11).

For years, prophecy teachers have tried to turn these creatures into whatever military machine happened to be most frightening at the moment. They have been

helicopters, drones, and perhaps things soon to be invented. Modern warfare may help us imagine parts of John's vision, but John tells us these beings come from the abyss and serve a destroying angel. Before we improve his explanation, we should allow him to mean what he says. These are not ordinary insects, and the darkness behind the final world system is not merely political. It is demonic.

The sixth trumpet releases four bound angels at the Euphrates. A mounted force numbering two hundred million advances, and a third of humanity is killed by fire, smoke, and brimstone. Whether every feature of that army is literal description or apocalyptic imagery, John's point is impossible to soften: demonic power and human war bring death on an almost unimaginable scale.

Then Revelation says something even more frightening than the death count. The survivors do not repent. They continue worshiping demons and idols. They do not turn from murder, sorcery, sexual immorality, or theft (Revelation 9:20-21). Pain does not automatically produce repentance. Evidence does not automatically create faith. A person can stand under the judgment of God, recognize that it is judgment, and still clench his fist.

Revelation 10 interrupts the trumpets with a mighty angel and a little scroll. John hears seven thunders speak, but heaven tells him not to write what they said. I love that detail because it destroys the illusion that God has told us everything curious people would like to know. John heard information we do not have. If the Holy Spirit chose not to put it in the Bible, my guess will not improve the Bible. Prophecy should make us humble, not turn us into people who can explain what God deliberately kept secret.

The Two Witnesses

In Revelation 11, John sees a temple, an altar, and worshipers. The holy city is trampled for forty-two months, while two witnesses prophesy for 1,260 days. Their miracles resemble the ministries of Moses and Elijah: they shut the sky, turn water to blood, and strike the earth with plagues. Many people therefore believe the witnesses are Moses and Elijah; others suggest Elijah and Enoch because neither of them died a mortal death; both were taken to heaven. The passage never names them. Apparently, God thought "*My two witnesses*" was enough information for us.

When they finish their testimony, the Beast kills them. Their bodies remain exposed in the city where the Lord was crucified, and people from around the world look upon them for three and a half days. This possibility would have sounded unheard of before the invention of television. The world celebrates their deaths and sends gifts to one another ... Amazon Prime, anyone? It is the only end-times holiday invented because two preachers died. Then God breathes life into them. Their

enemies watch them ascend in a cloud. A great earthquake follows, and the seventh trumpet announces that *“The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ”* (Revelation 11:7-15).

The Dragon and the Beasts

Revelation 12-14 pulls the camera back and shows the spiritual war behind the political events. A woman clothed with the sun appears with the moon beneath her feet and twelve stars upon her head. She gives birth to a male Child who will rule the nations with a rod of iron. A red dragon waits to devour the Child, but the Child is caught up to God and His throne. The imagery echoes Joseph’s dream in Genesis 37 and the royal Messiah of Psalm 2. I understand the woman as Israel, the Child as Jesus, and the dragon exactly as Revelation identifies him: *“that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan”* (Revelation 12:9).

Revelation 13 introduces two beasts. The first rises from the sea with political authority empowered by the dragon. The world marvels after him, worships him, and asks who can make war against him. He speaks blasphemies, exercises authority for forty-two months, and makes war against the saints. This is the ruler Christians commonly call the Antichrist, although Revelation usually calls him the Beast. He is not merely a cruel politician. He is a counterfeit messiah demanding the worship that belongs to Jesus.

The second beast rises from the earth. He looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon. He performs signs, directs worship toward the first Beast, and gives breath to an image that speaks. Revelation later calls him the False Prophet. Together the dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet form a blasphemous imitation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Satan does not create; he counterfeits.

The Mark Of The Beast

The False Prophet requires people to receive a mark on the right hand or forehead so no one can buy or sell without the mark, the Beast’s name, or the number 666 (Revelation 13:16-18). Every generation has tried to identify the mechanism. It was once barcodes. Then it was credit cards, implanted chips, vaccines, digital currencies, biometric identification, or the newest piece of technology that made people nervous. The final system may use technologies we already possess, a combination of them, or something we have not yet seen. The Bible does not tell us the technology - it does tell us the theology.

Revelation 14 shows the Lamb with the 144,000 and sends angels across the sky. One announces the everlasting gospel to every nation, tribe, language, and people. Another announces Babylon’s fall. A third warns plainly against worshiping the Beast

and receiving his mark. Before the bowls are poured out, heaven preaches. God does not hide the truth and then punish people for failing to guess it. Mercy keeps speaking even as judgment approaches.

The Bowl Judgments

Revelation 15 prepares the seven final plagues. Those who refused the Beast stand before God and sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. Exodus language fills the scene. Just as God once judged Pharaoh, delivered His people through the sea, and exposed Egypt's false gods, He will judge the final ruler, deliver those who belong to Him, and expose the false gods of the world. The worshipers declare that God's ways are "***just and true.***" Heaven never apologizes for God's holiness.

The 'Bowl Judgments,' I believe, are God's judgments at the hands of His holy angels. In Revelation 16, they are poured rapidly and without the partial limits of the trumpet judgments. The first produces foul sores upon those who carry the Beast's mark. The second turns the sea to blood and every living creature in it dies. The third turns rivers and springs to blood. Heaven answers that those who shed the blood of saints and prophets have been given blood to drink. The judgment fits the crime. The fourth bowl intensifies the sun's heat until people are scorched. Yet they blaspheme God and refuse to repent. The fifth strikes the Beast's kingdom with darkness and pain. Still they gnaw their tongues, curse God, and refuse to repent. Their suffering is real, but so is their rebellion. Revelation will not allow us to believe that every lost person secretly wants God and merely lacks enough information. Some people hate the light because they love darkness.

The sixth bowl dries the Euphrates and prepares the way for kings from the east. Demonic spirits go out to deceive the rulers of the world and gather them for "***the battle of that great day of God Almighty.***" They assemble at a place called Armageddon, from the Hebrew Har-Megiddo, usually understood as Mount Megiddo (Revelation 16:12-16). The term has become shorthand for the end of the world, but Revelation presents it as the gathering point for the world's final rebellion. Other prophets focus the conflict around Jerusalem. Armageddon is not merely one skirmish in one valley. It is the climactic campaign of the nations against God's King. The seventh bowl is poured into the air, and a voice from the throne announces, "It is done!" The greatest earthquake in human history tears through the nations. Cities fall. Islands flee. Mountains disappear. Babylon is remembered for judgment, and enormous hailstones fall. Once again, people respond not with repentance but blasphemy (Revelation 16:17-21).

Armageddon And Babylon

Revelation 17 and 18 then describe the fall of Babylon. In chapter 17, Babylon appears as a prostitute who seduces kings, rides the Beast, intoxicates the nations, and is drunk with the blood of the saints. In chapter 18, Babylon appears as a wealthy commercial power whose luxury enriches merchants while exploiting human beings. The final line of its inventory includes “*bodies and souls of men*” (Revelation 18:13). False worship, political power, sexual corruption, financial greed, persecution, and human trafficking have joined hands.

When Babylon falls, the kings mourn, the merchants weep, and shipmasters cry because the market has collapsed “*in one hour.*” They do not mourn her sin or her victims. They mourn lost revenue. Heaven responds differently. Heaven rejoices because God has judged the system that corrupted the earth and shed the blood of His servants.

That joy can make us uncomfortable until we remember what is being judged. Imagine every dictator exposed, every trafficker stopped, every abuser answered, every corrupt court overturned, every martyr vindicated, and every system that profited from human misery brought down forever. Heaven is not celebrating pain as entertainment. Heaven is praising perfect justice. This is what makes the coming of Jesus back to earth so glorious. Not only will we be with our loving God and King, but He will end all injustice once and for all.

Heaven Opens

Then comes what we’ve been waiting for: Revelation 19 opens with a sound John can barely describe: a great multitude like many waters and mighty thunder declaring, “*Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns!*” The marriage of the Lamb has come, and His bride is clothed in clean, bright linen. Judgment below is answered by worship above. Babylon’s counterfeit feast ends, and the marriage supper of the Lamb begins. Then heaven opens.

John sees a white horse. Its Rider is called Faithful and True. He judges and makes war in righteousness. His eyes are like fire. Many crowns rest upon His head. His robe is dipped in blood, and His name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven follow Him, also riding white horses and clothed in clean linen. John does not identify every member of that army, but other passages say that when Christ appears, His people will appear with Him in glory, and those with the Lamb are called, chosen, and faithful (Colossians 3:4; Revelation 17:14; Zechariah 14:5 and Jude 14). A sharp sword proceeds from His mouth. On His robe and thigh is the title no ruler can share: ***KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS*** (Revelation 19:16).

This is Jesus currently in heaven. Not “*gentle Jesus - meek and mild*” replaced by an angrier version. Not the Savior becoming someone else. This is the same holy Son of God we met in the Gospels, now unveiled in royal authority. The love that moved Him to confront sin at the cross now moves Him to remove sin from His world. The grace that saves the repentant does not require Him to make peace with evil forever.

The Beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies gather to fight Him. The scene sounds as though the greatest battle in history is about to begin. It does not become much of a battle. Jesus does not trade blows with Antichrist. He does not need reinforcement, strategy, or a last-minute rescue. The Beast and False Prophet are captured and cast alive into the lake of fire. The gathered armies are destroyed by the word proceeding from Christ’s mouth (Revelation 19:19-21). God spoke creation into existence. Jesus speaks rebellion to an end.

Israel Receives Her Messiah

Other passages fill out the scene. Jesus said that immediately after the Tribulation the sun would darken, the powers of heaven would shake, and the nations would see the Son of Man coming on the clouds “*with power and great glory*” (Matthew 24:29-30). Paul said the lawless one would be consumed “*with the breath of His mouth*” and destroyed by the brightness of Christ’s coming (2 Thessalonians 2:8). Zechariah said the nations would gather against Jerusalem, the LORD would go out to fight, and His feet would stand upon the Mount of Olives. The mountain would split, a way of escape would open, and “*the LORD shall be King over all the earth*” (Zechariah 14:3-9).

Zechariah also describes a profound spiritual awakening in Israel. God pours out a spirit of grace and supplication, and the people look upon the One they pierced and mourn for Him (Zechariah 12:10). Paul writes that a partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in, and then “*all Israel will be saved*” (Romans 11:25-27). I understand these passages to promise a future national turning of the surviving remnant of Israel to Jesus their Messiah. The King returns not only to destroy His enemies, but also to keep the covenant promises that human cruelty or demonic inspiration could not cancel.

Why A Loving God Judges

Some readers stumble over the violence of these chapters. I understand why. I do not read Revelation chapters 6 through 19 with a smile because suffering sounds exciting. If descriptions of death on this scale do not sober us, something is wrong with us. But a God who never judges evil would not perfectly love the world. It is a world in which Auschwitz, trafficking, rape, murder, persecution, and every hidden cruelty

receive no final answer. Victims cry, “*How long?*” because true love longs for evil to end.

God’s wrath is not a divine temper tantrum. It is His settled, holy opposition to everything that destroys what He loves. Human anger is often selfish, misinformed, excessive, and out of control. God’s judgment is none of those things. He knows every fact, sees every motive and thought, measures every act, hears every idle word, and never sentences one person unjustly.

The cross proves both His justice and His mercy. Before Jesus returns to judge sinners, He came to bear judgment for sinners. The One wearing the blood-dipped robe first shed His own blood. Anyone who turns to Him can be forgiven because the Judge took the judgment. If we reject that rescue, God is not the cause of cruelty for allowing our rebellion to reach its chosen end.

In fact, the surprising question of the Bible is not, “Why does God finally judge?” The surprising question is, “Why did He wait so long, warn so often, give so much, and save people like us?” If Revelation ended at chapter 19, we might assume that Christ’s return is followed immediately by the eternal state. But Revelation chapter 20 begins with the words “*Then I saw.*” An angel descends, seizes the dragon, binds him, casts him into the abyss, shuts it, and seals it “*so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished*” (Revelation 20:1-3).

The Thousand-Year Kingdom

The phrase a thousand years appears six times in Revelation chapter 20. The Latin words *mille* and *annus* give us millennium - one thousand years. Premillennialism simply means that Jesus returns before this kingdom. Amillennialism understands the thousand years symbolically and generally sees Revelation chapter 20 as circling back to describe Christ’s present reign from heaven. Postmillennialism also places Christ’s visible return after a long era of gospel triumph. I will give those views a fair hearing later.

I believe the natural sequence is exactly what John presents: Christ returns in Revelation 19, and then Satan is bound and Christ reigns in Revelation 20. I also believe the binding described here is far greater than Satan’s present limitation. Today Peter warns that the devil prowls like a roaring lion. Paul calls him the god of this age who blinds unbelieving minds. He deceives, tempts, accuses, and energizes systems opposed to God. He is restrained by God, but he is not presently sealed in the abyss and prevented from deceiving the nations. During the Millennium, he will be.

John sees thrones and people given authority to judge. He specifically sees those martyred under the Beast come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years. He calls this “*the first resurrection*” and says they will be priests of God and of Christ

(Revelation 20:4-6). Other passages promise that those who belong to Christ will reign with Him (2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 5:10). The kingdom is not merely Jesus ruling alone while His people watch from bleachers. The redeemed Christians participate under the authority of the King during this millennial time period.

Revelation 20 tells us the kingdom's length, but the Old Testament supplies much of its color. Psalm 2 presents Messiah ruling the nations with a rod of iron. Psalm 72 describes a righteous King defending the poor and bringing peace. Isaiah 2 says nations will stream to the mountain of the LORD to learn His ways. They will beat weapons into farming equipment and stop training for war. Isaiah 11 says the wolf will dwell with the lamb as animals won't eat each other but will snuggle instead. The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the Lord Jesus Himself will teach once again from Jerusalem, and people will be consumed with knowing His Word. Also, the Messiah will judge the poor with righteousness as a perfect one-world president/King. Isaiah 65 describes extraordinary longevity of people repopulating the earth, fruitful labor, houses enjoyed by those who build them, and a creation dramatically freed from its present violence. Zechariah 14 presents the LORD as King over all the earth and nations coming to Jerusalem to worship. What glory awaits the earth when Christ comes back!

This is not heaven floating somewhere beyond the clouds. It is the rightful King governing the earth He made. Jerusalem becomes the center of Messiah's rule. Jesus fulfills the promise made to David that his descendant would sit upon his throne. Israel receives the covenant blessings God promised. The nations experience government without corruption, justice without bribery, strength without cruelty, and truth without propaganda. There will finally be a ruler who does not lie, age, panic, campaign, poll, spin, hide his scandal, stumble up stairs, or need a teleprompter.

Yet the Millennium is not identical to the eternal state. Isaiah's description still includes death, even though life is greatly extended. Nations still exist. People travel to worship. Revelation says Satan will later deceive multitudes, which means there are people capable of being deceived. In the premillennial understanding, believers who survive the Tribulation enter Christ's kingdom in ordinary mortal bodies. In Matthew 25, Jesus describes Himself returning in glory, sitting on His throne, and eventually separating the nations as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Those who belong to Him enter the kingdom prepared for them, and eventually those who are not His will be judged and sent to an eternity in hell. These mortal believers have children and populate the earth, while resurrected and glorified saints, those who believed in the Messiah before His return, will reign with Christ. It also explains how people can live under perfect government and still need to trust the King personally.

Satan's Final Rebellion

At the end of the thousand years, Satan is released for a short time. He goes out and deceives nations described as Gog and Magog, gathering a vast rebellion against “*the beloved city*.” The names echo Ezekiel’s prophecy of hostile nations, though Christians disagree about whether Revelation chapter 20 describes the same conflict or deliberately reuses the names for a later, final rebellion. Whatever the relationship, this uprising occurs after the thousand years and ends instantly when fire falls from heaven (Revelation 20:7-9).

Why would God release Satan? The text does not give a complete explanation, but I believe this to be the same reason God placed the tree in the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve eventually ate from - God wants us to choose to love Him. Unfortunately, the fact that these people can be deceived reveals something devastating about the human heart. For a thousand years, humanity will experience righteous government, abundant provision, worldwide knowledge of God, and the absence of satanic deception. No one will be able to blame a broken political system, bad economic policy, corrupt media, inadequate education, or a bad neighborhood. Yet when Satan is released - multitudes choose rebellion. Again, this will only be those who have survived the great tribulation and live to a thousand years old, and those born in the millennial reign. This does not include glorified saints; our salvation and destinies are secure.

We often imagine that people are basically good and would become righteous if their environment improved. Eden had a perfect environment, and Adam sinned. The Millennium will have a perfect King, and unregenerate people will still rebel. Our greatest problem is not merely around us. It is within us. We do not need a better life coach. We need a new heart.

The final revolt does not threaten Jesus or His kingdom. Fire consumes those who rebel, and the devil is cast into the lake of fire where the Beast and False Prophet already are. After a thousand years, they have not been annihilated or escaped. Satan’s career ends not with him ruling hell but being punished in it forever. The devil is not God’s evil equal. He is a created rebel on a leash, and Revelation shows us the moment God ends the leash.

Two Judgment Seats

Then John sees a great white throne. Earth and heaven flee from the face of the One seated there. The dead, small and great, stand before God. Books are opened, and every person is judged according to his works. Every thought, word, action, and motive will shamefully be revealed before all. Then Jesus Himself will justly sentence each unbeliever to hell and eternal conscious torment. Another book is opened - the

Book of Life - and anyone not found in the Book of Life experiences the second death (Revelation 20:11-15).

Those written in the Lamb's Book of Life are those who believed in Jesus the Messiah. Not only will we not be judged for our sin, which is what we deserve, but we will be rewarded. There is another throne that Christians will stand before called the Bema Seat (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 3:11-15). This is where we will be rewarded for anything that we did in Christ's name, even if we give a cup of cold water to a child as our Lord said in Matthew 10:42. Although we will not be judged for our sins because the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all unrighteousness - it is clear that there is some kind of accountability for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Works do not purchase salvation. No one will stand there with enough good deeds to erase sin. The books reveal the perfect justice of the verdict. Every hidden action, every careless word, every cherished sin, and every rejected opportunity is known. The Book of Life reveals the only refuge: belonging to the Lamb who was slain. Do you rejoice that your name is written in the Book of Life?

The New Heaven and New Earth

After the Millennium and final judgment, Revelation 21-22 unveils a new heaven and new earth. The holy city descends. God dwells with His people. Death, sorrow, crying, and pain are gone. The curse is removed. That eternal New Heaven and New Earth deserves its own study, but the essential point is this: biblical hope is not that human beings will finally repair the earth. Earth's remodel and the judgment of God was the plan before the foundations were laid (Revelation 13:8). God judges evil, restores rightful rule through Christ, and ultimately makes all things new.

How Then Should We Live?

Since we apparently won't be here when all of these events happen - why does this matter to us? Peter asks the same question. After describing the coming day of the Lord, he writes, "***What manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness?***" (2 Peter 3:11). Biblical prophecy is ethical in nature. It is supposed to change how we live. It is to point us to love and live for Jesus more.

If we can identify every horn in Daniel but cannot control our lust, prophecy has not helped us. If we know the difference between a seal, trumpet, and bowl but refuse to forgive our brother, we have missed the point. If our end-times system makes us arrogant, argumentative, terrified, or indifferent to lost people - we might win at a Bible question game and lose the purpose of prophecy.

The goal of eschatology is not fighting. It is purity, urgency, endurance, worship, and evangelism. Purity, because everyone who has the hope of seeing Jesus purifies himself (1 John 3:2-3). Urgency, because the accepted time will not remain open forever. Endurance, because even when evil appears to win, the Lamb is still opening the scroll. Worship, because the angels and the saints are singing currently, and we should join in the heavenly chorus. Evangelism, because the Judge who is coming still offers salvation today to those who are far from Him.

The future does not belong to Antichrist. He gets a few chapters. It does not belong to Babylon. She falls in an hour. It does not belong to Satan. He ends in the lake of fire.

The future belongs to Jesus. And the glorious news is that you are on the winning side of the future of the world if you believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

The visible Second Coming is clear. Jesus returns after the Tribulation, descends in glory, defeats the Beast, rescues His people, and establishes His kingdom. But that clarity raises another question. Revelation 19 shows armies from heaven returning with Christ. Paul says dead believers will rise and living believers will be “*caught up*” to meet the Lord in the air. Jesus promised to receive His disciples to Himself. When does that gathering happen? Is it the same moment as Revelation 19, an earlier stage of Christ’s coming, or something else? That is the question of the Rapture.

Before Christians argue about the answer, we need to understand the word, the passages, and the promise of the Rapture. We also need to consider what the sudden disappearance of believers would do to the world and how a culture already trained to look to space, science, and even extraterrestrial life might explain what happened.

For now, remember the end of the story. Jesus came first as the suffering Savior. He will return as the reigning King. The Lamb will open the seals. The counterfeit kingdom will collapse. Every proud ruler will bow. Every promise will be fulfilled. Every wrong will receive a final answer.

The King is coming down. May we live in light of this Blessed Hope.

CHAPTER THREE

THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH

What the Rapture Is

When I was a kid, I thought the Rapture was a dinosaur. In my imaginative young mind, Jesus was going to return to earth riding a man-eating lizard. It was terrifying, confusing, and, if I am honest, I thought that was kind of awesome. I pictured the clouds opening, Jesus descending from heaven, and an animatronic dinosaur from *Jurassic Park* showing up to help with the end of the world. Then I read the Bible.

Jesus returns on a white horse, not a velociraptor. The Church is caught up to meet Him in the air and go to heaven, not taken away in a predator's mouth. Oddly enough, the English words raptor and rapture are linguistic cousins. Both trace back to a Latin family of words carrying the idea of seizing, snatching, or carrying something away. A raptor seizes its prey. At the Rapture, Jesus seizes His people - thankfully to deliver, transform, gather, and keep them forever in eternal bliss. So I was wrong about the dinosaur, but surprisingly close on the verb describing what will happen to the Church.

This chapter is about the Rapture of the Church. It is not yet about when the Rapture happens in relation to the Tribulation. We will cover the following theories in the following chapters: Preterism, amillennialism, pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, post-tribulation, and pan-tribulation. We will distinguish pre-wrath wherever it materially affects those arguments. But before we debate the location of an event on a chart, we need to establish the event itself. The question in this chapter is NOT, "When does the Church go up?" The question is, "What does the Bible say will happen to Christians when Jesus gathers His people?" On that question, Paul could hardly be clearer.

The Lord Himself Will Descend

The most complete description appears in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4. The new believers knew that Jesus would return, yet they were troubled by the deaths of Christians they loved. They seem to have feared that those who died before Christ returned would somehow miss the Rapture as well. Paul writes that Christians do grieve, but "***we do not grieve as others who have no hope.***" Our hope is that Jesus entered death, defeated it from the inside, and walked out of the grave. Because He rose, every believer who dies is safe with Him and will be raised by Him. The Rapture is built upon the resurrection of Jesus. Remove the empty tomb and the

whole promise collapses. Keep the empty tomb, and even a cemetery becomes temporary.

Paul then gives the sequence “*by the word of the Lord*”: “*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.*” -1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

Every phrase matters: “The Lord Himself will descend.” Jesus is not sending an assistant, an angelic Uber, or a heavenly retrieval drone. The same Lord who died and rose will personally come for His people. Christianity does not ultimately hope in an event. We hope in a Person. The great promise is not merely that we leave earth. It is that Jesus comes for us.

He descends “*with a shout*.” The Greek word describes a commanding cry, the order of one with authority. Jesus once stood before the tomb of Lazarus and cried, “Lazarus, come forth!” One dead man obeyed. At the Rapture, the dead in Christ will hear the command of the Lord of life, and every one of them will rise.

Paul also mentions “*the voice of an archangel*.” Jude identifies Michael as an archangel, so Michael is often assumed to be the voice here. This would also align with the announcement of the herald that repeats the King’s announcement. This certainly does not align with the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ view of Jesus Himself as Michael the archangel instead of Almighty God.

Then comes “*the trumpet of God*.” Throughout Scripture, trumpets announce God’s presence, summon an assembly, signal movement, warn of battle, and proclaim royal arrival. At Sinai, a trumpet sounded as the LORD descended upon the mountain. In Numbers, trumpets gathered Israel and set the camp in motion. This final trumpet in Paul is not background music. It is a divine summons. God calls His people together, and creation cannot keep them in their graves.

The Dead Rise And The Living Change

“*The dead in Christ will rise first.*” The Thessalonians feared that their departed loved ones would be disadvantaged. Paul says exactly the opposite. They are first in line. Those bodies may have been buried, burned, lost at sea, destroyed in war, or reduced to dust centuries ago. None are lost to God. The Creator who formed Adam from the dust does not need an intact casket to raise His children. He knows every person, every molecule, and every name.

Then “*we who are alive and remain*” join them. Some Christians will be living ordinary earthly lives when Christ comes. They will not need to die, spend three days

in a funeral home, and then catch up with everyone else. They will be transformed alive. One generation of believers will pass from mortality to immortality without traveling the ordinary road through the grave. The dead are raised. The living are changed. Both groups are gathered **“together.”**

Caught Up Together

That word may be one of the most beautiful in the passage. The Rapture is not merely an escape; it is a reunion. Believers separated by centuries, oceans, persecution, disease, and death will be together again. Parents will see children. Husbands will see wives. Friends will recognize friends. The Church that has worshiped across different languages, nations, denominations, and generations will finally stand as one redeemed family in the presence of Jesus.

Paul says we will be caught up **“in the clouds.”** Clouds in Scripture frequently signal the glory and presence of God. The LORD descended in a cloud at Sinai. His glory filled the tabernacle and Temple. A cloud overshadowed Jesus at the Transfiguration. A cloud received Him at His ascension. Daniel saw the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. Although there is symbolism - there is no reason not to believe that the Lord Jesus will be in the atmosphere somewhere, yet still unseen by the human eye.

We will **“meet the Lord in the air.”** The Greek word for meet, *apantēsis*, can describe going out to welcome an arriving dignitary. John Chrysostom later compared it to honored citizens going outside a city to greet their king. This makes a clear distinction from the Second Coming of Jesus, as this event is Jesus meeting His saints in the atmosphere, and at the physical coming Jesus splits the Mount of Olives in two to begin His rule.

Paul ends with the truth that towers over every timeline: **“Thus we shall always be with the Lord.”** Once Jesus comes to get His Bride, the Church, we will always be with Him in heaven. This brings comfort as we consider the Millennial reign of Christ because we won’t be in that group of people who could be deceived by Satan when he is released. We who experienced salvation will experience glorification, and we will always stay in that state.

That is the final destination for the raptured saints. Not clouds. Not air. Not merely heaven. Being with Jesus. From this set of verses, if the Rapture happens before the Tribulation, after the Tribulation, in the middle, or at a point no one successfully placed on a chart, every true Christian will end up with Christ forever. Timing matters, but the greatest promise is not where we are during a seven-year period. It is whom we are with for eternity.

Paul therefore concludes, “*Comfort one another with these words*” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). He does not say, “Confuse one another.” He does not say, “Debate one another.” The doctrine was first given to grieving Christians as comfort. Any teaching of the Rapture that produces arrogance, obsession, or terror while losing Christ has violated the purpose of the passage. Remember, the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

Where The Word ‘Rapture’ Comes From

That brings us to the word itself. Some people object, “The word rapture is not in the Bible.” Remember that the English word Trinity is not printed in the Bible either. A doctrine does not become unbiblical simply because the theological label is not English vocabulary used by the original authors. The question is whether this doctrine is taught in the Scriptures.

In this case, the label comes directly from the text through translation. Paul wrote in Greek. The verb translated “*caught up*” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is a form of *harpazō*. It means to seize, snatch, take away suddenly, or carry off by force. When the New Testament was translated into Latin, the form used in this verse was *rapiemur* - “we shall be caught up” - from the verb *rapio*. From that Latin family we eventually received the English word rapture. Greek: *harpazō*. Latin: *rapiemur*. English: rapture.

So the word was not invented by a prophecy teacher in the 1800s. The English label came through the Latin translation of a Greek verb Paul wrote in the first century. You may prefer to call it “the catching away,” “the catching up,” or “the gathering of the Church.” That is fine. Changing the label does not remove the event. The dead still rise, the living are still changed, and both are still caught up to meet Jesus.

The same Greek verb appears elsewhere in the New Testament. Jesus describes a wolf that snatches sheep in John 10:12. No one imagines the wolf submitting a polite transfer request. In Acts 8:39, after Philip baptizes the Ethiopian official, “*the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away*.” Philip does not die, dissolve, or become an allegory. God suddenly raptured him and relocated him. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12 that he was “*caught up*” to the third heaven and into Paradise. Revelation 12:5 says the male Child was “*caught up to God and His throne*.” The contexts differ, but the verb consistently carries decisive action. At the Rapture, gravity does not win a negotiation. God takes hold of His people.

The Mystery of Our Transformation

First Thessalonians tells us that believers will be caught up. First Corinthians 15 explains the transformation that makes that meeting possible. The Corinthian Christians had serious questions about resurrection. Some apparently struggled to believe that dead bodies could be raised. Paul responds with the longest sustained treatment of bodily resurrection in the New Testament.

Paul calls this a “*mystery*.” In the New Testament, a mystery is not a puzzle God wants us to solve with a decoder ring. It is truth once hidden in God’s plan and now revealed. The Old Testament clearly taught resurrection, but Paul unveils something further: not every believer will experience death, yet every believer must be transformed: “*Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed - in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet*” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

“*We shall not all sleep.*” Paul often uses sleep as a gentle description of a Christian’s physical death. It does not mean the believer ceases to exist or becomes unconscious in some absolute sense. It emphasizes that, because of Christ, death is temporary for the body. A sleeping person is expected to wake up. The cemetery is not the Church’s final address.

“*But we shall all be changed.*” Not some. Not only pastors, missionaries, or believers whose quiet time never got interrupted. Every person who truly belongs to Christ will be transformed. The Rapture is not a reward for reaching elite spiritual status in sanctification. Salvation is by grace, union with Christ is by grace, and glorification is the completion of that same grace.

The change happens “*in a moment.*” The Greek word is *atomos*, from which we get atom. It refers to something indivisible - an instant that cannot be cut into a smaller unit. Paul adds, “*in the twinkling of an eye.*” There will be no slow metamorphosis, no painful upgrade, and no heavenly progress bar slowly getting to one hundred percent. The Lord who spoke creation into existence can glorify His people without buffering. Paul continues: “*For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality*” (1 Corinthians 15:53).

Our present bodies are corruptible. They age, weaken, ache, scar, forget passwords, make strange noises when we stand up, and eventually die. The glorified body will be incorruptible. It will never decay, develop cancer, surrender to disease, or be reclaimed by a grave. Our present bodies are mortal - capable of death. The new body will be immortal - beyond death’s reach forever. Not only will we lose that stubborn belly fat - we’ll be able to walk through walls like Jesus did as He walked the earth after His resurrection.

This is transformation, not annihilation. The risen Jesus was recognizably Jesus. His disciples touched Him. He ate with them. His resurrection body had continuity with the body placed in the tomb, yet it was no longer subject to death. In the same way, God will not erase us and replace us with unrelated celestial clones. We will be ourselves, finally healed from everything sin and death have done to us.

Paul says that *“flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”* (1 Corinthians 15:50). He is not teaching that physical existence is evil. In the same paragraph he explains what he means: *“nor does corruption inherit incorruption.”* Our present fallen, perishable condition is not suited for the everlasting kingdom. We do not need to become less human. We need to become fully human as God intended - conformed to the risen glorified Christ.

Philippians 3:20-21 says that our citizenship is in heaven, *“from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior,”* who *“will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body.”* First John says that when Christ is revealed, *“we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is”* (1 John 3:2). We do not become gods. We do not merge into Jesus. We remain redeemed autonomous image-bearers, but every trace of corruption is removed and our bodies are fitted for life in His presence.

Paul ends the chapter with a taunt aimed at the grave: *“O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?”* (1 Corinthians 15:55). Death has wounded every family and emptied every home eventually. It feels invincible because no government, medicine, fortune, or technology has defeated it or can defeat it. But when the trumpet sounds, death will be forced to return everything it stole from Christ's people.

The resurrection of dead believers and the transformation of living believers belong together. First Thessalonians gives us the reunion in the air. First Corinthians gives us the incorruptible bodies. One passage answers grief; the other answers decay. Together they tell us what the Rapture is. Jesus personally gathers His entire Church, raises the believers who have died, instantly glorifies the believers who remain alive, and brings both groups into unbroken fellowship with Himself. If that is the Rapture, how is it different from the Second Coming described in the previous chapter?

Rapture And Second Coming

Second Thessalonians helps us see why Christians distinguish the descriptions even when they disagree about the distance between them. In his first letter, Paul comforts believers with Christ descending, dead Christians rising, living Christians changing, and the whole Church meeting the Lord in the air. In his second letter, Paul describes relief arriving *“when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty*

angels, in flaming fire,” bringing righteous judgment upon His enemies and being glorified among His saints (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).

The emphasis is different. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Christ comes and believers go up to meet Him. In 2 Thessalonians 1, Christ is publicly revealed from heaven with mighty angels and judgment falls. In the Rapture passage, the central action is resurrection, transformation, reunion, and comfort. In the revelation passage, the central action is exposure, recompense, astonishment, and judgment. The Rapture is Christ gathering His Church. The Second Coming is Christ appearing in unveiled glory to judge His enemies and establish His rule. Those are distinguishable descriptions. The question is whether they are separated by years or are two movements within one continuous arrival.

Second Thessalonians 2 places the debate in one paragraph. Paul writes about *“the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him,”* then discusses the Day of the Lord, rebellion, the man of sin, deception, restraint, and Christ destroying the lawless one *“with the brightness of His coming.”* Christians agree that the Church will be gathered and Antichrist will be destroyed. They disagree over how Paul’s sequence relates to the Tribulation and whether *“the coming”* functions as one event, an extended complex of events, or two phases of the same return.

Here is what we know for sure according to these Scriptures. Jesus will personally return. The dead in Christ will bodily rise. Living Christians will instantly change. All of them will be caught up together. They will meet the Lord. They will remain with Him forever. Christ will also be publicly revealed, destroy the lawless one, judge rebellion, and reign.

Biblical Pictures Of Translation

The Rapture does not appear in Scripture as a random theological meteor that crashes into Paul’s letters without warning. God had already placed patterns throughout the Bible showing His authority over death, gravity, judgment, and location. Patterns do not create doctrine - clear teaching does - but they help us recognize that the God who catches up the Church has been introducing Himself this way since the beginning of humanity.

Enoch is the earliest example. Genesis compresses his extraordinary life into a few words: *“Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him”* (Genesis 5:24). Hebrews explains that Enoch *“was taken away so that he did not see death”* (Hebrews 11:5). In a genealogy where the repeated drumbeat is *“and he died,”* Enoch simply walks out of the record with God, and does not experience death.

His translation establishes a crucial truth: God can take a living human being into His presence without that person first passing through death. The Rapture is not impossible merely because it is outside our ordinary experience. Creation's rules answer to creation's Lord. Elijah gives another preview. A chariot of fire appears, a whirlwind carries him into heaven, and Elisha watches until Elijah disappears from sight (2 Kings 2:11-12). Jesus also used the days of Noah and Lot to illustrate the suddenness of His future intervention. Ordinary life continued - eating, drinking, marrying, buying, selling, planting, building - right up until judgment arrived. Noah entered the ark before the flood overtook the old world. Lot was led out of Sodom before fire fell. The pattern teaches readiness and divine rescue.

Philip gives us a New Testament example without symbolic interpretation. After he shares the gospel with the Ethiopian official and baptizes him, "***the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away***" (Acts 8:39). The verb is *harpazō*, the same one Paul uses for the Church. Philip is suddenly transported from one location to another by the power of God. Acts simply says God took him and later he was found at Azotus.

Paul himself says he knew a man - almost certainly speaking modestly about his own experience - who was "***caught up***" to the third heaven and Paradise (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). Revelation describes Christ being "caught up to God and His throne" (Revelation 12:5). None of those passages is the Rapture of the Church, but together they show that *harpazō* was not special vocabulary invented for one obscure prophecy. It describes God's forceful, sovereign action in taking someone where He intends.

An entire generation of believers will be transformed alive while all the dead in Christ are raised, and together they will be caught up to the Lord. These earlier events are trailers, not the full movie. The doctrine rests on Paul's explicit teaching, but the God who performs it is the same God Scripture has revealed from Genesis to Revelation.

The Promise Of The Father's House

Jesus also prepared His disciples for this hope before Paul ever wrote a letter. On the night before the cross, the disciples were shaken. Jesus had told them He was leaving. Peter had learned that his confidence was about to collapse. The room was heavy with betrayal, fear, and confusion. Jesus did not comfort them with a principle. He comforted them with a promise. "***I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also***" (John 14:3).

Those words sound remarkably like Paul: Christ comes, He receives His people, and the goal is personal presence with Him. Jesus also speaks of His Father's house and of preparing a place for them. He promises to come again and take His people to

be with Him. Throughout His ministry, Jesus trained His followers to live ready. He described servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding, lamps burning and garments prepared (Luke 12:35-40). He told of ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom, five wise and ready and five foolish and unprepared (Matthew 25:1-13). He compared His arrival to a householder surprised by a thief - not because Jesus is morally like a criminal, but because an unannounced arrival exposes whether anyone was watching. ***“What I say to you, I say to all: Watch!”*** (Mark 13:37).

Serve And Wait

Watchfulness is not staring at the sky while the house burns down. A faithful servant does the Master’s work because the Master may return. Biblical readiness is active obedience. This is where Christians use the word imminence. It means His return is presented as a living expectation that should govern every generation. The Church was told by Christ to remain awake, faithful, and expectant.

Paul writes that the Thessalonians had ***“turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven”*** (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). Notice the verbs: serve and wait. Waiting for Christ did not cancel work; it gave work urgency. In chapter 2, Paul calls believers his joy ***“at His coming.”*** In chapter 3, he prays that their hearts will be blameless ***“at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** In chapter 4, he describes the catching up. In chapter 5, he prays that their whole person will be preserved blameless ***“at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”***

Every chapter of 1 Thessalonians points toward His return. Paul did not treat prophecy as an elective course for Christians who enjoy making timelines. The return of Jesus shaped conversion, ministry, holiness, grief, and perseverance. It told new believers what to abandon, whom to serve, how to mourn, and why to remain faithful.

The Blessed Hope of the Early Church

The earliest Christians even carried a one-word Aramaic prayer into Greek-speaking churches: Maranatha, ***“Our Lord, come!”*** (1 Corinthians 16:22). They loved Him, suffered for Him, and wanted to see Him. That expectation runs through the rest of the New Testament. Paul tells Titus that believers are ***“looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ”*** (Titus 2:13). James says, ***“The coming of the Lord is at hand,”*** then pictures the Judge standing at the door (James 5:8-9). Hebrews says, ***“For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry”*** (Hebrews 10:37). Peter tells suffering Christians to ***“rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ”*** (1 Peter 1:13). The apostles did not use Christ’s return to help believers

escape responsibility. They used it to make believers patient, courageous, sober, and holy.

The apostles repeatedly connect that hope with character. ***“Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure”*** (1 John 3:3). Peter asks what kind of people we ought to be in light of coming judgment and answers, ***“in holy conduct and godliness”*** (2 Peter 3:11). Paul concludes his great resurrection chapter, ***“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord”*** (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Revelation opens and closes with the expectation of Christ’s imminent coming, and the letters to the seven churches bring that expectation into ordinary congregational life. Jesus does not give the churches a single generic message. He confronts their specific compromise, suffering, lovelessness, deadness, endurance, and pride. Yet His coming stands over all of them.

To Thyatira He says, ***“Hold fast what you have till I come”*** (Revelation 2:25). To Sardis He warns that if they do not watch, He will come upon them ***“as a thief,”*** and they will not know the hour. To Philadelphia He says, ***“Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown”*** (Revelation 3:11). The final chapter repeats the promise three times: ***“I am coming quickly”*** (Revelation 22:7, 12, 20).

“Quickly” can carry the sense of nearness as well as swift and decisive action once it begins. Either way, the promise is meant to keep every church awake; it does not require us to conclude that John misunderstood the calendar when two thousand years passed. Revelation constantly teaches us to view time from God’s throne rather than our wristwatch. Peter reminds scoffers that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. God is not slow; He is patient, ***“not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance”*** (2 Peter 3:9).

Revelation’s letters do not encourage the Church to identify dates. They command the Church to repent, wake up, hold fast, conquer compromise, endure suffering, and listen to the Spirit. The expectation of Jesus is meant to make a cold church love again, a compromised church become holy, a sleepy church wake up, a suffering church endure, and a self-satisfied church repent. The Bible’s closing prayer is not, ***“Come, perfect timeline.”*** It is: ***“Even so, come, Lord Jesus!”*** (Revelation 22:20)

Imminence is not a license to abandon the world. It is a reason to live faithfully in it. We plant churches because Jesus is coming. We feed the hungry because Jesus is coming. We preach the gospel, reconcile relationships, resist sin, raise children, care for the hurting, and tell the truth because Jesus is coming.

Did Darby Invent The Rapture?

At this point someone will usually say, “But nobody believed in the Rapture until John Nelson Darby invented it in the 1800s.” That statement mixes together different claims and then throws them into a theological blender. First, the catching up of living believers and the resurrection of dead believers are written explicitly in the New Testament. Paul predates Darby by roughly eighteen centuries. Second, Christians throughout history taught and discussed the gathering, resurrection, transformation, and return described in those verses. Third, the fully developed doctrine of the Rapture before a future Tribulation, followed by Christ’s visible return and millennial reign was systematized in recent years.

The Didache [60-120 AD], a Christian teaching document generally dated to the late first or early second century, closes with this command: “Be ready, for you know not the hour in which our Lord comes” (Didache 16). It then describes deception, trial, a trumpet, resurrection, and the Lord coming on the clouds. This destroys the idea that expectancy was absent from the early Church. Christians standing near the apostolic age were told to live ready because they did not know the hour.

Clement [AD 35-100] wrote from the church in Rome near the end of the first century, and answered people who complained that the promised events have not occurred. The letter insists: “Soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished” (1 Clement 23). The next chapters defend future resurrection. That pairing should sound familiar: sudden fulfillment and bodily resurrection, exactly the hope Paul gave the Thessalonians and Corinthians. Irenaeus [AD 130-202], bishop of Lyons in the second century, used even more startling language. Writing against heresies, he said: “When in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, ‘There shall be tribulation’” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.29.1). Irenaeus knew a future catching up of the Church and connected it with end-time tribulation, yet his understanding of the exact sequence is less certain.

Around the same period, Justin Martyr [AD 90-160] taught a future resurrection and a thousand-year reign of Christ in Jerusalem. He also admitted that “many” sincere Christians disagreed with him. Justin’s own wording is worth hearing. He said that “many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 80). He held his millennial conviction without declaring every Christian who disagreed with it a heretic. We could use a little more second-century maturity in some twenty-first-century comment sections.

John Chrysostom, preaching in the fourth century, carefully explained 1 Thessalonians 4. He compared the Rapture to citizens going outside a city to greet an arriving king: “As He descends, we go forth to meet Him” (John Chrysostom, Homily 8 on First Thessalonians). Chrysostom understood the saints as meeting Christ in

honor and accompanying the arriving King. He unquestionably believed the dead would rise, living saints would be caught up, and all would meet the bodily returning Christ. The event was not invented in the nineteenth century.

Lastly, the early church father Augustine [AD 354-430], writing in *The City of God*, also took Paul's promise seriously. He wondered whether living believers would pass through an instantaneous death and resurrection while being caught up, or simply be transformed without dying. He concluded that the precise mechanism was difficult to know but affirmed that the saints "shall be caught up to meet Him" and would be with Christ "possessed of immortal bodies" (*The City of God* 20.20).

By the Reformation, commentators continued to explain Paul's text as a real future event. Commenting on 1 Thessalonians 4, John Calvin wrote that Paul spoke this way so believers "might be prepared at all times." Calvin believed living believers would be carried up with the resurrected saints and instantly changed by God's power. In the eighteenth century, decades before Darby was born, Baptist theologian John Gill commented that the living saints would be caught up "suddenly, in a moment," and explicitly called it "this rapture of the living saints" (*Exposition of the Entire Bible*, 1 Thessalonians 4:17).

Now, Darby was an influential nineteenth-century Bible teacher associated with the Plymouth Brethren. He did not write 1 Thessalonians 4, invent bodily resurrection, coin the Latin verb, or teach the first Christian that Christ could gather His people. What he did was organize a comprehensive form of dispensationalism that sharply distinguished Israel and the Church and placed the Rapture within that framework. His preaching, writing, travel, and network of Bible conferences spread the system through Britain, Europe, and North America. Darby did not invent the engine. He helped assemble a detailed transmission and then drove it across the English-speaking evangelical world.

Again, the Rapture event was not invented in the 1800s; it is stated in Paul and interpreted across Christian history. Expectation of Christ's return, bodily resurrection, transformation of living saints, and their catching up to meet Him are ancient Christian beliefs. Because of this we should be equally suspicious of two lazy claims: "Every early church father believed in a physical rapture," and "Nobody imagined a Rapture until the 1800's." Neither survives contact with the actual documents.

Why Prophecy Teaching Grew

Why, then, did end-times teaching gain such enormous popularity in recent centuries? Part of the answer is theological. The Reformation returned the Bible to ordinary people in their own languages. Printing expanded. Literacy grew. Concordances,

commentaries, study Bibles, seminaries, Bible institutes, and archaeological research placed tools once available to a small educated class into millions of homes. Readers could compare Daniel, Zechariah, Matthew, Thessalonians, and Revelation without traveling to a monastery or owning a herd of goats large enough to finance one handwritten scroll.

Part of the answer is historical. Two world wars, the Holocaust, nuclear weapons, the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948, the Cold War, global communication, cashless commerce, surveillance technology, and international institutions made ancient prophecies feel newly imaginable.

Part of the answer is technological. Radio put prophecy teachers in living rooms. Television gave them charts large enough to frighten the furniture. Paperbacks, movies, podcasts, YouTube, and social media carried end-times ideas far beyond churches. Good teaching spread faster. Unfortunately, so did nonsense. The internet did not merely give everyone access to a library; it gave everyone a pulpit, a ring light, and the confidence to identify the Beast from a supermarket receipt.

I also believe the answer is prophetic. Daniel was told: ***“Shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase”*** (Daniel 12:4). That verse is often treated as a direct prediction of airplanes, automobiles, Google, and exploding scientific knowledge. Those developments are remarkable, and they certainly make “running to and fro” and increasing information feel modern. The angel appears to be saying that many will search diligently through these words and understanding of the vision will increase as travel and information come with ease.

How Might the World Explain It?

If the Rapture occurs as suddenly as Paul says, what will the world think? The sudden removal of a vast number of people would shake the world. Families would be torn by unexplained absence. Churches could be full of people who knew the songs but never knew Christ. Workplaces, transportation systems, governments, markets, and emergency services could experience severe disruption. Some people would remember the warnings of Christian relatives immediately. Others would explain the event through whatever worldview they already trusted.

The explanation of a mass alien abduction is not difficult to imagine either. Our culture has spent generations telling stories about extraterrestrial visitors, abductions, interdimensional beings, and humanity’s next evolutionary step. Humanity is astonishingly creative when the alternative is repentance. The Bible never says the world will explain away the Rapture either. It warns of end-time deception and of

people refusing the truth. Whatever the expected explanation that emerges, panic and deception are not hard to imagine.

What Scripture does say is more important: if you are in Christ, you will not be misplaced, forgotten, or left in the grave. Jesus knows those who are His. The Rapture is for “*the dead in Christ*” and those believers who are alive at His coming. Jesus died for our sins and rose bodily from the grave. Jesus will personally descend from heaven. The dead in Christ will rise. Living believers will instantly exchange mortality for immortality. The entire redeemed Church will be caught up together to meet the Lord in the air. Death will lose. Separation will end. Our bodies will be glorified. We will be with Jesus forever.

Are You Ready?

That is the Rapture. It is not a dinosaur. It is not a metaphor for having an emotional worship service. It is not the secret invention of a nineteenth-century preacher. It is not permission to ignore the suffering world. It is the promise that the risen Christ will finish saving His people all the way down to their bodies. And because this hope is real, Paul tells us to comfort one another, purify our lives, remain steadfast, abound in the Lord’s work, and wait for God’s Son from heaven.

In the following chapters, we will ask the question everyone wants to ask: WHEN is the Rapture? We will let preterists explain why they locate much prophecy in the past. We will listen to amillennialists and premillennialists. We will examine pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, post-tribulation, and the cheerful pan-tribulation believer who refuses to buy a chart because “it will all pan out.” We will distinguish pre-wrath where its timing materially changes the argument. Each view will get its strongest biblical case, not a straw man wearing a bad theology wig. We will ask what verses support it, what assumptions shape it, what problems it solves, and what problems it creates. Each of these chapters will be much shorter because we have covered the most important topics with clarity.

May I end this chapter asking you a personal question: If indeed Jesus could come back at any moment, as the Scriptures teach, are you going to be raptured with the Bride of Christ? If not, your destiny is to inherit the wrath and judgment of Jesus Christ that we spoke about in detail in the previous chapter. I plead with you to prepare to meet your Maker. Look for the soon return of Jesus Christ as He comes for those who have placed their faith in the Gospel. Then you will not be *Left Behind*.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PRETERIST VIEW

What Preterism Means

When I first heard the word preterist, I thought it was either a Presbyterian who left church early or that the last name of the guy who came up with it was Preter. It is neither. The word comes from the Latin *praeter*, meaning past or beyond. In the simplest terms, preterists believe that many of the prophecies Christians commonly place in our future were fulfilled in the past, especially during the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in AD 70.

Preterism is not exactly another answer to the question, "Does the Rapture happen before, during, or after the Tribulation?" It is first an interpretive lens. It asks whether the Tribulation described by Jesus and much of the judgment pictured in Revelation are still future at all. Kenneth Gentry, one of the best-known modern advocates, calls preterism "basically a hermeneutic." It is a way of reading prophecy - rather than a complete system by itself. A person may combine a Preterist reading with amillennialism or postmillennialism, and some use a 'partial preterist' reading of Matthew 24 without adopting the entire package.

Partial And Full Preterism

There are also two very different kinds of Preterism, and confusing them seems unfair to those who hold this belief. 'Partial Preterists' believe that many end-times prophecies were fulfilled in the first century, but they still confess a future, personal, visible, bodily return of Jesus Christ, the bodily resurrection of the dead, final judgment, and the new heavens and new earth. The Rapture described in 1 Thessalonians 4 therefore remains future, although it is usually understood as the Church meeting Christ at His final return rather than escaping a future seven-year Tribulation. One of my favorite Bible teachers, R. C. Sproul, who is now with the Lord, described himself as "a partial preterist with respect to the Olivet Discourse." He believed Jesus was speaking largely about Jerusalem's coming destruction in Matthew 24 - while still expecting Jesus to return at the end of history.

'Full preterists' go much further in their understanding of Matthew 24. They believe all biblical prophecy, including the Second Coming and resurrection, was fulfilled by AD 70. Those events are redefined as spiritual or covenantal realities rather than future bodily events. This is not simply one more rapture position beside pre-tribulationism, mid-tribulationism, or post-tribulationism. It contradicts the

historic Christian confession that Jesus "*will come again in glory*" and that we "*look for the resurrection of the dead*."

I will plainly say that I regard this view as highly unbiblical and heretical. Paul warned about Hymenaeus and Philetus, who said "*the resurrection is already past*" and overthrew the faith of some (2 Timothy 2:17-18). We can listen to those who hold this view with love, but denying a future return and bodily resurrection is not a minor difference but, I believe, a closed-handed issue.

I'm sorry to state my opinion so early, and I want to assure you that I won't start each chapter on a different view this way. For the rest of this chapter, I will give partial preterism its strongest case, and I will be calling it 'preterism,' not 'partial preterism.' That is the orthodox version held by godly Christians such as Sproul. I may not agree with its overall conclusion, but several of its observations deserve to be taken seriously.

The Case From Matthew 24

The preterist case begins in the final week before the cross. Jesus pronounced judgment on the religious leaders and said, "*All these things will come upon this generation*" (Matthew 23:36). He then left the Temple. When His disciples pointed out its magnificent buildings, Jesus told them that not one stone would remain upon another. Sitting on the Mount of Olives, they asked when "*these things*" would happen and what sign would accompany His coming and the end of the age.

Jesus warned about false christs, wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, betrayal, and the abomination of desolation. He told people in Judea to flee to the mountains. That detail matters because the warning is intensely local and geographic; it fits a Judean crisis naturally. Futurists answer that a future worldwide Tribulation could still include a specific siege of Judea, but the preterist observation deserves to be heard. Luke's parallel account becomes even more specific: "*When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near*" (Luke 21:20). Then Jesus makes the statement that drives the preterist position, "*Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place*." (Matthew 24:34)

This Generation And AD 70

Preterists ask a fair question: Why would "*this generation*" mean the people standing before Jesus everywhere else in the surrounding chapters, but suddenly mean a generation living thousands of years later here? Roughly forty years after Jesus spoke, Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem. The siege became horrifying. Famine consumed

the city. Rival factions murdered one another inside the walls. The Temple burned, the city fell, and the old center of Jewish sacrificial worship was demolished.

The Jewish historian Josephus witnessed the war and wrote that those who died from famine were beyond counting and that their sufferings were unspeakable. Jesus' warning happened to real people, in a real city, within the lifetime of the generation that heard Him.

Preterists connect other difficult time texts. Some standing with Jesus would see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (Matthew 16:28), and the Twelve would not finish Israel's cities before He came (Matthew 10:23). Futurists point to the Transfiguration, resurrection, Pentecost, or a future mission to Israel. Preterists say AD 70 keeps the event and its stated clock together.

The Nearness Language Of Revelation

Preterists also point to the time statements surrounding Revelation. The book opens by describing events that *"must shortly take place"* and says *"the time is near"* (Revelation 1:1, 3). Near the end, John is told not to seal the prophecy *"for the time is at hand"* (Revelation 22:10). Daniel had been told to seal his vision because its fulfillment was distant. John receives the opposite instruction. The preterist argues that first-century believers in seven actual churches would naturally expect a significant portion of the prophecy to concern events approaching in their own world. *"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants - things which must shortly take place ... for the time is near."* (Revelation 1:1, 3)

Cosmic Judgment Language

The preterist reading also takes the Old Testament language of judgment seriously. Isaiah described Babylon's fall by saying the stars would not give light, the sun would be darkened, and the moon would not shine (Isaiah 13:10). Ezekiel used similar cosmic language for Egypt's downfall (Ezekiel 32:7-8). The prophets spoke of God riding on clouds when He judged nations, even though no one expected to see a literal saddle attached to a thunderhead. Therefore, preterists understand the darkened sun, falling stars, shaking heavens, and the Son of Man coming on the clouds in Matthew 24 as prophetic language for covenant judgment and Christ's royal vindication through Jerusalem's destruction.

Nero, 666, and Revelation's Date

They find a possible first-century identity for Revelation's villain in Nero, who brutally persecuted Christians. When "Neron Caesar" is transliterated into Hebrew

letters, one common spelling totals 666. Some preterists identify the Beast with Nero or the Roman imperial system, Babylon with apostate Jerusalem or pagan Rome, and the Great Tribulation with the Jewish-Roman War of AD 66-70.

This reading usually depends on Revelation being written before Jerusalem fell. Revelation 11 pictures John measuring the Temple, which preterists take as evidence that it was still standing. The more common traditional date, however, places Revelation near the end of Domitian's reign around AD 95. The date is a major hinge of the discussion.

Historically, Christians have long recognized at least some fulfillment of Jesus' words in AD 70. A developed preterist interpretation of Revelation appeared later, especially in the Jesuit Luis de Alcazar's commentary published in 1614. Protestants later adopted forms of the approach. R. C. Sproul, Kenneth Gentry, J. Marcellus Kik, and David Chilton have defended partial preterist readings. R. T. France and N. T. Wright also interpret major portions of the Olivet Discourse through first-century events.

Reasons To Consider Preterism

Perhaps you see there are clear reasons to consider partial preterism. It makes us listen to the original audience and remembers that apocalyptic symbols grow out of the Old Testament. It gives AD 70 the importance it deserves: Jesus predicted the Temple's destruction, and He was exactly right. It also protects us from setting dates for Jesus' return when we read the news - turning every war, earthquake, barcode, microchip, and unpleasant ruler into Revelation's final fulfillment.

Where Preterism Falls Short

I hope you see there are also clear reasons not to embrace it as the best explanation of the whole prophetic picture. First, Matthew 24 appears to move beyond the local judgment of Israel in the first century. Jesus describes His coming like lightning visible from east to west, the tribes of the earth mourning, angels gathering His elect, and cosmic disturbance following the Tribulation (Matthew 24:27-31). A preterist can divide the discourse or see AD 70 as a near fulfillment that previews the final return. But if every detail is locked inside the first century, the plain force of the passage becomes increasingly difficult to preserve.

Second, the New Testament describes a visible return of Jesus throughout apostolic teaching. Jesus will return as He ascended (Acts 1:11), every eye will see Him (Revelation 1:7), the dead will rise, living believers will be caught up, and mortality will put on immortality (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53). AD 70 was a devastating judgment, but graves around the world did not open, living

Christians were not glorified, death was not destroyed, and Jesus did not visibly stand upon the Mount of Olives.

Third, a late date for Revelation creates a serious problem for an interpretation that places most of the book in AD 70. If John received the vision around AD 95, the Temple had already been gone for a quarter century. Preterists offer responses, and the evidence offered in their scholarly work is not sufficient, in my opinion.

Finally, preterism can blur different biblical uses of the word "*coming*." The prophets say God "came" in historical judgment against nations. The Holy Spirit "came" at Pentecost. Partial preterists likewise say Jesus "came" in royal authority through Jerusalem's destruction. But those real uses of "coming" do not cancel the promised coming of Jesus Himself. A judge can issue preliminary rulings before entering the courtroom for the final verdict. AD 70 may be a genuine day of the Lord without being the Day that ends all days.

What Preterism Can Teach Us

What then can preterism teach us about living for Christ? It can teach us to read the Bible first as the original audience heard it. It can teach us that Jesus keeps His warnings as faithfully as He keeps His promises. It can teach us that religious institutions, impressive buildings, and inherited privilege cannot protect people who reject their King. The Temple looked permanent. Forty years later it was rubble.

It can also teach us not to use prophecy as Christian clickbait. We do not need to get so excited at every headline in Revelation language to make the Bible relevant. Scripture was relevant before the internet, and it will remain relevant after today's viral digital prophet finally deletes his channel after another date he set never arrives.

Most importantly, partial preterists who confess the future bodily return of Jesus, resurrection, judgment, and eternal life are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We can disagree about AD 70, Revelation's date, Nero, the Tribulation, and "*this generation*" while serving together, preaching the same gospel, and waiting for the same Jesus. We should not call someone a heretic because he reads Matthew chapter 24 like the legend R.C. Sproul.

The Boundary Of Orthodoxy

At the same time, love does not require us to erase doctrinal boundaries. If a system says Jesus has already finally returned and the bodily resurrection is already past, it has moved beyond a secondary disagreement about timing. Our hope is that the risen Jesus will come again, raise the dead, transform the living, judge evil, and make all things new. I am gladly drawing that boundary line, and I think you should too.

Jerusalem fell. Jesus was vindicated. His words came true. And Jesus is still coming back to earth to physically rule and reign.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE AMILLENNIAL VIEW

What Amillennialism Actually Teaches

When I first heard the word amillennial, I assumed it meant, “There is no Millennium.” That seemed like a difficult position to defend because Revelation 20 mentions a thousand years six times. As it turns out, whoever came up with the name is terrible at marketing. Amillennial Christians believe in a Millennium. They just do not believe it is a future, literal thousand-year kingdom on earth that begins after Jesus returns.

Many prefer the name ‘realized millennialism.’ In the simplest terms, amillennialists believe the thousand years of Revelation 20 symbolically describe the period between Christ’s first and second comings. Jesus is reigning now from heaven. Satan is bound in a specific sense. Departed believers reign with Christ, and the gospel is going to the nations. Near the end, evil will intensify, Satan will be released for a final rebellion, and Jesus will return visibly and bodily. The dead will be raised, living believers will be caught up, everyone will face judgment, and the eternal state will begin. There is no additional earthly kingdom between the Second Coming and the new creation.

Preterism asks how much prophecy was fulfilled in the past, especially in AD 70. Amillennialism asks what the Millennium is and where it belongs. A Christian can be a partial preterist and an amillennialist, but obviously not every amillennialist is a preterist. Many expect a future Antichrist, final apostasy, severe persecution, bodily return, resurrection, judgment, and renewed creation. They are not saying, “Nothing remains.” They are saying, “There is no separate earthly Millennium after Christ returns.”

Revelation As Recapitulation

The amillennial case begins with the way Revelation is organized. Pre-millennialists usually read Revelation 19-21 as a forward-moving sequence: Jesus returns, defeats His enemies, reigns for one thousand years, crushes Satan’s final rebellion, judges the dead, and creates the new heaven and earth. That certainly appears to be the most natural reading to me.

Amillennialists answer that Revelation often moves in cycles rather than one straight timeline. The book reaches what looks like the end several times. Revelation 6 unveils “*the great day of His wrath.*” Revelation chapter 11 announces Christ’s

kingdom and the judgment of the dead. Revelation 14 pictures the final harvest, Revelation 16 declares, “***It is done!***” and Revelation 19 presents Christ’s return. Amillennialists believe Revelation 20 then rewinds the prophetic film and retells the period between Christ’s two comings from another angle.

This approach is called ‘recapitulation.’ The events are not imaginary; John repeatedly surveys the same age, revealing different spiritual realities and moving toward the same victory. Revelation 20 may therefore be a fresh vision of the Church age rather than what happens next after Revelation 19.

In What Sense Is Satan Bound?

John sees an angel seize the dragon, bind him, throw him into the bottomless pit, and seal it “***so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished***” (Revelation 20:3). Amillennialists emphasize the stated purpose of the binding. Satan is not bound so that he can do absolutely nothing. He is bound so that he cannot keep the nations in total darkness or prevent the worldwide spread of the gospel.

Jesus used similar language. No one could plunder a strong man’s house without first binding him (Matthew 12:29). Jesus saw Satan fall like lightning (Luke 10:18), declared that the ruler of this world would be cast out, and promised to draw all peoples to Himself (John 12:31-32). Through His death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus defeated the devil and opened the nations to the gospel.

Before Christ, God’s covenant revelation was concentrated largely within Israel. After Pentecost, the gospel exploded toward the ends of the earth. Satan still tempts, accuses, persecutes, and blinds. Amillennialists do not picture him in a heavenly timeout. They picture a defeated enemy on a leash (chain): still dangerous, but unable to stop Christ from gathering the nations.

The Meaning Of The Thousand Years

The number one thousand is also understood symbolically. Revelation is filled with symbolic numbers and images. God owns “***the cattle on a thousand hills***” (Psalm 50:10), which does not mean hill 1,001 belongs to someone else. He keeps covenant to “***a thousand generations***” (Deuteronomy 7:9), describing vast completeness rather than an expiration date. Amillennialists see the thousand years as the full, God-appointed span of Christ’s present reign.

The First Resurrection

Then John sees thrones and “*the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus.*” They “*lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years,*” and John calls this “*the first resurrection*” (Revelation 20:4-6). Amillennialists differ slightly in explaining that resurrection. Some understand it as regeneration: sinners who were spiritually dead are made alive, raised with Christ, and seated with Him in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:4-6; Colossians 3:1). Others understand it as the believer’s entrance into the presence of Christ at death, where the souls of departed saints live and reign with Him while awaiting bodily resurrection.

They find support in John 5. Jesus says an hour “*now is*” when the dead hear His voice and live (John 5:25). A few verses later, He describes a future hour when all in the graves come out, some to life and some to condemnation (John 5:28-29). Amillennialists see a similar pattern in Revelation chapter 20: spiritual or heavenly life now, followed by universal bodily resurrection when Jesus returns.

One Return And One Final Judgment

The rest of the New Testament, they argue, places resurrection and judgment together at one final coming. The wheat and tares grow together until the harvest at “*the end of the age*” (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). When the Son of Man comes in glory, He separates the nations for eternal destiny (Matthew 25:31-46). Both the just and unjust come out of their graves in one future hour (John 5:28-29).

Paul says the dead in Christ rise at His coming, and “*then comes the end,*” when death is destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:23-26). Second Thessalonians chapter 1 places the Church’s relief and her persecutors’ judgment at the same revelation of Jesus. Peter’s Day of the Lord leads through judgment into the new creation (2 Peter 3:10-13). Amillennialists ask: If death is destroyed, the wicked judged, and creation renewed when Jesus comes, where is another thousand years of ordinary history?

For the same reason, amillennialists do not separate the Rapture from the Second Coming by several years. They fully believe 1 Thessalonians 4: the Lord descends, the dead in Christ rise, living believers are caught up, and the whole Church meets Him in the air. They understand that meeting as the public welcome of the returning King, not the beginning of a separate, hidden stage of His coming. The Greek word for “*meet*” was sometimes used for citizens going out to welcome a dignitary and accompanying him as he arrived. That background fits their view, although one word by itself cannot carry an entire end-times timeline.

Already And Not Yet

Amillennialism is built upon the “already and not yet” nature of Christ’s kingdom. Jesus said the kingdom had come because He cast out demons by the Spirit of God (Matthew 12:28). Peter preached that Jesus had been raised and exalted to David’s throne (Acts 2:29–36). Paul said the Father “*has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love*” (Colossians 1:13). Christ “*must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet*” (1 Corinthians 15:25). The kingdom is already here because the King is already enthroned. It is not yet complete because rebellion, suffering, sin, and death remain.

Israel And The Church

Amillennialists usually understand Old Testament kingdom promises through Christ and their final fulfillment in the new creation. Jesus is Abraham’s true seed and David’s Son; everyone united to Him shares His inheritance (Galatians 3:16, 29). They reject the charge that Gentiles simply replace Jews. They argue that Jew and Gentile are united in the Messiah, and some expect a large future turning of Jewish people based on Romans 11. What they reject is the need for a separate national Jewish kingdom between this age and eternity.

The Historical Development

Justin Martyr, writing in the second century, clearly expected a future earthly Millennium, yet he admitted that many who possessed “the pure and pious faith” thought otherwise. Pre-millennial expectation was early and significant, but it was not a test of whether someone was a true Christian. Augustine gave the present-millennium interpretation its most influential early form in the fifth century. In *The City of God*, he connected the first resurrection with spiritual life in Christ and understood the thousand years as the present reign of the Church with her Lord. Augustine’s influence helped make this framework dominant throughout much of Western Christianity. The medieval Roman Catholic tradition followed it.

During the Reformation, Lutherans and Reformed theologians generally retained a single-return, general-resurrection, final-judgment structure. The Augsburg Confession rejected the teaching that, before the resurrection, the godly would take possession of an earthly kingdom. John Calvin likewise rejected a future earthly Millennium after Christ’s return.

Modern amillennial theologians include Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkhof, Anthony Hoekema, G. K. Beale, Kim Riddlebarger, Sam Storms, and Michael Horton. They disagree on details but read Revelation according to its apocalyptic

genre, see its visions recapitulating the same age, affirm Christ's present kingdom, and unite the Second Coming with resurrection, judgment, and the eternal state.

Reasons to Consider Amillennialism

There are clear reasons to consider this view. It takes Revelation's symbols and repeated cycles seriously. It refuses to postpone the reign of Jesus and provides a unified ending: one visible return, general resurrection, final judgment, and glorious new creation. It also explains our strange mixture: the gospel advances while the Church suffers; Christ reigns while evil resists.

Why I'm Not An Amillennialist

There are also clear reasons I do not believe amillennialism best explains the whole biblical picture. First, Revelation chapters 19-21 read like a sequence. Christ returns and destroys the Beast and False Prophet. Then Satan is bound. After the thousand years, Satan is released, defeated, and thrown into the lake of fire *“where the beast and the false prophet are”* (Revelation 20:10). Then comes the Great White Throne and the new creation. John often recapitulates, but that does not prove he rewinds at Revelation 20. The repeated phrase *“Then I saw”* naturally sounds like the story is moving forward.

Second, the binding seems stronger than present world conditions suggest. Peter says the devil prowls like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). Paul calls him *“the god of this age”* who blinds unbelieving minds (2 Corinthians 4:4). John says the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one (1 John 5:19). Amillennialists rightly answer that Revelation limits the binding to deceiving the nations in a particular way. Still, the dragon is not merely leashed; he is thrown into the abyss, shut in, and sealed over. As I heard in a debate between pastors with differing views, a non-amillennialist said to the amillennialists, “Satan must have an extremely long leash.”

Third, Revelation uses the same verb when the martyrs *“lived”* and when *“the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished”* (Revelation 20:4-5). If the second coming to life is bodily, it is natural to understand the first the same way. Calling one spiritual and the other physical may be possible, but it is not the obvious reading. John also calls the first event a resurrection, a word normally associated with bodily life from the dead.

Finally, many Old Testament promises are clearly earthly, national, physical, and intermediate rather than merely spiritual or eternal. Isaiah describes nations coming to Jerusalem, creation experiencing extraordinary peace, and people enjoying remarkable longevity while death still exists (Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:1-10; 65:17-25). Zechariah pictures surviving nations going up to worship the King in Jerusalem after

the Lord's feet stand on the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14). Amillennialists see these promises fulfilled symbolically in Christ, the Church, and ultimately the new earth. Premillennialists believe a future kingdom allows every dimension of the promises to stand without collapsing Israel, the nations, earthly life, and eternity into one stage.

What Amillennialism Can Teach Us

Even where I disagree, amillennialism has something to teach us about living for Christ: Jesus is not campaigning for King. He is King. He is not pacing nervously in heaven, waiting to see whether Washington, Moscow, Beijing, artificial intelligence, or the Antichrist will ruin His plan. He reigns now.

The Church should not wait for a future kingdom to begin kingdom work. We preach because Satan cannot stop Jesus from saving the nations. We make disciples because all authority belongs to Christ. We endure because the martyrs live and reign with their Lord. We refuse utopian fantasies because wheat and tares remain until the harvest, and we refuse despair because the outcome is not in doubt.

Amillennialism's greatest strength is its insistence that the kingdom is already present and the King already reigns. Its greatest challenge is explaining why Revelation 20 appears to place a bodily resurrection and a thousand-year reign after the visible return of Christ.

I remain premillennial, but I can learn from my amillennial brothers and sisters. They confess the same risen Jesus, await His bodily return, believe in the resurrection of the dead, proclaim final judgment, and hope for the new heavens and new earth. We may disagree about whether Revelation 20 moves forward or rewinds, but we do not need to rewind Christian fellowship every time the subject comes up.

The Millennium may be debated. The King is not. Jesus reigns now. Jesus is coming again. Jesus will make all things new.

CHAPTER SIX

THE POST-TRIBULATIONAL VIEW

What Post-Tribulationism Teaches

The post-tribulation view is exactly what it sounds like: the Church goes through the Tribulation and is raptured after it. No decoder ring is required. If pre-tribulationism says the bride is taken before the storm, post-tribulationism says she remains faithful through the storm and meets the Bridegroom as He arrives. She is not abandoned. She is preserved, resurrected, transformed, and gathered to Christ at the end.

That is not a small difference. Revelation 13 is not a light drizzle. It describes the Beast, global deception, economic control, persecution, and martyrdom. Post-tribulationism does not tell the Church to pack an escape bag. It tells her to lace up her boots, keep the testimony of Jesus, and trust that the King will come before evil gets the final word.

Post-tribulationism answers the question of timing, not the question of the Millennium. An amillennialist may also place the Rapture at Christ's visible return, but the classic post-tribulation view considered here is futurist and pre-millennial. It expects a future Antichrist and Great Tribulation, followed by the visible return of Jesus, the resurrection and Rapture of the Church, the defeat of the Beast, and Christ's kingdom on earth.

In this view, the Rapture and the Second Coming are not two stages separated by seven years. They are parts of one arrival. The Lord descends, the dead in Christ rise, living believers are transformed, and the entire Church is caught up to meet Him. The saints then welcome and accompany their returning King as He takes possession of the world that has rejected Him. Up to meet Him, then with Him in victory.

The Case From Matthew 24

The strongest text for this view is Matthew 24. Jesus describes the abomination of desolation, warns of "great tribulation," exposes false christs, and then says, "Immediately after the tribulation of those days" the cosmic signs will appear, the Son of Man will come on the clouds, the trumpet will sound, and His angels will gather His elect from the four winds (Matthew 24:15-31). Post-tribulationists ask a very reasonable question: If Jesus places the gathering after the Tribulation, why should we place the Church's gathering before it?

They understand “*the elect*” to include Christ’s people, not a completely separate group with no connection to the Church. The trumpet, clouds, coming of the Lord, and gathering from the ends of the earth sound remarkably similar to 1 Thessalonians 4. Pre-tribulationists answer that Matthew is focused upon Israel and Tribulation saints, and that angels gather these elect while Christ personally catches up His Church. Still, the plain sequence in Jesus’ sermon gives post-tribulationism real weight.

The Case From Second Thessalonians

Second Thessalonians chapter 2 supplies its second major pillar. Paul writes “*concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him,*” then says that the Day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4). The post-tribulation reading keeps the coming, gathering, and Day together. Antichrist appears first; Jesus destroys him by the brightness of His coming; and the saints are gathered to their Lord.

Pre-tribulationists distinguish the Rapture in verse 1 from the Day of the Lord discussed after it, or understand the Day as a period whose judgments unfold after the Church is removed. Post-tribulationists believe that separation must be imported into the paragraph. Paul could have calmed the Thessalonians by saying, “You are still here, so the Day cannot have begun.” Instead, he reminds them of the apostasy, Antichrist, deception, and the victory of Jesus.

One Public Coming

They also read 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 as one continuous scene. Chapter 4 describes the Lord descending with a shout, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God. The dead rise, the living are caught up, and all meet the Lord in the air. Paul then turns to the “*times and seasons*” and the Day of the Lord. Post-tribulationists see resurrection, Rapture, judgment, and Christ’s arrival as one public, thunderous event. Nothing about it sounds like Jesus sneaking into the atmosphere wearing camouflage.

The Greek word translated “*meet*” is *apantesis*. As I mentioned before, this word is used when people go out to welcome an arriving person and then travel with him; as believers meet the bridegroom in Matthew 25:6 and Roman Christians meet Paul in Acts 28:15. Post-tribulationists therefore picture the Church rising to greet the King and joining His royal procession to earth. That is a meaningful background, although one Greek noun should not be forced to tow an entire prophetic timeline by itself.

The Last Trumpet

First Corinthians 15 adds the resurrection “*at the last trumpet*” (1 Corinthians 15:52). Post-tribulationists connect this with the trumpet in Matthew chapter 24 and sometimes with the seventh trumpet of Revelation, when the kingdom of the world becomes Christ’s. They also note that Jesus repeatedly promised to raise His people “*at the last day*” (John 6:39-54). The most natural sound of “*last*” is not “*last for now, with several prophetic trumpets still coming.*”

The Saints In Revelation

Revelation appears to strengthen the case. The Beast makes war with the saints (Revelation 13:7). Believers are described as those who keep God’s commandments and the faith of Jesus while the Beast demands worship (Revelation 14:12). John sees a multitude coming out of the Great Tribulation (Revelation 7:14), and Revelation 20 places the resurrection and reign of martyrs after the Beast has been defeated. Post-tribulationists ask why these saints should be called something other than the Church simply because the word church is not used.

Tribulation And Divine Wrath

This view carefully distinguishes tribulation from divine wrath when Christ sentences people to hell. Jesus promised His followers tribulation in the world, and Paul said believers enter the kingdom through many tribulations. God’s wrath, however, is His judicial anger against sin, and Christians are “not appointed” to it (1 Thessalonians 5:9). Post-tribulationists say the Church may be present while wrath falls without being its target. Israel remained in Egypt while God judged Egypt, yet Goshen was protected.

Noah passed through the Flood inside the ark. Presence is not the same thing as punishment.

Not every post-tribulation teacher places every seal, trumpet, and bowl into exactly the same category. Their shared conviction is simpler: Antichrist persecutes the saints, God can preserve His people spiritually or physically as He chooses, martyrs are not defeated, and Jesus gathers His Church when He appears in glory. The promise is not that believers will never bleed. The promise is that not one of them will be lost.

Historical Defenders

Historically, this position has deep roots. We should not pretend the early Church owned a laminated modern prophecy chart, but several early writings expected

Christians to face the final deceiver before Christ returned. The Didache warns believers to remain watchful, then describes the world-deceiver, a fiery trial, perseverance in faith, the trumpet, the resurrection, and finally the Lord coming on the clouds. Irenaeus expected Antichrist's reign before Christ's return and kingdom. In the early third century, Hippolytus was even more explicit. He interpreted Revelation 12 as persecution falling upon the Church and described the tyrant persecuting her for 1,260 days before the Lord's appearing. These fathers do not settle the debate - Scripture does.

Important modern defenders include Greek New Testament scholar S. P. Tregelles, Alexander Reese, George Eldon Ladd, Robert H. Gundry, and Douglas Moo. Ladd's *The Blessed Hope* argued that the Church's blessed hope is the Second Coming of Jesus Himself, not an earlier removal separated from it. Gundry's *The Church and the Tribulation* built a detailed case from the direct after-tribulation texts, the resurrection passages, and the history of Christian interpretation. Moo has presented the view in modern evangelical dialogue with similar emphasis upon one climactic return.

Reasons To Consider The View

There are clear reasons to consider post-tribulationism. It takes Matthew 24's sequence with great seriousness. It lets 2 Thessalonians 2 read as one argument. It unites the Rapture, resurrection, and visible return without requiring an unstated interval. It recognizes the saints in Revelation as followers of Jesus, and it fits the New Testament's repeated preparation of believers for deception, persecution, endurance, and martyrdom.

Why I'm Not A Post-tribulationists

There are also clear reasons I do not believe it best explains the whole biblical picture. First, it weakens the any-moment expectancy of Christ. The apostles tell believers to wait for God's Son from heaven, say His coming is at hand, and command us to watch. If the Antichrist must first be revealed and the Great Tribulation must first run its course, then Jesus cannot come for His Church today. Post-tribulationists answer that biblical watchfulness means readiness and certainty, not necessarily the absence of preceding signs.

Second, promises concerning wrath sound stronger than protection while remaining inside the hour. Jesus promises the faithful church in Philadelphia, "***I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world***" (Revelation 3:10). Post-tribulationists compare John 17:15, where Jesus asks the Father to keep believers from the evil one while they remain in the world. Pre-

tribulationists answer that Revelation promises deliverance not merely from evil within the trial, but from the worldwide hour itself.

Third, Daniel's seventieth week is decreed for Daniel's people and holy city (Daniel 9:24). Pre-tribulationists see that period as God's renewed dealings with Israel and notice that the word church disappears from Revelation's earthly judgments after chapter 3. Post-tribulationists answer that Revelation still describes saints who keep faith in Jesus, so changing the label does not remove the people. The disagreement is really about whether Israel and the Church remain distinct in God's prophetic program.

Fourth, the turnaround in the air is possible, but not explicit. First Thessalonians says we meet the Lord and will always be with Him; it does not say how quickly He continues to earth. Pre-tribulationists believe an interval better explains the Father's house in John 14, the judgment seat of Christ, the marriage of the Lamb, and the saints returning with Jesus. Post-tribulationists answer that those events do not require seven earthly years and that apocalyptic visions do not always function like a Southwest Airlines itinerary.

Finally, a post-tribulation Rapture creates a difficult question about the Millennium. If every believer is glorified at Christ's return and every unbeliever is removed in judgment, who enters the kingdom in natural bodies, has children, and populates the nations described during the thousand years? Post-tribulation explanations vary, but the question is not small. A pre-tribulation framework more easily identifies surviving Tribulation believers who enter Christ's kingdom as mortal people.

Post-Tribulation Courage

Even where I disagree, post-tribulationism delivers a needed punch to comfortable Christianity. It asks whether we have trained disciples to endure or merely trained them to disappear. Jesus never promised that faithfulness would be painless. The apostles did not build churches by telling everyone that suffering meant God had lost control. They taught believers to overcome by the blood of the Lamb, the word of their testimony, and a love for Christ greater than their love for life.

Every Christian should possess post-tribulation courage even if he holds pre-tribulation convictions. We should be able to obey when obedience costs money, reputation, freedom, or blood. We should know Scripture well enough to recognize counterfeit christs. We should build churches that can survive without celebrity platforms, political comfort, reliable electricity, or a functioning Wi-Fi password. A faith that only works when life is easy is not ready for anything bad to happen on Mondays, much less the seven-year Tribulation.

I remain pre-tribulational, for reasons we will examine later. Yet I do not dismiss the post-tribulation view as foolish, faithless, or unbiblical. It is held by serious students of Scripture who love Jesus, believe the Bible, proclaim the gospel, and are trying to follow the most direct sequence they see in the text, although they may be wrong about the timing.

Post-tribulationism's greatest strength is its straightforward reading of the passages that place Christ's gathering after suffering and Antichrist's appearance. Its greatest challenge is accounting for imminence, deliverance from the worldwide hour of wrath, Israel's distinct prophetic fulfillment, the heavenly interval, and mortal survivors entering the Millennium.

The Church may debate whether Christ gathers us before the final storm or at its end. She must never debate whether He is worth following through it. If we escape, we will praise Him. If we endure, He will sustain us. If we die, He will raise us. In every faithful Christian view, the Beast loses, the saints live, and Jesus wins.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE MID-TRIBULATIONAL VIEW

What Mid-Tribulationism Teaches

The mid-tribulation view is the Goldilocks position at the prophecy breakfast. Pre-tribulation seems too early, post-tribulation seems too late, and mid-tribulation says, “Right in the middle feels just right.” Of course, biblical prophecy cannot be settled by the temperature of our porridge. The real question is whether Scripture places the Rapture at the midpoint of Daniel’s final seven years.

Mid-tribulationism teaches that the Church will remain on earth through the first three and a half years of that period. During that time, the world will experience deception, political upheaval, war, famine, and the rise of Antichrist. At the midpoint, Antichrist will reveal his true character, commit the abomination of desolation, and begin the Great Tribulation. Before God pours out the most severe judgments of the final three and a half years, Jesus will raise the dead in Christ, transform living believers, and catch His Church up to meet Him in the air.

This view is pre-millennial and futurist. It expects a future Antichrist, a real Tribulation, the bodily Rapture of the Church, the visible return of Jesus, and His earthly kingdom. Like pre-tribulationism, it separates the Rapture from Christ’s descent at Armageddon. Like post-tribulationism, it believes the Church must witness important prophetic events before being gathered.

The Prophetic Midpoint

The biblical case begins with the clearest clock in end-times prophecy. Daniel 9:27 describes one final “*week*,” or seven-year period. In the middle of that week, a ruler causes sacrifice and offering to cease. Daniel 7:25 and 12:7 describe a terrible period lasting “*a time, times, and half a time*.” Revelation expresses that same length as forty-two months or 1,260 days (Revelation 11:2-3; 12:6, 14; 13:5). Scripture keeps circling three and a half years in red ink.

Jesus appears to recognize this division in Matthew 24. He describes wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, and deception as “*the beginning of sorrows*.” He then points to Daniel’s abomination of desolation and warns that afterward there will be “*great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world*” (Matthew 24:15-21). Mid-tribulationists therefore distinguish the troubles of the first half from the unprecedented Great Tribulation of the second. The Church is not

promised immunity from ordinary tribulation, but it is removed before that final horror reaches full strength.

The Last And Seventh Trumpets

The view's most distinctive argument comes from the trumpets. Paul says that believers will be changed ***“in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet”*** (1 Corinthians 15:52). Revelation later presents seven trumpet judgments. When the seventh trumpet sounds, heaven announces, ***“The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ,”*** and the twenty-four elders declare, ***“Your wrath has come”*** (Revelation 11:15-18). If Paul's last trumpet is Revelation's seventh trumpet, the Rapture has found a recognizable place on the prophetic timeline.

The Two Witnesses

The two witnesses make the connection even more interesting. They prophesy for 1,260 days, are killed by the Beast, lie dead for three and a half days, return to life, and hear a voice from heaven saying, ***“Come up here.”*** Then they ascend in a cloud while their enemies watch (Revelation 11:3-12). Mid-tribulationists commonly place their ministry in the first half of Daniel's week and see their resurrection and ascension as occurring alongside, or picturing, the Rapture of the Church. Shortly afterward, the seventh trumpet sounds. The pieces appear to lock together: 1,260 days, resurrection, a heavenly summons, a cloud, and the last of seven trumpets.

Antichrist Revealed

Second Thessalonians 2 provides another pillar. Paul writes “concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him,” then says the rebellion and revelation of the man of sin must occur before the Day arrives. Antichrist is most decisively revealed when he exalts himself in God's temple - the abomination Daniel and Jesus place at the midpoint. Mid-tribulationists conclude that the Church will be present to see that revealing, but Jesus will gather her before Antichrist's three-and-a-half-year reign of terror.

Persecution and Wrath

Finally, the view appeals to the promise that believers are “not appointed to wrath” (1 Thessalonians 5:9). Christians have never been promised freedom from persecution. The Church has survived Nero, the Colosseum, prison camps, firing squads, and more terrible church business meetings than I care to remember. Mid-tribulationists argue

that the first half contains human conflict and satanic opposition, while God's concentrated wrath falls during the second half, especially in the bowl judgments. The Church may experience the wrath of man, but she will be removed before the wrath of God.

Historical Defenders

The modern view is most closely associated with Norman B. Harrison, whose 1941 book *The End: Rethinking the Revelation* presented the Rapture as occurring before what he called the Great Tribulation. Conservative Presbyterian theologian J. Oliver Buswell defended a midweek Rapture in *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*. He identified Paul's last trumpet with Revelation's seventh trumpet and connected the ascension of the two witnesses with the catching up of the Church. Old Testament scholar Gleason L. Archer later offered "The Case for the Mid-Seventieth-Week Rapture" in the evangelical volume *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribunational?*

These were serious men attempting to harmonize difficult texts, not three guys in a basement measuring locust wings with a calculator. Still, the fully developed mid-tribulation system is relatively modern and has never commanded a large portion of the Church. That does not make it false. Theology is judged by Scripture, not by market share. It does mean we should avoid claiming that the apostles handed the Church a laminated mid-trib chart.

Reasons To Consider Mid-Tribulationism

There are clear reasons to consider this view. First, it respects the Bible's repeated emphasis on the midpoint. Daniel, Jesus, and Revelation all mark a dramatic transition after three and a half years. Second, it gives "the last trumpet" an obvious candidate instead of treating the phrase as an undefined trumpet known only to God. Third, it takes 2 Thessalonians 2 seriously by allowing the Church to witness the revelation of Antichrist. Fourth, it preserves a distinction Scripture plainly makes between suffering at the hands of evil and condemnation beneath God's wrath.

It also corrects a soft American assumption that God's love should exempt Christians from hardship. A believer can suffer terribly without being under divine judgment. The cross settled our condemnation; it did not guarantee padded seats on the road to glory.

Why I'm Not A Mid-Tribulationist

There are equally clear reasons I remain unconvinced. First, Revelation never explicitly says its seventh trumpet sounds at the midpoint. The 1,260 days assigned to the witnesses do not tell us beyond dispute whether their ministry occupies the first or second half, and Revelation's visions contain pauses and flashbacks that make a simple stopwatch reading difficult.

Second, Paul's "*last trumpet*" does not have to be Revelation's seventh trumpet. First Corinthians was written before John received Revelation, so Paul's original readers could not have identified it by counting John's seven trumpets. In 1 Thessalonians 4, the trumpet is "*the trumpet of God*," calling His people upward. In Revelation, seven angels sound trumpets that release judgment. They may be the same trumpet, but the shared word does not prove a shared event. A referee's whistle, a marching band's horn, and an angelic trumpet can all signal something without announcing the same event.

Third, it is difficult to push all divine wrath into the second half. The Lamb opens the seals. The trumpet judgments devastate the earth before the seventh trumpet ever sounds. By the sixth seal, the rulers of the world cry that the great day of the Lamb's wrath has come (Revelation 6:16-17). War, famine, mass death, burning mountains, poisoned waters, darkness, and demonic torment look like more than the usual turbulence of human history.

Fourth, the two witnesses are never called the Church. Their resurrection is real, their ascension is spectacular, and their command to "*come up here*" sounds wonderfully Rapture-ish. Nevertheless, turning two prophets into the timing mechanism for every believer requires an inference the text never states.

Fifth, mid-tribulationism weakens strict imminence. Once Daniel's final week begins, believers could start a three-and-a-half-year countdown. The exact day might remain uncertain, but the Rapture could not occur until a covenant, a temple-centered crisis, Antichrist's unveiling, and the ministry of the witnesses had appeared. Mid-tribulationists answer that the New Testament commands watchfulness, not necessarily signlessness. That is a respectable answer, but I do not think it best explains the Church's constant expectation of Christ.

The position's greatest strength is that it takes the biblical midpoint seriously. Its greatest weakness is that no verse plainly places the Church's Rapture there. It must identify Paul's last trumpet with John's seventh, locate that trumpet halfway through Daniel's week, treat the earlier judgments as something less than God's wrath, and connect the two witnesses' ascension with the whole Church. Each step is possible; together they carry a heavy load.

Faith That Can Endure

Even so, mid-tribulationism gives us a needed word: get tougher. If our faith collapses during the beginning of sorrows, it was not ready for ordinary Christian life, much less the end of the world. We should be able to face suffering without assuming God has abandoned us, and we should know the difference between the discipline of a Father, the hatred of the world, and the judicial wrath from which Christ has saved us.

I remain pre-tribulational, but a mid-tribulation Christian is not my enemy. We confess the same Jesus, the same gospel, the same resurrection, and the same blessed hope. If my brother thinks the bus arrives at halftime and I believe it comes before kickoff, we can still spend the game telling people how to get on.

The point is not to win the chart and lose our witness. The point is to be faithful whenever Christ calls: lamps burning, armor on, gospel on our lips, and no love affair with the world we are about to leave.

WHY I AM PRETRIBULATIONAL

The Calvary Chapel View

I want to be straight up with you about where I got my eschatological view. Jesus saved me inside a movement of churches called Calvary Chapel. It began under Pastor Chuck Smith in Southern California, spread through the hippie generation like holy wildfire, and eventually became the backdrop for the 2023 movie *Jesus Revolution*. Calvary Chapel is known for teaching through the Bible verse by verse, the forming of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), baptizing people in the Pacific Ocean, wearing enough Hawaiian shirts while preaching, and believing that Jesus could come for His Church at any moment.

Historically, we are pre-millennial and pre-tribulational. Pastor Chuck devoted one of the longest sections of *Calvary Chapel Distinctives* to the Rapture because this was such an important doctrine to him and to the movement. The early Calvary pastors preached with the expectation that Jesus was coming soon, and there seemed to be a greater urgency for people to be saved. That expectancy fueled evangelism, church planting, missions, holiness, and an urgent confidence that Christ was going to come back for the Bride He adored.

I inherited that conviction even before I fully understood it. I also inherited some of the attitude that sometimes came with it. When I was younger, I could debate Christians who held other views all night. I seemed to win the argument at times because others weren't really arguing, or even held tightly to any particular view. But I held onto it as a 'closed-handed' issue, thinking that if Christians disagreed with me, then I should doubt their salvation.

Over the years I have had more cordial conversations with other believers who love Jesus deeply and hold different end-times theology. I have become less combative about this issue, but I have not become less convinced. In fact, after more than two decades of reading, teaching, listening, questioning, and returning to the text, I believe pre-tribulationism more strongly than I did when I was young. I just hope I now hold it with a shepherd's heart instead of a cage fighter's posture.

This chapter matters deeply to me because I want our church, my children, and those who read this book to live as pre-tribulationists. I want them to see what I see: a promise woven throughout Scripture that Jesus will gather His bride before God pours out His final judgment upon a rebellious world. I want them to wake up believing that Christ could come today. I want that hope to make them pure, urgent, courageous,

generous, evangelistic, and difficult for the devil to distract. So I am not writing this merely to win an argument. I am writing because what we expect tomorrow shapes how we live today.

What Pre-tribulationists Believe

Before I explain why I believe it, let me state exactly what pre-tribulationists believe. We believe Jesus will descend from heaven and gather His Church before Daniel's final seven-year period begins, in what we call the Rapture of the Church (Daniel 9:24-27; John 14:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:16-17; 5:9; Revelation 3:10). The dead in Christ will be raised, and believers who are alive will be instantly transformed (1 Corinthians 15:51-53; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17). Together, we will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and He will receive us to Himself so that we will always be with Him in a glorified state (John 14:2-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:17; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 John 3:2).

On earth, the final seven years revealed to Daniel will unfold (Daniel 9:24-27), including the rise of Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, 8-10; Revelation 13:1-8), a covenant involving Israel - commonly understood as some form of peace agreement (Daniel 9:27), the abomination of desolation (Daniel 9:27; Matthew 24:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:4), unparalleled deception (Matthew 24:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12; Revelation 13:13-14), persecution (Matthew 24:21-22; Revelation 13:7-10; 20:4), and the judgments described throughout Revelation (Revelation 6-19).

At the end of those years, Jesus will return bodily and visibly with His saints (Zechariah 14:3-5; Matthew 24:29-30; Acts 1:11; Revelation 19:11-14), destroy the rule of Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:8; Revelation 19:19-21), rescue Israel (Zechariah 12:10; 14:1-5; Romans 11:25-27), judge the nations (Joel 3:2, 12; Matthew 25:31-46; Revelation 19:15), establish His kingdom upon the earth for one thousand years (Zechariah 14:9, 16-19; Revelation 20:1-6), and eventually create the New Heavens and the New Earth (Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1-5).

The Rapture and the visible Second Coming belong to the same great return of Christ, but they are not the same event (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Revelation 19:11-21). At the Rapture, Jesus gathers His saints to Himself in the air (John 14:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). At the visible return, He comes with His saints to the earth (Zechariah 14:4-5; Colossians 3:4; Revelation 19:11-14). At the Rapture, believers are rescued and transformed (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53; Revelation 3:10). At the visible return, rebels are confronted and judged (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10; 2:8; Revelation 19:15-21). At the Rapture, believers meet Jesus in the air; Scripture does not describe His feet touching the earth (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). At the visible return, His feet stand on the Mount of Olives, and the

mountain splits in two (Zechariah 14:4). One is presented as the imminent and blessed hope of the Church (Titus 2:13; Philippians 3:20-21; James 5:7-9; Revelation 22:7, 12, 20); the other is preceded by the most clearly described series of signs in the Bible (Matthew 24:4-30; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-8; Revelation 6-19).

Persecution Is Not Divine Wrath

One important factor to consider about the pre-tribulationist view is that it does not promise that Christians will avoid suffering before it happens. Some who hold other views believe that we believe in ‘escapism.’ Jesus promised us tribulation in this world (John 15:18-20; 16:33). The apostles were beaten, imprisoned, and killed. Believers are suffering for Christ around the world as I write these words. Pre-tribulationism is not the belief that God loves American Christians too much to let anything uncomfortable happen to them.

We must distinguish persecution from divine wrath. Persecution is what a rebellious world, led by an evil devil and demons, does to God's people. Divine wrath is what a holy God will do to persistent rebellion. The Church has never been promised exemption from persecution; in many places we are promised the opposite. But because Jesus bore the wrath our sin deserved, His people are repeatedly told that they are not appointed to God's wrath. We wait for the Son from heaven, Paul says, the One who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10). A few chapters later he writes, *"God did not appoint us to wrath"* (1 Thessalonians 5:9). Pre-tribulation is not built upon the fragility of the Bride. It is built upon the faithfulness of the Bridegroom.

A Cumulative Case

Now for an admission that might make some people in my camp nervous: there is no single silver-bullet verse that says, "The Church will be raptured exactly seven years before Jesus returns to the Mount of Olives." In fact, just as I see reasons to believe in or not believe in other views, I have the same reservations about my theological leaning. I simply see there are fewer holes in the pre-tribulationist view, and it offers a more holistic way to view all of Scripture's prophecies.

The case for pre-tribulationism is a tapestry. One strand comes from Daniel's seventy weeks. Another comes from the distinction between Israel and the Church. Another comes from the promises concerning wrath. Another comes from the imminent expectation of the apostles. Revelation adds its divine outline, its movement from churches on earth to worshipers in heaven, the twenty-four elders, the sealed tribes of Israel, and the Bride prepared before Christ rides out in judgment. Matthew adds an ordered timeline. The feasts, parables, wedding imagery, and Old Testament

rescue stories add recurring patterns. Yet no strand should be made to carry the whole weight. The strength of this view is cumulative. When the threads are viewed together - they form one coherent picture.

This is not unusual in theology. The Bible never gives us the word Trinity followed by the Nicene Creed in one verse. We confess one God in three Persons because the full testimony of Scripture requires it. In a much less central doctrine, pre-tribulationism works similarly. We ask which view allows the greatest number of passages to speak naturally and requires the fewest passages to be flattened, reassigned, or explained away.

Daniel's Seventy Weeks

As I begin to weave these together, the strongest structural strand is found in the Old Testament, in Daniel 9. Daniel had been reading Jeremiah and understood that Jerusalem's seventy years of desolation were nearing their end. He responded by fasting, confessing sin, and praying. (Pro tip: prophecy rightly understood should drive us toward humility and intercession.) While Daniel prayed for his people and his city, the angel Gabriel came with an answer that stretched far beyond the end of the Babylonian captivity.

"*Seventy weeks*," or seventy units of seven, were determined for "*your people and your holy city*" (Daniel 9:24). Daniel's people were Israel. Daniel's holy city was Jerusalem. Gabriel did not say the seventy sevens were determined for the Church, Rome, or America. The prophecy is Jewish in address, Jerusalem in geography, and messianic in fulfillment. The context requires these sevens to be years. Seventy sevens equal 490 years. Gabriel then divides them into seven sevens, sixty-two sevens, and one final seven. The first two divisions total sixty-nine sevens, or 483 years. From a command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, sixty-nine sevens would pass (Daniel 9:25).

There were several Persian decrees connected with the Jewish return, but the decree in Nehemiah 2 is especially significant because it concerns Jerusalem's city and walls, not only the Temple. In the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, Nehemiah received authority to return and rebuild. That places the starting point in Nisan of 445 or 444 BC. Sir Robert Anderson, in *The Coming Prince*, discovered this famous calculation. Sixty-nine sevens equal 483 years. Revelation later equates forty-two months with 1,260 days, indicating thirty-day prophetic months and a 360-day Jewish calendar year in Daniel's final period. Using that same measure, 483 multiplied by 360 equals 173,880 days.

Beginning with March 14, 445 BC, Anderson counted forward 173,880 days and arrived at April 6, AD 32 - the day he identified as Jesus' Triumphal Entry. The

calculation placed the end of the sixty-ninth week at the moment Jesus publicly presented Himself to Jerusalem as “*Messiah the Prince*” (Daniel 9:25). Daniel then declared that after the sixty-nine weeks, “*Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself*” (Daniel 9:26). Just days after entering Jerusalem as its promised King, Jesus was rejected and crucified - not for His own sins, but for ours. Daniel also foretold that the city and sanctuary would afterward be destroyed, which occurred when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70 (Daniel 9:26). The prophetic order is remarkable: Messiah presented, Messiah cut off, and Jerusalem destroyed - exactly as Daniel foretold.

That day was not random - it was written in plain sight for all to see. Zechariah had promised that Zion's King would come humble and riding on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9; John 12:14-15). Jesus had repeatedly resisted attempts to make Him king before the appointed time. Then He deliberately arranged the colt, entered Jerusalem in public, received messianic praise, and refused to silence the crowd. When the Pharisees objected, He said the stones would cry out if the people became quiet. Looking over the city, Jesus wept and said, “*If you had known, even you, especially in this your day*” (Luke 19:42). Daniel had placed Messiah on God's calendar. Jerusalem should have recognized the hour of its visitation to the very day.

The Gap Before The Final Week

The sequence also reveals a gap. Daniel says that after the sixty-two weeks that follow the first seven, Messiah will be cut off. Then the people of a coming prince will destroy the city and sanctuary. Both Messiah's death and Jerusalem's destruction occur after the sixty-ninth week. Only after those events does verse 27 describe one ruler confirming a covenant with many for one week, stopping sacrifice in the middle of the week, and bringing the abomination of desolation. The text itself places events after the sixty-nine weeks but before the final covenant and its midpoint violation of the temple.

Prophecy often places separated events beside one another. Just as we saw in Jesus reading Isaiah 61 to declare Himself as the Messiah - there is a distinction between the Messiah's gracious first coming and the day of vengeance in one sentence. Yet Jesus stopped reading in Nazareth before the vengeance phrase because that portion awaited His return. A prophetic valley can exist between two mountain peaks even when the Old Testament picture shows the panorama of the peaks touching.

The final week concerns Daniel's people, Daniel's city, a sanctuary, sacrifice, covenant violation, and Israel's final trouble. This prophecy culminates in the goals announced in verse 24: transgression dealt with, righteousness established, prophecy fulfilled, and Messiah's kingdom brought in. The Church is not removed because God

has stopped loving Israel. The Church is removed because God is not finished with Israel. We will return to this thought, and God's future plan for the Jewish people, once we take a look at a fuller view of the tapestry of pre-tribulationism.

The Imminent Return Of Christ

Next in importance is the immediate return of Jesus like "*a thief in the night*" (Matthew 24:43). This is called the Imminent Return of Christ. The apostles tell the Church to wait for Christ, not first to wait for Antichrist. Paul praises the Thessalonians for turning from idols "*to wait for His Son from heaven*" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). He includes himself among those who might be alive at the rapture of the church. He tells Titus to look for the "*blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ*" (Titus 2:13). He tells the Philippians that our citizenship is in heaven, "*from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior*" (Philippians 3:20). James says the coming of the Lord is at hand and the Judge is standing at the door. John ends Revelation with Jesus saying He is coming quickly and the Church answering, "*Even so, come*" (Revelation 22:20).

Imminence does not mean Jesus had to return in the first century or that the first generation was promised it would be the final one. It means no revealed prophetic event must occur before Christ can gather His Church. He may come at any moment, so instead, every generation must remain ready for His immediate return. Pre-tribulationism is the only major Rapture-timing view that preserves that expectancy without placing a necessary Tribulation marker first. Mid-tribulation requires half the week. Pre-wrath, which is a view I chose not to give a chapter to, requires the rise of Antichrist and the great persecution. Post-tribulation requires the entire sequence. In those systems the Rapture may be sudden, but it cannot be next. Also, with these other views, dates can be set to know the day and the hour of His return based on the revelation given in Daniel 9.

Pre-tribulationism puts the signs of His coming where Scripture puts them: as signs leading toward Christ's public appearing and Israel's redemption, not prerequisites requiring the Church to watch for the Antichrist, mark of the Beast, or battle of Armageddon before it can begin watching for Jesus. The Rapture clears the stage for the events we have been waiting for. Then, as possibly billions of people disappear in an instant, a scrambling world will look for the rider on the White Horse (Revelation 6:2) to rise with a brilliant plan and sign a covenant of false peace in the Middle East for seven years.

The rapture of the Church ends the present age and allows the final sequence to move forward.

This distinction also makes sense of Jesus' statement that no one knows the day or hour (Matthew 24:36). In the Olivet Discourse, found in Matthew 24, He places those words after a highly detailed Tribulation sequence, which is why faithful interpreters debate whether Jesus is shifting focus, emphasizing the world's unreadiness, or speaking from the vantage point before the sequence begins. Pre-tribulationism does not make every question disappear, but it gives the tension a natural home: the Church lives in genuine any-moment expectancy - while the later public return unfolds through revealed and measurable signs.

Revelation's Divine Outline

No one can circle the Rapture on a calendar like you can for the middle of the tribulation's Abomination of Desolation, or the end of the tribulation's Battle of Armageddon. Once someone does, you can safely use that date to schedule a dental cleaning or trip to Disneyland. Revelation strengthens this sequence by giving us a divine outline of the book. Jesus tells John, "***Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this***" (Revelation 1:19). The things John had seen are centered in his vision of the glorified Christ in chapter 1. The things which are concern the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. Then, in chapter 4, John writes, "***After these things***," using the same Greek phrase translated "**after this**" in the outline. A door opens in heaven, a trumpet-like voice summons John upward, and the scene moves from churches on earth to a throne in heaven - then a seven-year sequence of events found in Revelation 6-19.

That sequence matters. It also shows the entire final week of years bears the character of divine judgment, not only the bowls at the end. The Lamb takes the scroll from the Father's hand, and the Lamb opens the first seal. The four horsemen go because God had written the events into history. Conquest, war, famine, and death have their way on earth, and by the sixth seal, the rulers of earth hide and cry out that the great day of the Lamb's wrath has come. All will know this is the judgment that was spoken about in Revelation 6. Then the trumpets and bowls intensify the wrath and the earth's remodel. If Christ promises to keep His Church from the coming hour, and if Paul says we are not appointed to wrath, the most natural time for the Church's deliverance through the Rapture is before the Lamb begins opening the scroll.

The Last Days Churches

The letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 contribute another remarkable pattern. First and most importantly, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea were real churches, with real pastors, with real people, and real problems in real cities. Jesus addressed their actual faithfulness, compromise,

suffering, pride, and need for repentance. Every church and every Christian in every century can find itself somewhere in those letters. Just like the epistles inspired by the Holy Spirit and addressed to particular churches, these seven letters were written to them, but preserved by God for us - for our doctrine, correction, instruction, and preparation for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Many teachers have also seen a broad panorama of Church history in their order: Ephesus (first century; approximately AD 30-100) resembles the apostolic Church: doctrinally serious and hardworking, yet in danger of leaving its first love. Smyrna (second-early fourth centuries; approximately AD 100-313) resembles the persecuted Church, crushed by Rome but rich before God. Pergamos (fourth-sixth centuries; approximately AD 313-590) reflects the era when Christianity moved from persecution into political favor and compromise. Thyatira (sixth-sixteenth centuries; approximately AD 590-1517) resembles the medieval Church, where corruption grew but a faithful remnant endured. Sardis (sixteenth-eighteenth centuries; approximately AD 1517-1750) resembles the Reformation era: a recovered name and great truths, yet too often a reputation for life without its fullness. Philadelphia (eighteenth-nineteenth centuries; approximately AD 1750-present) resembles the missionary and Bible teaching movement, holding fast to Christ's Word while He sets an open door before it. Laodicea (twentieth century-present; approximately AD 1900-present) resembles a wealthy, self-satisfied, lukewarm religious culture that thinks it needs nothing while Jesus stands outside knocking.

Philadelphia and Laodicea present two expressions of Christianity that reach toward the end of the Church Age: a faithfully watchful church walking through the open door Christ has set before it, and a compromising comfortable church intoxicated with itself. Both are alive today. As we consider them, ask yourself: Which kind of church do I belong to, and which kind of Christian do I most closely resemble?

Philadelphia has *"a little strength,"* yet keeps Christ's Word and refuses to deny His name (Revelation 3:8). Laodicea possesses wealth and apparent success but is spiritually lukewarm and blind (Revelation 3:15-17). This is not about a church's size, wealth, or style. A small poor church can possess Laodicean pride, and a large wealthy church can faithfully follow Jesus. The issue is dependence upon the Holy Spirit and obedience to God's Word. Philadelphia has little but gives everything to Christ - Laodicea thinks it has everything but has pushed Jesus outside (Revelation 3:20). One spends itself carrying the gospel through Christ's open door - the other uses Jesus to sell a baptized version of the American dream.

Jesus described this same end-times contrast: *"The love of many will grow cold,"* yet *"this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world"* (Matthew 24:12-14). Love grows cold while the gospel advances. Lawlessness, deception, and

compromise increase while faithful believers endure and reach the nations. Scripture presents both spiritual apathy and gospel passion growing together.

Paul likewise warned that the last days would produce people who are self-loving, greedy, proud, unholy, without self-control, and “*lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God*” (2 Timothy 3:1-4). Significantly, they would possess “*a form of godliness*” while denying its power (2 Timothy 3:5). The world’s values would enter the Church wearing religious clothing. People would no longer endure sound doctrine but would gather teachers who satisfied their desires and itching ears (2 Timothy 4:3-4). They might not discard the Bible; they would simply search until someone made it agree with them. That is Laodicean Christianity. It may retain services, buildings, platforms, programs, music, books, podcasts, and Christian language - while resisting Christ’s authority in their actions. Jesus becomes a means of achieving success rather than the Lord to whom we surrender, and the gospel becomes a self-improvement program instead of the Good News that sinners can be reconciled to God through Christ’s death and resurrection.

Of importance to an apathetic church on the topic of eschatology, Peter adds another last-days characteristic: “*Scoffers will come*,” asking, “*Where is the promise of His coming?*” (2 Peter 3:3-4). Christ’s return is increasingly denied, mocked, treated as a metaphor, or made functionally irrelevant. This is certainly true with an unbelieving world, but also quite visible within the Church. Yet His apparent delay is not a broken promise; it is mercy giving sinners time to repent (2 Peter 3:9). The day of the Lord will still come unexpectedly (2 Peter 3:10). Therefore, prophecy should not make us lazy, speculative, arrogant, or combative, but holy, watchful, prayerful, urgent, hopeful, and evangelistic (1 Peter 4:7; 2 Peter 3:11-12).

Together, Philadelphia and Laodicea give us a spiritual portrait, not a date on the calendar, but the recognition of the end of the age. Some abandon sound doctrine - while others keep Christ’s Word. Some mock His coming - while others hold fast because He is coming. Some pursue comfort - while others exhaust their little strength carrying the gospel through His open door.

Jesus gives Philadelphia this remarkable promise: “*Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth*” (Revelation 3:10).

Jesus does not merely promise protection from a particular judgment but to keep them “*from the hour*” - the worldwide period itself. Revelation repeatedly uses “those who dwell on the earth” for humanity settled in rebellion against God (Revelation 6:10; 8:13; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:8).

The Greek expression *tereo ek*, “*keep from*,” is debated. Jesus uses it in John 17:15 when praying that His disciples be kept from the evil one while remaining in

the world. That is a fair objection, so the grammar alone cannot settle the Rapture debate. However, John 17 concerns protection from an evil being; Revelation 3:10 concerns deliverance from a coming period. The most natural way to be kept from an hour is not to enter it.

This again is not a silver-bullet verse, but it is a strong strand in the biblical rope. It fits naturally beside the promises that Jesus “*delivers us from the wrath to come*,” that believers are “*not appointed...to wrath*,” and that the Church will be caught up to meet Christ in the air (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:16-17; 5:9).

Jesus immediately adds, “*Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have*” (Revelation 3:11). The faithful Church’s calling is not to decode the mark of the beast, but to obey Jesus at all costs. It is to keep His Word, confess His name, walk through His open door, and hold fast because He is coming. Biblically, the “*last days*” began with Christ’s coming and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:16-17; Hebrews 1:1-2). Nevertheless, the patterns Jesus and the apostles described are standing before us: cold love beside advancing missions, self-satisfied religion beside sacrificial faithfulness, and mockery of Christ’s return beside believers ordering their lives around it.

The question is not merely whether we can identify Philadelphia and Laodicea, but which one identifies us. Will we reshape Christ’s Word around our desires or hold fast to it? Will we use Jesus to become comfortable or spend ourselves making Him known? The darkness is growing, but Christ’s door remains open. Jesus is still saving, the gospel is still advancing, and the Bridegroom is still coming. I long to be recognized as a Philadelphian Christian in the sea of Laodicean churches.

The Seven Kingdom Parables

Yet the seven churches are only one strand in this prophetic tapestry. When we turn to the seven parables of Matthew 13, we find the same broad pattern presented from another perspective. Revelation traces the course of the Church through seven letters; Matthew traces the course of the kingdom through seven parables. Each parable certainly has personal application, but they are much more than seven disconnected devotional lessons. Jesus called them “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (*Matthew 13:11*). **They are kingdom parables** placed together in the order Jesus gave them; they present a prophetic panorama of the kingdom during the King’s physical absence:

The Sower (the apostolic church; approximately AD 30-100) teaches that the kingdom begins with the sowing of God’s Word. The same seed falls upon hard, shallow, crowded, and receptive hearts, but only those who truly receive the Word endure and bear lasting fruit. This corresponds to the apostolic age, when the gospel

was carried throughout the known world, churches were planted, and truth was faithfully defended (Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23).

The Wheat and Tares (the persecuted church; approximately AD 100-300) teaches that the Son of Man plants true believers in the world while the enemy plants counterfeits among them. Both grow together until the harvest, when Christ - not human judgment - perfectly separates the righteous from the wicked. This corresponds to the persecuted Church, when Rome attempted to destroy Christianity but genuine believers remained faithful unto death while the enemy continued sowing deception within the wider visible kingdom (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43).

The Mustard Seed (the politically accepted church; approximately AD 300-600) teaches that the kingdom would grow from a remarkably small beginning into an enormous visible presence, with birds lodging in its branches - birds, of course, represent demons.

This corresponds to the era following Constantine, when freedom from persecution allowed Christianity to spread, but political acceptance also transformed it into a powerful earthly institution. The Church's influence increased, yet its alliance with imperial power created branches in which compromise, idolatry, and demonic corrupting powers found shelter (Matthew 13:31-32).

The Leaven (the medieval church; approximately AD 600-1500) teaches that an influence introduced secretly can work quietly from within until it permeates the whole. In this prophetic panorama, the leaven pictures false doctrine, unbiblical tradition, and spiritual corruption gradually spreading throughout the visible Church. This corresponds to the medieval era, when serious corruption became deeply entrenched, although Christ still recognized genuine love, faith, service, and perseverance and preserved a faithful remnant who refused to embrace its errors (Matthew 13:33).

The Hidden Treasure (the reformation church; approximately AD 1500-1750) teaches that a treasure hidden in a field remains so precious that the man joyfully gives everything to secure it. In this panorama, the treasure pictures Israel - God's treasured possession - hidden among the nations but never forgotten or abandoned by Him. This corresponds to the Reformation, which recovered the buried treasures of Scripture and justification by faith, yet often retained replacement theology, state-controlled religion, and lifeless institutional forms (Matthew 13:44).

The Pearl of Great Price (the missionary Church; approximately AD 1750-present) teaches that the merchant recognized one pearl of incomparable value and gave everything necessary to obtain it. In this panorama, the merchant pictures Christ and the pearl pictures His Church - one beautiful people gathered from every nation and purchased at the immeasurable cost of His own blood. This corresponds to the great

missionary and Bible movement, when a Church kept Christ's Word, refused to deny His name, and carried the gospel through the worldwide door He opened (Matthew 13:45-46).

The Dragnet (the last-days professing church; approximately AD 1900-present) teaches that the kingdom net gathers people of every kind, but being caught within its outward reach does not prove that someone truly belongs to Christ. The good and bad remain together until the end of the age, when the angels permanently separate the righteous from the wicked. This corresponds to last-days visible Christianity, where enormous reach, religious profession, wealth, and self-sufficiency exist alongside genuine faith, while Christ often stands outside what bears His name. When the King returns, He will expose the difference between possessing Christianity and truly possessing Christ (Matthew 13:47-50).

The final two parables bring the application directly to us. The pearl pictures the true Church - one precious people for whom Jesus gave Himself (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25-27). Like Philadelphia, this Church keeps Christ's Word, refuses to deny His name, and walks through the door He opens (Revelation 3:8). The dragnet presents the sobering alternative. It gathers "*some of every kind*," but everything caught in the net does not belong to the King. At the end of the age, the true will be separated from the false (Matthew 13:47-50).

Philadelphia and Laodicea are both present today: passionate devotion beside comfortable religion, gospel urgency beside spiritual apathy, and genuine disciples beside people who merely identify as Christians. The question is not whether we attend church or have been gathered into the net of visible Christianity. The question is whether we truly belong to Jesus. The King is coming, and He will separate what human religion has mixed. You certainly don't want to hear the dreadful words, "*I never knew you; depart from Me*" (Matthew 7:23), but instead enter eternity hearing, "*Well done, good and faithful servant*" (Matthew 25:21, 23).

Israel's Seven Appointed Feasts

The seven churches and seven kingdom parables are not the only places where God repeats this prophetic pattern. Israel's seven appointed feasts in Leviticus 23 reveal the sequence of Christ's redemptive ministry - from His death and resurrection to His gathering of the Church, Israel's repentance, and His coming kingdom. These feasts were real covenant appointments given to Israel, not Christian illustrations invented centuries later. Yet Scripture tells us that God's appointed festivals were "*a shadow of things to come*," while their substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). Amazingly, the feasts, in the order God gave them, form a prophetic calendar centered upon Jesus.

Passover (Christ crucified) points to Jesus, the spotless Lamb whose blood saves us from judgment. He was crucified during Passover, and Paul explicitly declares, “*Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us*” (Exodus 12:1-13; John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

Unleavened Bread (Christ buried) immediately follows Passover and pictures the sinless body of Jesus placed in the tomb. Leaven repeatedly represents corruption, but Christ possessed no sin, and even in burial His body would not be abandoned to decay (Leviticus 23:6; Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:27; 1 Corinthians 5:8).

Firstfruits (Christ risen) was presented on the first day after the Sabbath and points directly to Christ’s resurrection. Jesus rose as the beginning and guarantee of the greater resurrection still to come, which is why Paul calls Him “*the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*” (Leviticus 23:10-11; 1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

Pentecost (the Spirit poured out and the Church formed) came fifty days later. On that exact feast, the Holy Spirit descended, believers were united into one body, and the gospel began moving from Jerusalem toward the nations (Leviticus 23:15-17; Acts 2:1-4, 41; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

The first four feasts were fulfilled through Christ’s death, burial, resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit - in their biblical order and during their appointed seasons. Then God placed a long harvest interval between Pentecost and the fall feasts. That interval pictures the present season in which the gospel is being proclaimed and Christ is gathering a people from every nation (Matthew 9:37-38; Acts 1:8; Revelation 5:9-10).

Trumpets (Christ gathering His Church) begins the fall sequence with a sudden trumpet blast calling God’s people to awaken and assemble. I am convinced that it pictures the Rapture, when the trumpet will sound, the dead in Christ will rise, living believers will be transformed, and together we will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

The Day of Atonement (Israel repenting and receiving her Messiah) follows Trumpets and points to Israel’s future national humbling. Christ completed the sacrifice for sin once for all at Calvary, but the day is coming when Israel will look upon the One whom they pierced, mourn, repent, and receive the cleansing He has already provided (Zechariah 12:10; 13:1; Romans 11:25-27; Hebrews 9:11-12).

Tabernacles (Christ dwelling and reigning with His people) completes the calendar with celebration, rest, and kingdom joy. It points to the Messiah returning to dwell among His people and reign over the nations - so clearly that Zechariah says the nations will celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles during His kingdom (Zechariah 14:9, 16-19). Its ultimate promise reaches into the New Creation, when “the tabernacle of God” will be with humanity forever (Revelation 21:1-3).

The sequence is unmistakable: Christ crucified, Christ buried, Christ raised, the Spirit poured out, the gospel harvest gathered, the Church caught up at the trumpet, Israel brought to repentance, and the Messiah dwelling and reigning with His people. The first four appointments were fulfilled exactly in their God-given order in Jesus' first coming. I am convinced that the remaining three reveal the order of what comes next in Christ's second coming.

Matthew 24 in Its Jewish Context

The feast calendar ends with a trumpet gathering, Israel's repentance, and Messiah dwelling among His people. That same sequence brings us directly to Matthew 24 - the chapter most often used to challenge pre-tribulationism. Yet when the Olivet Discourse is read in its Jewish setting, prophetic order, and connection to Daniel, it does not overturn the pre-tribulation view. It reinforces the distinction between the Rapture of the Church and Christ's visible return to rescue Israel and establish His kingdom.

In the context of this prophetic teaching, Jesus had just confronted Jerusalem's religious leaders and pronounced judgment upon their house. As He left the Temple, the disciples pointed out its magnificent buildings. Jesus responded by declaring that not one stone would be left upon another. Later, on the Mount of Olives, they asked when these things would happen, what sign would announce His coming, and what would mark the end of the age (Matthew 23:37-39; 24:1-3).

The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 fulfilled Jesus' immediate warning concerning the Temple and foreshadowed Israel's final trouble, but it did not exhaust the prophecy. Rome destroyed Jerusalem, but the Son of Man did not appear in the clouds, every tribe of the earth did not mourn, the heavens were not shaken, and the angels did not gather God's elect from the ends of heaven. Jesus looked beyond AD 70 to Daniel's final week and the events surrounding His visible return.

His prophecy moves forward with unmistakable order. Great deception appears. Wars and rumors of wars follow. Race wars rise with nation against nation. Famines, pestilences, and earthquakes come as the beginning of birth pains. Persecution intensifies, lawlessness abounds, love grows cold, and the gospel is still preached throughout the world. Then Jesus names "*the abomination of desolation*" spoken of by Daniel standing in the holy place. Those in Judea must flee. Great Tribulation follows. False christs and false prophets perform deceptive signs. The heavens shake. Immediately after that Tribulation, the Son of Man appears in glory and gathers His elect (Matthew 24:4-31).

Birth pains are the perfect image because they move toward a definite arrival. They become closer, stronger, and harder to ignore. The sequence moves forward

until the child arrives. In the same way, Jesus traces a progressing chain of events that culminates in His public return. Pre-tribulationists do not stumble over the words “immediately after the tribulation.” We underline them. Jesus absolutely returns visibly after the Tribulation. That is exactly what pre-tribulationism teaches. The question is not whether Matthew 24:29-31 occurs after the Tribulation. The question is whether this is the Rapture of the Church or the glorious return already foretold by Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation 19.

The answer is found in the passage itself. At the Rapture, believers are resurrected, or transformed, and caught up to meet Jesus in the air (1 Corinthians 15:51-53; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). In Matthew 24, Jesus appears openly after unmistakable Tribulation signs, every tribe sees Him, the nations mourn, and His angels gather His elect as He returns to the earth. This is not the Church being introduced to Paul’s mystery. This is the King returning to rescue His people, judge the nations, and claim His kingdom.

Jesus cites the Jewish prophet Daniel. He speaks of Judea, Jerusalem, the holy place, the abomination connected with sacrifice and the rebuilt temple. When a passage describes Jewish people in Judea fleeing from a desecrated holy place while concerned about the Sabbath, we should not rename them the Church simply because we have reached the New Testament.

Even the gathering language comes directly from Israel’s prophets. Moses promised that God would gather His scattered people from the farthest parts under heaven (Deuteronomy 30:3-4). Isaiah foretold a great trumpet sounding as Israel’s outcasts returned to worship the Lord at Jerusalem (Isaiah 27:12-13). God repeatedly calls Israel His elect and promises to gather them from the four corners of the earth (Isaiah 11:11-12; 45:4). Matthew 24 therefore describes Israel’s final trouble, Messiah’s visible arrival, and the regathering of His believing elect. It is not the Church’s Rapture itinerary. It is Israel’s Tribulation roadmap.

One Taken And One Left

Jesus then compares His coming to the days of Noah. People continued eating, drinking, marrying, and planning their futures until the Flood arrived and “***took them all away.***” Jesus immediately says that two will be together: one will be taken and the other left (Matthew 24:37-41). Many Rapture sermons have assumed that the person taken is a believer lifted into heaven. The context points in the opposite direction. In Noah’s day, those taken were swept away in judgment, while Noah and his family remained alive to enter the cleansed world. Luke’s parallel makes the destination even clearer. When the disciples ask where those taken will go, Jesus answers with the

image of bodies and gathering vultures - a picture of judgment, not a reunion in heaven (Luke 17:34-37).

I personally do not see this as a pre-tribulation Rapture passage, and we do not need to force it into becoming one. It describes the sudden separation that occurs when the King returns: the rebellious are removed in judgment, while believing survivors remain to enter His kingdom. A strong biblical case becomes stronger when we stop recruiting verses for jobs they were never given.

Jesus also declares, “*This generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place*” (Matthew 24:34). The generation that witnesses the beginning of this end-time sequence will see it reach its completion. Once the birth pains move into their final prophetic intensity - that generation will by no means pass away.

The Restoration Of Israel

As you know, on May 14, 1948, after nearly two thousand years without national sovereignty, the State of Israel was established. During the same historic return, Hebrew - preserved for centuries in Scripture, prayer, worship, and study - was revived as the everyday language of a people living in their ancient homeland. No other nation has experienced that exact history. Peoples are normally conquered, scattered, absorbed, and eventually lost within the nations that receive them. Israel was conquered but not erased, scattered but not dissolved, persecuted but not extinguished. Human history tried repeatedly to bury the Jewish people, yet because God is not done with His people - they have been preserved.

This ‘super sign’ from a prophecy of Jesus has been fulfilled in our lifetime. I believe this is one of the reasons prophecy has had a resurgence in this generation. That does not give us permission to add seventy, eighty, or one hundred years to 1948 and announce Jesus has to come back before then. Jesus did not tell us to calculate the years. Instead, He told us to watch for His coming as the signs grow with intensity.

This does not mean every Jew knows God and has a personal relationship with Jesus. Coming from Jewish descent myself - my family and I have placed our trust in the Messiah for salvation. Israel needs Jesus just as every other nation needs Jesus. Biblical support for Israel is based in the blessing and curse that God gave to Abraham (Genesis 12:3, 26:3-5, 28:13-15). God declared that He would regather them for His name, place them in the land, cleanse them, give them a new heart, and put His Spirit within them (Ezekiel 36:22-28).

This order given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit matters. Ezekiel sees the bones come together before breath enters them. The body is assembled, but it is not yet spiritually alive. Only afterward does God breathe life into it (Ezekiel 37:7-14). Zechariah likewise sees Jerusalem restored and surrounded by the nations before

Israel looks upon the One whom they pierced and receives the Spirit of grace and supplication (Zechariah 12:2-3, 9-10).

Modern Israel is therefore not the finish line of Ezekiel 36-37 and Zechariah 12. It is the stage being constructed in front of us. If prophecy requires Jewish people living in their ancient land, Jerusalem becoming the focus of international conflict, a future covenant, a holy place, Israel's final trouble, and the nation ultimately receiving her Messiah, then modern Israel is not a minor newspaper curiosity. It is a prophetic prerequisite standing in plain sight.

God Still Has A Plan For The Jews

God's continuing plan for Israel rests upon His covenant character. When God established His covenant with Abraham, Abraham was asleep while God alone passed between the sacrificial pieces (Genesis 15:12-18). The fulfillment ultimately depended upon God's faithfulness, not Abraham's perfection. God later called it an everlasting covenant and promised the land to Abraham's descendants (Genesis 17:7-8).

Jeremiah makes the promise almost impossible to spiritualize. God ties Israel's continued existence as a nation to the fixed order of the sun, moon, and stars. Only if those ordinances disappear will Israel cease from being a nation before Him (Jeremiah 31:35-37). The sun rose this morning. The moon is still where God placed it. God is not finished with Israel.

Paul provides the inspired theological explanation in Romans 9-11. Romans 9 looks backward at Israel's privileges, covenants, promises, patriarchs, and God's sovereign purpose. Romans 10 explains Israel's present unbelief and the universal necessity of faith in Jesus. There is not one gospel for Gentiles and another for Jews. Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:9-13). Then Romans 11 looks forward and asks the question directly: ***"Has God cast away His people?"*** Paul's answer is not hesitant: ***"Certainly not!"*** (Romans 11:1). Israel's stumbling is real, but it is not final. Israel's hardening is partial, not total, and temporary, not permanent. It continues ***"until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in,"*** and then ***"all Israel will be saved"*** when the Deliverer comes out of Zion and turns ungodliness away from Jacob (Romans 11:25-27).

Again, ***"All Israel"*** does not mean every Jewish person throughout history will be saved regardless of faith. It describes the national turning of the surviving remnant when Israel finally recognizes Jesus as Messiah. Zechariah shows them looking upon the One they pierced. Paul shows the Deliverer removing their sins. The nation that once cried for His crucifixion will one day cry for His salvation. Paul's olive-tree illustration leaves no room for Gentile pride. Some natural branches were broken off because of unbelief, and wild Gentile branches were grafted into the covenant root.

But Paul immediately warns us not to boast. We do not support the root; the root supports us. If God grafted in wild branches; He is certainly able to graft the natural branches back into their own tree (Romans 11:17-24).

The Church has not replaced Israel. This is a gross belief system that has been held by many respected theologians of old who didn't understand the fullness of prophecy like we can see today. Unfortunately, 'replacement theology' has had a resurgence in recent years as the demonic agenda against God's people is creeping back into the church. God does not need to break His promises to Israel in order to keep His promises to the Church. The Gentile Church is not Israel's replacement. The Church is proof that Israel's Messiah is presently saving the nations, and Israel's future restoration will be proof that the covenant-keeping God never forgot His Word.

The 144,000 Jews

Revelation's 144,000 make this distinction almost aggressively specific. John does not describe a vague spiritual group from a symbolic nowhere. He hears the number: 144,000. He tells us their ancestry: "*all the tribes of the children of Israel*." He gives their distribution: twelve thousand from each of twelve named tribes (Revelation 7:4-8). The tribal list contains unusual features, but unusual does not mean imaginary. Biblical tribal lists vary depending upon inheritance, geography, priesthood, and prophetic purpose. The nouns still matter. Israel means Israel. Tribes mean tribes. A symbol must still symbolize something, and John tells us exactly whom God seals.

These servants of God are sealed during the coming judgment and later stand with the Lamb as "*firstfruits to God and to the Lamb*" (Revelation 7:1-8; 14:1-5). They are frequently called 144,000 Jewish evangelists. That may accurately describe how God uses them, especially because a great multitude from every nation appears immediately after their sealing. The text explicitly reveals a distinct Jewish remnant sealed for God's purposes during the Tribulation. Their presence makes perfect sense when the Church has been raptured, and God is bringing His people back to Himself in its appointed climax. It makes very little sense if Israel has permanently disappeared into the Church and tribal language no longer means what it says.

Who Enters the Millennium?

This distinction also explains who enters and populates Christ's millennial kingdom. Revelation 20 describes resurrected and glorified saints reigning with Christ, while the Old Testament describes ordinary human life continuing under Messiah's rule. People build houses, plant vineyards, raise children, and experience extraordinary longevity (Isaiah 65:20-23). Jerusalem contains elderly men, women, and children

playing in its streets (Zechariah 8:4-5). Survivors from the nations travel to Jerusalem to worship the King and celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (Zechariah 14:16-19).

At the end of the thousand years, Satan is released and deceives an enormous number from the nations into rebelling against Christ (Revelation 20:7-9). These cannot be glorified saints losing their salvation. They are descendants of mortal people who entered the kingdom alive. Although they grow up beneath Christ's perfect government, they must still personally repent and believe. As we've considered in a previous chapter, a perfect environment cannot cure a rebellious heart.

Who are the mortal believers who enter that kingdom? Pre-tribulationism gives the coherent answer. The Church is gathered and glorified before Daniel's final week begins (Daniel 9:24-27; John 14:1-3; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Revelation 3:10). During the Tribulation, God seals a distinct Jewish remnant (Revelation 7:1-8; 14:1-5), raises two powerful witnesses (Revelation 11:3-12), and saves a multitude from Israel and every nation (Zechariah 12:10; Romans 11:25-27; Revelation 7:9-14). Many are martyred for refusing the Beast and later raised to reign with Christ (Revelation 6:9-11; 13:7, 15; 20:4-6). Others survive until His visible return and enter the kingdom alive - the believing remnant of Israel and the righteous sheep from among the nations (Matthew 24:21-22; 25:31-34, 46; Zechariah 13:8-9; 14:16).

When Jesus returns, He judges the nations as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The unbelieving goats are removed, while the believing sheep enter the kingdom alive in mortal bodies (Matthew 25:31-46). Israel's believing remnant also receives her Messiah and enters the kingdom promised by the prophets. These survivors marry, bear children, cultivate the earth, and populate the nations under Christ's righteous reign.

If the Rapture occurs at the exact moment Jesus descends to the earth, all living believers are immediately transformed into glorified bodies - while every unbeliever is excluded from the kingdom. That leaves no natural mortal population to enter, marry, and bear the descendants who later rebel. The post-tribulation position must either exempt some believers from the transformation or manufacture another group of mortal saints after Christ arrives. The pre-tribulational interval requires neither. It allows every passage to remain where Scripture places it.

Matthew 24 therefore does not collapse the Rapture and the visible return into one event. It traces Israel through Daniel's final week to the public arrival of her King. Romans declares that God has not cast Israel away. Revelation seals twelve thousand from twelve tribes. The prophets place Israel in the land, bring her through final trouble, and show her receiving Messiah. The Millennium then reveals the kingdom

Jesus promised to Israel and the nations. The prophetic picture is consistent with the pre-tribulational view.

The Restrainer

An important thread that can't be overlooked when we consider the rapture of the church is found in Second Thessalonians: the Restrainer. Paul explains that the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but someone or something holds it back until the restraining presence is taken out of the way. Then the lawless one is revealed, whom Jesus will ultimately destroy with the brightness of His coming (2 Thessalonians 2:6-8). Paul does not name the Restrainer, so humility is required. Suggestions have included human government, the Roman Empire, angelic authority, Michael, gospel proclamation, and the sovereign action of God. I believe the best explanation is the Holy Spirit exercising a unique restraining ministry through the indwelt Church.

The Spirit is omnipresent, so He cannot be removed from earth. He was active before Pentecost and will be active during the Tribulation. No one can be born again apart from His work. The point is that His present Church-age ministry through the body of Christ - the *ekklesia*, the Church - is removed. When the Church is caught up in the Rapture, the temple the Holy Spirit indwells corporately is no longer functioning on earth in the same way.

Think about what even the imperfect Church restrains. Every time believers preach truth, expose darkness, raise children in righteousness, feed the hungry, oppose trafficking, protect life, forgive enemies, create honest businesses, serve neighborhoods, write just laws, confront corruption, and refuse to bow to the world's systems - the Holy Spirit is restraining lawlessness. Remove that preserving and illuminating presence from every nation at once, and the world does not become neutral. It becomes ready for the man of lawlessness to take power on earth.

If the Restrainer is the Spirit working through the Church, the sequence is powerful: all true believing Christians are raptured, restraint from the righteous remnant is removed, the lawless one is unveiled, and the final rebellion accelerates. The Holy Spirit leaves Himself unnamed by Paul, which is another indication it's Him (John 16:13), but this strand fits the rest of the tapestry for a pre-tribulation view.

Old Testament Examples

Then the Bible gives us memorable stories that echo this same distinction between removal and preservation. As we bring this chapter to a close, allow me to mention a few of them. Actually, that is a preacher's way of saying, "I am about 75 percent finished with what I wanted to share."

Let's return to Genesis. Enoch walked with God, pleased God, and then suddenly disappeared because "**God took him.**" Hebrews explains that he was translated so that he would not see death (Genesis 5:21-24; Hebrews 11:5-6). Before a worldwide judgment came, God removed a righteous man from the earth without allowing him to pass through death. Enoch did not enter the Flood - he was preserved from the Flood completely by being taken from earth before it happened. He was taken before judgment arrived. In that, he gives us the Bible's earliest picture of a rapture, and a beautiful portrait of the Church being completely preserved before the coming wrath.

Noah gives us the companion picture. God does not remove Noah from the earth before the Flood. He shuts him inside the ark, seals the door, carries him safely through the judgment, and brings him out alive to inhabit the cleansed earth (Genesis 7:16, 23; 8:15-17). The contrast is unmistakable. Enoch pictures the Church removed before judgment, while Noah pictures Israel's believing remnant preserved through "the time of Jacob's trouble" and brought alive into Messiah's kingdom (Jeremiah 30:7; Revelation 12:6, 14). One is raptured before judgment; the other is sealed and carried through it. God is able to accomplish both forms of deliverance, and the narrative found in the book of Revelation reveals that He will.

Lot gives a similar picture. While he lingers in Sodom, the angels take him by the hand and physically lead him, his wife, and his daughters out of the city. One angel commands him to hurry because judgment cannot proceed until he reaches safety. Only after Lot enters Zoar does fire fall upon Sodom (Genesis 19:15-24). God does not rain fire around Lot and ask him to endure it. He removes Lot before releasing the judgment.

Jesus deliberately points back to Lot when describing the sudden judgment accompanying His revelation, and Peter draws the lesson plainly: "***The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment***" (Luke 17:28-30; 2 Peter 2:7-9). Lot's life was messy enough to remind us that deliverance rests upon God's mercy, not our ability to save ourselves. I believe this also gives us a clear understanding that there is not a 'partial rapture' where Christians on the freshman team get left behind to go through the Tribulation while varsity Christians make the dream team. The same Holy Spirit who records Lot's compromise also calls him righteous. God knew exactly who belonged to Him, removed him from the place appointed to wrath, and then allowed the fire to fall. You can trust not only in God's saving power for your soul from an eternity in hell, but also in His power to preserve you from the judgment that is to come on earth.

The final illustration, and admittedly the weakest, is found in Daniel 3. Nebuchadnezzar erects an enormous image and commands the peoples, nations, and languages of his empire to worship it. Anyone who refuses must die. The parallels to

the coming Antichrist are difficult to miss: a powerful Gentile ruler, an image, compulsory worship, and a death sentence for everyone who refuses to bow (Daniel 3:1-6; Revelation 13:14-15).

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego - Rack, Shack, and Benny, if VeggieTales helped raise you - refuse to worship the image. Nebuchadnezzar becomes so furious that he orders the furnace heated seven times hotter. The three Jewish men are bound and thrown into the fire, but when the king looks inside, he sees a fourth Man walking with them. I believe this is the preincarnate Christ meeting His servants in the flames. They emerge without a burned hair, a damaged garment, or even the smell of smoke upon them (Daniel 3:19-27).

These three faithful Jewish servants beautifully picture the believing remnant of Israel during the Tribulation. Antichrist will erect his image, demand worldwide worship, and sentence to death those who refuse. Yet God will preserve the remnant who belongs to Him. They will pass through the furnace of Israel's final trouble, but they will not pass through it alone. Their Messiah will be with them in the fire and will bring them safely into His kingdom (Zechariah 13:8-9; Revelation 12:6, 14).

Then comes the glaring question: where is Daniel? The chapter never tells us. Perhaps he was away conducting government business, or perhaps his position provided some other explanation for his absence. Yet the man who wrote to a Gentile people in a Gentile language, Aramaic, is completely missing from the furnace scene. While a Gentile ruler commands the world to worship his image, faithful Jewish servants pass through a sevenfold fire with their Messiah, and Daniel is nowhere to be found.

Daniel's absence does not establish the doctrine of the Rapture; hopefully the beautiful tapestry of Scripture has already done that. But once the doctrine has been established, the picture is almost impossible to miss. Daniel is absent while the faithful Jewish remnant is preserved through the fire. It is a marvelous sermon illustration, although it would still be a terrible place to shout, "No further questions, Your Honor."

Place these stories beside one another and the same distinction repeatedly appears. Enoch is translated before worldwide judgment. Noah is sealed and preserved through that judgment. Lot is physically removed before fire falls. Daniel is absent while faithful Jewish servants are preserved through a sevenfold furnace by the presence of Christ. These stories are not isolated curiosities or clever illustrations searching for a doctrine. They are memorable echoes of the prophetic order revealed throughout Scripture.

The Twenty-Four Elders

If I could swing the camera back to Revelation, we would see a scene in heaven before the seal is broken and the Tribulation begins. We see a group worth mentioning: John sees twenty-four elders around God's throne. They are seated on thrones, dressed in white, and wearing golden crowns. Later they worship with harps and bowls of incense. The number twenty-four evokes the twelve tribes and twelve apostles, the redeemed people of God in their fullness. Why do many pre-tribulationists see the Church represented there? Jesus has just promised overcomers white garments, crowns, and a seat with Him on His throne (Revelation 3:21). Angels are never elsewhere called elders, and the New Testament uses the victor's crown for rewarded believers. The scene looks like redeemed representatives who have already been gathered and rewarded.

Revelation never says explicitly, "The twenty-four elders equal the Church," so I hold the identification as strong supporting evidence of the tapestry for pre-tribulationism rather than a stand-alone proof. The wording of their song in Revelation 5 also has a genuine manuscript variation between "us" and "them," so I will not hang the doctrine on one pronoun. The more important observation is the location and timing: before judgment begins on earth, a crowned, white-robed, priestly kingdom is worshipping around the throne.

Where Is The Church?

Then there is the conspicuous disappearance of the word church. The Greek word *ekklesia* appears nineteen times in Revelation 1-3. Jesus walks among the churches, corrects the churches, warns the churches, and tells the Spirit to speak to the churches. After Revelation 3, *ekklesia* does not appear again until Revelation 22:16, where Jesus says the testimony is for the churches. The Bride returns to view in Revelation 19, prepared and clothed in fine linen before Christ rides from heaven; of course, the Bride is synonymous with the Church in the New Testament (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:25-32). But the technical word church is absent throughout the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments. This is more precise than saying the Church is not mentioned again until chapter 19. The Church is present there under bridal imagery; the word itself does not return until chapter 22.

Revelation certainly describes saints on earth during the Tribulation. Pre-tribulationism does not deny that anyone will be saved after the Rapture. The word saint means a holy one and is used for God's people in more than one era. Revelation specifically distinguishes sealed Israelites, two witnesses, believing martyrs, a multitude coming out of great tribulation, and people who refuse the mark of the

beast. Calling them saints does not automatically identify them as the Church formed at Pentecost.

I'm honestly okay if you dismiss this allusion to the Church in heaven through the twenty-four elders. I simply find it interesting that Revelation's divine outline (Revelation 1:19) lines up as it meticulously addresses seven churches and then suddenly we aren't reintroduced to the 'Church' until the physical return of Jesus. That movement fits pre-tribulationism exactly. Then, of course, we hear an invitation into heaven in Revelation 4:1 as the final break in the divine outline begins. After the final church letter, and "*after these things*," John sees an open door in heaven and hears a trumpet-like voice say, "*Come up here*." Immediately he is in the Spirit before the throne. The wording, location, trumpet, upward call, and placement after the churches make it a striking picture of the Rapture and the perfect literary transition into the heavenly scene.

John the revelator is being summoned as a prophet to receive a vision and share it with the world. The verse does not explicitly say the whole Church was raptured with him. I gladly use it as a picture, but I refuse to present it as an exact correlation to 1 Thessalonians 4.

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned that Pastor Chuck Smith devoted one of the longest sections of *Calvary Chapel Distinctives* to the Rapture. Apparently, I took notes - not only from his theology, but also from his word count. This chapter has become considerably longer than the others, and that was on purpose ... I have the pen and I'm going to share what I believe. I also want to personally come back to a love for the appearing of Jesus that spurred on the last revival in America. If the expectation of Christ's return could fuel a movement of evangelism, church planting, missions, worship, and radical faith in one generation - then I hope He does it again in me, and in you.

The Bridegroom And His Bride

But after all these pages, I do not want to land this plane on a chart. I want to remind you of the love that Jesus has for us and that He illustrated His coming as He told a story of a wedding and called us His Bride.

The context of this story is found in the way an ancient Jewish marriage normally unfolded in two major stages. First came betrothal - *erusin* or *kiddushin* - a covenant far more binding than a modern engagement. Matthew shows this in the relationship between Mary and Joseph. Before they came together and began sharing a home, Joseph was already called her husband, and ending the relationship would have required divorce. They belonged to one another by covenant even though the marriage had not yet been consummated (Matthew 1:18-20).

Then came a period of preparation. Ancient Jewish tradition gave a virgin bride as much as twelve months to prepare her clothing and jewelry, while the groom also prepared for their life together and the coming celebration. When the appointed time arrived, the groom came to receive his bride and bring her into the marriage household. His arrival could be accompanied by friends, lamps, a procession, a shout, and a feast - the familiar world behind Jesus' parable of the ten virgins. The Bridegroom was delayed, the cry came at midnight, and those who were ready went in with Him to the wedding (Matthew 25:1-13).

Scripture even records wedding celebrations lasting seven days. Jacob completed Leah's wedding week, and Samson held a seven-day wedding feast (Genesis 29:27-28; Judges 14:12). From beginning to end, the biblical picture is one of covenant, preparation, expectancy, arrival, reunion, and celebration. Then the New Testament takes that beautiful picture and places Jesus at its center.

Paul says the Church has been betrothed to one Husband - Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2). Jesus ***"loved the church and gave Himself for her"*** so that He might sanctify her, cleanse her, and ultimately present her to Himself as a glorious Bride without spot or wrinkle (Ephesians 5:25-27). He did not merely say He loved His Bride. He demonstrated that love by shedding His blood to purchase her.

Then, on the night before the cross, Jesus spoke to His disciples in the language of home, preparation, return, and reunion: ***"In My Father's house are many mansions... I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also"*** (John 14:2-3).

Notice how personal that promise is. Jesus did not merely say, ***"I will send for you."*** He said, ***"I will come again and receive you to Myself."*** He is not merely rescuing us from something; He is receiving us to Someone - Himself. He has gone to the Father's house. He is preparing a place. He will return for His own. He will gather us to Himself so that wherever He is, we will be there with Him. That is the movement of the Rapture: the Bridegroom leaves, prepares a place in His Father's house, returns, receives His Bride, and brings her home. Home to heaven.

Revelation 19 completes the picture. Before Jesus rides out of heaven as the conquering King, the marriage of the Lamb is announced in heaven. His Bride has made herself ready and is clothed in fine linen, bright and clean. The marriage supper is proclaimed, heaven opens, and Christ descends in glory. The armies of heaven follow Him, also clothed in fine linen, white and clean (Revelation 19:7-14). The Bridegroom who comes for us in love will one day return with us in glory.

Enraptured By The Love Of Jesus

After laying the passages beside one another, I am more convinced than ever that the pre-tribulational view allows the entire tapestry of Scripture to remain intact. Daniel's final week, God's promises to Israel, the Church's deliverance from wrath, the imminent expectation of the apostles, the structure of Revelation, the marriage of the Lamb, and the return of Christ with His saints all belong together. But I want more than for you to be convinced of the Rapture. I want you to be enraptured by the love of Jesus.

This is where prophecy becomes deeply personal. The Rapture is not merely God's evacuation plan for the end of the world. It is a Bridegroom keeping His promise. Jesus did not purchase His Bride with His own blood, spend centuries preparing a place for her, and then forget to come back. He is coming because He loves us. He wants us with Him. He has determined that where He is, we will be also.

That brings us back to Paul's command: "*Comfort one another with these words*" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). The Rapture was revealed to grieving believers who feared that their dead brothers and sisters had somehow missed the coming of Jesus. Paul assures them that the dead in Christ will rise first, the living will be caught up together with them, and all of us will be with the Lord forever. He then moves directly into the Day of the Lord: we are children of light, that Day should not overtake us like a thief, and God has not appointed us to wrath (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11).

Our comfort is not that Christians will never hurt (John 16:33). Our comfort is that death has lost its sting (1 Corinthians 15:54-57), Antichrist cannot steal us from Christ's hand (John 10:27-29), and divine wrath cannot reverse the verdict Jesus purchased at the cross (Romans 8:1, 31-34; 1 Thessalonians 5:9). Whether we wake or sleep, Paul says, we will live together with Him (1 Thessalonians 5:10). The One who justified us will glorify us (Romans 8:30), and nothing in heaven, on earth, or beneath the earth can separate Christ's Bride from His love (Romans 8:38-39).

Abide And Be Ready

John tells us what that love and expectation should produce in us right now: "*And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming*" (1 John 2:28). Then John can barely contain himself: "*Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!*" We are already His children, but the fullness of what we will become has not yet been revealed. Then comes the promise: when Jesus is revealed, we will be like Him, because we will see Him as He is. Everyone who has this hope in Christ purifies himself, just as He is pure (1 John 3:1-3).

Notice the order. We are loved. We are called His children. We are promised that we will see Jesus and be made like Him. Then that hope begins purifying us now. We do not pursue holiness so that Jesus might finally decide to love us or include us in the Rapture. We pursue holiness because He already loves us, has made us His own, and is coming to receive us.

Before I was a Christian I lived as a child of wrath, and I was breaking the heart of God and of my believing parents. My mom would catch me doing something shameful and ask me the question, “Do you want to be doing that when Jesus returns?” Praise God Christ has saved me and forgiven me. Now, the question has moved to, “How should I live if He could return today?”

The Bride in Revelation does not prepare herself by buying canned beans, chasing every prophetic rumor, or arguing with strangers beneath videos about red heifers. She makes herself ready. She abides in Jesus. She walks in the light. She keeps short accounts with sin. She loves people, serves faithfully, shares the gospel, worships her Bridegroom, and keeps oil in her lamp by being filled with the Holy Spirit.

I am listening for the shout of the Bridegroom. He may come today. When He does, the argument will be over, faith will become sight, and the Bride will finally see the face of the One who loved her and gave Himself for her. We will see Him as He is. We will become like Him. We will be with Him forever.

Until then, abide in Him. Walk in the light. Make yourself ready.

CHAPTER NINE

THE PANTRIBULATIONAL VIEW

It's All Going To Pan Out

Perhaps you already know that being pan-tribulational is not an official theological view held by serious students of prophecy. It is a dumb joke Christians tell when we do not want another Scripture-quoting cage match: “I am a pan-tribulationist. I believe it is all going to pan out in the end.” I have heard people in the church I pastor use the line, especially those who have never studied prophecy deeply.

The joke is harmless. The ignorance it can conceal is not. Paul told the Thessalonians, “*I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren,*” before explaining what would happen to believers who died before Christ’s coming (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). He taught them about the resurrection, the rapture of living believers, our reunion in the clouds, and our everlasting life with the Lord - so we could know What In The End Of The World Is Going To Happen. In his second letter, Paul reminded this young church that he had already taught them about the Day of the Lord, the man of sin, and the Restrainer (2 Thessalonians 2:1-7). Prophecy was not an elective for scholars with color-coded markers. It mattered because hope, holiness, endurance, and the return of Jesus mattered.

Therefore, “It will all pan out” is not permission to remain biblically lazy. God wants us to know what He has revealed, but He did not reveal every detail, and none of us understands perfectly. Serious study must be joined to sincere humility, which unfortunately doesn’t go hand in hand. And perhaps you have seen pride ooze from the words of this little book, as much study has possibly blinded me to it.

Ashley’s Pantribulation Posture

I should also confess something many people do not know: my dear wife Ashley is a practicing pan-tribulationist. I do not say this to throw her under the bus - quite the opposite. Her Calvary Chapel pedigree runs deep. While hippies were still meeting in the tent in Costa Mesa, Ashley’s grandparents, Johnny and Ola, left the Southern Baptist Convention to help with the work God was doing through Chuck Smith. Her grandfather became one of the earliest Calvary Chapel church planters and pastored in Santa Cruz, California.

Then Ashley’s dad became a Calvary Chapel pastor when she was a baby. He later replanted Calvary Chapel Santa Cruz in the same building where Ashley’s grandfather had dedicated her to the Lord. Years later, in 2004, I stumbled into that same building

drunk and high. God used the clear presentation of the gospel by Ashley's dad to bring me to saving faith in Jesus. That day, I saw Ashley and fell in love, and it was just few years and we would be married. Still, it was a very good reason for church attendance.

The clear Bible teaching of Calvary Chapel helped make me a different man. I have since pastored a couple of Calvary Chapel churches, and more than likely one of my four sons will pastor a Calvary Chapel someday too. I tell you all of that because my wife knows the Bible. She believes the Bible. If you asked her what she believes, she would tell you how she holds a pre-tribulational, pre-millennial view of the end times. Her theology is pre-tribulation - her temperament is pantribulation.

Ashley has faithfully followed and served Jesus since she was in the single digits, but she has never been interested in arguing with other Christians about every finer point of the faith. She has been more concerned with praying for prodigal family members, reaching unsaved friends, homeschooling her five children, discipling young moms, planting and transitioning churches, and going on dates with her pastor, which I strongly believe is an essential ministry of the local church.

When I became entangled in debates over open-handed issues, her life and sometimes her words would often correct me toward “*a more excellent way*”: love (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:2). That does not mean disregarding theology. It means putting biblical truths in biblical order: holding the gospel tightly, studying disputed doctrines carefully, and treating the people Jesus purchased lovingly. Knowledge without love inflates our ego; truth spoken in love builds up the body (1 Corinthians 8:1; Ephesians 4:15-16).

Unity Without Compromise

God commands us to be “*endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*” (Ephesians 4:3). We do not manufacture unity by pretending doctrine does not matter. The Spirit created our unity by joining every believer to Christ; we must guard it without sacrificing truth.

Closed-Handed And Open-Handed Doctrine

Some doctrines must be held with closed hands because they define the Christian faith. There is one eternal, triune God who created the heavens and the earth. The Bible is God's inspired and inerrant Word. Humanity is fallen and cannot save itself from sin. Jesus is fully God and fully man, virgin-born and sinless. He died as the sacrifice for our sins, was buried, bodily rose on the third day, ascended to the Father, and lives forevermore. Salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, not by works. The Holy Spirit indwells God's people. Jesus will bodily return, the dead will rise,

every person will face judgment, and God will complete His redemptive plan. These are not details we trade away for comfort. We must contend for “*the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3). Charity does not require us to call heresy another perspective.

The timing of the Rapture, the relationship between Israel and the Church, and the nature of the Millennium are important. They affect how we read the whole of Scripture. But they are not the gospel or a test of whether someone belongs to Jesus. We can hold convictions without weaponizing them against believers who read the timeline differently. Depending upon our disagreement, I may not be able to plant a church with you or serve beside you as an elder. Church leaders need enough agreement to teach clearly rather than becoming a theological debate club every Sunday. But when organizational partnership would be unwise, spiritual brotherhood can remain. I can encourage you to follow Jesus, preach the gospel, love your family, and prepare people for Christ’s return. We may not draw the same arrows on the end-times chart, but we can point people to the same Savior.

Learning From Every Orthodox View

Perhaps we can give the pan-tribulation joke a second meaning. The prefix *pan* means “all.” I am not suggesting syncretism or borrowing from every system because it sounds good. Scripture must remain our final authority. The Bereans received teaching eagerly and then searched the Scriptures daily to see whether it was true (Acts 17:11). Humility is not the absence of conviction; it remembers that Scripture is infallible and our interpretation is not. Nevertheless, all orthodox positions may emphasize truths that the rest of us need to hear.

I’m happy to admit I have some amillennialist tendencies in the way I want to live for Jesus. I love to see heaven touch earth. Jesus taught us to pray, “*Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” (Matthew 6:10). I have started businesses that are shaped by Christian values and find different ways to carry the gospel into the world. I want believers to influence the world with music, politics, education, business, art, filmmaking, homebuilding, and even craft coffee.

I do not believe the Church will perfect the world and then hand Jesus the keys. Jesus Himself will return to establish His kingdom. Yet I want to learn from amillennial brothers and sisters who emphasize Christ’s present reign and refuse to act as though faithfulness here does not matter.

I have learned from postmillennial believers whose confidence in the gospel inspires them to build for generations they may never see. Even if I disagree with their prophetic expectations, I admire Christians who plant trees to shade their great-

grandchildren. Expecting Jesus soon should never become an excuse to leave nothing faithful behind.

I also have midtribulational and posttribulational tendencies in how I follow Christ. I want to be bold and endure hardship. Jesus never promised freedom from persecution; He promised to be with us in it (John 16:33; 2 Timothy 3:12). By His grace, I refuse to deny His name even if I am tortured or killed. My confidence is not in my flesh, but in the One who is able to keep me. The saints overcome “*by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony*” (Revelation 12:11).

Every once in a while I like a good conspiracy theory about how a one-world system may already be forming to take over the world. I even can food to feed our family of seven if the world falls apart. I do not believe the Church must pass through Daniel’s final week, but I want to learn from Christians who prepare to stand when obedience costs them. I want pre-tribulational hope with a post-tribulational backbone.

This is my commitment: whatever your end-times position, I desire unity in the gospel, clarity in essential doctrine, humility where we disagree, and charity in all things. We need the grace of Jesus for our sins and grace toward one another when we seem to disagree.

If the amillennial view is correct, then let us put our hands to the plow and faithfully display Christ’s kingdom in the world. If the post-millennial view is correct, let us build, preach, disciple, and labor with confidence in the gospel’s victory. If the mid-tribulational or post-tribulational view is correct, let us encourage one another to remain strong in the faith no matter what this world brings. If my pre-tribulational view is correct, then let us high-five as we are caught up together to meet the Lord in the air.

Our Assignment Until He Comes

Until then, our assignment is the same. Watch. Pray. Abide in Christ. Pursue holiness. Make disciples. Preach the gospel. Endure suffering. Live as though Jesus may come today, and build as though your great-grandchildren will finish what you started.

Every orthodox end-times view must meet on immovable ground: Jesus will return personally, visibly, bodily, and victoriously (Acts 1:9-11; Revelation 1:7). He will raise the dead, judge the world, destroy evil, dwell with His people, wipe away every tear, and make all things new (John 5:28-29; Acts 17:31; Revelation 19-22). He shall reign forever and ever (Revelation 11:15).

It Will All Pan Out Because Jesus Is Lord

Pantribulationism is terrible theology if it means, “I do not need to study because none of this matters.” But it is a beautiful posture if it means, “I have studied, I hold my convictions, I love my brothers and sisters, and I trust the sovereign Lord to fulfill every word exactly as He promised.” It will all pan out in the end - not because I am right, but because Jesus is Lord.

Perhaps Ashley has understood that better than I have. She spends more time preparing people to meet Jesus than preparing arguments about when they will meet Him. She has shown me how to know what I believe while remaining fully present with the people Christ has placed in front of me.

So study prophecy. Know why you believe what you believe. Refuse to be ignorant. Hold tightly to the gospel and faithfully teach the whole counsel of God. But never allow your confidence about the sequence of the last days to make you unloving toward someone Jesus loves and died to save.

Even So, Come, Lord Jesus

One day the trumpet will sound, faith will become sight, and every true believer will discover that Jesus kept every promise. If I am right about the timing, I will look for you on the way up. If you are right, I pray I will be standing faithfully beside you when the world grows dark. Either way, our hope is not ultimately in our ability to understand every detail. Our hope is in the One who said, “*Surely I am coming quickly.*”

And together, with one Church, one hope, and one voice, we answer: “*Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!*” (Revelation 22:20).

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